

# **THE EMPLOYMENT ABILITY OF STUDENTS IN HIGHER VOCATIONAL COLLEGES BASED ON USEM MODEL-A CASE STUDY OF YUNNAN ECONOMICS TRADE AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS COLLEGE**

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**Abstract:** Based on the USEM employment ability model framework, this paper aimed to explore the current situation of employment ability of graduates in higher vocational colleges. The objectives of this study were: (1) To analyze the current situation of vocational college employment ability at Yunnan Economics Trade and Foreign Affairs College; (2) To propose effective measures to enhance their employment ability. The study used the qualitative research method and the USEM model framework. An in-depth investigation was conducted on the students majoring in different majors in 2023 and 2024 of Yunnan Economics Trade and Foreign Affairs College. During the investigation, 60 students and 10 school-enterprise cooperative enterprises HR were randomly selected to conduct face-to-face interviews. The results showed that: (1) Students in higher vocational colleges face multiple challenges, including lack of solid professional knowledge, lack of practical experience, lack of ability and confusion in employment. (2) Based on the USEM model, Yunnan Economics Trade and Foreign Affairs College should: Firstly, strengthen the training of students' professional knowledge and skills, to ensure that students master solid professional skills and practical ability; Secondly, it is necessary to cultivate students' key skills, such as learning ability, practical ability, innovation ability and application ability, and improve their comprehensive quality and competitiveness. Thirdly, the college should strengthen the cultivation of students' self-efficacy, and help students establish positive self-cognition and teamwork spirit through psychological counseling and campus culture construction. Finally, it is necessary to enhance students' meta-cognition ability, rationally plan career, establish correct employment concept, and lay a solid foundation for career development.

**Keywords:** Employment Ability, Employment Ability Promotion Measure, USEM Model

## **Introduction**

In the period of China's planned economy, college enrollment and the distribution of graduates were subject to unified planning and coordinated management by the state. After graduation, college students usually have a unified job arrangement by the state, which includes the

assignment of work units and jobs. The state controls and manages the allocation of human resources through the planned economic system, which ensures that each industry and region can obtain sufficient talent support, and also provides relatively stable employment opportunities for graduates.

However, this mode has restricted the enrollment scale and development speed of higher education institutions to a large extent. With the rapid development of China's social economy, the demand for talents is growing day by day, and the disadvantages of small enrollment scale and slow development speed of colleges and universities are gradually emerging. In the middle and late 1990s, the employment mode of college graduates in China experienced a profound change from "planning, unified distribution and state use" to "market allocation, two-way selection and merit-based admission". Higher education has changed from "elite education" to "mass education". With the deepening of China's economic reform, (China National Development Planning Commission, Ministry of Education, etc., 1999) The implementation of the policy of college enrollment expansion resulted in a sharp increase in the number of college graduates. The employment problem of college students has become increasingly prominent (Li, 2017).

With the continuous growth of the number of graduate from higher vocational colleges, the employment pressure they are facing is increasing day by day. In addition, with the influx of rural labor into cities for development and the adjustment of China's industrial structure, the absorption capacity of college graduates has shown a downward trend. In the job market, higher vocational college graduates face the competition of doctoral students, master's students, undergraduates and other graduates with higher levels of education, so that their competitive advantages are not obvious. In such an environment, the employment ability of vocational college graduates has become a key factors affecting their employment. Yunnan Province, as a key province in southwestern China, has unique geographical characteristics and development trends. This study used 60 randomly selected students from different majors of Yunnan Economics Trade And Foreign Affairs College, Trade and Foreign Affairs in 2023 and 2024, as well as 10 school enterprise cooperation units as the research samples. Yunnan Economics Trade And Foreign Affairs College, Trade and Foreign Affairs has a national comprehensive index of 85.306 (CUAA,2022), ranking first among private colleges in Yunnan Province, with strong representativeness. By studying the samples, we can gain a deeper understanding of the current situation of private vocational education in Yunnan Province, and provide guidance and suggestions for the employment ability of graduates from private vocational colleges.

### **Research Objectives**

(1) To explore the current situation of vocational college students' employment ability at Yunnan Economics Trade And Foreign Affairs College;

- (2) To propose effective measures to enhance their employment ability.

## Literature Review

With the rapid development of the emerging internet economy and the continuous transformation and upgrading of industrial structure, the employment situation of Chinese vocational college students is not optimistic, and there is a certain gap between employment ability and market demand (Zhu, 2021), and the employment pressure of vocational college graduates is further increased. The employment ability of graduates is of indispensable importance to their future career development and life stability. At present, it has become an urgent challenge to improve the employment ability of students in higher vocational colleges.

Based on the employment ability framework constructed by USEM model, this paper deeply analyzes the current situation of graduates' employment ability in higher vocational colleges. On this basis, this paper puts forward a series of targeted measures to help vocational college students improve employment ability, so as to better adapt to the changing job market demand and lay a solid foundation for their future development.

As Western economies recovered and the industrial sector became a key driver of growth, employment ability research emerged after World War II. Companies focus on improving efficiency and value by studying front-line production workers. Governments have also taken steps to improve the re-employment prospects of the unemployed. By the 1970s, the importance of improving the knowledge and skills of the workforce for employment became apparent. The emergence of the knowledge economy and the demand for the role of technology have highlighted the importance of the quality of the workforce. At the end of the 20th century, countries recognized that talent is the core of future national strength and competitiveness, and thus increased investment in higher education and universal education. "Employment Ability" as a key indicator to measure workplace competitiveness, originated from the concept put forward by the famous British economist Beveridge (1912), define it as the ability of individuals to obtain and retain employment. On this basis, many scholars and research institutions have deeply discussed the essence and composition of employment ability and the strategies to improve college students' employment ability, and put forward different definitions and viewpoints.

Mayer (1992) proposed that employment ability is a basic ability applicable to different industries, emphasizing the integration of skills and knowledge in the actual working environment. Hill&Pollard(1998) defined employment ability as the ability of an individual to obtain employment through personal efforts and to continuously develop his/her role to achieve his/her full potential. According to ILO (2000), employment ability means the ability of workers to access and maintain career opportunities, progress in their careers, and adapt to changes in the job market. Fugat et

al.(2004) describes employment ability as an individual's ability to advance their career by identifying and seizing opportunities within and outside the organization. The definition of employment ability is closely related to its components, focusing on factors such as interview skills (Harvey, 2001). Mupa et al.(2013) emphasized that employment ability includes professional skills that meet the demands of the job market. Brown et al.(2003) indicating that external factors will also affect employment ability and affect college students' chances to obtain and retain diversified job positions.

In China, with the continuous improvement of the popularization of higher education, the employment problem of college students has become increasingly prominent, which has prompted Chinese scholars to deepen the research on employment ability. According to the interpretation of modern labor relations dictionary, employment ability covers the comprehensive ability of workers in three aspects: physical quality, scientific and cultural literacy and ideological quality. The degree of matching between these qualities and social needs determines the adaptability of individuals in the workplace. Zheng(2002) first put forward the concept of college students' employment ability, emphasizing the skills and abilities that students develop through acquiring knowledge and improving their comprehensive quality. These abilities can not only help individuals achieve their personal employment goals, but also meet the needs of society. She said that the primary criterion for measuring the quality of university education is students employment ability competitiveness, so he stressed that universities should make improving students' employment ability a top priority.

On this basis, Zhao(2004) emphasized that the essence of employment ability lies in meeting the needs of the job market. It is not just about acquiring knowledge and skills; Also need to improve their comprehensive quality through continuous learning. This overall quality directly affects career development and is very practical and focused. The employment ability of college students is defined as the ability to bridge the gap between themselves and their ideal jobs, ultimately increasing the chances of graduates getting employment opportunities (Shao & Hu, 2005). Xie(2005) argued that employment ability is what individuals develop through learning and practical experience that helps them keep their jobs and advance their careers in the workplace.

Wen (2006) put forward a narrow perspective on employment ability, emphasizing that the development of employment ability is a comprehensive ability rooted in individual learning and closely related to employment. In contrast, Huang(2007) took a broader view, emphasizing that employment ability is a multifaceted concept that is influenced by various acquired factors such as education and social capital. Zhao et al.(2008) believes that college students' employment ability refers to the ability formed through participation in academic and social activities, including not only knowledge and skills, but also personal psychological quality. Wang & Chen(2017) emphasized that employment ability is a complex ability that is closely related to an occupation and consists of a series

of interrelated qualities. Finally, Luo et al.(2020) defines employment ability from the perspective of college students, pointing out that employment ability refers to the ability to obtain and maintain employment by concentrating on learning professional knowledge and actively accumulating practical experience in the course of study.

In the research field of employment ability, scholars generally believe that employment ability is a comprehensive ability covering a variety of abilities, and its components are widely concerned by researchers and institutions at home and abroad. According to NCIHE(1997), employment ability includes communication, cooperation, analytical skills, independent work, reflection, and ethical awareness within a specific field. CBC(2001) emphasized fundamental skills (communication, problem solving, information processing), individual management skills (responsibility, adaptability, continuous learning), and team skills. ACCI(2002) believed that employment ability includes key skills such as communication, teamwork, organizational planning, problem solving, technology application, learning ability, self-management and continuous learning. In addition, scholars such as Saunders & Zuzel (2010), Somalingam & Shanthakumari(2013), Chavan & Surve(2014) and Kumari (2015) believed that employment ability includes subject knowledge, core skills, personal qualities, innovation, communication skills, social leadership, honesty, integrity, self-confidence, problem solving, teamwork, communication, decision making, time management, basic academic skills, personal qualities and advanced abilities.

Foreign scholars' research on the concept and composition of college students' employment ability is developing with the progress of research. They generally view employment ability as a combination of competencies, such as skills (general and professional), personal qualities (communication, interaction, cooperation and execution), and personal attitudes.

In China, the research field of college students' employment ability mostly involves the education industry. Zheng(2002) proposed that the structure of graduates' employment ability includes learning ability, thinking ability, adaptability, practical ability and application ability. Tian(2002) proposes that college students' employment ability is developed through learning and practical experience during school, enabling them to effectively cope with job challenges and make potential progress in their careers. Core components of employment ability identified include responsibility, job search and employment skills, reasoning and problem solving skills, health and safety habits, and personal qualities.

Zeng(2004) conducted an empirical quantitative analysis on the structure of employment ability and found that there is a strong correlation between college students' job-hunting difficulties and the response ability of universities and job seekers to market demands, with special emphasis on students' professional knowledge and skills. Li et al.(2005) concluded through factor analysis that college students' employment ability mainly consists of personal quality, problem-solving ability and

social leadership ability. In China, the research field of college students' employment ability mostly involves the education industry. Scholars have different views and opinions on the connotation and composition of college students' employment ability. In some studies, researchers have conducted detailed analysis and discussion on various aspects of college students' employment ability. (Xiao et al., 2007) adds innovation capability as a key dimension of employment ability along with the basic competence proposed by other scholars.

In the context of scientific and technological progress, Zhu(2014) emphasizes that quality such as responsibility is fundamental to college students' successful employment, and emphasizes that learning ability and scientific research and innovation are key elements. Huang et al.(2016) holds that the employment ability of college students in higher vocational colleges includes three key indicators: professional knowledge and technical practice ability, career cognition and career planning ability, professional accomplishment and innovation and expansion ability. (Wang, 2018) explores and constructs an "onion-like" employment ability structural framework from the perspective of coupling supply and demand, which involves five factors, namely external employment ability, knowledge, skills, general ability portfolio, individual and occupational personality.

Western scholars Harvey(2001) put forward that college students' employment ability can be gradually enhanced and improved in the process of their transition from campus to workplace and from graduates to specific job holders. Fugate(2004) believes that in order to have high professional ability in the workplace, individuals need to actively improve their adaptability in the field of work, and the improvement of this adaptability depends on the cultivation and development of professional awareness. Yorke & Knight(2006) After an in-depth study of the USEM model, it is pointed out that the four elements in the model do not exist in isolation, but are closely related to each other. For college students, if they want to improve their professional skills, the key lies in enhancing their understanding of subject knowledge, mastering key skills and cognitive abilities, and cultivating good personal qualities. These factors together constitute an important way to improve college students' vocational skills. Pillai(2009) suggested that colleges and universities should maintain close communication and cooperation with enterprises and adopt the teaching mode combining learning to improve college students' practical skills. Bustamam(2015) proposed to carry out innovation and entrepreneurship education and establish an innovation and entrepreneurship practice base to improve the innovation ability of college students. Sumanasiri(2016) proposed to improve college students' employment ability by participating in scientific research activities.

Li (2006) emphasized the importance of cooperation between government and universities in increasing students' practical opportunities. The national employment ability framework is recommended to be integrated into curriculum systems and employment training programs (Liu & Wu, 2010). In addition, Lv(2017) proposed that the government should formulate strategic plans for

employment ability training, formulate relevant policies, and increase financial support to provide a solid guarantee for improving college students' employment ability. Zhu & Ma(2004) suggested to strengthen cooperation with employers to create more opportunities for college students. They suggest signing agreements with companies to align the training offered by colleges and universities with the needs of the job market (Sun, 2007).

In order to meet the market demand, it is suggested that educational institutions implement teaching reforms to improve students' employment ability (He, 2007). This includes making strategic adjustments to university curricula, providing strong career guidance, and ensuring access to comprehensive career information (Zhang, 2007). In addition, it is proposed to establish a career development education system and a career development platform (Zhang, 2011). Based on the analysis of college students' employment ability system, Shi (2016) put forward a four-stage model of prevention, support, incentive and sustainability to improve students' employment ability. In addition, Cheng(2017) emphasizes the importance of cultivating campus culture, enabling students to independently improve employment ability, and creating a favorable educational environment and learning system through cultural incentives.

Hill & Pollard(1998) conducted a groundbreaking study that synthesizes various existing philosophies regarding employment ability. They identified four main components of employment ability: assets, deployment, presentation, and environment. While this study is important for underpinning key theories of employment ability, it fails to acknowledge the complexity and multifaceted nature of employment ability. The study does not fully examine the employment ability dimension, but focuses narrowly on "employment skills". This limitation lies in an overemphasis on soft skills at the expense of other important aspects that are critical to career success. Knight & Yorke (2002) proposed a more comprehensive perspective on employment ability, introducing the concept of "soft skills +". This approach extends employment ability to include competencies, social and psychological factors, emphasizing that employment ability encompasses more than just skills. The importance of a "skills +" approach is highlighted, highlighting a broader spectrum of employment ability beyond pure skills.

Knight & Yorke put forward the USEM model, which is an abbreviation of understanding ability, skills, efficacy, and meta-cognitive ability, namely: Understanding ability (U), which refers to the degree and depth of understanding of professional knowledge and skills after students receive professional education in colleges and universities. This includes not only a solid grasp of professional knowledge, but also the ability to apply skilled skills relevant to the field. Skills (S) : refers to the ability and quality of students in the employment process, including learning ability, practical ability, innovation ability and application ability. These skills directly affect the competitiveness of students in the job market and the success of career development. Efficacy (E)

refers to the degree of independence, self-confidence and psychological endurance shown by students in the employment process, which can motivate students in the actual employment process and constantly mobilize their enthusiasm; Meta-cognition (M) : the ability to recognize and manage one's own cognitive processes. In career development, meta-cognitive ability affects the formation and management of career planning and employment concept. Good meta-cognitive skills help students manage their learning and career development process more effectively, achieve personal career goals and adapt to social needs(Guruler& Karahasan, 2010).

The USEM model is a framework that emphasizes the key factors affecting employment ability. It emphasizes the integration of understanding, personal attributes, and key skills to improve graduates' employment ability. The USEM model is widely regarded as a major advance in employment ability research, extending the concept of employment ability beyond soft skills. It provides a road map for course developers to incorporate a employment ability development component into the curriculum to better prepare students for employment. Although Dacre Pool&Sewell(2007) criticized the USEM model for its lack of practical application and research argument, it has been utilized in a large number of subsequent studies and has gained recognition in literary criticism. Despite its limitations, the USEM model remains a valuable tool for understanding and improving graduate employment ability. Its integrated approach incorporates a variety of factors such as skills, beliefs and reflection, differentiating it from traditional employment ability frameworks. Going forward, further research and application of the USEM model can continue to enhance the effectiveness of employment ability initiatives in academia.

## **Methodology**

This study used a semi-structured interview method to randomly select 60 students from different majors and 10 human resources cooperation enterprises from Yunnan University of Economics and Trade for face-to-face communication. Based on the USEM employment ability model, interview design revolves around four dimensions: understanding, skills, efficacy, and meta-cognition , covering professional knowledge, professional skills, learning ability, practical ability, innovation ability, job seeking ability, self-confidence, independence, psychological endurance, career planning ability, and values. The research aims to reveal the current situation of employment ability of vocational college students and propose targeted improvement measures. During the interview process, systematic notes and recordings were used to record the data, and detailed organization was carried out. Based on the four dimensions of USEM model, high-frequency words in interview texts are analyzed to find out the main concerns and key issues. On this basis, a more in-depth topic analysis is carried out to find out the commonalities and differences between the feedback of students and enterprises' human resources, and the feedback of different groups of respondents



(students and enterprises) is compared in various dimensions.

## **Results**

The interview results found that there are the following problems with the employment ability of vocational college students:

(1) The students in higher vocational colleges show the problems of weak professional knowledge, narrow scope of knowledge and lack of professional skills. (2) In terms of skills, it shows the problems of poor learning ability, weak practical ability, lack of innovation ability and weak recruitment ability. (3) In terms of self-efficacy, it shows the problems of lack of self-confidence, poor independence and weak psychological endurance. (4) In terms of meta-cognitive ability, it shows the problems of weak awareness of career planning and lack of employment values.

## **Discussion**

In the rapid development of the information age, the social demand for talents is becoming increasingly strict with the rapid development of technology. This demand is not only reflected in the depth and breadth of graduates' professional knowledge, but also highlights the expectation of their comprehensive quality, innovative thinking and ability to adapt to change. For students in higher vocational colleges, employment ability is the decisive factor for their future career development and quality of life. However, the cultivation of this ability is not limited to the professional knowledge and skills students learn in school, but needs to pay more attention to the improvement of their comprehensive quality and ability. Therefore, it is particularly important to build a comprehensive training plan, implement diversified training mechanisms, strengthen the cooperation between schools and enterprises, pay attention to mental health education and establish a sound career planning system. These measures aim to comprehensively enhance students' employment ability and lay a solid foundation for their smooth integration into the workplace, personal growth and improved quality of life.

The employment ability of students in higher vocational colleges has a profound impact on their future career development and life quality. This ability is not only limited to the professional knowledge and skills students learn in school, but also lies in the cultivation of their comprehensive quality and ability.

First of all, develop a comprehensive training plan: vocational colleges should develop a comprehensive training plan, including strengthening professional knowledge and skills training, strengthening students' key skills, strengthening self-efficacy training and enhancing students' meta-cognitive ability. Such a program should be comprehensive, covering all aspects of the student's academic and professional development.

Secondly, establish diversified training mechanisms: schools can establish diversified training mechanisms, including classroom teaching, practical training, school-enterprise cooperation projects, etc., to meet the training requirements of students at different levels and different needs. Such a mechanism can better stimulate students' learning interest and enthusiasm.

Moreover, strengthen the cooperation between schools and enterprises: schools should strengthen the cooperation with enterprises, incorporate the needs of enterprises into the curriculum and teaching content, and provide students with more practical and market demand training. At the same time, the school can also provide more internship and employment opportunities for students, so that they can improve their employment ability in practice.

In addition, pay attention to mental health education: schools should pay attention to students' mental health education, strengthen psychological counseling and counseling work, help students establish a positive attitude and self-confidence, and enhance their ability to cope with challenges.

Finally, establish a sound career planning system: schools can establish a sound career planning system to provide students with career planning guidance and support, to help them clear career goals, develop career development plans, so as to better achieve personal development and employment goals.

Finally, the establishment of a sound career planning system is an indispensable part. Schools should provide career planning guidance and support to students to help them clarify career goals and formulate corresponding development plans, so as to achieve personal development and employment goals more effectively.

Based on the USEM employment ability model, this paper studies the current situation of employment ability of students in higher vocational colleges in Yunnan Province and measures to improve it, which provides some references for the future improvement of students' employment ability in higher vocational colleges. The improvement of employment ability is a complex and systematic project, which cannot be achieved solely by individual efforts and must be achieved through multi-faceted collaborative efforts. Due to time and some limitations, this study only makes suggestions for the improvement of schools, and future studies need to consider more factors, such as the government, employers, students themselves, families, etc. At the same time, for higher vocational colleges, how to better connect with enterprises and improve students' practical ability and professional quality is also a problem that needs to be focused on and studied in the future. It is a long and complicated process to improve the employment ability of students in higher vocational colleges. Only through the concerted efforts of various aspects can we promote the continuous improvement of the employment ability of students in higher vocational colleges and make greater contributions to the development of society.

## Conclusions

This study conducted a random in-depth interview of 60 students from 2023 and 2024 private higher vocational colleges in Yunnan Province, which ranked among the top three in the comprehensive index, and HR from 10 school-enterprise cooperation enterprises, aiming to comprehensively understand the current situation of employment ability of higher vocational college students and put forward targeted suggestions. The results of this study are as follows: (1) The students in higher vocational colleges show the problems of weak professional knowledge, narrow scope of knowledge and lack of professional skills. (2) In terms of skills, it shows the problems of poor learning ability, weak practical ability, lack of innovation ability and weak recruitment ability. (3) In terms of self-efficacy, it shows the problems of lack of self-confidence, poor independence and weak psychological endurance. (4) In terms of meta-cognitive ability, it shows the problems of weak awareness of career planning and lack of employment values.

In view of the above employment ability problems, this paper puts forward measures to improve employment ability: (1) It is suggested to strengthen the training of students' professional knowledge and skills, strengthen the training of students' professional skills by strengthening the study and expansion of students' professional knowledge, so as to ensure that students have a solid grasp of professional skills and practical ability, so that students can better cope with challenges in future study and work. (2) It is suggested to strengthen the cultivation of students' key skills, comprehensively improve their comprehensive quality and competitiveness by strengthening the cultivation of students' learning ability, practical ability, innovation ability and recruitment ability, and lay a solid foundation for their future development. (3) It is suggested to strengthen the cultivation of students' self-efficacy, and help students establish positive self-cognition and improve their ability to cope with challenges by strengthening students' psychological counseling and counseling. By creating a good campus cultural atmosphere, we can cultivate students' self-confidence and teamwork spirit, so as to promote the cultivation of students' self-efficacy. (4) It is suggested to enhance students' meta-cognitive ability and guide students to establish correct employment mentality and concept through reasonable career planning. Through correct employment mentality and concepts, students can better understand themselves and their careers, and lay a solid foundation for future career development.

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