

THE STRATEGY OF HIGHER EDUCATION TO ENHANCING GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

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Abstract

This research aims to explore institutional strategies to enhance graduate employability and understand the dynamics of their implementation through a multi-actor perspective in the context of higher education in China. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design on a public university in China, which has been anonymized. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with program leaders, lecturers, students, and industry representatives, and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The research results show that the strategy for improving graduate employability is multidimensional, including the reorientation of industry based curricula, strengthening work-integrated learning, developing soft skills, career development services, and collaboration with industry. However, the main finding reveals that the effectiveness of these strategies is not only determined by the existence of the programs but also by the level of integration and consistency in their implementation. Moreover, differences in perceptions among actors create a policy practice gap that affects the success of the strategy. This research emphasizes that employability needs to be understood as an ecosystem-based process involving interactions between strategies, actors, and institutional contexts, thereby contributing conceptually to understanding the complexity of the relationship between higher education and the world of work.

Keywords: Career Development, Employability, Higher Education, Industry Collaboration, Work Integrated Learning

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary higher education, graduate employability has become a key indicator of institutional relevance and performance (Bennett, 2019). Institutions are increasingly positioned as strategic actors responsible for producing adaptable, competent graduates for dynamic labor markets (Bejinaru, 2017). The shift toward a knowledge-based economy, alongside rapid digitalization and automation, has redefined expectations of graduates (O'Donovan, 2020). Beyond disciplinary knowledge, graduates are now expected to demonstrate interdisciplinary competencies, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and lifelong learning readiness (Hart, 2019). In this context, graduate employability reflects the capacity of higher education institutions to bridge academia and the labor market, with employment outcomes indicating both individual capability and systemic effectiveness (Angeloni, 2021). As a result, employability has become a strategic priority in higher education policy, emphasizing institutional accountability, competency based curricula, and industry collaboration (Teressa & Besha, 2020). Globally, multiple approaches have been adopted, including work-integrated learning, which provides students with practical experience through internships, placements, and collaborative projects (Jackson et al., 2017). In addition, strengthening career development services such as job readiness training, career counseling, and labor market access has become widespread (Okolie et al., 2020) alongside growing institutional engagement in industry partnerships, including curriculum co design, applied research, and graduate recruitment. The effectiveness of employability strategies is inherently context-dependent, shaped by social, economic, and institutional conditions, and thus not directly transferable across settings. Understanding how such strategies are implemented at the institutional level, including policy translation and actor interactions, remains critical. China provides a compelling context, having undergone rapid higher education transformation in recent decades. Expansion has significantly increased graduate output (Altbach et al., 2019). reflecting greater access but also intensifying labor market competition and pressures on graduate quality and relevance (Angeloni, 2021). Higher education institutions in China are encouraged to adopt innovative strategies to enhance employability, including competency based curricula, stronger industry collaboration, career support systems, and entrepreneurship education (Teressa & Besha, 2020; Igwe et al., 2021).

However, their implementation largely depends on institutional capacity, leadership, and partnership networks. Previous studies identify key determinants of employability, such as curriculum alignment, soft skills, practical experience, and institutional quality (Al Shua'ili, 2025; Poddar, 2025). Industry involvement through curriculum design and internships also plays a significant role in enhancing work readiness (Kapareliotis et al., 2019). In China, government policies have been central in driving reforms toward greater labor market alignment (Knight et al., 2017). Despite the growing literature on graduate employability, several gaps remain. First, employability is often treated as an outcome measured by indicators such as employment rates or job fit, overlooking the institutional processes that shape it. These risks reducing employability to a result without examining how strategies, policies, and practices interact. Second, existing studies frequently focus on isolated initiatives such as internships, curriculum design, or career services without analyzing how these elements are integrated within a cohesive institutional system, leading to fragmented understanding. Third, employability is often examined from limited perspectives, typically centered on students or institutions, despite being inherently shaped by interactions among multiple actors, including faculty, academic leaders, and industry representatives. Addressing these gaps, this study seeks to provide a deeper, context-sensitive understanding of employability strategies within Chinese higher education. Focusing on a public university in China, it examines both the strategies developed and their implementation in practice. Using a qualitative case study approach, the study explores the perspectives of key actors, including program directors, faculty, students, and industry representatives. The study aims to analyze institutional strategies and their implementation dynamics across stakeholders, emphasizing the interplay between policy, practice, and outcomes. Accordingly, it is guided by two main research questions: (1) What strategies has a public university in China developed to improve graduate employability? (2) How are these strategies implemented and perceived by various stakeholders, including academic staff, students, and industry representatives?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Graduate Employability in Higher Education

The concept of graduate employability has evolved in response to increasingly dynamic and competitive labor markets (Bennett, 2019). Initially defined as the ability to obtain employment (Suleman, 2018), it is now understood more broadly as the capacity to secure, sustain, and adapt within a lifelong career (Clarke, 2018). Employability is thus conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing technical skills, non-technical skills, and personal attributes (Puad et al., 2024). While technical skills reflect disciplinary knowledge, non-technical skills include communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking, in addition, career identity and self-efficacy play a critical role in shaping individuals' readiness for the workforce (Putri & Violinda, 2025).

The Role of Higher Education Institutions in Enhancing Graduate Employability

As employability has evolved, so too has the role of higher education institutions, which now extend beyond knowledge provision to preparing work-ready graduates (Patfield et al., 2025). Institutions are increasingly positioned as strategic actors bridging education and employment (Kvilhaugsvik, 2022). This shift is reflected in efforts to embed employability within curricula, pedagogy, and institutional initiatives aligned with industry needs (Reimers & Chung, 2019), including skills training, internships, and career services (Okolie et al., 2020). However, implementation remains uneven. Persistent challenges include misalignment between curricula and labor market demands (Alam & Roslan, 2021), alongside resource constraints and fragmented, non-systemic approaches to employability development.

University Industry Collaboration in Enhancing Graduate Employment Rates

The relationship between higher education and industry is a strategic driver of graduate employability (Okolie et al., 2020). The concept of university–industry linkage highlights the need for synergy to ensure education remains relevant to labor market dynamics (Gemedo et al., 2025). This collaboration includes internships, co-developed curricula, industry involvement in teaching, and applied research, enabling institutions to better understand industry needs while providing students with practical experience (Aithal & Maiya, 2023). However, such collaboration is often suboptimal. Challenges including misaligned interests, limited communication, and weak coordination frequently undermine its effectiveness (Castañer & Oliveira, 2020). In many cases, partnerships remain symbolic and fail to produce substantive impacts on employability (Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2021), highlighting the need to examine how these collaborations are implemented at the institutional level.

Institutional Strategies for Enhancing Employability

Competency based curricula are central to aligning higher education with workforce demands by emphasizing industry relevant learning outcomes over purely theoretical knowledge (Syomwene, 2023). Complementing this, work integrated learning (WIL) embeds practical experience through internships, placements, and collaborative projects, significantly enhancing graduate readiness (Milagro, 2024). Beyond technical competencies, soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving are increasingly prioritized as critical employability attributes (Qizi, 2020). Career development services further support this transition by connecting students to the labor market through training, counseling, and recruitment facilitation, though their effectiveness varies with program quality and student engagement. Additionally, entrepreneurship education offers an alternative pathway by fostering innovation and self-employment, albeit contingent on supportive ecosystem conditions (Belitski & Heron, 2017).

The Context of Higher Education in China

China has experienced significant expansion in higher education, marked by an increase in the number of institutions and graduates (Jiang & Ke, 2021). This situation has created challenges regarding labor market absorption, prompting the government to implement reforms focused on employability. Higher education institutions are encouraged to enhance the relevance of education through collaboration with industry and the development of adaptive curricula. However, the implementation of these policies varies across institutions. Factors such as institutional capacity, resources, and partnership networks influence the effectiveness of the strategies implemented. Therefore, studies at the institutional level are essential for a deeper understanding of these dynamics.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore institutional strategies for enhancing graduate employability (Khan, 2019). This approach enables an in depth understanding of complex, context specific phenomena, particularly institutional practices and actor interactions within higher education. Focusing on a public university in China, the case study design facilitates a detailed examination of internal dynamics, strategic initiatives, and policy implementation in real-world settings.

Research Site and Context

This study was conducted at a public university in China, selected for its active efforts to enhance graduate employability. The institution represents the broader transformation of China's higher education system toward greater alignment with labor market demands, including strengthened industry collaboration and the development of employability-oriented programs.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance and depth of insight (Obilor, 2023). Informants included the head of the study program (P1), lecturers (P2), students (P3), and industry representatives (P4), each representing key roles in policy, teaching, learning, and employment. This multi-actor sampling enabled a comprehensive understanding of graduate employability from both internal and external perspectives.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were primarily collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews to enable flexible yet focused exploration of key issues (Eppich et al., 2019). The interview guide was developed based on a conceptual framework encompassing institutional strategies, program implementation, student experiences, and industry perspectives. To enhance data validity, document analysis was also conducted, including curricula, institutional policies, and career development programs. Data analysis employed a thematic analysis approach to identify patterns and emerging themes (Ahmed et al., 2025). The process involved transcription, repeated reading for familiarization, and initial coding to capture relevant meaning units. These codes were then grouped into categories and developed into overarching themes reflecting institutional strategies and their implementation dynamics. The analysis was conducted iteratively by continuously relating empirical data to the conceptual framework, ensuring robust, integrated, and data-driven interpretations.

Trustworthiness

To ensure research quality, this study applies trustworthiness criteria, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ahmed, 2024). Credibility was achieved through data triangulation across academics, students, and industry representatives. Transferability was supported by providing detailed contextual descriptions, while dependability was ensured through systematic documentation of data collection and analysis. Confirmability was maintained by grounding interpretations in empirical data and minimizing researcher bias.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical principles by ensuring voluntary participation and informed consent. Institutional and participant identities were anonymized to maintain confidentiality, and all data were used solely for academic purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**Result****Institutional Strategies for Improving Graduate Employment Rates**

The findings suggest that strategies to enhance graduate employability at a public university in China extend beyond standalone programs, instead reflecting an evolving configuration of policies and practices shaped by internal needs and external pressures. These include curriculum reorientation, work-integrated learning, soft skills development, career services, and industry partnerships. Crucially, the study highlights not merely the presence of these strategies, but how they are shaped, negotiated, and implemented within a complex institutional context. A key strategy is curriculum reorientation toward industry relevance, reflecting a shift from theory-driven approaches to more adaptive, practice-oriented frameworks. The curriculum is increasingly treated as a dynamic strategic tool rather than a static document. As one informant noted, “We no longer design the curriculum based solely on internal discussions. Now we routinely invite industry representatives to provide input regarding the skills needed in the field” (interview, January 18, 2026, P1). This signals a transition toward greater external responsiveness, though it also introduces tensions, as academic decision-making becomes influenced by labor market demands. At the operational level, challenges persist, particularly regarding faculty capacity. Lecturers often navigate competing expectations between maintaining academic rigor and ensuring practical relevance, as reflected by another informant: “Conceptually, we understand the importance of industry integration, but not all faculty have industry experience” (interview, February 2, 2026, P2).

This finding suggests that curriculum transformation requires not only policy reform but also capacity building at the implementation level; without this, theory practice integration risks remaining symbolic. Beyond curriculum reform, internships emerge as the most tangible strategy for bridging education and work. They provide not only practical experience but also professional socialization, enabling students to internalize workplace norms and expectations. As noted by P3, “Before the internship, I felt fairly confident, but after joining the company, I realized that many things aren’t taught in class” (interview, February 10, 2026, P3). This highlights the epistemological gap between academic and practical knowledge, with internships serving as a critical, though not always seamless, interface between the two. The findings also reveal variability in internship quality, shaped by industry type, organizational context, and mentor engagement. As noted by P3, “I was placed in a department that didn’t align with my major much of the time was unproductive for learning technical skills” (interview, February 22, 2026, P3). This suggests that, despite being institutionalized, internships still face challenges in standardization and quality control. Beyond technical competencies, soft skills development emerges as a critical institutional focus. Universities increasingly recognize communication, teamwork, and adaptability as key determinants in recruitment. As emphasized by P2, “Companies are not only looking for academically smart graduates, but those who can work in teams, communicate, and adapt quickly” (interview, February 28, 2026, P2).

Soft skills development remains insufficiently embedded in the formal curriculum, often occurring implicitly through instructional practices rather than structured design. As noted by P3, “Soft skills are taught, but not specifically usually during presentations or group work” (interview, March 7, 2026, P3), highlighting a gap between recognition and systematic implementation. Meanwhile, career development services function as a key support mechanism facilitating students’ transition to the workforce, reflecting an institutional shift toward outcome-oriented education. As P3 explained, “After participating in resume and interview training, I became more confident and knew how to prepare” (interview, March 10, 2026, P3). However, uneven participation suggests that their overall effectiveness remains limited. Industry collaboration constitutes a central institutional strategy, enabling knowledge exchange and enhancing educational relevance. However, its implementation remains uneven, as noted by P1: “Collaboration does exist, but not all academic programs have strong ties with industry” (interview, March 22, 2026,

P1). Overall, while these strategies reflect a progressive orientation, they continue to face challenges related to integration, consistency, and implementation capacity.

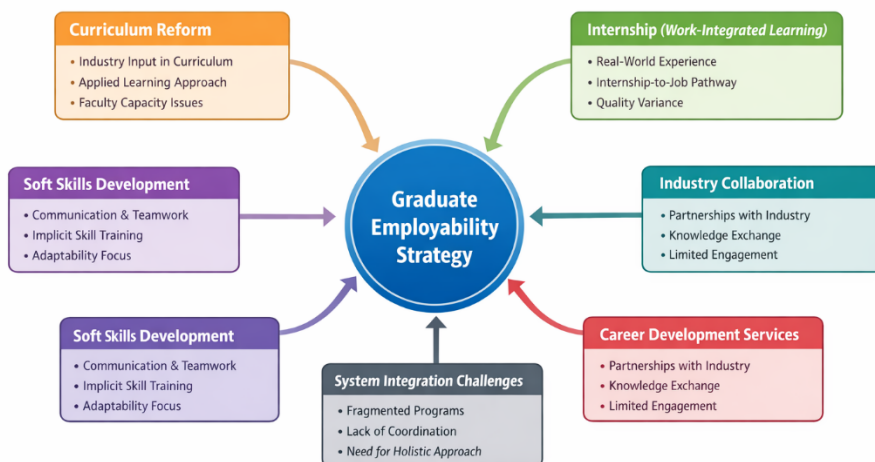


Image 1: Institutional Strategies for Enhancing Graduate Employability

Implementation and Perception of Strategies by Stakeholders

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of strategies to improve graduate employability is not only determined by institutional policy design but is also significantly influenced by how these strategies are understood, interpreted, and implemented by various stakeholders. In this context, implementation cannot be viewed as a linear process from policy to practice, but rather as a social process involving negotiation, adaptation, and even reinterpretation among the actors involved. One key finding is the difference in perspectives among actors regarding the meaning and objectives of employability enhancement strategies. (P1) tends to view the strategy as part of a systemic effort to enhance institutional competitiveness and the relevance of education. This perspective is macro-level, policy oriented, and focused on institutional sustainability.

As expressed by an informant: “We have many programs to improve employability, but the challenge is how to connect all these programs, so they run consistently” (interview, March 25, 2026, P1). This statement indicates that from a managerial perspective, the main issue is not a lack of programs, but rather the fragmentation of implementation. In other words, the main challenge lies in cross-unit coordination and integration, indicating that organizational complexity is a key factor in determining the effectiveness of the strategy. In contrast to the leadership’s perspective, (P2) interprets strategies for enhancing employability within a more operational and pragmatic framework. As policy implementers, their experiences are primarily tied to the challenges of implementation at the classroom level. In this context, strategies designed at the institutional level are often reinterpreted when confronted with the realities of the classroom. As one informant stated: “We are encouraged to make learning more practical, but it is not always easy due to time constraints, teaching loads, and limited access to industry practice” (interview, March 5, 2026, P2).

This quote indicates a gap between institutional expectations and implementation capacity at the faculty level. Faculty members serve not only as implementers but also as mediators who must balance curriculum demands, resource constraints, and student needs. Consequently, the implementation of strategies becomes highly dependent on individual interpretations and contextual conditions at the micro level. Meanwhile, (P3) views strategies for improving employability within a more direct, experience-based framework. For them, the value of a strategy is measured by the extent to which it provides concrete benefits in preparing them to enter the workforce. This perspective is pragmatic and results oriented. As expressed by an informant: “What helped me the most was my internship experience, because that’s where I truly learned how to work and understood what is required in the workplace” (interview, March 12, 2026, P3).

However, students also demonstrate a selective attitude toward the various programs offered by the institution. Not all strategies are viewed as having equal value. Programs that are practical and provide hands-on experience tend to be valued more highly than those that are theoretical or merely formal. This is reflected in the following statement: “There are many programs offered by the university, but not all of them feel important. What really helps are those that provide hands-on experience, not just seminars or short training sessions” (interview, March 14, 2026, P3). These findings indicate that there is a discrepancy between program design and user perceptions, where the effectiveness of strategies is largely determined by the relevance perceived by students. From the perspective of (P4), employability enhancement strategies are understood within the framework of labor market

needs and graduate readiness. The industry tends to adopt a more utilitarian approach, where the value of graduates is measured based on their ability to contribute directly to the workplace. As expressed by an informant: “We don’t really look at where the graduates come from, but rather whether they are ready to work, can adapt, and possess a professional attitude” (interview, March 20, 2026, P4). This perspective indicates that industry places strong emphasis on practical and behavioral aspects of work readiness. This simultaneously underscores that the success of institutional strategies is not only measured from an internal perspective but also by the extent to which graduates can meet external expectations. Furthermore, the research findings indicate that differences in perception among stakeholders are not always contradictory but often reflect their respective positions and roles within the system. However, these differences also have the potential to cause misalignment in strategy implementation. For example, while academic leaders emphasize the importance of program integration, faculty members face limitations in implementation, students are selective about programs, and industry demands concrete results. This situation creates a dynamic in which top-down strategies are not always consistently translated at the lower levels.

This is also evident in the context of collaboration with industry, where although it is considered important in policy, its implementation still faces various obstacles. One informant stated: “Collaboration with industry does exist, but not all study programs have strong relationships, so the impact is also uneven” (interview, March 22, 2026, P1). From an analytical perspective, this situation indicates that the implementation of employability enhancement strategies is uneven and heavily influenced by the networking capacity of each unit or study program. In addition, the research findings also indicate that the success of strategy implementation depends heavily on the level of stakeholder engagement. Strategies involving direct interaction between students and the workforce, such as internships, tend to have a more significant impact than indirect strategies. However, this level of engagement is not always consistent. Students who actively seek opportunities tend to gain greater benefits compared to those who are passive. This indicates that employability is shaped not only by institutions but also by individual agencies.

Overall, the findings related to RQ2 suggest that the implementation of strategies to enhance graduate employability is a complex, multidimensional process influenced by interactions among stakeholders. Differences in perception among stakeholders not only reflect varying perspectives but also indicate challenges in aligning policies, practices, and expectations. Thus, the success of strategies depends not only on program design but also on the institution’s ability to manage dynamics among actors, foster effective communication, and create a system capable of integrating diverse perspectives into a coherent framework.

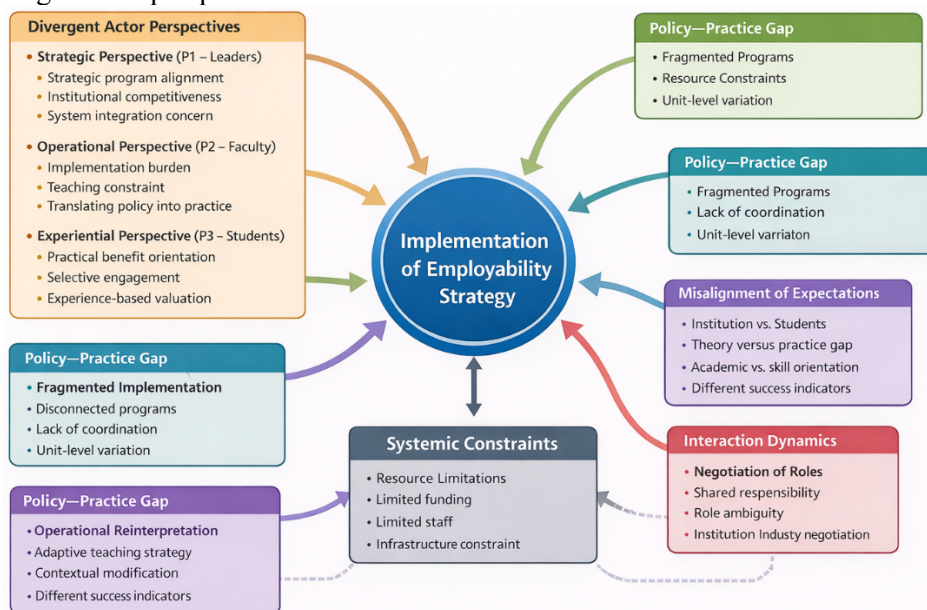


Image 2: Conceptual Model of Employability Strategy Implementation Dynamics

Discussion

This study examines how institutional strategies for enhancing graduate employability are developed, implemented, and perceived by stakeholders in Chinese higher education. The findings reveal that employability is not the outcome of isolated policies, but a construct shaped by the interplay of strategies, practices, and multi-actor dynamics. Accordingly, the discussion focuses on two dimensions: institutional strategy configuration (RQ1) and actor-based implementation dynamics (RQ2). Findings for RQ1 show that employability strategies are multidimensional, encompassing curriculum reorientation, work-integrated learning, soft skills development, career services, and industry collaboration. This supports the view that employability extends beyond individual competencies to include institutional conditions (Clarke, 2018). However, the study further reveals that such strategic diversity does not ensure systemic integration; rather, strategies often evolve in parallel, leading to fragmentation and reduced effectiveness.

Curriculum reorientation toward industry needs reflects a shift from traditional academic models to competency-based, practice-oriented approaches, aligning with calls for responsiveness to labor market demands (Okolie et al., 2019). However, the findings indicate that such integration extends beyond technical adjustment, involving epistemological tensions between academic and practical knowledge. Institutions must balance disciplinary depth with industry driven expectations, reflecting inherent tensions in employability agendas. Thus, curriculum integration emerges as an ongoing process of negotiation rather than a fixed transformation, challenging dominant assumptions that position industry alignment as a straightforward solution. These findings suggest that enhancing employability requires not only structural reforms but also a redefinition of institutional roles. Internships, as a core form of work-integrated learning, represent a key strategy for bridging academia and the workplace, supporting evidence on the role of work experience in enhancing graduate readiness (Okolie et al., 2020). However, the findings reveal that their effectiveness is contingent on the quality of student experiences. Variations in placement conditions challenge assumptions that internships are inherently effective, highlighting that their impact depends on design, supervision, and integration into learning processes. Thus, the presence of internship programs alone does not guarantee improved employability; rather, implementation quality is the critical determinant of their success.

Soft skills development constitutes a critical component of employability strategies, consistent with evidence highlighting their growing importance in recruitment (Kapareliotis et al., 2019). However, the findings reveal a gap between recognition and implementation, as soft skills remain implicitly and inconsistently embedded in curricula (Puad et al., 2024). This reflects a broader discrepancy between theoretical emphasis and practical execution, reinforcing Clarke (2018) argument that employability often remains rhetorical rather than systematically enacted. Accordingly, the study highlights the need for more structured integration of soft skills within higher education. Career development services and industry partnerships reflect institutional efforts to support students' transition into the workforce. However, both remain limited in access and participation, indicating that employability strategies require not only effective design but also inclusive implementation mechanisms (Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2021). Overall, the findings for RQ1 suggest that employability strategies have evolved toward a more comprehensive approach, yet remain insufficiently integrated, highlighting the need for a systemic framework that connects diverse initiatives coherently.

Findings for RQ2 reveal that employability strategy implementation is not a linear policy-to-practice process, but a socially constructed dynamic shaped by interactions among multiple actors (Bennett, 2019). Divergent perspectives administrators viewing employability strategically, faculty as an implementation challenge, students as experiential, and industry as work readiness underscore its non-uniform meaning, consistent with Clarke (2018) view of employability as a social construct. The study also identifies a policy practice gap, where institutional strategies are not consistently enacted at the operational level. Faculty, as primary implementers, adapt policies to contextual realities, indicating flexible and situated implementation, in line with Angeloni (2021) view that educational policies always undergo a process of interpretation in practice.

Misalignment among stakeholders indicates that employability outcomes depend not only on program design but also on shared understanding across actors. Tensions between academic orientations and industry demands require active institutional mediation. The findings also highlight the role of individual agency, as proactive students and innovative faculty are better able to leverage existing strategies, suggesting that employability is shaped by both structural conditions and individual actions (Okolie et al., 2019). Conceptually, this study advances an ecosystem perspective, framing employability as the product of interactions among strategies and actors rather than isolated interventions. This extends existing literature by offering a more integrative and context-sensitive understanding, with implications for both theory and practice in sustaining graduate employability.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that graduate employability at a public university in China is shaped by multidimensional strategies, including curriculum reorientation, internships, soft skills development, career services, and industry collaboration. However, effectiveness depends less on program availability than on the integration and consistency of implementation. Findings also highlight the influence of multi stakeholder dynamics, where differing perspectives among administrators, faculty, students, and industry generate policy practice gaps and misalignment between strategy and execution. Employability thus emerges as a non-linear outcome of complex ecosystem interactions. Conceptually, the study advances an ecosystem-based perspective, emphasizing the interplay between strategies, actors, and context. Practically, it underscores the need for greater integration, coordination, and sustainable industry partnerships. While limited to a single case, the study contributes to a more contextualized understanding of employability strategy development and implementation in higher education.

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