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STRUCTURAL CONTRADICTIONS AND GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY AT SHANGRAO NORMAL UNIVERSITY: A MIXED-METHODS ANALYSIS OF EMPLOYMENT TRENDS FROM 2019 TO 2023

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ABSTRACT

Graduate unemployment in China has reached structurally significant levels, with youth unemployment hitting 21.3% in June 2023 before national data reporting was suspended. This study examines structural contradictions in graduate employment at Shangrao Normal University (SRU), a regional institution in Jiangxi Province, across four dimensions: curriculum-market alignment, student competencies, regional economic mediators, and discipline-based disparities. A mixed-methods design combined a graduate survey (n=300), semi-structured interviews (n=20), and secondary analysis of SRU employment reports from 2019 to 2023. The overall employment rate at SRU declined from 92.3% to 86.5%, with employment satisfaction falling from 74.7% to 62.5% over the same period. Pilot study data (n=50) confirmed that university support is the strongest predictor of employment outcomes ($r=0.52$, $p<0.01$). Findings point to curriculum reform, stronger university-industry partnerships, and expanded career guidance as the most actionable interventions for regional universities facing structural employment challenges.

Keywords: Graduate Employability, Structural Contradictions, Higher Education, Labour Market Mismatch, Regional Employment, Mixed-Methods, Shangrao Normal University, China

INTRODUCTION

China's higher education system has undergone the most rapid expansion of any country in recent history. The annual number of university graduates grew from approximately 2.39 million in 2004 to 11.79 million in 2024, producing one of the most competitive graduate labour markets in the world (Ministry of Education, China, 2024). By June 2023, the unemployment rate among urban youth aged 16 to 24 had reached 21.3%, a figure that prompted the government to suspend its public reporting of youth unemployment data (Nulimaimaiti, 2023). For local and regional universities, the pressure of this national trend is compounded by institutional constraints such as limited industry networks, curricula that lag behind market demand, and geographic positioning in provinces with weaker industrial bases.

Shangrao Normal University (SRU) is a public regional institution in Jiangxi Province, central China. A review of SRU's graduate employment reports from 2019 to 2023 reveals a consistent decline in employment rates, widening salary disparities across disciplines, and falling graduate satisfaction. The employment rate dropped from 92.3% in 2019 to 86.5% in 2023, while employment satisfaction fell from 74.7% in 2020 to 62.5% in 2023. In 2023, the average starting

salary stood at 5,200 yuan RMB per month, with STEM graduates earning 5,800 yuan against 4,700 yuan for humanities and education graduates. These patterns signal not merely a temporary market shock but persistent structural contradictions between what SRU produces academically and what the labour market demands.

Despite a broad literature on graduate employment in Chinese higher education, empirical studies focused on specific regional institutions and the structural conditions shaping their employment outcomes remain sparse (Qian, Bian, & Chen, 2023). This study addresses that gap. It investigates four interconnected structural dimensions: the alignment between curriculum and labour market, student-level personal competencies, regional economic mediators, and discipline-based employment disparities. By combining quantitative survey analysis with qualitative interviews and secondary employment data, the study offers a comprehensive account of graduate employment challenges at SRU and identifies actionable intervention points.

Research Gap

Existing research on Chinese graduate employment tends to focus on elite national universities or aggregate national statistics, leaving regional and local institutions analytically underrepresented (Jiang, Chen, & Lei, 2023). Studies that do examine provincial universities rarely integrate structural, institutional, and individual-level factors within a single analytical framework. This study fills that gap by applying a multi-dimensional, mixed-methods approach to a single regional institution, generating findings that are both institutionally specific and generalizable to comparable local universities across inland China.

Research Objectives and Hypotheses

This study is guided by four Research Objectives (RO). RO1 examines the relationship between SRU's curriculum and labour market integration across different industry sectors. RO2 is investigates the impact of students' personal competencies and extracurricular engagement on employability. RO3 analyses whether regional economic development and industrial structure mediate the relationship between talent cultivation and employment choices. RO4 is identifies differences in employment competitiveness across graduates from different disciplines.

Four corresponding hypotheses are proposed. H1 states that stronger curriculum-market alignment is positively associated with graduate employment outcomes at SRU. H2 states that higher levels of personal competency and extracurricular engagement are positively associated with individual employability. H3 states that regional economic conditions and industrial structure mediate the relationship between SRU talent cultivation and graduates' employment location choices. H4 states that significant differences in employment competitiveness exist across graduates from different disciplinary groups at SRU.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Graduate Employment in Chinese Higher Education

The expansion of Chinese higher education has created a structural paradox because rising educational attainment has not produced proportional gains in employment quality. The

depreciation of academic credentials as degree holders flood the market has disproportionately affected graduates from lower-tier provincial universities, who lack the institutional prestige advantages of graduates from elite national institutions (Yeung W.-J, 2013). This credential depreciation effect is visible in the divergence between employment rates, which remain nominally high when further study is included, and employment satisfaction rates, which have trended downward since 2020.

National-level data from China's Ministry of Education confirm persistent geographic imbalances in employment outcomes. Jiangxi Province, where SRU is located, produced approximately 350,000 university graduates annually by 2023, competing in a provincial labour market that offers fewer high-value employer options than coastal provinces (CEIC, 2024). Research by Guohua et al. (2021), using employment monitoring data from a central Chinese province, found that graduates systematically prefer large and medium cities with higher economic activity, and that this preference varies significantly by major, institution type, gender, and educational level. For SRU graduates, this preference manifests as talent outflow from Jiangxi Province, which, as this study documents, accelerated between 2020 and 2023.

Li, Meng, Xiong, and Cook (2023) analysed job preferences and outcomes for Chinese college graduates using data from the Chinese College Student Survey. They found that over half of college-educated workers were employed in the state sector, despite non-state enterprises employing the vast majority of urban workers nationally. This preference for state-sector employment reflects the perceived stability and benefits of public-sector jobs, a pattern clearly visible at SRU, where 12.5% of 2023 graduates entered the public sector and 49.68% entered the education sector, both of which are primarily state-affiliated. While this pattern provides short-term employment security, it also signals limited diversification of graduate employment pathways and an over-reliance on sectors whose growth is constrained by public spending and demographic trends.

Structural Contradictions in Graduate Employment

Three forms of structural contradiction recur across the literature on Chinese graduate employment. The first is a discipline-market mismatch, where the knowledge and skills graduates develop during study do not correspond to what employers seek. Qian, Bian, and Chen (2023) provided an analysis of the causes and countermeasures of employment difficulties faced by Chinese college graduates, identifying this mismatch as the most persistent and structurally embedded challenge. The second form is regional employment imbalance, characterized by graduate concentration in certain geographies and sectors while other areas remain underserved. The third is an expectation-reality gap, where career aspirations formed during university diverge substantially from available job conditions.

Research from Shaanxi Province by Jiang, Chen, and Lei (2023) confirmed that university-level institutional factors, including faculty quality, infrastructure, and curriculum design, are significant predictors of graduate employability outcomes, outweighing individual demographic characteristics in regression models. This finding is consequential for SRU, as it shifts analytical attention away from individual graduate deficits and toward institutional structures as primary levers of change. Skill gaps represent a particularly actionable dimension of structural contradiction. Peng and Deng (2022) found that a mismatch between IT industry skill demands and the skills developed in formal computer science education worsened during the COVID-19

pandemic. Across manufacturing, retail, and the public sector, employers consistently report that fresh graduates lack practical competencies, professional communication skills, and adaptive thinking capacities that formal education rarely prioritizes.

Regional Economic Conditions and Employment

The geographic and industrial context in which a regional university is embedded strongly shapes its graduates' employment prospects. China's urban-rural per capita disposable income ratio narrowed from 2.81:1 in 2013 to 2.45:1 in 2022, reflecting incremental progress, yet the absolute income differential remains substantial, particularly for inland provinces like Jiangxi (Liu, Zhang, Liu, & Wang, 2025). Research on the employment mobility of graduates from Double First-Class universities in central China found that employment distribution exhibits a hierarchical spatial pattern, decreasing with geographic distance from major economic centres, with central China experiencing a competitive tug-of-war between regional and eastern coastal employment markets.

Cui, Wang, and Wang (2022) documented that talent concentration in economically developed coastal regions accelerates over time, creating a feedback loop in which weaker inland regions lose graduates, further reducing regional economic dynamism. For SRU, this dynamic is visible in the decline of graduates choosing to remain in Jiangxi Province, from 66.4% in 2020 to 63.0% in 2023. Among those who did remain, 69.7% concentrated in Shangrao City itself, rather than distributing to smaller towns with acute teacher shortages. The industrial structure of Jiangxi, dominated by manufacturing, agriculture, and traditional services rather than high-technology sectors, limits the range of high-value employment options available to graduates with humanities, education, or social science degrees, directly contributing to the salary disparities documented in this study.

Curriculum, Work-Integrated Learning, and Employability

The alignment between university curricula and labour market demand is one of the most consistently identified factors in graduate employability research. Jackson and Dean (2023) demonstrated through a large-scale national survey of 76,261 Australian graduates that work-based work-integrated learning produces the strongest positive effects on employment readiness, outperforming non-workplace and global learning experiences. Their study confirmed that graduates who participate in structured industry placements report significantly higher self-perceptions of employability and achieve faster time to employment.

A systematic review by Vlachopoulos & Pachni (2026) synthesizing 84 journal articles published between 2015 and 2025, found consistent evidence that project-based learning, live industry projects, and consultancy-style assignments develop the transversal skills most valued by employers, including teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, and adaptability. The review also identified persistent implementation challenges: high coordination demands, assessment complexity, and the need for sustained commitment from industry partners. For SRU, these challenges are amplified by resource constraints and faculty workloads common in regional institutions. Arranz et al. (2022) added a social capital dimension, finding that university-enterprise cooperation enhances graduates' access to industry contacts and job market information, resources that are particularly valuable in regional labour markets where formal recruitment channels are less developed.

Sun and Yuen (2012) noted that in most Chinese universities, employment guidance dominates over career planning, with services focused on resume preparation and interview coaching rather than on helping students develop long-term career identity and self-awareness. This distinction matters for employment satisfaction: graduates who enter the labour market with realistic previews of job conditions, salary ranges, and career trajectories report higher satisfaction than those who encounter significant mismatches between expectation and reality. The SRU pilot study finding that only 42% of respondents accessed career guidance services suggests that the gap between employment guidance and genuine career planning identified by Sun and Yuen over a decade ago persists at regional institutions today.

Individual Competencies and Employment Outcomes

Beyond institutional structures, individual-level factors contribute to employment outcomes. Personal qualities including communication ability, critical thinking, and adaptability are consistently ranked highly by employers across sectors in China and internationally (Jiang et al., 2023). Research by Ding and Liu (2022) on the role of social networks in employment quality found that graduate students with stronger interpersonal networks, built during university through extracurricular activities, peer collaboration, and faculty mentorship, achieve better employment outcomes, as these networks reduce labour market information asymmetry and provide access to informal job referrals.

Precise career planning is associated with better human and social capital accumulation, which translates into improved employability and employment quality (Zhang et al., 2025). Goal-setting theory supports this finding: students with specific, clearly articulated career goals take more directed action toward their employment targets than those with vague aspirations. For SRU graduates, the pilot study data suggest that individual factors represent the most positively perceived dimension ($M=3.65$, $SD=0.59$), yet regional constraints ($M=2.89$, $SD=0.72$) substantially limit the translation of personal capability into favourable employment outcomes. This gap between individual capacity and structural opportunity is the defining tension in SRU graduate employment.

Summary of Research Gaps

The literature reviewed above reveals three clear gaps relevant to this study. First, while national studies on Chinese graduate employment are plentiful, institution-specific analyses of regional universities that integrate structural, institutional, and individual factors in a single framework are rare. Second, longitudinal employment satisfaction data from provincial normal universities are almost entirely absent from the published literature, making SRU's five-year trend data a contribution to the empirical base. Third, the interaction between regional economic mediators and institutional curriculum factors as joint predictors of graduate employment location choice has not been examined in the context of Jiangxi Province. This study addresses all three gaps.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods convergent parallel design. Quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously, analysed separately, and then integrated during interpretation to produce a more comprehensive account than either method alone could achieve. The quantitative component provides statistical evidence of employment trends, construct relationships, and hypothesis testing. The qualitative component provides interpretive depth, contextual understanding, and access to the lived experiences of graduates, employers, and administrators that survey data cannot capture.

Secondary analysis of SRU's annual graduate employment reports from 2019 to 2023 complements both primary components. These reports provide five-year trend data on employment rates, industry distribution, regional distribution, salary levels, and satisfaction rates that anchor the study's findings in institutional reality. The secondary data are triangulated against Jiangxi provincial statistics and Ministry of Education national data to assess the reliability of institutional reporting and to contextualize SRU outcomes within the broader regional and national employment environment.

Sampling

The main study targets 300 to 400 SRU graduates from the 2019 to 2023 cohorts, selected using stratified random sampling across all 14 faculties. Sample allocation is proportional to each faculty's share of total graduates, ensuring disciplinary representation. Gender distribution follows the observed institutional ratio of approximately 56% female and 44% male graduates, consistent with pilot study demographics. Power analysis at a significance level of 0.05 with medium effect size supports this sample range as sufficient for the regression models applied in the study.

For qualitative interviews, purposive sampling selected 20 participants: 10 recent graduates representing a cross-section of disciplines and employment outcomes, 6 local and regional employers from the education, manufacturing, retail, and public sectors, and 4 university administrators with direct responsibility for career services or curriculum development. Interview participants were selected to maximize variation in perspective while remaining directly relevant to the study's research questions.

Instrumentation and Pilot Study

The survey instrument was developed through a review of validated scales used in comparable graduate employability research and adapted to the SRU context. It measures four constructs: university support (10 items), individual factors (10 items), regional factors (8 items), and employment outcomes (8 items), all on a five-point Likert scale. A pilot study was administered to 50 SRU graduates between December 2023 and January 2024 to test instrument reliability and identify wording ambiguities before main data collection.

The pilot study returned an overall Cronbach's Alpha of 0.87, with subscale reliability values of 0.84 for university support, 0.82 for individual factors, 0.79 for regional factors, and 0.81 for employment outcomes, all exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Two items in Sections

C and D were revised for clarity following pilot feedback. Average completion time of 18 minutes was reduced to a target of 15 minutes by eliminating three redundant items. The instrument as revised was used for main data collection beginning February 2024.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis proceeds in three stages. Descriptive statistics first characterize the sample and provide means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions for all major variables. Pearson correlation analysis then examines the relationships between university support, individual factors, regional factors, and employment outcomes. Multiple linear regression tests the predictive contribution of each independent variable to graduate employment outcomes, with employment rate and employment satisfaction as dependent variables. Discipline membership is entered as a categorical predictor to test H4.

Qualitative data are analysed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Codes are generated inductively from interview transcripts in the first two coding rounds, then consolidated into themes through iterative comparison and researcher reflexivity. A joint display approach integrates quantitative and qualitative findings during the discussion phase, placing statistical findings and interview-derived themes side by side to identify convergences, contradictions, and complementary insights. Three pilot study participants validated the preliminary thematic map through member checking before final analysis.

FINDINGS

Five-Year Employment Trends at SRU

Secondary analysis of SRU's annual graduate employment reports from 2019 to 2023 reveals a consistent downward trend in overall employment rates, from 92.3% in 2019 to 86.5% in 2023, a decline of 5.8 percentage points over five years. This trajectory broadly mirrors national trends: China's graduate numbers exceeded 10 million for the first time in 2022, and youth unemployment reached a record high of 21.3% in June 2023 before data reporting was suspended (Nulimaimaiti, 2023). The 2022 and 2023 cohorts faced the most competitive markets in the study period, and SRU's employment rate decline accelerated correspondingly in those years.

Table 1:SRU Graduate Employment Trends, 2019-2023

Year	Employment Rate (%)	Avg. Salary (RMB/month)	Satisfaction Rate (%)	Graduates in Jiangxi (%)
2019	92.3	4,650	N/A	67.1
2020	90.1	4,800	74.7	66.4
2021	89.4	4,950	71.2	65.2
2022	87.8	5,050	67.3	64.1
2023	86.5	5,200	62.5	63.0

Note. Data derived from SRU Annual Graduate Employment Quality Reports, 2019-2023. Satisfaction data not reported in 2019 institutional report.

Industry distribution data for 2023 confirm a heavy concentration in the education sector at 49.68%, followed by the public sector at 12.5%, retail and wholesale at 11.46%, manufacturing at 7.01%, and other sectors collectively accounting for 19.35%. This distribution reflects SRU's institutional identity as a normal university and the relative stability of state-affiliated employment in an uncertain labour market (Li et al., 2023). The concentration also signals limited diversification of employment pathways, a vulnerability that becomes more pronounced as public-sector hiring slows.

Salary disparities across disciplines are substantial. STEM graduates earned an average starting salary of 5,800 yuan RMB per month in 2023, compared to the institutional average of 5,200 yuan and 4,700 yuan for humanities and education graduates. This 23.4% premium for STEM graduates over their humanities peers reflects national labour market structures in which technical skills command higher wages. The salary gap has widened over the five-year period, as industry demand for technical competencies has grown faster than demand for the types of skills that education programs typically produce.

Pilot Study Quantitative Results

The following pilot study findings are presented as preliminary benchmarks to guide hypothesis formulation and instrument refinement for the main study. They do not constitute final research findings. Main study data collection commenced in February 2024, with full results to be reported in subsequent publications.

Descriptive statistics from the pilot study (n=50) show that individual factors received the highest mean score (M=3.65, SD=0.59), indicating that students generally assess their personal competencies positively. University support received a moderate mean (M=3.42, SD=0.68), reflecting perceived institutional support with acknowledged room for improvement. Employment outcomes received a mean of 3.28 (SD=0.63). Regional factors received the lowest mean at 2.89 (SD=0.72), the only dimension scoring below the theoretical midpoint of 3.0, confirming that regional economic constraints weigh substantially on graduate employment perceptions.

Table 2: Pilot Study Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix (n=50)

Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation	University Support	Individual Factors	Regional	Outcomes
University Support	3.42	0.68	1.00	0.45*	0.32*	0.52**
Individual Factors	3.65	0.59	0.45*	1.00	0.28*	0.48**
Regional Factors	2.89	0.72	0.32*	0.28*	1.00	0.41*
Employment Outcomes	3.28	0.63	0.52**	0.48**	0.41*	1.00

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. All correlations are Pearson r coefficients. Data are from the December 2023 - January 2024 pilot survey.

The strongest correlation in the matrix is between university support and employment outcomes ($r=0.52$, $p<0.01$), providing preliminary support for H1 and pointing to institutional capacity as the most actionable predictor of graduate employment within SRU's control. Individual factors also correlate strongly with employment outcomes ($r=0.48$, $p<0.01$), offering preliminary support for H2. Regional factors show a significant but weaker association ($r=0.41$, $p<0.05$), consistent with H3's proposition that regional conditions mediate rather than directly determine employment outcomes. A notable inter-construct correlation between university support and individual factors ($r=0.45$) suggests that stronger institutional environments also cultivate stronger individual competencies, a dynamic that warrants further investigation in the main study.

Structural Contradictions Identified

Four structural contradictions emerged consistently across secondary data analysis and pilot study findings. First, a curriculum-market mismatch is evident in the gap between graduates' reported skill sets and employer expectations documented in employment quality reports. The education sector's dominance at 49.68% reflects curricula concentrated around teacher preparation, leaving graduates with limited preparation for the diversified labour market they actually enter upon graduation.

Second, regional employment imbalance is documented through secondary data. The share of SRU graduates remaining in Jiangxi Province declined from 66.4% in 2020 to 63.0% in 2023, and 64% of pilot study respondents expressed a preference for employment outside Jiangxi. Among those who stayed, 69.7% concentrated in Shangrao City, producing a geographic clustering of talent in the provincial hometown rather than distribution to areas with the greatest public service need. This pattern, consistent with Guohua et al.'s (2021) finding that graduates prefer economically vibrant cities regardless of home-region ties, represents a structural challenge for regional human capital development.

Third, an expectation-reality gap in employment satisfaction is confirmed by the sustained decline from 74.7% in 2020 to 62.5% in 2023. This 12.2-percentage-point drop over three years indicates

that graduates consistently encounter job conditions that fall short of expectations formed during their university years, a pattern consistent with findings on Chinese graduate employment satisfaction nationally (Li et al., 2023). Fourth, discipline-based disparities in employment competitiveness are visible in both salary data and industry placement rates. STEM graduates achieve faster placement and higher starting salaries, while humanities and education graduates face a more constrained and lower-wage employment environment.

DISCUSSION

Curriculum-Market Mismatch and H1

Preliminary data offer support for H1, that stronger curriculum-market alignment is positively associated with graduate employment outcomes. The 49.68% concentration of SRU graduates in the education sector, while partly reflecting institutional mission, also indicates that curriculum design has not produced sufficient versatility for graduates to compete effectively across multiple industries. Employer interview accounts describe candidates who are theoretically grounded but lack applied competencies, professional communication skills, and the adaptive thinking that cross-functional roles demand.

Compared with Australian universities where Jackson and Dean (2023) found that work-based learning dramatically improved employment readiness across disciplines, SRU's curriculum integration with industry remains limited. Only 42% of pilot respondents accessed career guidance, and the absence of systematic internship programs means that many graduates enter the labour market without the practical exposure that employers now treat as a baseline expectation. Noting that universities facing implementation constraints in scaling work-integrated learning tend to produce graduates whose skills are less competitive in industries outside the graduates' primary field of study.

Individual Competencies and H2

The pilot study provides preliminary support for H2. Individual factors received the highest mean score across all constructs ($M=3.65$), and the correlation between individual factors and employment outcomes ($r=0.48$, $p<0.01$) is second only to the university support correlation. Students who report higher personal competency scores, stronger communication skills, and greater extracurricular engagement demonstrate better employment outcomes in the preliminary data.

This finding aligns with Jiang et al.'s (2023) Shaanxi Province study, where individual academic performance and practical experience emerged as significant predictors alongside institutional factors. The important qualification, however, is that individual competencies are partly a function of institutional environment. The significant inter-construct correlation between university support and individual factors ($r=0.45$) in the pilot data suggests that institutions which invest in student development programs, peer learning environments, and practical experience opportunities also produce graduates with stronger individual competency profiles. Individual and institutional factors are therefore complementary, not competing, explanations of employment outcomes.

Regional Mediation and H3

Preliminary evidence is consistent with H3, that regional economic conditions mediate the relationship between institutional talent cultivation and graduate employment location choices. The low regional factors mean ($M=2.89$) and the clear trend of increasing talent outflow from Jiangxi Province suggest that even when SRU cultivates competent graduates, regional industrial structure and wage levels make local employment unattractive relative to coastal alternatives. This finding resonates with Cui et al.'s (2022) interregional human capital migration analysis, which documented a systematic concentration of graduates in more developed regions regardless of home-province ties.

The mediation pattern proposed in H3 has practical significance. It implies that SRU cannot fully solve its graduate employment challenge through curriculum reform alone: unless the regional economic environment offers competitive employment options, improvements in graduate quality will primarily benefit coastal employers who hire SRU graduates who migrate. Policy interventions at the provincial government level, including employer incentives to create high-quality local jobs and infrastructure investments to diversify Jiangxi's industrial base, are necessary complements to institutional-level curriculum changes.

Discipline-Based Disparities and H4

Preliminary data support H4, that significant employment competitiveness differences exist across disciplinary groups. The 23.4% salary differential between STEM and humanities graduates, combined with disciplinary variation in employment satisfaction and time to placement, reflects structural labour market conditions in which technical competencies are rewarded disproportionately. Compared with national findings from Li et al. (2023), who documented a strong preference for state-sector employment among college-educated workers generally, SRU's humanities and education graduates are particularly concentrated in state-affiliated employment, a pattern that provides security but limits wage growth and career development diversity.

These disparities call for targeted interventions rather than uniform institutional approaches. Humanities and education graduates who participated in cross-faculty projects or internships in sectors beyond education in the pilot study reported better satisfaction outcomes than those who did not. This suggests that experiential learning tailored to non-STEM students, exposing them to industries where communication, analytical reasoning, and cultural knowledge are valued, can partially offset discipline-based structural disadvantages without requiring students to change their field of study.

Institutional and Policy Implications

Three institutional priority areas emerge from the combined evidence. First, curriculum reform should embed applied learning components, industry case studies, and capstone projects into programs where they are currently absent. Particular attention is warranted for education and humanities programs, where the gap between academic content and employer expectations is widest. Second, university-industry partnerships should be formalized and expanded. Arranz et al.'s (2022) social capital framework provides a practical rationale: partnerships create employment information channels and referral networks that are especially valuable in regional markets with limited formal recruitment infrastructure. Third, career guidance services should be

scaled and restructured from a reactive, pre-graduation function to a proactive, multi-year developmental process, consistent with Sun and Yuen's (2012) distinction between employment guidance and genuine career planning.

At the provincial government level, the findings support policies that incentivize local employer engagement with SRU graduates, including tax benefits for enterprises offering structured internships or first employment to local graduates, and targeted investment in diversifying Jiangxi's industrial base toward higher-technology sectors. Without such structural economic interventions, institutional improvements at SRU will continue to primarily benefit the graduates who leave the province, rather than the communities and regional economy that SRU was established to serve.

CONCLUSION

This study documents four structural contradictions shaping graduate employment at Shangrao Normal University between 2019 and 2023: curriculum-market mismatch, regional employment imbalance, expectation-reality gaps in satisfaction, and discipline-based disparities. The five-year decline in employment rates from 92.3% to 86.5%, combined with a 12.2-percentage-point fall in employment satisfaction, reflects not a temporary market disruption but enduring structural misalignments between what a regional normal university produces and what China's evolving labour market demands.

Pilot study data and secondary analysis consistently identify university support as the most actionable predictor of employment outcomes within institutional control ($r=0.52$, $p<0.01$). Curriculum reform, expanded university-industry partnerships, and strengthened career guidance services represent the three highest-priority interventions, with evidence from international and Chinese research supporting each. Regional economic mediation, however, means that institutional actions alone are insufficient: provincial policy investment in industrial diversification and local employer engagement is a necessary complement.

Preliminary support for all four hypotheses (H1 through H4) is established through pilot study correlations and secondary data analysis. Main study findings, to be reported in subsequent publications, will provide full hypothesis testing using regression analysis on the complete graduate survey dataset ($n=300-400$), enabling stronger causal inference and discipline-level comparative analysis. Future research should adopt a longitudinal design tracking SRU graduates across multiple post-graduation years, and a multi-institution comparative study across inland provincial universities would clarify which patterns are SRU-specific and which are structural features of regional higher education in central China more broadly.

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