

Drivers and Strategies for Mitigating the Underutilization of Career Guidance Resources in Higher Education: A Psychological Distance Perspective

Yu Tian

Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China, 100024

Abstract: While higher education institutions continue to expand their career guidance resources, they frequently encounter a dilemma characterized by low utilization rates among university students. This study introduces Psychological Distance Theory to investigate the underlying causes of this supply-demand mismatch from the perspective of front-line counselors and career guidance practitioners. The research reveals that excessive psychological distance across temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical dimensions leads to cognitive abstraction and behavioral inertia among students. Consequently, career guidance initiatives should adopt strategies such as the decomposition of objectives into micro-tasks, the decentralization of resources, the integration of peer-led mentoring, and the visualization of experiential processes. These interventions effectively shorten psychological distance and activate student agency during the job search, facilitating a precise alignment between resource supply and student demand.

Keywords: Psychological Distance Theory; University Career Guidance Resources; Resource Underutilization.

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1. Introduction

The ongoing expansion of higher education in China has resulted in a record number of graduates and an increasingly challenging employment landscape. Consequently, governmental authorities and academic institutions have established extensive career guidance systems that include career planning courses, resume clinics, individual counseling, and recruitment seminars. Despite these efforts, practitioners observe a significant paradox characterized by the disconnect between student sentiment and behavior. While students report high levels of career-related anxiety, they often demonstrate a surprising indifference toward the comprehensive resources provided by their institutions, which leads to the underutilization of valuable institutional support. Although existing literature examines resource quality and promotional strategies, the internal cognitive processes of the students remain under-explored.

This study utilizes Psychological Distance Theory, as proposed by Trope and Liberman, to analyze these cognitive dynamics^[1]. The theory posits that human perception is shaped by the distance between an object and the self across four dimensions, which are temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical distance^[2]. Increased psychological distance typically leads to abstract mental representations and diminished motivation, whereas proximity fosters concrete representations that facilitate decisive action. Applying this framework provides a systematic lens to understand why students overlook available career resources and offers a theoretical basis for resolving the misalignment between service provision and student engagement.

2. Problem Formulation: The Phenomenon of Resource Underutilization

In the practical implementation of career guidance, a sharp contrast exists between the objective abundance of resources and the subjective indifference of the student population. This discrepancy manifests through several distinct cognitive and behavioral patterns.

First, there is a coexistence of high cognitive anxiety and a detached observer orientation. While many students express profound confusion regarding their post-graduation prospects during individual consultations, they frequently perceive resources or recruitment events as irrelevant to their immediate needs, which results in a persistent outsider mentality^[3].

Second, a temporal contradiction occurs between chronic procrastination and reactive preparation. Students in

their early academic years often operate under the misconception that employment is a concern exclusive to the graduation period, and they consequently neglect proactive career planning resources. When the final year arrives, this lack of cumulative preparation induces panic and leads to avoidance behaviors, which are often characterized as delayed or suspended employment.

Finally, a psychological barrier persists despite the presence of physical and virtual infrastructure. Although universities provide dedicated counseling centers and comprehensive digital networks, the actual engagement with individualized consultation remains minimal. Low completion rates for online career assessments and instructional modules suggest that physical and virtual accessibility does not inherently translate into psychological proximity or engagement. The core challenge of these phenomena lies in the failure to transform the objective existence of resource provision into a subjective sense of relevance. This significant misalignment between supply and demand necessitates a rigorous analysis of the underlying cognitive mechanisms within the student population.

3.Causal Analysis: A Multidimensional Perspective Based on Psychological Distance Theory

Psychological Distance Theory offers a robust conceptual framework for interpreting the underutilization of career guidance resources among university students. The primary reason students neglect these resources is that such provisions appear cognitively distant, unfamiliar, or characterized by excessive uncertainty.

Temporal distance plays a foundational role in this perception. Psychological research suggests that the further an event is in the future, the more individuals rely on abstract, high-level construals to process it. For lower-division students, employment is a distal event that may not occur for several years. This temporal gap causes their cognitive representation of career development to remain at a macroscopic level, such as a vague desire for a successful career, while lacking the low-level construals necessary for concrete action. Consequently, students fail to engage in immediate tasks like attending industry seminars or refining resumes, as the perceived distance diminishes the urgency of current resources.

Beyond time, spatial distance creates significant psychological barriers. Spatial distance encompasses both physical geography and the psychological barriers constructed by the layout of the environment. In many universities, career services centers are situated within administrative buildings characterized by a formal and bureaucratic atmosphere. This spatial arrangement creates a psychological boundary for students who primarily occupy residential and academic zones. Consequently, when encountering career confusion, students perceive the administrative environment as intimidating or inconvenient. This physical displacement translates into cognitive friction and avoidance behaviors, discouraging them from initiating counseling appointments.

Social distance refers to the perceived dissimilarity between the self and target groups or individuals. In university career guidance, this alienation is particularly pronounced. Guest speakers invited by school are often highly successful alumni decorated with academic or professional accolades. For average students experiencing identity confusion, a vast social distance is perceived between themselves and these elite models. Believing that the experiences of these outliers are inapplicable to their own trajectories, students develop identity-based resistance, refusing to internalize these resources for their personal development^[4].

Finally, hypothetical distance reflects the perceived probability or authenticity of an outcome. When students perceive the utility of a resource to be low, the hypothetical distance increases. Skepticism toward career planning courses or resume workshops often leads students to believe that such resources are superficial or lack practical value^[5]. If the certainty of securing a desirable job offer through these resources is subjectively low, the resulting hypothetical distance encourages avoidance behaviors. Students frequently choose immediate gratifications, such as entertainment or social media, as a means of escaping the anxiety of reality rather than investing effort into resources they perceive as potentially ineffective.

4.Strategic Solutions: Optimizing Career Guidance by Reducing Psychological Distance

Addressing the systemic underutilization of career guidance resources requires a fundamental paradigm shift

from a provider-centered model to a student-centered approach. University counselors and career practitioners should act as facilitators of integration, employing the following strategies to systematically shorten the psychological distance and enhance the utilization rate of guidance resources.

4.1 Shortening Temporal Distance: From Distant Vision to Immediate Execution

The primary strategy for mitigating temporal distance involves the integration of career education throughout the entire academic lifecycle, which effectively dismantles the misconception that career planning is reserved solely for senior students. By initiating professional enlightenment during freshman orientation, the overarching objective of career development is decomposed into discrete and actionable tasks distributed across every academic term. This transition from abstract aspirations to concrete, goal-driven activities replaces distal slogans, such as improving general competitiveness, with proximal milestones including the completion of an initial resume or the conduct of industry alumni interviews. By significantly reducing the perceived temporal gap between current efforts and long-term professional outcomes, this approach fosters the requisite urgency to stimulate immediate and proactive student engagement.

4.2 Minimizing Spatial Distance: Construction of One-Stop and Immersive Guidance Matrices

Within the physical dimension, this approach aligns with the national initiative for one-stop student community construction by decentralizing career services into student residential zones. By establishing career workshops and resume counseling corners directly within student dormitories and academic departments, the strategy ensures that guidance resources are readily accessible, which effectively eliminates the sense of spatial isolation. Simultaneously, the strategy emphasizes precision delivery within virtual spaces by leveraging new media platforms such as TikTok. Lengthy career lectures are restructured into concise micro-videos that highlight essential practical insights. This delivery format conforms to the digital consumption habits of contemporary students, enabling zero-distance access to guidance resources through a virtual medium.

4.3 Narrowing Social Distance: Cultivating Peer-Led and Empathetic Counseling Teams

In the selection of guest speakers, priority is given to recent graduates who possess academic backgrounds similar to those of the target audience and have successfully navigated employment challenges after initial setbacks. This shared social identity effectively minimizes the perceived gap between the guest and the student, which significantly enhances the credibility and replicability of the shared experiences. Furthermore, counselors adopt communication styles that align with the linguistic habits of the student demographic during individual consultations. By establishing deep emotional resonance and utilizing accessible discourse, counselors dismantle the social role barriers between faculty and students, thereby creating a foundation of trust that facilitates more effective guidance.

4.4 Reducing Hypothetical Distance: Converting Uncertainty into Certainty

The strategy for minimizing hypothetical distance focuses on replacing abstract negative pre-judgments with concrete positive experiences. Career guidance center can facilitate this transition by providing low-barrier trial opportunities, such as thirty-minute introductory consultations or preliminary interpretations of career assessment results. According to Construal Level Theory, once individuals engage in these specific experiences, their mental representation of the service shifts from an abstract concept to a concrete one, allowing positive outcomes to displace prior negative expectations. Furthermore, the implementation of anonymous communication channels addresses the psychological barriers that often prevent students from asking even basic questions. By providing a platform for students to voice their hesitations without fear of judgment, the uncertainty surrounding the decision to seek help becomes a subject of manageable dialogue rather than a source of avoidance. Finally, the visualization of service procedures via flowcharts or short videos on appointment platforms effectively demystifies the guidance process. By detailing specific steps such as entering the office, the initial assessment, and the subsequent collaborative discussion, the service is transformed from an unknown abstract framework into a sequence of tangible action steps that students

can easily internalize.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the underutilization of career guidance resources among university students is not merely a consequence of personal inertia or a lack of ambition. Instead, it represents a complex process of psychological representation. Analysis based on psychological distance theory indicates that when career guidance resources diverge from student self-perception across temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical dimensions, students experience a misalignment in construal levels. While they perceive employment pressure at a macro level, the excessive distance of resources prevents the initiation of specific job-seeking actions at the micro level.

Given the current challenges in the labor market, higher education institutions must evolve beyond their traditional roles as mere providers and distributors of resources. Counselors and career guidance practitioners should internalize the cognitive patterns of students by applying psychological distance theory. By implementing strategies such as the concretization of goals, the integration of resources into student communities, the adoption of peer-led guidance, and the creation of scenario-based experiences, practitioners can effectively eliminate the sense of alienation prevalent in the student body. Bridging the gap between institutional resources and the student experience is essential to activate student agency. This alignment ensures that guidance resources achieve their intended impact, ultimately facilitating the educational objective of high-quality and sustainable employment.

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