

THE EFFECT OF LEARNING INPUTS ON EMPLOYABILITY AMONG UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN SHANDONG PROVINCE: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF INTEGRITY

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Abstract: *With increasing competition in the labour market, enhancing employability of university students has become an important concern for higher education institutions. The primary objective was to examine the relationship among learning inputs, integrity, and employability among university undergraduate students in Shandong Province, China. A quantitative research design was adopted, and 384 full-time undergraduate students from six universities in Shandong Province were selected as research participants through a systematic sampling approach. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire based on established measurement scales. Structural equation modelling (SEM) was conducted to examine the hypothesized relationships. Findings confirmed that learning inputs exerted a significant positive influence on both integrity and employability among university undergraduate students. Furthermore, integrity significantly positively predicted employability. The mediation analysis demonstrated that integrity partially mediated the relationship between learning inputs and employability. This study concludes that improving learning inputs of students and cultivating integrity can effectively enhance employability. The findings suggest that universities should strengthen academic guidance, integrity education, and career development programmes to comprehensively improve employment competitiveness of students.*

Keywords: *Learning inputs; Integrity; Employability; University Undergraduate Students*

Introduction

The expansion of higher education has substantially increased the number of university graduates, intensifying labour market competition and making graduate employability a critical concern for scholars and employers. Employability is no longer simply reflected in whether graduates can obtain employment, but also in whether they can achieve sustainable career development, which requires professional knowledge, diversified skills, adaptability, self-management ability, and ethical awareness (Donald et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2021; Healy et al., 2022). In China, the increasingly competitive employment market highlights the importance of analyzing the factors influencing employability of university students, particularly amid economic transformation in Shandong Province.

In the process of employment, students' psychology and learning behavior are two important factors that can affect employment ability. In the research process, the investment of learning resources is regarded as the investment of cognition, emotion and behavior, which requires students to persist for a long time and put forward the concept of student participation, which is consistent with the Utrecht student work participation scale. UWES-S (Schaufeli et al., 2002) is an effective tool for operationalization. Some scholars have pointed out that students have a high degree of learning participation, which is conducive to the development of professional ability and self-regulation ability, and has a positive impact on employability (Lei et al., 2022; Li et al., 2023). In previous studies, most scholars analyzed the relationship between learning inputs and employability, but did not pay enough attention to the transformation of learning inputs into employability.

Integrity is the key to the relationship between learning inputs and employability. Integrity is a multi-dimensional concept, including honesty, responsibility and other aspects, which is highly valued in the professional field (Succi et al., 2020). Employers hope that graduates have strong sense of responsibility and can abide by professional ethics. From the development point of view, students can cultivate integrity through learning, which requires students to abide by discipline and pursue perseverance, which is conducive to the formation of good behavior habits and the cultivation of good moral character. Therefore, if students have a strong sense of integrity, they can abide by professional ethics and have a strong sense of responsibility, which can bring confidence to enterprises and get employment opportunities. Therefore, it can be seen that integrity is an important mediating variable, not just a direct predictor of employability.

Although the existing research focuses on the relationship among learning inputs, integrity and employability, there are still some limitations. First, the mechanism by which learning inputs affects employability requires further exploration (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Donald et al., 2020). Second, the role of integrity in the relationship between learning inputs and employability remains to be further examined in empirical studies (Yorke, 2006; Lowden et al., 2011; Byrne, 2022). Third, limited evidence is available regarding undergraduates in Shandong Province (Ma et al., 2024; Tao, 2021). Through this research, it can further grasp the relationship between learning inputs and employability of undergraduates in Shandong Province, and analyze the role of integrity in this relationship.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundation

In this study, the COR theory and the basic principles of positive psychology are taken as the theoretical basis. The COR theory points out that in order to achieve ideal results, individuals

need to accumulate resources and protect resources (Hobfoll, 1989). In the context of higher education, students need to invest more in learning, which is a necessary personal resource. Only by continuously investing in academic activities can students accumulate knowledge, improve their abilities, and develop strong psychological resilience, which is the key to preparing for their careers.

Positive psychology theory holds that if individuals can show good performance in development, they should be supported by positive behavior and have outstanding performance in terms of strength (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). According to this theory, learning inputs is not only an academic activity, but also a learning experience, which can cultivate students' sense of responsibility and self-regulation ability, and enable them to form correct values. Therefore, learning inputs can be divided into two ways, one is to master professional knowledge and skills, the other is to cultivate personal positive attributes, and to have good integrity. In the light of the above views, this paper constructs a theoretical model, which holds that integrity is the key to the relationship between learning inputs and employability.

Learning inputs and Employability

Whether students have strong employability has become an important indicator to measure whether the quality of higher education is guaranteed. In this way, the comprehensive quality of students is effectively improved, and their academic achievements can be reflected in many aspects. In the study of employability, scholars put forward many concepts, including personal adaptability, professional quality, career management ability, transferable skills and so on, which can be used to evaluate the employability of students (Donald et al., 2020).

Empirical research results show that there is a positive relationship between students' learning experience and employability. Students' learning enthusiasm, willingness and behavior are all related to their career development and learning ability (Lei et al., 2022). Only by actively participating in learning can students form strong problem-solving ability, continuously improve their knowledge reserve, and form good learning ability, which is an inevitable requirement for professional employment (Healy et al., 2022).

At present, most scholars focus on employment ability from the external level, take curriculum design, vocational guidance and so on as research objects, and do not pay attention to students' internal cognitive ability and metacognition. In this study, the resource conservation theory is introduced, which means that individuals can obtain more resources in the process of participating in meaningful activities, and thus form a virtuous cycle (Hobfoll, 1989). In this study, it is believed that students with strong investment willingness in learning are willing to accumulate more resources, and their employability will be significantly enhanced.

In the development of higher education in Shandong Province, it is necessary to cultivate high-quality applied talents to promote the improvement of economic level and promote social development. In this case, it is necessary to analyze the relationship between academic input and employment rate, so as to put forward reasonable research questions.

H1: Learning inputs positively predict employability.

Learning inputs and Integrity

Integrity is a multidimensional personal attribute that encompasses honesty, accountability, and ethical sensitivity—qualities increasingly valued in professional settings. In academic research

and professional work, people are fully aware of the importance of integrity, and employers are increasingly concerned about the ethical behavior of talents (Succi et al., 2020).

Although previous studies have analyzed the connotation of integrity, they have not made a systematic analysis of how to cultivate students' integrity in the process of education (Bretag, 2020). With the support of positive psychology, students should not only acquire knowledge in the process of university education, but also achieve personal growth and development. It requires students to show strong perseverance in learning, and to be responsible for their behavior, which can gradually cultivate students' good moral awareness. Learning inputs is a necessary way to build resources, and students have excellent personal qualities. Students with higher engagement in learning are more likely to develop self-regulation, responsibility, and positive personal qualities (Bond et al., 2020).

In the process of cultivating integrity, most scholars believe that it is a key content of graduate education, but there are not enough scholars to focus on how students' learning behavior can promote the cultivation of integrity. Therefore, this paper attempts to make up for this deficiency by examining the relationship between integrity and learning inputs.

H2: Learning inputs positively predict Integrity.

Integrity and Employability

In contemporary labor markets, employability is a composite concept. It not only requires employees to master excellent technical skills, but also requires them to have a good personality. In this way, graduates can have a high level of professional knowledge, and they can also have a strong sense of integrity and ethics, and be recognized by employers (Succi et al., 2020).

Empirical research shows that more and more employers prefer graduates who are responsible and have good professional ethics, because they have outstanding performance in organizational commitment, career development and so on (Tomlinson, 2022). Integrity is an important prerequisite for the formation of trust relationship, which requires enterprises to assume responsibility and enhance the employability of talents.

From the perspective of positive psychology, integrity is a kind of personal resource, which can play an important role in career development and social development. Some people show a high level of integrity, which requires consistency of behavior and strong adaptability to the environment, and such people can better adapt to the development of the society.

Generally speaking, in the previous research, employability is regarded as the key content, and scholars have focused on the analysis of skills and abilities, but they have not analyzed the impact of ethics and morality in depth. In this study, the personal attributes of the person are analyzed, and the integrity of the person is regarded as an important indicator to measure employability.

H3: Integrity positively predict employability.

The Mediating Role of Integrity

Although the relationship between learning inputs and employability has been confirmed in the previous research, the specific mechanism has not been accurately grasped. In this study,

integrity is regarded as a mediating variable, which can enhance students' employability through learning investment and guide students to form good behavioral habits.

From the perspective of resource conservation theory, all individuals need to pursue resources in the process of development, and make reasonable arrangements for resources. This paper analyzes that learning inputs is an initial investment, and personal participation in education activities can cultivate integrity as a personal resource. With the increase of students' cognitive and emotional investment, they will show a strong sense of responsibility, self-discipline and ethics, and the cultivation of these qualities will promote the improvement of students' integrity, which will become an important indicator in the analysis of employability.

Integrity can provide a reasonable theoretical framework, guide students to achieve a transformation from learning to employment, and not only make students have a strong employability, but also guide students to develop good psychological quality and take action, so that students' learning experience can play a role in career development.

H4: The integrity has a mediating effect in the relationship between learning inputs and employability.

Methodology

Research Design and Participants

In this research, the cross-sectional research method is introduced to analyze the relationship between learning inputs, integrity and employability among university students in Shandong Province, China. This method can quantify variables and analyze the relationship between variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). In the process of data collection, questionnaires are used to get the required data.

The target population consisted of undergraduate students from 72 general undergraduate institutions in Shandong Province. Since employability development is particularly important during the transition from higher education to the labour market, senior undergraduate students were selected as the respondents of this study. A systematic sampling approach was adopted. First, six undergraduate institutions were selected from the 72 institutions in Shandong Province. Second, the number of respondents from each selected institution was determined based on the proportion of graduating students in 6 universities to ensure an appropriate representation of the sample. Online questionnaires were then distributed to graduating undergraduate students from the selected institutions. The six schools are Ludong University, Jinan University, Qingdao Agricultural University, Shandong University of Science and Technology, Shandong Second Medical University and Yantai University. The online questionnaire is filled out by the students who are about to graduate.

A total of 384 valid questionnaires were collected, and the participating students came from different majors, including Engineering and technology science, Humanities and social science, Natural science, medical science, Agricultural science. Male account for 56%, and female account for 44%. All students participated voluntarily after providing informed consent in this study.

Research Items

In order to understand the learning inputs of students, the questionnaire is designed and evaluated in three dimensions, and the measurement content can be adapted to the Chinese

higher education environment, and the translation and adaptation are strictly implemented to enhance the pertinence of the context. Subsequently, experts evaluated the validity of the questionnaire, including experts in human resource management, organizational behavior and so on, who paid attention to whether the questionnaire content was appropriate and whether it was related to the context.

In the process of investigation and research, the learning inputs scale is used to measure the learning inputs of students, which is an important tool. In the process of using this tool, the learning inputs scale draws on the Utrecht work engagement scale (Schaufeli et al., 2002), which has three dimensions: absorption, dedication and so on. Li et al. (2010) translated the learning inputs scale into Chinese and conducted validation, which showed that the scale had good psychometric properties and could be used to evaluate the academic performance of Chinese students. The scale includes 17 questions, which require students to give answers according to the Likert scale, which has 5 levels, the lowest score is 1, the highest score is 5, and the score is calculated to reflect the learning inputs of students. The internal consistency of this research is relatively high, which can be seen from the Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

In this study, The version of the university Student Integrity Psychology Questionnaire used is based on Yang and Zhang (2019). The two parts of this scale are called the positive and negative orientations. The three factors of the Positive Orientation module are integrity, virtue and conscientiousness; the three factors of the Negative Orientation module are self-love, falsehood and arrogance. The integrity of students is evaluated by questionnaire, which includes 30 questions and focuses on six aspects, including integrity, virtue and so on. All participants use a five-point scale to evaluate the items, including strong disagreement, agreement and so on. The reliability of the test results is relatively high, with a total Cronbach's α of 0.892.

In this study, the University Student Employment Scale was used to measure the employment ability of students, which was developed by Song in 2012. This scale has 22 questions and four sub-scales, including career development ability, professional application ability, communication and cooperation ability, and job-seeking adaptability. The internal consistency of the whole scale is relatively high, and the coefficient is 0.916.

Data Analysis

SPSS and AMOS are used in the study of the above data. Common method bias analysis were carried out. The study introduced the two-step method into the structural equation model (SEM) to evaluate the measurement model, and first analyzed the confirmatory factor (CFA). In the evaluation, the reliability, validity and other parameters of the measurement model were analyzed, and the measurement model was evaluated to verify whether it was reasonable. Then, the direct effect and mediating effect are verified using the structural model.

Results

Common Method Bias Test

In the process of completing this study, the self-report questionnaire method is used to collect data, and the most serious problem is the common method deviation. Therefore, in this study, the exploratory factor analysis method is used to process the data, and the relevant research results are analyzed by using Harman's single factor test, which can be seen that all measurement items are analyzed in the analysis process. Thirteen factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted, and the first factor explained 28.75% of the total variance, which

was below the recommended threshold of 50%, indicating that common method bias was unlikely to be a serious concern. In addition, CFA was conducted to assess the reliability and validity of the measurement model.

Measurement Model Assessment

In order to ensure the effectiveness of the research, this paper draws on the research results of Anderson and Gerbing (1988) to construct the measurement model with the help of SEM, and introduces three variables: EMP, INT and LI to analyze the reliability and validity of the measurement model. After the analysis, it is found that the model fits the data well, and the following indicators can be obtained: $\chi^2/df = 1.09$, CFI = 0.990, TLI = 0.990, RMSEA = 0.014, SRMR = 0.048. The standardized factor loadings of all items exceeded 0.50, indicating acceptable indicator reliability. At the same time, The composite reliability (CR) values exceeded 0.70 and the average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.50, indicating satisfactory convergent validity (Hair et al., 2019).

To evaluate the discriminant validity, it is necessary to compare the square root of the average variance extracted with the correlation between the constructs. If the former is greater than the latter, it means that the discriminant validity is ideal. The data in the table show that the square root of the average variance extracted for each construct is greater than the correlation between the constructs, which means that the discriminant validity is satisfactory (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 1: Evaluation of the Measurement Model

Variable	LI	INT	EMP	CR	AVE
LI	0.733			0.952	0.538
INT	0.512	0.743		0.948	0.552
EMP	0.486	0.543	0.731	0.962	0.535

Note: The diagonal values represent the square roots of the AVEs for each construct, while the off-diagonal values represent the interconstruct correlation coefficients.

Structural Model Assessment

After verifying that the measurement model is reasonable, AMOS is used to analyze the structural model to grasp the relationship between the various variables in the model. The goodness of fit of the structural model is relatively high ($\chi^2/df = 2.086$, CFI = 0.964, TLI = 0.952, RMSEA = 0.057, SRMR = 0.043), which means that the model can be used for analysis and can get reasonable data. Therefore, the relationship between learning inputs and employability is further analyzed.

Direct Effect and Hypothesis Testing

In order to test the hypothesis put forward in this study, the direct effect among the variables is analyzed. As shown in Table 2, there is a significant positive relationship between learning inputs and employability ($\beta = 0.486$, $p < 0.001$), which is enough to show that Hypothesis 1 is reasonable. This result shows that the more investment in learning activities, the stronger the ability to develop, and the stronger the ability to achieve ideal employment.

Learning inputs is an important factor in predicting integrity ($\beta = 0.512$, $p < .001$), which is enough to prove that Hypothesis 2 is reasonable. The analysis shows that students' learning inputs is positively related to self-discipline and ethical awareness. The integrity of students can

have a positive impact on their employability ($\beta = 0.543$, $p < .001$), which is enough to support Hypothesis 3. This means that the personal characteristics of students have a significant impact on employability.

The results of the structural model analysis demonstrated that learning inputs had significant positive effects on Employability and Integrity, while Integrity also had a significant positive effect on Employability. These findings indicate that the hypothesized direct relationships among learning inputs, Integrity, and Employability were supported. Therefore, H1, H2, and H3 were supported.

Table 2: Structural Model Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path Relationship	β	p-value	Decision
H1	LI $\rightarrow$ EMP	0.486	<0.001	Supported
H2	LI $\rightarrow$ INT	0.512	<0.001	Supported
H3	INT $\rightarrow$ EMP	0.543	<0.001	Supported

Mediating Effect of Integrity

In this study, the mediating role of integrity in the association between learning inputs and employability is analyzed. Integrity is introduced into the structural model as a mediating variable. In this case, learning inputs has a significant impact on employability ($\beta = 0.214$, 95% CI [0.128, 0.305]). Integrity significantly mediated the relationship between learning inputs and Employability, with a significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.272$, 95% CI [0.193, 0.356]). The bootstrap confidence interval did not include zero, indicating that the indirect effect was statistically significant. Therefore, Integrity partially mediated the relationship between learning inputs and Employability.

The partial mediating effect means that learning inputs will have an impact on employability through two mechanisms. Firstly, students' learning inputs can promote the improvement of employability, and students can have a deep understanding of a certain field of knowledge and master various skills. Secondly, students' learning inputs can enhance employability in an indirect way, so that students can form a sound personality, develop their career, and become a trustworthy and responsible person. Therefore, integrity is no longer just a variable, but also a reasonable explanation of how students' learning experience can be transformed into employment results.

Table 3: Results for Mediation Analysis

Effect	β	95% Confidence Interval	Decision
Total Effect	0.486	—	Significant
Direct Effect	0.214	[0.128, 0.305]	Significant
Indirect Effect	0.272	[0.193, 0.356]	Significant

Conclusion

The research results are consistent with the positive psychology theory and the theory of resource conservation. The influence of learning inputs on the employability of undergraduate students in Shandong Province was analyzed, and the mediating effect of integrity was analyzed from the perspectives of conservation of resources theory and positive psychology theory. At the same time, it is pointed out that if the learning inputs is higher, it will be conducive to the improvement of professional ability and career ability, and have a positive impact on

employment ability. This is consistent with the previous research results, which believe that if students actively participate in learning activities, their personal abilities and transferable skills will be significantly enhanced (Jackson et al., 2021). There is a positive relationship between learning inputs and integrity, which means that if students invest more in learning, they can cultivate good qualities, such as strong sense of responsibility and discipline. This conclusion is consistent with the previous research results, which believe that students' participation in learning activities is conducive to their development (Lei et al., 2022). Integrity can also have a positive impact on employability, which means that graduates have strong employability competition because of their integrity and high moral standards (Succi et al., 2020). The most important thing is that integrity can play an important role in the relationship between employability and learning inputs, which shows that learning experience can not only improve employability through the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but also cultivate positive personal qualities.

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