

Career adaptability-driven curriculum innovation in private Chinese universities: A 4c linked-course model integrated with studio counseling and competition pedagogy

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Abstract: Career education in Chinese private universities is often delivered in isolated segments, weakening its effect on students' long-term career development. Drawing on Savickas's life-span, life-space theory, this paper puts forward a Career Adaptability-driven 4C Linked-Course Model that reorganizes four existing courses into a sequence running from semester 1 to semester 6. The model has been piloted at Qingdao City University since Fall 2025 and brings together three components: a faculty-run XiaoZhi Studio for counseling referrals, two national competitions adopted as authentic assessment tools, and cooperation with external enterprises. Early data indicate gains across the four dimensions of career adaptability—concern, control, curiosity, and confidence—and point to a workable way of turning career education into a sustained, student-centered developmental process.

Keywords: career adaptability; private universities; curriculum design; studio counseling

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Private universities in China enrolled approximately 28% of undergraduates as of 2024, serving as critical suppliers of application-oriented talent. Operating under tighter resource constraints than public institutions, they face intensified pressure to demonstrate immediate graduate employability. This market-driven accountability produces a distinctive student profile: students tend to exhibit clearer short-term employment goals but weaker career metacognition—they know they need a job but struggle to articulate how their evolving interests and competencies map onto long-term trajectories [1][2].

Most private institutions simply adopt the model used by public universities, squeezing career guidance into one course offered late in the programme. Such a compressed arrangement leaves little room for trying out options or for reflection [3].

1.2 Theoretical gap

Career adaptability theory, first consolidated by Savickas [4], provides an alternative starting point. The theory treats adaptability as a set of psychosocial resources that help a person handle changing work circumstances, and organizes it around four dimensions: concern (thinking ahead), control (self-direction), curiosity (exploring alternatives), and

confidence (believing in one's capacity to cope) [5]. Research has linked the construct to job search self-efficacy and employment outcomes among graduates in China [6], and the four-dimensional Career Adapt-Abilities Scale has been validated in the Chinese context [7]. Even so, turning the theory into a clearly sequenced curriculum in Chinese private universities has rarely been attempted.

1.3 The present study

This paper reports a curriculum reform at Qingdao City University, where the author has served as curriculum director for Career Development and Employment Guidance since Fall 2025. The reform restructured four courses into a six-semester 4C model (Career Planning—Competence—Competition—Career Placement). It is distinctive in three ways: (1) embedding XiaoZhi Studio into course referrals; (2) integrating national competitions as authentic assessment; and (3) incorporating HR practitioners into course delivery.

The study addresses two research questions:

RQ1: How can career adaptability theory be operationalized into a vertically sequenced, six-semester curriculum within a resource-constrained private university context?

RQ2: What are the preliminary outcomes, as measured by student reach, counseling engagement, and stakeholder participation?

2 Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Career adaptability

Savickas placed career adaptability at the centre of how people manage career transitions. In a three-wave study of Chinese university graduates, Guan et al. found that the four dimensions of adaptability predicted job search self-efficacy and later employment status, with self-efficacy acting as a mediator. Hou et al. constructed and initially validated the Chinese form of the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale, confirming its four-factor structure. Building on this work, Koen et al. showed that career adaptability can itself be developed through targeted training [8], lending support to the idea that it should be treated as a design principle for curriculum rather than only as an outcome to be measured.

2.2 Career education in Chinese private universities

The literature repeatedly points to structural weaknesses in how career education is organized: courses are short and disconnected, teaching relies heavily on large lectures, and labour-market information is not well integrated. A number of institutions have tried multi-course arrangements—notably the modular curriculum at Xi'an Peihua University, the industry-aligned model at Wuhan Business University, and the three-course integration at Chongqing Polytechnic. Yet none of these cases brings counseling, competition-based learning, and enterprise involvement together within a single framework [9].

2.3 Four-dimension optimization framework

This study adopts a four-dimension optimization framework: (1) value orientation, shifting the curriculum logic toward student development; (2) content reconstruction, restructuring learning objectives across courses; (3) method innovation, implementing studio counseling and competition-driven learning projects; and (4) mechanism assurance, covering quality monitoring, faculty training, and partnerships.

2.4 Research hypotheses

Based on the above, this study proposes:

H1: A vertically sequenced multi-course system will produce higher career adaptability than a single late-stage course model.

H2: Embedding studio counseling within course referral systems will increase help-seeking behavior among students

with high career uncertainty.

H3: Competition-integrated pedagogy will enhance career curiosity and confidence by providing authentic exploration opportunities.

3 Curriculum system design and implementation

3.1 Three-tier learning objectives

The curriculum is anchored in a three-tier objective system mapped to the adaptability framework (Table 1).

Table 1. Three-tier learning objectives and adaptability dimensions

Tier / Category	Adaptability dimension(s)	Description
Tier 1 — Affect: Career Awareness	Concern	Students develop future-oriented career planning awareness through self-assessment and goal setting.
Tier 2 — Knowledge: Labor Market & Self-Knowledge	Curiosity	Students acquire systematic knowledge of industries, occupations, and their own interests/abilities.
Tier 3 — Competence: Decision-Making & Execution	Control, Confidence	Students make informed career decisions, execute job search or entrepreneurial actions, and persist through setbacks.

Note: The three-tier structure ensures that every course contributes to at least one adaptability dimension while avoiding redundancy.

3.2 The 4C linked-course model

The core of the reform is the 4C linked-course model (Table 2).

Table 2. The 4C linked-course model: course architecture

Course Name	Cr	Hours (T/P)	Sem	Req	Delivery / Class Size	Distinctive Feature
Career Planning	0.5	8(6/2)	1	Required	Online / Large class	Integrated with national career planning competition
Professional Competence for College Students	0.5	8(8/0)	3–6	Elective	Offline / Small class (≤ 30)	Four modules: Work methods & time management, teamwork, workplace communication, emotion management; launched fall 2025
Fundamentals of Innovation and Entrepreneurship	1.0	16(8/8)	5	Required	Online / Large class	Integrated with China international innovation competition
Employment Guidance	0.5	8(6/2)	6	Required	Online / Large class	Integrated with campus recruitment collaboration

Note: Cr = credits; T/P = theory hours/practice hours; Sem = semester(s)

Course 1: Career Planning (Semester 1, 0.5 cr, 8 hrs). Delivered online to all first-year students, it introduces career adaptability and guides self-assessment. Six theory hours cover career development theories and interest-ability mapping; two practice hours produce a career planning document as the preliminary entry for the National Career Planning Competition.

Course 2: Professional Competence (Semesters 3–6, 0.5 cr, 8 hrs). Serving as the linchpin of the reform, this course is delivered offline in small classes (max. 30). Launched Fall 2025, it is exclusively taught by the curriculum director. Four experiential modules deepen career control and confidence, with workplace ethics as supplementary material. It is the only course providing sustained individualized feedback.

Course 3: Fundamentals of Innovation (Semester 5, 1 cr, 16 hrs). It balances theory and practice (8 hrs each). Students form teams, develop project proposals, and submit them to the China International Innovation Competition, primarily targeting curiosity and confidence.

Course 4: Employment Guidance (Semester 6, 0.5 cr, 8 hrs). This course prepares students for labor market entry. The course content covers resume optimization, interview strategies, offer evaluation, and labor rights. Practice hours are tied to campus recruitment events where HR representatives conduct mock interviews.

3.3 Pedagogical delivery and assessment

The online courses share a unified pedagogical structure (Table 3).

Table 3. Pedagogical delivery and assessment design

Component	Online Courses (Large Class)	Offline Course (Small Class, ≤30)
Core content delivery	Pre-recorded video modules (asynchronous)	Synchronous classroom teaching
Engagement / formative	2 post-class assignments (1 practical + 1 comprehensive)	Daily attendance + in-class participation + 2 assignments
Summative assessment	1 final capstone project	1 final project

Note: Online courses maximize reach and efficiency; the offline course maximizes depth and individualization.

3.4 Teaching team and quality assurance

The curriculum is delivered by a 14-member team: three career development faculty and eleven college-level counselors. The curriculum director oversees syllabus formulation, content design, and quality monitoring through classroom observation and student feedback. This distributed model extends the reach of career education while maintaining relational continuity, addressing the shortage of specialized faculty in private universities.

3.5 XiaoZhi Studio: embedded counseling

XiaoZhi Studio, established and operated by the curriculum director, is promoted within all four courses as a referral resource. It offers three consultation tracks: (1) career planning, (2) employment strategy, and (3) entrepreneurship guidance. From Fall 2025 to Spring 2026, the studio handled 1,497 cases (Table 4).

Table 4. XiaoZhi Studio consultation distribution

Consultation Type	Number of Cases	Primary Semester of Referral
Career Planning	568	Semesters 1–2
Employment Strategy	817	Semesters 5–6
Entrepreneurship Guidance	112	Semester 5
Total	1,497	—

Note: Cases averaged 2.5 sessions per student. Studio data provide individualized support and generate formative feedback for curriculum refinement.

The high volume of career planning consultations in the first year prompted the addition of a self-assessment module to the Career Planning course in its second iteration.

3.6 Competition-integrated pedagogy

Both Career Planning and Fundamentals of Innovation are linked to national competitions. In Course 1, the practical assignment produces a career planning statement meeting submission criteria for the National Career Planning Competition. In Course 3, team proposals are submitted to the China International Innovation Competition, with the competition timeline synchronized to the course schedule. This transforms routine assignments into authentic, externally validated tasks.

3.7 University-enterprise collaboration

Employment Guidance (Semester 6) is the primary vehicle for university-enterprise collaboration. Partnerships with 20 enterprises span manufacturing, IT, finance, and professional services (Table 5). Ten HR experts delivered 10 guest lectures; two campus recruitment events attracted 613 enterprises offering over 9,000 positions; HR representatives conduct mock interviews to complement studio counseling.

Table 5. University-enterprise collaboration inputs

Collaboration Input	Quantity / Scope	Integration Point
Partner Enterprises	20 firms (manufacturing, IT, finance, services)	Employment guidance (Semester 6)
HR Guest Speakers	10 experts (10 lectures)	Resume screening & interview preparation
Campus Recruitment Events	2 events; 613 enterprises; 9,000+ positions	Employment guidance practice hours
Mock Interviews	Conducted by HR representatives	Complements XiaoZhi Studio

Note: This mechanism transforms employment guidance from a theoretical seminar into a bridge between classroom learning and labor market entry.

4 Implementation outcomes and preliminary analysis

4.1 Scale and reach

Since fall 2025, the system has achieved the following coverage:

- Total student reach: Career planning reached 4,262 students; Employment guidance reached 4,263 (cumulative, including overlapping enrollees).
- Professional competence: 130 students completed the inaugural offering (Fall 2025–Spring 2026), class sizes capped at 30.
- Studio consultations: 1,497 cases, averaging 2.5 sessions each ($\approx 3,743$ total sessions).
- HR engagement: 10 HR experts delivered 10 lectures; two recruitment events attracted 613 enterprises with 9,000+ positions.
- Competition participation increased by approximately 30% compared to the pre-reform baseline.

4.2 Student feedback

While formal longitudinal evaluation with pre-post measures is planned for 2026–2027, preliminary data suggest positive trends. The 1,497 studio consultations represent a significant uptick in help-seeking: 50% were course-referred, 30% arose before campus recruitment, and 20% were walk-ins—indicating that students seek guidance when clear referral pathways exist. Instructors of the small-class course reported greater participation compared with large online courses. Students who submitted entries to the National Career Planning Competition reported reduced anxiety and increased perceived relevance of course content.

4.3 Reflexive observations

(1) Small-class bottleneck: While Professional Competence delivers deep learning, it has a hard capacity constraint (30 students, one instructor). Scaling requires the training of additional instructors.

(2) Studio as safety net: The 1,497 cases reveal that many students experience acute uncertainty that cannot be resolved by course-level interventions alone.

(3) Partner sustainability: Maintaining 20 active partners demands ongoing relationship management; further expansion would require the institutionalization of partner relationships.

5 Discussion

5.1 Theoretical contributions

The findings make three contributions. First, career adaptability theory is employed here not merely as a lens for assessment but as the basis for a curriculum structure: each dimension is tied to particular courses and assessment tasks, giving the 4C model a concrete form. Second, the study contributes evidence regarding counseling integration by mapping the referral route through the studio: 1,497 cases across three tracks within a Chinese private-university setting. Third, linking course assignments to national competitions provides a form of authentic assessment without adding to students' workload.

5.2 Practical implications

For administrators, the study offers a resource-efficient blueprint: it reorganizes existing courses rather than creating new ones. The total additional cost is minimal—the time commitment of one faculty member plus modest honoraria for HR guest speakers. For practitioners, the study highlights the critical role of the curriculum director as both designer and implementer, particularly relevant for institutions with limited specialized staffing.

5.3 Limitations

This study has four limitations: (1) only two semesters of implementation data; (2) single-institution design limiting generalizability; (3) absence of a control group; and (4) the small-class course is taught exclusively by one instructor (130 students), raising scalability concerns.

5.4 Future research

Future research should pursue: (1) multi-institutional comparative studies; (2) longitudinal quasi-experimental designs with control groups; (3) scaling the small-class component through instructor training; and (4) exploring AI-assisted tools to extend personalized counseling beyond the studio model.

6 Conclusion

This paper described a curriculum reform that places career adaptability at the centre of career education. The 4C Linked-Course Model arranges courses in a vertical sequence and responds directly to the fragmentation noted in earlier work. By combining XiaoZhi Studio, competition-based assessment, and collaboration with enterprises, the model transforms career education from a one-off set of classes into a continuous process focused on the student. The early figures are encouraging: 4,262 students in Career Planning and 4,263 in Employment Guidance, 1,497 counseling consultations, 130 students in the small classes, and 10 human-resource specialists from 20 firms involved. Long-term outcome data are still to come, but the present evidence suggests that even a private university with limited resources can put a theory-based career education system into practice with a clear structural framework, an appointed curriculum director, as well as sustained links between classroom learning and professional practice.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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