
A New Conceptual Framework for Enhancing Employability Skills Among Higher Vocational Students Base on Group Work Interventions

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Abstract

This paper aims to describe a new conceptual framework for enhancing employability skills based on group work interventions. The research design used is an experiential learning design and was conducted through explanatory research, which combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Higher vocational students were used as research subjects, and group dynamics theory was used as the theoretical basis. Data were collected using questionnaire surveys, interviews, group work methods, and experimental research. A new conceptual framework for enhancing employability skills was developed by selecting 40 fresh graduates from Jiangmen Polytechnic to participate in a 2-month employability skills promotion group work activity. The new conceptual framework clarifies the variables and characteristics that affect the improvement of employment skills and reveals the relationships between the variables. The findings present a new conceptual framework for improving the employability skills of higher vocational students based on group work interventions and describe the variables and characteristics within this framework. This research significantly contributes to the field, equipping educators and organizers with the knowledge to create tailored programs for enhancing employability skills among higher vocational students. Ultimately, these efforts aim to empower students with the necessary competencies to thrive in the dynamic job market and embark on successful career paths.

Keywords: *conceptual framework; employability skills; group work intervention*

1.0 Introduction

Contemporary Chinese college students are facing employment difficulties, and it is even more difficult for higher vocational graduates to find employment (Rao Yun, 2018). Higher vocational students' difficulty in finding employment is due to a variety of reasons, and how to improve their employability skills rapidly will be the key to solving this problem (Meng Yajuan, 2023). To stand out from stiff competition, higher vocational students need to continuously improve their employability skills. Only then will they be well-positioned in the job market and have better opportunities for professional development.

In recent years, group work interventions, as an experiential learning approach that helps members quickly learn and master skills through group activities, have emerged as an effective way to improve employment skills (Wang Jinping, 2023). At present, a growing number of universities and academics have conducted theoretical studies on how to improve the employability skills of college students through group work interventions, but empirical studies on higher vocational students are rare.

This research uses an experiential learning design and interpretive research approach that combines qualitative and quantitative research. Through data analysis, this paper establishes the effectiveness of group work in improving employability among higher vocational students and proposes a new framework for group work interventions to enhance employability skills among higher vocational students.

2.0 Problem statements

Employment is not only the most significant livelihood for the people but also the fundamental support for economic development. Whether college graduates can be employed smoothly and promptly is related to the vital interests of every student and their family, as well as the livelihood projects of the whole society, and has far-reaching significance for maintaining social harmony and stability (Zhangxing Li & Mengnan Hao, 2022). General Secretary Xi Jinping (2022) clearly stated in the report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, "implement the employment priority strategy and strengthen the employment priority policy." In the face of the current opportunities and challenges at home and abroad, the Chinese government attaches great importance to the quality of employment. However, relevant data show that higher vocational students generally have low employability skills and find it difficult to adapt to job demands (Zhang Jing, 2018). The employment of higher vocational students not only affects the realization of student self-worth but also seriously affects the sustainable development of enterprises and vocational education. In the long run, this will impact the sustainable economic development of the whole country.

2.1 Research problem statements

There are still many problems with the improvement of employability skills among higher vocational students:

a. The traditional career teaching model lacks effectiveness. Traditional teaching methods tend to focus on imparting knowledge and theory, with insufficient emphasis on experiential career education and the cultivation of practical and application abilities (Zhang Shaobing, 2016).

b. There is a lack of a framework for career guidance activities for higher vocational students. Employment guidance in most vocational colleges is limited to post-graduation employment guidance, which lacks comprehensive consideration and overall arrangement. Although some colleges and universities have introduced job-guiding courses for college students, they have not been fully integrated into the teaching program. Furthermore, some schools lack systematic teaching materials and career guidance teachers for job skills improvement courses (Rao Yun, 2018).

c. There is insufficient research on the significant characteristics of group work in improving the employability skills of higher vocational students (Wang Jinping, 2023). Research on group work interventions to enhance employability skills is limited, and there is a lack of sufficient evidence to support their effectiveness and associated characteristics. Group work interventions may have unique features in enhancing employability skills, such as teamwork and collaboration, but these have not been extensively studied and explored. Current research tends to focus on a single intervention and lacks comparative studies of group work interventions with different characteristics to determine which ones are most effective in enhancing employability skills. To address this research gap, this study aims to explore a variety of group work interventions with different characteristics, including different durations, topic content, number of participants, and mentoring formats, to compare their impact on enhancing employability skills among higher vocational graduates. These group work interventions will focus on five characteristics: cooperation, respect, trust, acceptance, and sharing. By systematically comparing the effects of these interventions, we hope to identify the most promising and effective features to provide more targeted recommendations and improvements for vocational education and career guidance.

2.2 Research objectives

The research was conducted among graduates of Jiangmen Polytechnic, where a working group was set up to improve employability, and it was conducted through controlled experimental methods. The objectives of the research were as follows: a. To explore the significant characteristics of group work intervention in improving employability skills among higher vocational students; b. To establish the effectiveness of group work interventions in improving employability skills among higher vocational students; c. To propose a new framework for group work interventions to enhance employability skills among higher vocational students.

2.3 Research questions

The research was designed to answer the following research questions: a. What are the significant characteristics of applying group work intervention to the improvement of employability skills in higher vocational students? b. Is group work intervention effective in improving the employability skills of higher vocational students? c. How to design a new group work framework for enhancing employability skills among higher vocational students?

2.4 Research hypotheses

Based on the research questions, the present research proposes three pairs of research hypotheses.

The first set of hypotheses pertains to the factorial ANOVA analysis conducted on 4950 higher vocational graduates from Jiangmen Polytechnic. The main research hypothesis (H0) posits that there is no significant difference among group work interventions with different characteristics in enhancing employability skills, suggesting that the effects on improving employability skills are similar. The alternative research hypothesis (H1), on the other hand, proposes that there exists a significant difference among these interventions, with certain characteristics being more effective in enhancing employability skills. Some characteristics may need to be further optimized and adjusted to improve their effectiveness.

The second set of hypotheses focuses on the T-test analysis that examines the relationship between group work intervention and employability skills. The main research hypothesis (H0) suggests that there is no significant difference in employability skills between the intervention group and the control group. In contrast, the alternative research hypothesis (H1) posits that there is a significant difference in employability skills between the two groups, indicating that the intervention group outperforms the control group in terms of employability skills.

Lastly, the third set of hypotheses centers around correlation analysis, which explores the association between employability skills before and after a group work intervention. The main research hypothesis (H0) states that there is no significant positive correlation between the two time points. Conversely, the alternative research hypothesis (H1) proposes that there is a significant positive correlation between employability skills before and after the group work intervention, indicating that the intervention is related to improved employability skills.

3.0 Literature review

3.1 Definition of terms

3.1.1 Employability skills

Employability skills, also known as transferable skills, are the core skills and traits needed to succeed in any job. Scholar Gazie (1999) defined it as the ability of workers to obtain and keep jobs and to progress and deal with job changes. In the research on the structural composition of college students' employability skills, the U.S. Department of Labor's Employability Skills Survey Committee issued a survey report in 2000, pointing out that modern employability skills should include three foundations and five capabilities. The three foundations are the ability foundation, thinking foundation, and quality foundation. The five capabilities refer to the abilities of coordinating resources, communicating, obtaining and using information, thinking and solving problems, and using the Internet. Chinese scholar Zheng Xiaoming (2002) subdivided it into five aspects: learning ability, thinking ability, practical ability, application ability, and adaptability.

The paper argues that employability skills are comprehensive abilities gradually formed by college students through participation in learning and practical activities. These abilities include the capacity to successfully find a job, adapt to a job, maintain a job, change a job, and maximize personal career development. To quantitatively evaluate controlled experiments, this research adopts the division method of employability skills proposed by Yuan Xi (2020). It operationalizes "employability skills" into the following five aspects, encompassing a total of 20 abilities, to assess the employment skills of higher vocational students in this project:

- a. Learning and innovation ability: information acquisition, observation and experience, innovation and creation, curiosity and challenge, etc.
- b. Ideological thinking ability: self-knowledge, self-confidence, judgment, logical reasoning, planning, etc.
- c. Communication practice ability: accurate expression, active participation, professional skills, executive response, etc.
- d. Job application ability: resume production, interview performance, teamwork, image appearance, etc.
- e. Social adaptability: emotional management, professional dedication, EQ level, moral character, etc.

3.1.2 Group Work Intervention

Group work intervention is an intervention that promotes personal growth and problem-solving by organizing and leading group activities. It places individuals in a group environment to achieve specific goals through interaction and cooperation (Mo Xiaomei, 2013).

Group work interventions are usually organized and led by a professional interventionist (e.g., a counsellor, social worker, or educator). These interveners use a variety of techniques and strategies to facilitate effective communication among group members, build trusting relationships, solve problems, and develop individual and team competencies. In group work interventions, the interventionist can set different activity themes based on the needs, such as improving communication skills, adaptability, and innovation. They design and conduct various group activities, such as group discussions, scenario simulations, team presentations, etc., to help group members achieve these goals (Yang Jing, 2021).

The main principle of group work interventions is to influence and change individual behavior and beliefs through group interaction and support around common goals. In an accepting, supportive, and encouraging environment (William B. Bennis & Bert Nanus, 1985), group members are free to share each other's experiences, perspectives, and emotions, to better understand themselves, to respect others and to integrate into the group, and to find solutions to problems.

Group work interventions can help students improve their employability skills and prepare them for careers. For example:

a. Learning and innovation ability

Group work interventions encourage students to actively learn and research, participating in group discussions and projects that enable them to acquire and integrate new knowledge, fostering a sense of self-directed and continuous learning. Collaborative thinking and cooperation among group members can stimulate students' creative thinking, nurturing problem-solving and innovation skills.

b. Ideological thinking ability

Group work interventions provide a platform for students to exchange and share ideas, foster healthy ideological awareness and cognitive development, and foster critical thinking and independent reasoning. Through group discussions and interactions, students can understand and respect diverse perspectives, enhancing their cross-cultural communication and understanding.

c. Communication skills

Group work interventions emphasize enhancing students' communication skills, encouraging them to effectively express their views and ideas, and learning to listen to and understand the opinions of others. Activities such as role-playing and team tasks allow students to practice non-verbal communication and teamwork, setting the stage for effective communication with colleagues and clients in the workplace of the future.

d. Job application ability

Group work interventions help students improve job-seeking and recruitment skills, including resume writing, interview techniques, etc., to enhance their competitiveness in the job market. Through simulated interviews and feedback during the intervention, the students continuously improved their job-seeking skills, adequately preparing themselves for future employment opportunities.

e. Social adaptability

Group work interventions develop students' ability to adapt to different environments and interpersonal relationships within teams and societies. Collaboration in a group setting requires students to work with peers of diverse backgrounds and characteristics, enabling them to navigate interpersonal relationships adeptly and improve their social skills and collaboration abilities.

Through group work interventions, students practice and develop these employability skills in an authentic group environment. Intervention experts provide feedback and guidance to help students identify strengths and areas for improvement, thus preparing them for their future careers. Such practices and training enable students to better adapt to future professional environments, enhancing their employability and development potential.

3.2 Theoretical basis of the research

Theoretical sources for group work interventions can be traced to multiple disciplines and fields, including psychology, social work, education, and organizational behavior. The following are some of the contributors and related theories to the theory of group work interventions:

Leonard Beeghley and Frank J. Borkowski proposed the concept of "Group Work Intervention" in the late 1970s and stated that group work can foster individual and group growth, learning, and development.

Eric Berne (1958) proposed the theory of transactional analysis, which explores the roles and communication styles of individuals in group interactions. He noted that analyzing and understanding the transactions and games among group members can reveal an individual's internal conflicts and foster personal growth.

Bruce Tuckman (1965) proposed the "Forming-Storming-Norming-Performing" model, which described the stages of group development and the corresponding dynamics. This model emphasizes the importance of group members in forming common goals, building trusting relationships, and resolving conflicts.

Kurt Lewin developed the theory of group dynamics in the 1940s and 1950s. It emphasizes the influence of interactions and forces within groups on the behavior of individuals. His theory provides an important theoretical basis for group work interventions, emphasizing the importance of the group environment on individual behavior and change.

These theories and contributors provide a theoretical framework and guiding principles for group work interventions, helping interventionists better understand and guide group interactions to promote individual and group growth and development. Based on these theories,

this study establishes the "Conceptual Framework of Group Work Interventions" (see Figure 1). In this framework, the characteristics of group members, goals and tasks, and resources and support are considered as input factors that directly influence the development and performance of the group. Additionally, the forms of activities and the activity guidance framework are regarded as process factors that determine how the group operates and collaborates. The output factors include task performance, learning and development, and satisfaction, which reflect the effects of the group work intervention. Specifically:

a. Input Factors:

Characteristics of Members: The members of the group are the most basic input factors, including the characteristics, abilities, and skills of each member.

Goals and Tasks: Identify the goals and tasks of the group to provide direction and goals for the group's work.

Resources and Support: Resources and support available to the group, including time, money, equipment, and support from the organization.

b. Process Factors:

Forms of Activities: Group dynamics models focus on the interaction and cooperation of group members in different activities. Activities can take the form of group discussions, role plays, team tasks, etc.

Activity Guidance Framework: An activity guidance framework is a structure and strategy for directing and organizing group activities. This can include activity goals, role assignments, feedback, and assessments, among others.

c. Output Results:

Task Performance: Effectiveness and performance of the group in completing tasks.

Learning and Development: The learning and personal development of team members on the job.

Satisfaction: The degree to which group members are satisfied with the work and results of the group.

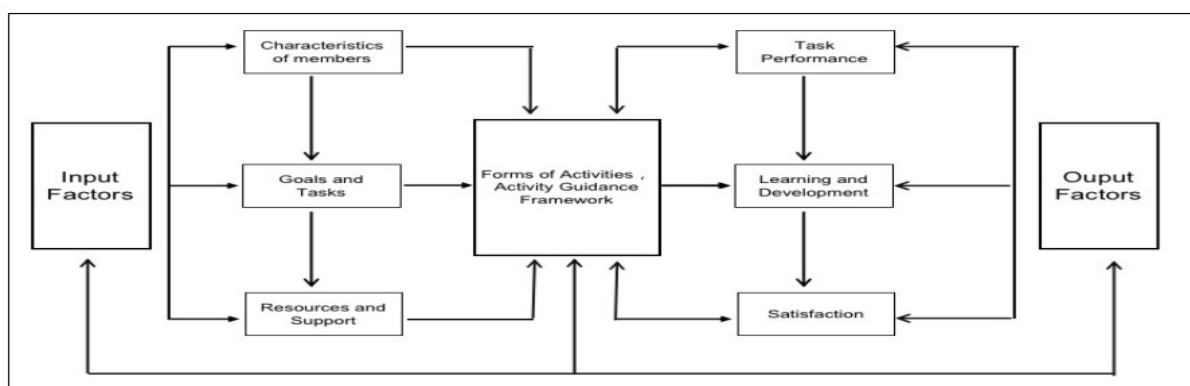


Figure 1: Conceptual of Framework of Group works intervention

Source: Developed for this research.

Within this conceptual framework, group work intervention is seen as a targeted intervention measure aimed at promoting individual and group growth through organizing and guiding group activities. The proper configuration of input factors provides a solid foundation for implementing group work, while optimizing and coordinating process factors affect group cohesion and efficiency. The assessment and analysis of output factors serve as crucial criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of group work interventions, providing valuable insights for further improvement and optimization of such interventions.

Through this conceptual framework, we hope to gain a better understanding of the role of group work interventions in enhancing employability skills and provide guidance and reference for future practices. Additionally, this framework facilitates in-depth research into the underlying mechanisms and influencing factors of group work interventions, offering new perspectives and possibilities for related fields of study. Overall, this conceptual framework lays a solid theoretical foundation for the effective implementation and promotion of group work interventions.

3.3 The application of group work interventions to improve employability skills

The historical development of group work interventions to improve the employability skills of college and vocational students is a process of continuous evolution and development. The following is a general overview of the field:

Early Stages: In the late 20th century, as an understanding of education and career development improved, research began to focus on the positive effects of group work on student skill development. This phase explores the impact of group work on communication skills, teamwork, and problem-solving.

Theoretical Foundation Established: In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a theoretical framework around group work interventions gradually took shape. For example, Tuckman proposed a five-stage model of group development, including formation, contradiction, norm, performance, and dissolution. This model guides group work interventions and emphasizes the importance of teamwork and collaboration.

Practical Exploration: From the 1990s to the Early 2000s, Group Work Interventions Were Widely Used and Practiced to Improve the Employment Skills of College and Vocational Students.

Future Trends in the Development of Group Work Interventions to Improve the Employment Skills of Higher Vocational Students:

a. **Customized Interventions for Specific Occupational Fields:** Future research may pay more attention to employment skills in specific occupational fields and provide customized intervention programs for higher vocational students in different majors and industries. This will help to better meet the employment needs of various industries and improve the vocational competitiveness of higher vocational students.

b. **Integrating Technology and Online Learning:** Future research may integrate more technology and online learning resources to explore the effect of virtual group work interventions. Technical means such as online platforms, virtual teamwork, and distance

learning may provide higher vocational students with more flexible learning methods to adapt to the demands of the modern professional environment.

c. **Emphasis on Hands-On and Workplace Experience:** Future research may place greater emphasis on the importance of hands-on projects, internships, and workplace experience for employability skills. Group work interventions may work more with businesses to provide more practical opportunities for higher vocational students.

These future trends will help to further improve research on group work interventions to improve the employability skills of higher vocational students and promote the career development and employment competitiveness of higher vocational students.

4.0 Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The research design used in this paper is explanatory research, a mixed research method that combines qualitative and quantitative research. The research begins with quantitative research (see Figure 2), where the independent variable is the group work intervention, the moderator is the Framework Guidance for Employment Guidance Activities, and the Teaching Model for Career Education is considered, while the dependent variable is the Employability Skills. The effectiveness of group work interventions with different characteristics in improving employability skills is assessed through questionnaires. Subsequently, a qualitative method called group intervention is employed to explain the phenomenon of employability skills. Through the application of phenomenological analysis, the study delves into the effects of group work interventions on improving employability skills, and more objectively observes, describes, and understands the experience. This approach helps to reveal the impact of interventions, the growth of participants, and their relation to the employment environment, thereby providing valuable insights for further improvement and optimization of group work interventions.

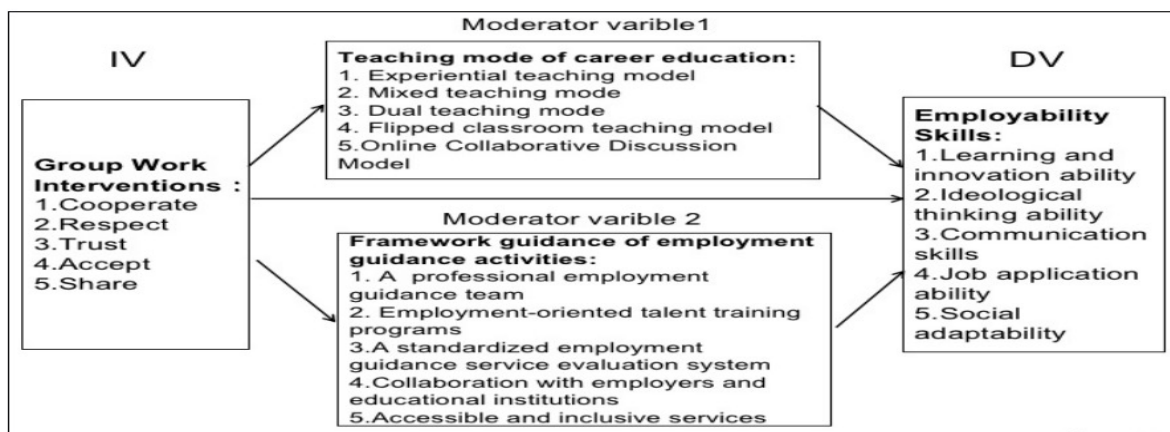


Figure2: Quantitative Analysis Framework

Source: Developed for this research.

4.2 Sampling

Samples will be selected from higher vocational students at Jiangmen Polytechnic for the following reasons:

a. Jiangmen Polytechnic is a nationally renowned vocational college, recognized as a model institution in Guangdong Province, and distinguished for its success in graduate employment. The pilot study conducted at this college is representative and demonstrative, providing valuable insights for other higher vocational colleges.

b. As a school career counsellor, the researcher possesses certain advantages and conveniences to execute the intervention program effectively. These include knowledge of the group's basic information, easy access to social resources, and a venue to schedule events.

Thus, selecting this group as a sample aligns with the basic requirements for group work interventions. In the project, 40 fresh graduates from Jiangmen Polytechnic will be chosen as research subjects to participate in the group work intervention.

4.3 Data collection and analysis

a. Quantitative research

Factorial ANOVA analysis: A survey was conducted on 4950 higher vocational graduates from Jiangmen Polytechnic using questionnaires to collect their views on the development of school employment guidance work, the characteristics of employment skill improvement group work intervention, and the connotations of employment skills. The questionnaire results underwent Factorial ANOVA analysis to conduct comparative research on group work interventions with different characteristics. The goal was to determine which intervention characteristics were most effective in improving employability skills and which aspects needed further improvement.

T-test analysis: The independent variable is group work intervention (intervention group vs. control group), and the dependent variable is employability skills. Assuming that the group receiving the intervention performed better in employability skills, the alternative hypothesis suggested that the mean employability skills of the intervention group were not equal to those of the control group. Employability skills level tests were administered to both groups, and independent-sample t-tests were conducted to compare the differences in employability skills between them. The mean of the two sets of samples was calculated, and a hypothesis test was performed to determine whether the difference between the two sets was significant.

Correlation analysis: Pre-test and post-test were conducted on 40 students who participated in a group work intervention using the employability skills self-assessment scale. The Pearson correlation coefficient was used to measure the degree of association between employability skills before and after the intervention. Additionally, the correlation between group work intervention and employability skills was analysed. The correlation coefficients and significance results were calculated to explain the relationship between the two variables, describing the strength and direction of the correlation coefficient and determining if a positive correlation exists.

b. Qualitative research

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (see Figure 3): Focus group interviews and reflective journals were coded and analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis. The goal was to gain insight into the impact of group work on enhancing employability skills and to optimize the design of group work interventions.

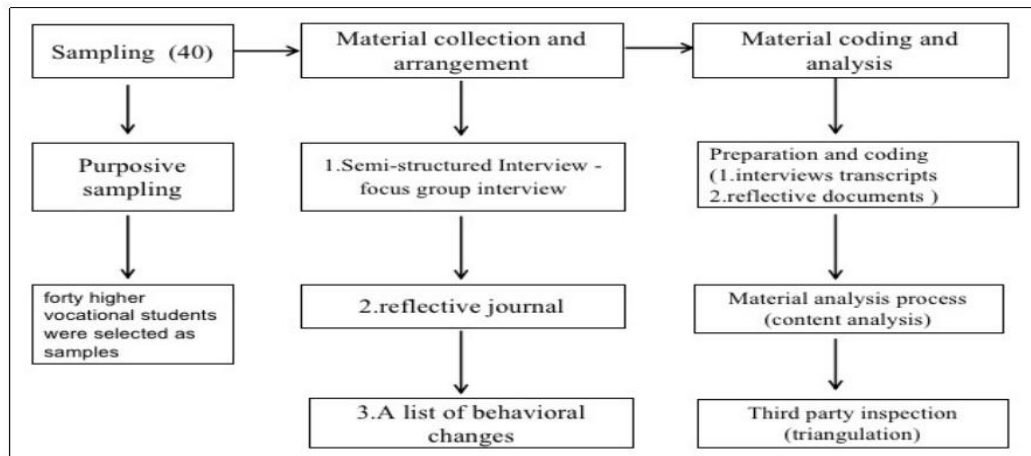


Figure3: Interpretive phenomenological analysis design - IPA

Source: Developed for this research.

4.4 Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted to test the validity and reliability of the questionnaire before conducting the main study. The pilot study involved a small sample of 30 higher vocational students at Jiangmen Polytechnic who would also participate in the main study.

The pilot study included distributing questionnaires to participants and analyzing their responses. The questionnaire was designed to measure students' perceptions of the implementation of career guidance work in schools, the characteristics of group work intervention activities to improve employment skills, and the connotations of employment skills. It consisted of 5 components and 22 questions, measured using a 10-point Likert scale.

After completing the questionnaire, a debriefing session was held to collect feedback from the participants. They were asked to provide feedback on the clarity of the questions, the ease of completing the survey, and any suggestions for improvement. The results of the pilot study were analysed using descriptive statistics and factor analysis. The analysis showed that the survey questionnaire had good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.86. Based on the results of the pilot study, further improvements were made to the questionnaire to ensure its validity and reliability.

5.0 Conclusion and implications

This paper proposes a new conceptual framework for improving vocational skills based on group cooperation, using mixed research methods. The questionnaire was revised through the pilot study to improve its clarity and readability and to ensure the validity and reliability of subsequent large-scale sample surveys. For better research, follow-up work is still needed in the following three areas:

- a. Explore group work interventions that may have unique characteristics in improving employability skills.
- b. Compare group work interventions with different characteristics to determine which aspects of group activities need further optimization through intervention experiments.
- c. Explore how to effectively implement group work interventions and how to objectively evaluate their effects.

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