

Social Empowerment Preferences and Trends Among Contemporary Higher Education Students in Population-Dense Nations: A Questionnaire-Based Study Using Chinese University Students as a Sample

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Abstract: In the wake of a comprehensive enhancement in the educational system of our country, higher education is now more ubiquitous than ever, placing graduate employability into the spotlight of social attention. This study utilized extensive questionnaire surveys, which accumulated feedback from 426 university students and 57 non-student respondents, to dissect the critical factors influencing career selection among university graduates. The findings revealed that the primary elements influencing career choice include salary, perks, and workload intensity. In addition, personal satisfaction recorded notable significance in the decision-making process, with no bias towards their ideal employment city. Further, no statistical disparity existed in the society's perception of acceptable starting salaries for fresh graduates ($P>0.05$). When assessing the capacities prized by employers, statistical differences were conspicuously noticeable between university students and non-student respondents regarding professional abilities, communication skills, and teamwork ($P<0.05$). Nonetheless, no such difference was statistically considerable with respect to academic qualifications, academic performance, and personal interests ($P>0.05$). This study propounds that university students should amplify their social involvement, gain a clear understanding of societal needs, and cultivate a well-founded employment outlook. Simultaneously, society should amplify opportunities for students to gain job awareness and amass work experience. To this end, appropriate policies advocating a holistic view of employment among university students ought to be established at the national level.

Keywords: University Students, Employment Outlook, Higher Education, Questionnaire-Based Study.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10869030>

1 Introduction

China, one of the world's most populous nations, has seen an enormous surge in higher education enrollments since 1977. As per the records, the total national university enrollment grew from 1.08 million in 1998 to 1.59 million in 1999 [6] displaying a growth rate of 47.4%. In 2002, with student enrollment reaching 3.2 million, higher education in China entered its popularization stage. Since then, rapid expansion has continued, as evidenced by a 2018 growth rate reaching 48.1%. By 2023, the number of colleges and universities in China reached 3,013, and concurrent student enrollments exceeded 11.2 million, which is almost ten times more than in 2001. In 2023, the Ministry of Education announced that Chinese higher education had entered the stage of universality. The surge in graduate volume has led to heightened job market competition and prolonged, rigorous education that often culminates in graduate and Ph.D. degrees [5]. At the same time, many private companies require their employees, who are often recent graduates, to work long hours for subpar compensation [10].

This article examines the employment expectations and intentions of 426 students through a comprehensive questionnaire survey.

2 Method

The issue of graduate employment is multifactorial, but the discord between graduate skills and societal demands is a seminal aspect. To explore this, a simple random sampling method was employed, and questionnaires were distributed online and offline amongst university students and employed individuals. The distribution took place at the Shipai Campus of Jinan University, where the research team distributed paper questionnaires amongst students from diverse faculties. The team underwent prior training regarding questionnaire distribution, application, and problem-solving. In the survey phase, there was no influence on the respondent selections which might affect the result. If the respondent had any obstacles, such as visual impairment, the questions would be read aloud so the respondent could complete the questionnaire. Of the 450 student respondents, 426 valid questionnaires were

collected, marking a 94.6% recovery rate. For the public survey, 57 valid questionnaires were received from 60. All the collected data was stored in IBM SPSS Statistic 26.0 for subsequent data analysis.

3 Result

3.1 Reliability and Validity Assessment

A rigorous literature review demonstrated a lack of authoritative questionnaires relating to the topics of interest in this research. Consequently, the research team crafted a self-administered questionnaire. Reliability and validity assessments of this questionnaire were conducted utilizing Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 26.0.

As per recommended statistical guidelines, a Cronbach's coefficient Alpha threshold of 0.700 was set as the indicator of acceptable reliability. The survey questionnaire adhered to this requirement with a Cronbach's coefficient of 0.700, thus ensuring its reliability. Analysis of the questionnaire's validity, utilizing the KMO and Bartlett test coefficients, yielded a value of 0.726. This is notably higher than the recognized cut-off of 0.700, thereby invoking confidence in the questionnaire's validity [4]. The results of this analysis validate the questionnaire as a reliable and statistically sound instrument for exploring the employment outlook of university students.

3.2 Outcome of Sample Distribution

Of the 426 recovered university student survey samples, males comprised 38.26% (n=163), and females constituted 61.74% (n=263). The majority of respondents (59.62%; n=254) were from mainland China, followed by those from Hong Kong (24.41%; n=104), and Macau (9.62%; n=41). The sample also included participants from Taiwan (n=14) and students studying abroad (n=9). A breakdown of Chinese mainland responses showed a larger representation of students from southern regions (63.64%; n=161) compared to northern China (36.36%; n=92). In terms of economic background, 60.3% (n=257) of respondents hailed from urban environments. The sample also included students from rural regions (15.26%; n=65), mixed urban-rural locations (13.62%; n=58), and a smaller proportion from suburban areas (10.8%). Family economic conditions, segmented into five categories, revealed most students identified their economic situation as being "average level" (55.63%, n=237) or "good" (23.71%, n=101). A cumulative 15.73% (n=67) of respondents considered their economic conditions to be "poor" or "very poor". In terms of class level and major, freshmen comprised the chief portion (53.52%; n=228), followed by seniors (14.32%; n=61), sophomores (13.62%; n=58), with the smallest group being second or third-year postgraduate students. Majors' distribution portrayed liberal arts (30.75%; n=131) as the predominant field. This was succeeded by medical (24.18%; n=103) and science (21.83%; n=93) majors. Lower proportions of engineering (13.62%) and

business (7.51%) majors were found. These findings are in overall alignment with expectations.

3.3 Analysis on employment outlook of university students

3.3.1 University students' expectations and views on their parents

The results of this survey show that among the 426 samples, 268 students strongly agree or somewhat agree that their parents have expectations and requirements for their future employment, accounting for 62.91% of the total. Only 10 people believed that their parents did not have any requirements for their employment. In addition, 255 people believed that it was completely inconsistent or relatively inconsistent with the opinions of parents and relatives on whether parents and relatives should be considered in the job search process. Combining the above results, it can be seen to a certain extent that university students' career choices are generally subject to the expectations and pressures from their original families, but they believe that the views of family and relatives should not be considered in the career selection process [7]. This shows that today's university students have a negative attitude towards career choice. Have free thinking and yearning, and do not want to be pressured by family.

According to past research, the employment difficulties of university students come from the fact that university students prefer to work in economically developed cities rather than choosing economically backward areas. This is mainly directly related to the salary levels in the two places. However, in recent years, due to the high pressure of life and high cost of living in first-tier cities, more and more people are willing to choose to develop in cities which is not so developed, and this survey also collected similar results. 38.26 % of university students hope to work in first-tier cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen), and 31.46 % of university students hope to choose second and third level cities. The two combined exceed 60 % of the total. Given the divergence in civil service structures, remuneration, and management systems across Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and foreign countries [8], this study confines its focus on exploring the preferred employment types among university students in Mainland China. The analysed sample accommodated 426 responses, out of which 253 were from Mainland China.

The demographic distribution within the Mainland China cohort consists of 161 respondents from Southern regions (including Jiangsu, Anhui, Zhejiang, Shanghai, among others), compared to 92 from the Northern territories. Most notably, data revealed a preference for civil service and public institution roles, accounting for 24.51% (n=62) and 28.06% (n=71) of the total responses respectively. A chi-square test confirmed no significant discrepancy between Northern and Southern regional

preferences.

Notwithstanding the relatively lower salary levels within the civil service, specifically evident in regions like Guangdong and Zhejiang, the institutional positions, such as civil servants, continue to attract the current younger generation. Past research indicates that this stems from a reluctance among university students to seek employment in less economically developed regions, opting instead for flourishing urban centres. This pattern initially reflected salary disparities across these areas. However, recent times have witnessed an increased shift towards second and third level cities, most likely attributed to the escalating cost of living and life pressures in first class cities. Conformingly, the survey data revealed that 38.26% (n=97) aspired to work in first-tier cities, while slightly fewer, 31.46% (n=80), favoured second and third level cities. The combined figures accounted for more than 60% of the entire sample.

In conclusion, the contemporary era is characterized by an intensification of labor exploitation from private corporations, increasing economic volatility worldwide, fierce competition amongst smaller enterprises, and rapid industrial transformations [11]. In response to this trend, secure employment has emerged as a preferred job-searching criterion amongst a growing number of university graduates. This shift in aspirations is subtly redefining the job market landscape, evidenced by a reduced concentration of graduates seeking employment in first-tier international cities. Increasingly, the allure of second and third-tier cities is augmenting, demonstrating these graduates' willingness to broaden their horizons in their career development trajectories.

3.3.2 Job-Seeking Priorities Among University Students

Understanding the priorities of university students when they are job hunting is important as it offers insights into the evolving job market. This analysis, founded on an expansive survey, specifically focused on uncovering these priorities. Ten elements critical to job seekers were identified: salary, job intensity, corporate culture, potential for growth, self-fulfilment, personal interests, social status, commuting distance-time, job stability, and salary. From the collected data, it was discovered that the top three priorities for university students were: salary (chosen by 407 out of 426 respondents), job intensity (selected by 64% of the participants), and corporate culture (selected by 50% of the respondents). In contrast, social status, commuting distance, and self-fulfilment were ranked as the least important, chosen by only 6%, 9%, and 9% of respondents respectively.

The survey additionally sought student perspectives on the 'slash youth' phenomenon, a term deriving from Merrick Alber's book "Dual Careers", typically describing individuals who engage in multiple job roles simultaneously due to dissatisfaction with a singular career life. When asked if they were amenable to being part of the 'slash youth' for income enhancement, 58% of respondents answered

positively, while only 4.46% responded negatively. This data underscores that contemporary students highly prioritize monetary compensation and personal financial growth in their choice of career [1]. They are prepared to expand their effort in pursuit of more remunerating jobs or engage in multiple roles at once, illustrating a shift in employment perspectives focused on maximizing salary.

3.3.3 University students' views on personal development

This team conducted a survey on what abilities university students want to improve during school. Among the five options of "score ranking", "English ability", "communication ability", "scientific research ability" and "not sure at all", the most popular choice was "communication ability", accounting for 29.34% of the total, followed by "English Ability", accounting for 23.24% of the total, and "achievement ranking" ranked third, with a total of 22.54% of people choosing this item. Regarding the question of whether social practice and internship experience are helpful for job hunting, more than 70% of university students chose "very helpful" or "helpful", and only 2.35% believed that social practice and internship experience will be helpful for their future job hunting. Not helpful at all. In addition, according to the survey results, 268 (62.91%) university students prefer to work directly after graduation, while only 158 (37.09%) believe that they need to continue their studies and are not in a hurry to find a job. According to the above results, it can be explained to a certain extent that current university students believe that social practice, work experience and communication skills are very important bonus points when applying for jobs, and they are also one of the abilities that should be focused on developing during their studies in university. In addition, more university students would prefer to work, find a job quickly, and accumulate work experience than continuing their studies [12].

3.3.4 Perceptions on Physical Labor and Grassroots Development Among University Students

Diverse perspectives exist in society regarding contemporary university students, particularly concerning their endurance capacity compared to previous generations. Despite this discussion, these study's findings reveal that 43.86% of participants believe contemporary university students demonstrate superior characteristics compared to their predecessors. Additionally, 40.35% perceive no significant difference in student quality between now and the past. Merely 15.79% of the respondents, which in our study accounts for nine individuals, perceive a decline in student quality over time. Within this minority, seven people specifically noted a perceived decline in the capacity for endurance among university students. Thus, for our sample, only 12.28% of the population view contemporary students' endurance capacity as inferior to that of past students, indicating that this negative perception represents a minority view. Overall, societal views regarding the quality of current university students remain largely positive. This study further delved into university students' attitudes towards

engaging in technical or manual labor roles and their willingness to contribute to grassroots and remote developmental projects in their home country. Upon satisfying remuneration, 14.08% and 34.27% of respondents expressed strong and moderate interest, respectively, in considering roles involving technical and manual labor post-graduation. Additionally, 15.96% and 31.69% of respondents conveyed high and moderate hopes, respectively, of contributing to grassroots or remote developmental projects. However, a small portion of respondents (3.52% and 7.75%) indicated they would never consider both these options.

3.4 Social Result Summary

An analysis was conducted on 57 surveyed responses, collected from public figures hailing from diverse work sectors. Of the total responses, 42.11% were derived from individuals involved in domestic private enterprises, 17.54% originated from state-owned enterprises, and 14.04% were acquired from public institutions. Additionally, 14.04% of the responses have been attributed to entrepreneurs or freelancers, while 5.26%, 3.51%, and 3.51% respectively represented contributors from foreign companies, social professionals in business, and government departments. Considering geographical representation, of the 57 samples, approximately 91.23% (52 individuals) are based in mainland China, whereas the rest are located in Macau and Hong Kong, China. The mainland China respondents are dispersed across various cities, comprising 27 in first-tier cities, 22 in second- and third-tier cities, and 4 in fourth-tier cities or at the grassroots level. A majority of respondents, 78.94%, demonstrated a fundamental understanding of the career prospects for recent university graduates in their respective industries. A significant proportion, 71.93%, opined that the present employment pressure on university students is distinctly higher than before, with only one respondent presuming the contrary. In terms of work intensity within their unit, the opinions varied with 16 respondents concurring completely, 9 partially agreeing, and 25 considering it largely in agreement. This study will incorporate the collected data from societal representatives with the relevant survey data gathered from university graduates in performing statistical analysis [3]. This will deduce if there exist any disparities in the employment perceptions between the two groups.

Through examining comparative cognitions of job market conditions between current university students and broader societal participants, a study was conducted to better comprehend perceptions of entry-level salaries, using SPSS independent sample t-test for analyzing statistical differences. The results indicated little significant statistical differentiation ($P > 0.05$) between both perceptions of initial salaries for recent university graduates, suggesting a coherent outlook. This demonstrates that initial remuneration for jobs secured by recent graduates generally conforms to societal expectations. Advancements in our information network technology facilitates contemporary

university students' access to job market conditions and information, thereby allowing them to develop a relatively accurate understanding of the baseline conditions and benefits in various industries. Regarding the importance of various factors in job recruitment, university students perceived professional skills (91%), academic qualifications (81%), and communication skills (72%) as most valued by employers. Meanwhile, societal participants assessed the key attributes desired by employers more evenly, including professional skills (61%), communication skills (60%), institutional education (51%), teamwork (40%), and learning ability (40%). This study utilized the SPSS chi-square test to examine discrepancies across these factors. The results indicated statistically significant differences ($P < 0.05$) in the perceptions of professional competencies, communication skills, teamwork, and learning capabilities between university students and societal representatives. Thus, it is suggested that university students may overrate the importance of professional skills and communication capabilities in job hunting, while potentially underestimating teamwork and learning abilities. Society at large, in contrast, values not only professional skills and communication abilities but also appreciates teamwork dynamics and continuous learning aptitude in candidates. In terms of academic qualifications, academic performance, and personal interests, there proved to be no statistically significant discrepancies ($P > 0.05$), indicating a consensus between university students and societal members regarding the importance of these factors in job hunting. Among them, academic credentials were viewed as the most crucial, while school performance and personal interests were considered less noteworthy in the job selection process.

4 Conclusion and Discussion

The contemporary outlook on university student employment is marked by a strong sense of individualism, pragmatism, rationality, and a sometimes-unidimensional perspective. In their pursuit of employment, they prioritize personal sentiments and perceptions, often overlooking familial expectations. Furthermore, they carefully consider the remuneration and workload of prospective jobs, insisting on an equitable work-pay balance. They demonstrate a willingness to embrace employment multiplicity, or the 'slash lifestyle', to satisfy their material needs rather than depending on a singular job. Yet, they exhibit a nuanced cognizance of societal employment standards, underlining monetary compensation, job benefits and the significance of practical experience or internships.

However, they possess a somewhat skewed understanding of the employers' criterion during candidate selection, often prioritizing professional competence and communication skills. They are, thus, neglecting the diversity of skills employers might seek. Society demands a more holistic, multi-faceted and multi-layered approach in job applicants. This study, therefore, posits: For the government, university students are the nation's future, the

driving force behind national progress. The employment challenge facing graduates is a critical societal concern that demands urgent and resolute attention [2]. Nationally, there should be a better grasp of talent stratification and alignment, enhance the efficacy of talent-job correlation and encourage multi-dimensional, diversified and multi-tiered graduate employment. The state should establish policies to discourage the exploitation of graduate labor by private firms, augment the overall employment milieu in the private sector, and improve workplace conditions for graduates [9]. Through awareness campaigns, the ethos of service and patriotism should be promoted among students to cultivate a positive attitude toward employment and career choices. From a societal perspective, there is a need to comprehend the personality attributes and employment pressures of present-day university students. Society should actively offer internship opportunities to expose students to the practical facets of working in various industry sectors. Entrepreneurship, job selection, and career lectures should be regularly conducted, offering financial assistance and support if possible. A rejection of diploma-centered mentality, transparent employment norms, and remuneration policies can marshal a proper understanding of employment.

Lastly, for university students themselves, opportunities should be embraced, participate in community-engagement activities, gain knowledge about different job roles in advance, and accumulate substantial internship experiences. Enhancing their competencies in line with employer's requirements should be the focus of a student's academic journey, thus fortifying their employment competitiveness. Apart from considering the material benefits and job workload, psychological aspects of the job, personal aspirations, life needs, self-realization, and a spirit of service should consolidate to foster a sound and constructive perspective on employment and career choice.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the editor and anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and valuable suggestions.

Funding

Not applicable.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Not applicable.

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