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Employment for College Graduates under COVID-19 in China: Vocational Education Should Take a More Important Role

Zimu Zhai[1,a,*]

[1]*Wuhan University, Wuhan, Hubei Province, 430072, China*
a. zhzm2002@sina.cn
**corresponding author*

Abstract: The issues affecting college undergraduates in terms of job choice and employment are increasingly complicated and pressing in the COVID-19 age. Among these, elements relating to career planning have drawn increased focus. This paper mainly discusses the career planning education for college graduates under COVID-19 period in China, it offers focused solutions including enhancing systematization, upgrading faculty teams, psychological interventions, and improving course applicability based on questionnaires and literature reviews. Interpretation of the current situation of domestic career education based on research and comparison of domestic and foreign career education models are provided to improve domestic career education, and to enhance the current situation of college students' employment problems.

Keywords: career education, career planning, employment, undergraduates, COVID-19

1. Introduction

For the fresh graduates of universities in the past two years, the most direct impact of COVID-19 is the decrease in the number of employment positions, more intense competition for employment, lower average salary level, and increased difficulty in employment, which have caused psychological pressure on fresh graduates of colleges and universities.

Compared to previous graduates who are actively engaged in the job market, many undergraduates in the post-epidemic era choose to apply for graduate school, civil service, or establishment positions, and those who fail to take the exam mostly choose to prepare for the exam without any income, missing many employment opportunities. This reveals the situation that graduates seek stability as job uncertainty increases and do not really have a correct concept of career choice [1].

In School-to-Work Programs and Transitions from Work to Education, David Neumark, a scholar at the University of California, and Donna Rothstein, a staff member at the United States. Bureau of Labor Statistics, draw on data from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97) to assess the impact of school--to--career (STC) programs on high school graduates' employment and transition rates [2]. Using high school career education opportunities as a background, John H. Bishop and Ferran Mane discovered throughout a 12-year longitudinal study that high school career education can have a favorable impact on graduates' job earnings [3].

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Research achievements have shown the great importance in career education in students' job-seeking and the wellbeing of their working life.

In China, the lack of career education, students' lack of knowledge and skills about career planning, and the blending of aspirations for future education and employment do not meet the criteria for today's talent training. Such shortcomings have been amplified during COVID-19, leaving recent graduates even more bewildered and lost.

1.1. The Current Situation of Career Planning Education for Chinese College Students

After reviewing literatures and having a questionnaire collected, the current stage of career planning education in China can be explained as developing, inefficient, and still lack of system.

Questions in questionnaire are circled around vocational views, self-cognition, career planning education students once received, and their expectations toward career planning education.

Since the research population is already zoomed in on university graduates and prospective graduates (which means external validity is more important than internal validity), the questionnaire adopts the method of purposive sampling in non-probability way. 166 answers were collected, and 161 of them are valid, effective rate is 96.99%.

1.1.1. Chinese Career Planning Education Starts Late

There are only 69.28% of respondents who have experienced career planning education, the rest have not been educated about their careers and have not even heard much about them.

Of the valid responses returned, only10.43% "in elementary school", 26.95% "in middle school", 55% "in high school", and 66.09% "in college" regarding the stage of having received career education. This indicates that career education in China started mostly at the higher education level, with universities as the main focus. This not only reflects the lack of emphasis on career education in China, but also demonstrates that career education in China is mainly practical and more utilitarian. Introducing career education in the first few years of entering the workplace seems to save time and effort, but it neglects the concept of career education in cultivating students' independent career ideas, individual career interests, and more awareness that should be popularized at the primary education level.

In the 1970s, American scholars Sydeny Marland and Kenneth B. Hoyt proposed and developed career education theory. He pointed out that: career education is education about all jobs; self-awareness and work-world awareness are equally important and closely related; the goal of career education is to increase opportunities for individual career choices; and career education is lifelong and must encompass the whole society and schooling [4].

With the increasing attention to career planning, we should gradually realize that it is difficult to fundamentally solve the problem of individual career development with career guidance alone. Individual career development has a lot to do with their outlook on life, career, awareness, and ability of career planning. What's more, it is essentially a matter of education for individual career development, not limited to career itself.

1.1.2. The Lack of Practical Application of Career Planning Education in China

Although the most immediate purpose of career planning education in China is to guide the soon-to-be employed students into the job market faster and more efficiently, its practical measures for this core purpose are not really aligned with reality.

In the question about "the areas for improvement in the career planning education you received", 65.22% of the respondents thought that "the basic career-related knowledge in the curriculum is not enough" and 51.3% of the respondents thought that "there is no full-time teaching team and the

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teachers are not professional enough". More than half of the respondents suggested room for improvement in the composition and efficacy of career planning, which indicates that although career planning education in China has taken shape and is continuously adjusting with the Chinese career market, there are still urgent needs to improve such courses.

As a group of students directly faced with career choices, they should be more directly exposed to the current state of the job market through such classes and have more transparent ways to know and understand careers. This requires a more professional team with more time.

1.1.3. The Lack of Individual Cultivation in Career Planning Education in China

In the career planning of college students, they need to continuously compare and analyze various aspects such as career types, regions, positions, and salaries, and finally choose a suitable career for themselves, set reasonable career development goals, and gradually realize career development. These choices should be determined based on individual factors such as students' personal characteristics and interests and expertise. However, at present, many college students have a utilitarian mentality and set too high expectations of employment goals, which leads to difficulties in employment.

In the ranking question of "factors to consider when choosing a job", "salary and benefits" took the largest share in both the first and second positions, while other options such as "city of work" and "position level", and "hobbies and interests" were in the middle of the ranking, reflecting that students do not closely link their personal characteristics and interests with their job search.

In the question "the areas for improvement in the career planning education you received", 49.57% of respondents consider "insufficient attention and guidance to the psychological aspects of students' career choice in the curriculum".

All along, the focus of teaching work in Chinese education system has been on students' professional education, and the support for students' career planning guidance work is relatively weak. With the increasingly severe employment situation of college graduates and the introduction of a series of national policies to promote the employment of college graduates, colleges and universities have only gradually begun to pay more attention to the employment situation of college students. At present, most colleges and universities have set up special guidance centers to educate college students on career planning and provide lectures on employment and entrepreneurship guidance for college students who are nearing graduation. However, in the process of actual work, the career planning education are relatively more concerned with the employment rate of students, but not enough attention to the adaptability of students' career planning. More concerns are put into the employment readiness of college students, but not enough attention to the changes of their employment ability and psychological quality. This makes the systemic and effectiveness of school career planning guidance work affected to a certain extent and cannot effectively solve a series of psychological problems brought about by the blindness, confusion, and disorientation of college students in career planning.

1.2. International Career Education Models

1.2.1. America

The development of career education in the United States began earlier, and after three major reforms, it was officially renamed Career and Technical Education (CTE) in 2006 [5-6].

CTE in the United States mainly includes secondary education, post-secondary education, and comprehensive public high schools are the main place where CTE is conducted in the United States. One study shows that over 95% of high school students take at least one CTE course in high school,

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and nearly 30% of students will focus on one area of concentration taking more than three CTE courses.

Based on career clusters, the United States CTE program guides the development of local characteristics by leveraging the strengths of each region. The variety of CTE programs in the United States is tiered in terms of difficulty level, allowing students of the right age to receive a career education from the shallowest to the deepest, in which they can integrate career practices and have the space to be exposed to one or more careers in depth.

At the same time, CTE in the United States is based on a flexible credit transfer system that allows career education in various fields in the United States to be easily articulated without wasting human and material resources. This reflects the chain and integrity of the United States career education system, where students will receive career technology education at multiple learning stages.

CTE is a large educational system that requires multiple guarantees to operate steadily, in addition to career clusters and credit support. Among them, the faculty strength of American career education is a very important point. Take Naperville North High School as an example, the school has a special CTE department with 14 full-time teachers, most of whom have 5 to 10 years of practical experience in companies in this industry and have academic backgrounds in related fields, and the course standards and syllabus of each course are open to the public. California's specialized career education teachers and school counselors are subject to rigorous testing and certification [7]. Career education teachers are responsible for teaching subjects that encompass both academic knowledge and technical skills, and therefore need to maintain close ties with industry to ensure that the content is not divorced from society. School counselors are also responsible for the broader academic, career, emotional, and social guidance of students. Palo Alto High School, for example, which is adjacent to Stanford University and Silicon Valley, has a dedicated guidance department that instructs teachers in a series of events, such as career awareness days and career month presentations [7].

1.2.2. Canada

Canada's career centers are government-run and well-funded. The career guidance provided by the government and universities is highly specialized and standardized, and they maintain close contact and cooperation with each other. Students can seek help at the center from the beginning of their studies, including going to the "job search clinic" [8]. Career guidance personnel are highly specialized and have a strong sense of service. Counselors there have a doctorate in education, psychology, counseling or the corresponding humanities and social sciences, and have some work experience. Instructors or administrators have a master's degree in humanities. These professionals design career options and plans for students and provide advice on job application strategies and job search information. Universities also often use their contacts with companies and past alumni to organize special job breakfasts and luncheons to give graduates the opportunity to interact naturally in office settings and get to know each other with potential employers.

2. Recommendations Related to Domestic Policy Interventions

2.1. The State and Society Work Together to Provide Support and Regulate the Career Planning System

As a group of people who are both unfamiliar and curious about society and careers, students are relatively inexperienced when faced with the problem of future career planning, and the loopholes in career planning lead many students to blindly follow the trend or have no way to start, lacking the awareness of career planning.

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The curriculum of career education should systematically reflect the characteristics of career guidance, be included in the teaching plan, and implemented effectively. The content and form of the curriculum should include both basic knowledge of career planning and practical activities such as social activities to enhance students' ability to know themselves and their careers, and to expand their cognitive pathways. In view of the current situation of insufficient full-time teachers and incomplete curriculum construction in China, schools should explore and integrate career curriculum resources of various disciplines as early as possible, provide students with guidance on life, ideals and career, provide timely knowledge and information on further education, employment and entrepreneurship related to the teaching contents, and guide students to organically link their subject learning interests and abilities with their future career development.

2.2. Establish a Professional and Specialized Career Education Faculty Team

What can be learned from foreign career planning education systems is that a solid teacher base is the core guarantee of the education system. Energetically, no matter of how many incentives implemented for full-time teachers would got, they still have heavy tasks that unable them to achieve the quality of work of full-time career planning teachers. Professionally speaking, teachers without relevant professional academic backgrounds as well as corporate work experience are prone to repeat the same mistakes that gave rise to the problems summarized above in career education in China.

Teachers are the main body of teaching activities. High-quality teachers are the guarantee of high-quality teaching. Career guidance teachers in high schools should be sufficient in number, stable in staff, and specialized in teaching. Among them, specialize teaching staff is especially urgent. From foreign experience, developed countries all have strict qualification regulations for career education instructors. For example, in the United States, to serve as a career instructor, one must have at least a master's degree, be nationally certified or licensed, and meet the ethical and professional standards set by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) [9]. In Chinese general high schools, career guidance teachers should also receive systematic training in career planning, pedagogy, psychology, and other knowledge, and have strong theoretical and practical skills. They should not only be competent in classroom teaching, but also in planning and organizing career experience activities. To this end, schools should establish rules and regulations to enhance the professionalism of career planning instructors, such as "regularly evaluating the performance of professional teachers' work status" and "gradually improving the mechanism of continuing education and training for career planning teachers, and providing various learning opportunities for teachers who participate in continuing education and training" [10]. In addition, universal career planning education activities should be carried out for all teachers in schools, such as "listing books, setting a time limit for reading, writing study experiences, and conducting regular exchanges", so that teachers can establish correct career education concepts, master certain career planning skills, and permeate career education in teaching activities of various subjects [11].

2.3. Focus on Individual Student Differences and Implement Psychological Interventions

Chinese students' own factors are the key that create psychological problems in their career planning. In the process of career selection and employment, college students lack accurate cognition and assessment of themselves, which leads to self-cognitive dissonance and makes a big gap between their career planning and reality. Targeted efforts should make to enhance students' self-confidence in choosing a career and their ability to resist stress in employment.

Students should be guided to conduct a comprehensive self-assessment and form a correct self-perception, based on which they can build a personalized career plan and promote their

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self-worth in career planning. Firstly, schools should guide students to build a dynamically adjusted self-assessment system by establishing files for students and guiding them to record their own personality characteristics, interests, professional abilities, expertise and strengths at different times to form a dynamic file presentation. Then a comprehensive self-assessment based on it should be made. Secondly, according to the self-assessment, students will be guided to build personalized career plans. Through the comprehensive self-assessment, students can have an accurate understanding of their actual abilities, and in the process of career planning, they can really determine their own career interests and abilities based on their own reality, so as to realize personalized career development.

As mentioned earlier, the differences in individual students' abilities, interests, and view of life and values implicitly create each student's unique career orientation. Only by effectively stimulating these vocational tendencies and strengths can career planning education enable students to find the right career field for themselves. Their sense of achievement from their work would increase in direct proportion to how well their own values were realized. Career planning is only a part of life planning. By leading students to have a comprehensive understanding of their own traits and career environment, career education has the role of promoting students' career planning and career development.

To improve the vocational education modes in colleges and universities and strengthen the effective integration of career planning and mental health education, we need to improve the construction of career planning classroom system and enrich the content of mental health education. At the present stage, career planning education in colleges and universities pays insufficient attention to the mental health of college students, and the education content focuses on the guidance of employment methods, without effectively integrating the knowledge of mental health, and the psychological counseling for students is relatively insufficient [12]. Therefore, to improve the career education curriculum system, it is necessary to integrate mental health education in career education.

The career planning platform can serve as a mental health education center for students' career planning and introduce the concept of "career planning clinic". In this way, it can provide targeted education and guidance for students' psychological problems, as well as provide psychological counseling services for students' career development and solve their problems in time. Through these measures, we can eliminate students' ambivalence and confusion when facing career planning and guide them to make correct self-cognition and reasonable career planning.

2.4. Popularize Real-time Workplace Information and Introduce Workplace Skills Appropriately

Creating a good social atmosphere for career planning education of Chinese students and advocating its importance is crucial to the development of career education in China. At present, college students need information about employment market that is updated constantly to guide them to effectively link their career planning with the current employment market reality. Strengthening the degree of college students' understanding of the career market is the basis of making a scientific career planning and determining a suitable job for students.

In the questionnaire survey, 71.08% of the respondents wanted to learn "job hunting, interviewing and speaking skills" in the career education course. More than half of the respondents would like to receive guidance on "career etiquette, professional image" and "understanding of career types and national policies". Since career education in China is concentrated at the advanced education level, it is also important to respond immediately to the needs of the students, who are the main targets of career planning education, and provide them with as much assistance as possible in career selection and employment.

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3. Conclusion

In recent years, with the new demands of domestic social and economic development and education reform, vocational education and career education have received more and more attention and discussion. How to enhance the awareness of career education in the whole society, improve the cultivation of career awareness and vocational ability, cultivate new practical talents for social and economic development, and promote the transformation of China from a big manufacturing country to a strong “smart manufacturing” country is a problem that career education needs to pay attention to.

Both employment and education are essential to people’s livelihood. The special nature of the post-epidemic era poses new challenges to the already increasingly competitive employment of college students in China, and this issue has received both social attention and academic attention widespread. This research begins with career education to investigate the potential for improving Chinese students’ career concepts and cognition, so that more people can comprehend the value and necessity of career planning and increase college students’ profession selection and employment in the epidemic period.

Based on the current situation of career education for domestic college students, this study draws on foreign educational experiences and investigates the room for improvement of the whole Chinese career education system. At the present time of continuous social development, receiving career planning-related education as early as possible may be one of the ways to directly promote students’ career selection and better solve the employment problem of college students in the post-epidemic era.

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