



# Research on the Chinese University Graduates'

## Preference on Jobs

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**Abstract.** As China's employment pressure is getting more and more serious, and the job market competition is getting increasingly fierce, Chinese graduates have gradually formed their own employment preferences. Based on the interviews with five graduates, it is concluded that graduates tend to prefer stable job types and large cities as their workplace. To make the first step from theory to practice, graduates need to exercise their subjective initiative urgently.

**Keywords:** Employment, preference, University graduate

## 1 Introduction

Employment has always been a core issue in social and economic development. It not only directly affects individuals' livelihoods and quality of life, but also plays a crucial role in maintaining social stability and harmony. However, in recent years, with significant changes in the employment environment and labor market for university graduates, the issue of employment has gradually become a global challenge. With the increase in the number of graduates and the reduction of job opportunities, the employment pressure on graduates in various countries is constantly increasing, which even threatens their mental health. Research on unemployment in general has found an association with psychological distress, including shame, depression, and anxiety (Andersen 2009; Hamilton et al. 1990; Tefft 2011; Van Horn 2014). Different countries have introduced policies to improve the employment rate of graduates.

The Chinese employment market is also facing the same issues. The employment pressure continues to increase. With the continuous increase in the number of university graduates, the competition in the job market is becoming fiercer. Specifically, the number of graduates in 2001 was only 1.14 million, but by 2022, the number of university graduates across the country had reached 10.76 million, a record high of over 10 million for the first time (Ma, B. & Hu, L. 2023). This has escalated competition in the job market, resulting in increased pressure for job-seekers, particularly causing a severe imbalance in supply and demand in the urban labor market (Chu, J., Liu, J., & Liu, S. 2019). And there have been issues of low employment matching and a weak guiding role played by universities. This employment market is highly complex, and many researchers have investigated the underlying reasons for employment phenomena in hopes of identifying appropriate countermeasures.

The existing employment problem in China is affected by a combination of factors, based on many previous research associated with political and economical macrosystems: Firstly, the government's employment policies lack sufficient targeted and practical solutions (Zhou, W., Li, S., & Feng, Y. 2022). Secondly, the level of participation of employers in talent cultivation is not high, leading to a disconnect between university talent cultivation and social needs (Zhou, J., Zhang, L., & Zhu, Z. 2020). Finally, due to social environmental factors, the supply and demand situation in the job market for university graduates has undergone significant changes (Zhang, X. 2010). Despite these factors that are unfavorable for the employment of university graduates, the Chinese government has still implemented a series of measures to promote employment rates and alleviate employment pressure. The government actively explores diversified employment channels such as campus, network and entrepreneurship to promote the prosperity and development of the employment market. Finally, the government provides employment assistance for key groups, and offers policy recommendations and support for them.

In the employment issue of university graduates, in addition to the influence of macro policies, individual student factors also play a key role in employment. Li Yongyang and other scholars believe that although the employment difficulties of graduates are related to external factors, they are closely related to the insufficient ability of college students to solve practical problems (Li, Y., Yang, P. & Yan, F. 2012) and their high expectations for employment (Fan, X. 2015). Besides these two

factors mentioned above, personal preferences formed on the basis of the student's own development conditions and career aspirations are particularly important.

Given that the employment behavior of college students is directly influenced by their personal employment preference, in order to alleviate the employment difficulties of university graduates, it is necessary to identify the personal employment preference of the college student population and the factors that influence their personal employment preference (Zhang, X. 2020). Through studying the research results of previous scholars on employment intention, it can be found that there are still some tendencies among college students. In the choice of ideal work units, college students still show a relatively obvious "preference for the bureau " in their employment aspirations, pursuing relatively stable and high-status jobs (Liu, B. 2020). In the choice of ideal work areas, college students are more inclined to work in economically developed regions such as first-tier cities after graduation. They expect more job opportunities and larger development platforms in these regions (Wang, L. 2018). These scholars have conducted a relatively thorough study on the personal employment preferences of college students. But few research set their focus on the reasons why graduates have this tendency in their employment preference. This research aims to not only describe the graduate employment condition in the post-pandemic period of China, but also dive deeply into the students' opinions which shape their behavior and decision.

## **2 Methodology**

### **2.1 Methodological Approach**

A qualitative research approach was adopted in order to find out the perceptions of university graduates on employment and their willingness to choose a career. Qualitative methods are designed to obtain research data through in-depth communication between the researcher and the research subjects, which is more authentic and effective. Summarising the research data and analysing it from a holistic perspective helps to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the various influencing factors. In addition, in the process of dialogue with the research subjects, the researcher can understand their ideas from their perspective.

Sampling & Participants

2.2 Data Collection

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select graduates from different universities who had to be university students who graduated in 2023 and chose to be employed. Selecting representative samples can help researchers focus on specific research objects to better meet research purposes and questions. As a graduate, the author is very concerned about the current employment situation, including the graduate’s perspective on the current employment tendency, the graduate’s attitude towards employment, and reasons of preference on job. Convenience sampling is also employed. For the convenience or resource-saving consideration, the samples of this study were selected from friends who are about to graduate and who are known by the researchers. This facilitates the investigation and in-depth communication, and makes the results more authentic.

A total of 5 graduates will be recruited for the study. The study involved three female and two male students with an average age of 22 years, studying five different majors at different universities. The sample is from the top 13.8% of students in China.

Table 1. Interviewee’s background

| Interviewee | Gender | Major          | Employed or not |
|-------------|--------|----------------|-----------------|
| A           | female | Humanity       | unemployed      |
| B           | male   | Stem           | employed        |
| C           | female | Humanity       | unemployed      |
| D           | male   | Stem           | employed        |
| E           | female | Social science | unemployed      |

The study utilised one-to-one semi-structured interviews to collect the research data (table 1), with the help of internet chat software during the process. This method allows more room for respondents to answer, so that they are always in a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere and are able to express their views freely. And it can quickly build up trust between the investigator and the respondents and ensure the privacy of the interview content. My interview outline mainly encompasses three aspects: the expectations of interviewees on their jobs, the methods and means of job search, and their views on the overall employment situation. During the interview, I will pursue further questions based on the answers of different interviewees, vertically explore their deep-seated views on employment, and ensure that the interview topics are of depth.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be employed to analyze the interview transcripts. The interview data will be taken and be summarised with similar themes. The participants will be divided into two groups, employed and unemployed, and the interviews will be conducted for the different groups. This method is more focused and the data is more visual.

## 3 Graduate's Employment Preference

As the pressure on China's job market gradually intensifies, graduates' demands for their desired jobs have gradually become clearer, revealing numerous problems while also developing obvious preferences. In the survey on graduates' individual employment preferences, several relatively obvious features have emerged. Based on the summary and analysis, it is found that they have different preferences for ideal positions and factors influencing their employment.

### 3.1 Preference on Ideal Position

**“Seeking For Stability”: Ideal Position For Most Graduates.** In the investigation of graduates' preferences for types of employment, almost all students mentioned preferring stable jobs and aiming to enter the government, public schools, and state-owned enterprises. They argue that "stable jobs provide relatively secure income streams, carry a lower risk of unemployment, and reduce the likelihood of mid-life job losses" (A, C, D, 2023.7). Such employment ensures that employees do not lose their jobs due to market fluctuations or company bankruptcies. Additionally, employees enjoy high welfare benefits, including medical insurance and social security policies, that enhance their resilience against accidents and risks. During interviews, one graduate mentioned that "civil servant jobs offer stability, good welfare, and low stress" (A, 2023.5). He considers stable jobs to have satisfactory salaries and social status, making them a desirable option for post-graduation employment within the public sector. Compared to other corporate employees, civil servants enjoy significant advantages in terms of lower risks and comprehensive personal livelihood guarantees, such as access to inexpensive yet delicious meals at their workplaces, thus addressing basic survival needs.

While the majority favors stable employment, some still prefer flexible work arrangements. Interviewee B opined that "I do not want to define the meaning of work based on traditional mainstream values. Earning money with my own hands and doing what I love is sufficient, as long as it does not interfere with my personal life. External evaluations and perspectives are not that important" (B, 2023.6). He aspires to gain external respect and recognition through his personal capabilities. Furthermore, he believes that this type of work offers greater freedom, more promotion opportunities, and more flexibility in terms of compensation and welfare levels, being more responsive to market conditions. Flexible work entails the adaptability of work time and location, as well as the diversity of work content and format. Unlike stable employment, which tends to follow a more fixed model, flexible work provides a broader range of choices for employees to select the most suitable work format based on their interests and expertise. Furthermore, they can make different choices at any time.

**“A Larger Platform in Big Cities”: the Ideal Field for Graduates.** When it comes to choosing a work location, all respondents expressed a strong preference for working in first-tier or newly-designated first-tier cities. They generally believe that compared to smaller cities, these metropolises offer more employment opportunities, better development prospects, abundant resources, convenient living conditions, and higher salary levels. Interviewee C, discussing his preference for working in big cities, mentioned that "large cities can provide me with a larger platform to meet more people. In such an environment, I can grow rapidly, broaden my horizons, and enhance my capabilities in various aspects" (C, 2023.6). Interviewee A, who resides in a major city and is accustomed to its infrastructure and lifestyle services, believes that "the services of big cities provide me with more convenient living conditions. Furthermore, the rich educational, cultural, and social resources of large cities are more conducive to the comprehensive development of graduates" (A, 2023.5). Compared to small cities, big cities also boast more developed social activities and networks, which facilitate relationship-building and maintenance. During the interviews, all participants unanimously agreed that the most critical factor was the abundance of employment opportunities in big cities, which offers a wider range of choices in selecting professions. The increased number of companies and organizations increases the likelihood of finding suitable job opportunities.

While the majority of graduates tend to favor employment in major cities, interviewee E, who hails from a small town, expressed her intention to return to her hometown after graduation. She stated, "I want to develop my career close to my parents, not too far away from home. Ideally, my workplace should also be nearby, which would lower my living expenses and enhance my quality of life" (E, 2023, 8). Indeed, the cost of living in small cities is significantly lower than that in first-tier cities. Employment in such locations often entails less work pressure, less intense workplace competition, and more time for family, strengthening emotional bonds.

### 3.2 Factors Behind the Employment Preference

**Majors: A Decisive Factor to Working Types.** Graduates' preferences for work vary depending on their majors, social trends, and family factors. From the perspective of majors, interviewee B, as a business graduate, aligns his career planning with his major and expects a vast career development space. His job expectations are "lucrative salaries and bonuses, a sense of job accomplishment, and realizing my personal value. The reason for choosing this job is the large platform, the opportunity to meet more people, the company's promising development prospects, and the ability to learn a lot and grow rapidly" (B, 2023, 5). Business graduates often choose large multinational corporations and renowned consulting firms when selecting employment units, as these companies can provide comprehensive training systems and extensive career development spaces. Meanwhile, interviewee A, majoring in humanities and social sciences, idealizes working as a high school teacher in a public school. "I believe that teaching suits me and I'm interested in education. My undergraduate studies were also related to high school curricula, so I give priority to pursuing a teaching career (A, 2023, 7)." Graduates who study majors related to high school curricula, especially those from normal universities, have received systematic training in teaching skills during their undergraduate studies and have obtained teacher qualification certificates. They are more inclined to choose teaching as a profession. Therefore, the difference in majors leads to different professional knowledge and skills, which directly affects graduates' preferences for different job types.

**Social Trends: Subtle Influence on the Choice of Working Field.** From the perspective of social trends, graduates have a strong enthusiasm for emerging

industries or industries strongly supported by the state, such as artificial intelligence and new energy. These industries often provide a large number of employment opportunities for graduates, and they are eager to join these positions. Interviewee D is currently employed in the artificial intelligence industry, responsible for external communication work. He believes that "the current job market is relatively saturated, and it is not very friendly to undergraduate students without work experience like me. Everyone wants to work in the institutional sector, leading to increasing competition for certain positions, while some jobs remain unfilled. I think I can broaden my horizons and consider different types of work and emerging industries. Otherwise, it's too limiting" (D, 2023, 8). With the development of the economy and the transformation of the industrial structure, some traditional industries may gradually decline, while emerging industries are booming. This requires graduates to consider the development prospects and potential of industries when selecting work, assessing the fit of their career choices based on whether the industry offers abundant employment opportunities and significant career development spaces.

**Family: Parents' Instruction on Graduates.** From the perspective of family factors, stable jobs are often preferred by graduates. Some families may pay more attention to stability and comfort, hoping that their children can work in their hometown or nearby areas. Graduates growing up in such a family environment may be more inclined to choose workplaces closer to their homes. For example, Interviewee E hopes to return to her hometown after graduation and become a junior high school teacher, which is close to her home and has a regular lifestyle. She believes that this kind of work and living environment is easier to adapt to. On the other hand, some families focus on their children's personal development and achievements, encouraging them to pursue their own career dreams. Graduates growing up in such a family environment may be more willing to choose workplaces that can give full play to their talents and potential. The cost of living in big cities is significantly higher than that in small cities, but the salary level is more likely to meet the expectations of college graduates. For instance, Interviewee B is determined to challenge himself and wants to have more opportunities to learn and improve himself in big cities and larger platforms. Therefore, he prefers competitive multinational enterprises. Although the working pressure in such enterprises is relatively high, the work efficiency is often high, with generous salaries and bonuses.

## 4 Conclusions

As the graduation season arrives every year, the issue of graduate employment has become the focus of social attention. After in-depth interviews with graduates on their employment preferences, the following conclusions can be drawn: Firstly, graduates' preferences for job types have changed. More and more graduates combine personal majors, interests, and social needs. Most graduates tend to prefer stable jobs, not overly pursuing particularly high salaries, but only pursuing relatively stable income sources. Some graduates have a greater preference for flexible work, hoping to engage in challenging jobs and paying more attention to personal growth and job satisfaction. Secondly, big cities remain very popular among graduates when it comes to employment choices. According to a survey on the employment expectations of university graduates in Jiangsu Province, more than 70% of graduates hope to find jobs in big cities and medium-sized cities. This is because big cities offer more employment opportunities and higher salary levels (Wang, Y. 2021). Additionally, big cities are conducive to personal career development, with rich resources available and larger spaces and platforms for career development. In the context of the overall sluggish employment situation in society, graduates' employment preferences show a trend that varies depending on their majors, social trends, and family factors. In the process of choosing a job, they pay more attention to the realization of personal and social values.

Under the current market economy conditions, many graduates have exhibited clear employment preferences but lack motivation and practice for shaping self-capabilities, as well as developing their abilities in self-differentiation. Facing such a market environment, graduates should promptly shift their employment mindset, accurately position themselves in the market, establish correct and positive employment values, and enhance their subjective initiative (Xing, X. 2009). In my interview survey, many graduates struggled to find suitable jobs, or they were busy preparing for civil service or postgraduate entrance exams, missing out on the best job opportunities. However, graduates should make sufficient preparations before job hunting. Although significant efforts are required in the initial stages, this is very worthwhile and necessary for finding an ideal job. Therefore, graduates should first recognize themselves, build confidence, and carefully plan their careers. Secondly, they need to enhance their comprehensive quality, studying their major knowledge diligently, establishing a solid theoretical foundation while integrating theory with

practice (Wang, Y.2024). Finally, they should keep up with the latest industry trends, make full use of various Internet resources and social media platforms, and promptly obtain recruitment information from various channels. Through these preparations and continuous accumulation of experience, graduates can stand out in the job-hunting process and find ideal jobs.

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