



Higher education expansion and post-college unemployment: Understanding the roles of fields of study in China

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ABSTRACT

Post-college unemployment has become a serious social problem in China. The current study draws data from two regional state universities—a comprehensive state university and a polytechnic state university—and examines the relationship between fields of study and labor market outcomes. Both universities have expanded their enrollment numbers, but the pathways to expansion and experienced structural changes vary greatly between the two. The study explores three specific questions: (1) Do university graduates majoring in humanities and social sciences (HSS) experience more difficulty obtaining a job than students majoring in economically-oriented field or technical field? (2) Is the employment gap greater in polytechnic state universities than in comprehensive state universities? And (3) are HSS students more likely to pursue graduate studies to avoid unemployment? A multinomial logistic regression analysis provides strong evidence that students majoring in HSS experience greater employment difficulties. Expansion in postgraduate studies has to some extent lessened this labor market disadvantage for students majoring in these two “soft-fields.” The relative labor market disadvantage of HSS students is greater in polytechnic state universities that have merged with a liberal arts college. The proposition that HSS students are more likely to pursue graduate studies in response to a high risk of unemployment was only confirmed for the comprehensive state university. This study extends related theories and contributes to the literature on comparative studies of higher educational expansion and employment.

1. Introduction

Post-college unemployment has become a serious problem since China transitioned from elite to mass higher education. Between 2004 and 2009, less than 60% of university graduates found a job in a work unit (China Higher Education Student Information and Career Center [CHESICC], 2011). Between 19% and 27% of all university graduates could not find any jobs at graduation. The situation was even worse for students who graduated from second- and third-tier universities located in central and western China (China Higher Education Student Information and Career Center, 2011). In 2009, more than 10,000 high school students in Chongqing, the majority of whom were born to poor rural families, responded to the deterioration of the college graduate job market and opted out of pursuing post-secondary education (The Chongqing Evening News, 2009). This has raised public concerns over inequality and the sustainability of higher education expansion and has motivated a number of empirical studies on higher education expansion and post-college employment. However, the results have been less conclusive. Although most of the empirical evidence suggests a negative employment effect from higher education expansion (e.g., Wu and Zhang, 2010; Li et al., 2014; Yu, 2014), Qu and Zhao's (2016) recent

analysis of the same data used by Li, Walley, and Xing revealed a positive association between higher education expansion and college employment.

Moreover, despite the growing inequalities in earnings and employment-related outcomes among college graduates (Autor et al., 2006), researchers have not devoted sufficient attention to the fields of study, school reputation, and other measures of the qualitative differences among college graduates that either represent structural links between educational systems and the labor market (Kerckhoff, 1995; Roksa and Levey, 2010) or serve as proxies of skills, competencies (Becker, 1993), and innate abilities (Spence, 1973) in labor market entry (e.g., Wu and Zhang, 2010; Li et al., 2014). Most of the existing studies that have linked fields of study to college employment either are descriptive or focus their analysis on students majoring in a specific field (Li et al., 2008; Yu, 2014). Although a few studies have drawn on data from several universities and compared the employment prospects of students majoring in different fields of study (e.g., Ma and Jiang, 2010; Wang, 2013), the structural features of higher education systems, the interplay between higher education expansion and labor market restructuring, and the implications for the increasingly diversified school-to-work transitions among graduates (Furstenberg et al., 2008)

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have not been addressed adequately in the literature.

The current study selects two regional state universities located in central and western China and examines the relationship between fields of study and employment status at graduation. Regional state universities are selected because regional state universities are the cornerstone of China's higher education system. The bulk of higher education expansion has occurred through enrollment in humanities and social sciences (HSS) in regional state universities. The employment status of students who graduated from regional state universities, especially those majoring in HSS, thus provides a more solid basis for evaluating the rationale behind higher education expansion. Because the market economy is less well developed in central and western China, the labor market experience of graduates from universities located in these two regions also provides researchers with an invaluable opportunity to examine how the levels of economic development and institutional barriers to geographical mobility interact with higher education expansion and affect university graduates. Most importantly, the pathways that these two universities have followed to achieve higher expansion, although they are unable to capture the full complexity of the Chinese higher education system, are representative of the national trend. The result of the analysis will thus contribute to current policy debate on higher education reforms, the sustainability of higher education expansion, and the bridging of higher education systems and the labor market.

This study explores three specific questions: (1) Do HSS students have greater difficulty in obtaining a job at graduation than do their counterparts in other fields of study? (2) Is this relative labor market disadvantage of HSS students conditional on the type of university? (3) Are HSS students more likely to pursue graduate studies to avoid unemployment risks? This study makes three contributions to the literature. First, this study improves the estimation of college employment by identifying postgraduate school enrollment as an alternative route for transitioning to the labor market. Differences in employment status between college graduates in different fields of study therefore reflect not only the labor market conditions, but also the influence of postgraduate expansion (Goyette and Mullen, 2006; Zhang, 2005). Second, the typical structural changes that the two selected universities have experienced allow for examining how institutional mergers and restructuring and fields of study interact and affect college graduates' employment prospects. Finally, the unique pathway China has adopted to transition to mass higher education, economic restructuring following the 2008 financial crisis, remarkable regional disparities, and institutional barriers to geographical mobility promise that an investigation regarding the fields of study and post-college employment in China will contribute to comparative studies on institutional arrangement and labor market outcomes (Van de Werfhorst, 2004; Nunez and Livanos, 2010).

In the following, theories and empirical studies on fields of study and employment prospects are reviewed, and the higher education expansion in China is briefly introduced, followed by hypotheses on the relationship between fields of study and employment outcomes at graduation in China, a description of the data, and a report on the results. The paper ends with concluding remarks and policy implications.

2. Theoretical perspectives

2.1. The structural perspective

The labor market is segmented from a structural perspective. Fields of study represent the structural links between the educational system and the labor market. Labor market entry and occupational mobility partly reflect the characteristics of the educational system and its relationship to the labor market (Kerckhoff, 1995, 2001). In the structural perspective, the strength of the link between the educational system and the labor market depends on the occupational specificity of fields of study. Academic fields that offer more occupationally specific training

have clear occupational counterparts in the labor market and thus have a greater capacity to structure the flow of college graduate into the labor market (Maurice et al., 1986). By contrast, liberal arts fields and sciences have no obvious occupational matches in the labor market (Grubb, 1997), and college graduates majoring in these two broad categories of fields will take more time to find a job.

The positive labor market effect of occupationally specific training has been observed consistently in research on high school graduates and sub-baccalaureate labor market entrants. However, evidence on the association between the occupational specificity of an academic field and college graduates' transition into the labor market has been mixed. In a study on college students' reactions to economic downturn and a high post-college unemployment rate in Taiwan, Wu (2011) found some indirect evidence for the structural perspective. That evidence revealed that college students are more likely to enroll in practical, employment-oriented, and credential-related courses to enhance their competencies and employability. Wu's findings have been echoed by a recent survey in mainland China, which showed that college graduates ranked job-related competencies, internships, and work experiences as the most important factors in finding a job (Institute of Economics of Education at Peking University, 2011). Yue's (2014) study on the initial placement rate suggested that the employment effect of occupationally specific training may have surpassed that of educational level in China (Yue, 2014). The initial placement rate of Chinese students who graduated from two-and-three-year vocational and polytechnic schools has caught up to and then surpassed that of four-year undergraduates. By 2011, the initial placement rate of polytechnic students was 8 percentage points greater than that of four-year college graduates.

Research tracking college graduates over time has revealed that graduates in liberal arts and social sciences are more disadvantaged for labor market entry than students who have earned degrees with high occupational specificity. However, graduate students who have earned a degree in fields focusing on general education have much faster growth in occupational status than do students who possess credentials with a high level of occupational specificity (Roksa and Levey, 2010). Cross-national comparative studies have suggested that the rigidity of the labor market (Nunez and Livanos, 2010) and the "vocalization" of higher education (Van de Werfhorst, 2004) will likely make the relationship between fields of study and employment-related outcomes more complicated than predicted by the structural perspective. Labor market outcomes are related more closely to fields of study in a highly vocationally oriented tertiary education system than in educational systems that combine undergraduate and graduate pre-doctoral education or offer courses in "minor" and "major" subjects. In a study on Chinese college graduates' labor market entry, Li et al. (2008) found that general higher education that combines both knowledge and vocational skills in the form of double majors or minors reduces college unemployment risks.

2.2. The human capital perspective

Similar to the structural perspective, the human capital perspective perceives that learning environments and acquired competencies and skills vary between fields. Labor market outcomes at graduation are determined by the competencies and skills developed in each field of study (Murdoch and Paul, 2007). The human capital perspective differs from the structural perspective in two main aspects. First, although the structural perspective emphasizes occupational specificity of college majors and its relationship to the labor market, the human capital perspective is concerned with a broader category of skills and competencies developed in the fields of study, including vocational skills, technical expertise, and higher order skills (such as communication, problem solving and reasoning). From the human capital perspective, the labor market value of skills are determined not only by occupational specificity, but also by scarcity, transferability, replicability, and other characteristics that are directly related to productivity. Compared to

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