CHAPTER 9

New Changes to the Employment Difficulties Experienced by University Graduates: A Longitudinal Study of Graduates of Twelve Higher Learning Institutions

Li Chunling*

Abstract

As the scale of higher education in China has been greatly expanded, such problems of university graduates as employment and income, living conditions, social attitude, and so on, have garnered a considerable degree of attention. This chapter uses data from a longitudinal study conducted by the Institute of Sociology of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and focus group interviews to analyze the suddenly occurring problems within and changes to the employment process of university graduates. It discovers that the attitudes of graduates are beginning to change. They are beginning to employ many different strategies, but it is still difficult for them to avoid such situations as social unfairness in employment and life. This chapter will call for overall reforms and innovations to relevant policies to resolve the employment problems faced by university graduates.

Keywords

university graduates – employment – changes

Since government policies for increasing the enrollment of universities were implemented in 1999, China’s higher education institutions have grown rapidly, and the number of university graduates has grown yearly, up to 6.8 million in 2012, over eight times the 1998 figure. At the same time, China’s higher learning institution gross enrollment rates grew from about 10 percent

* Li Chunling, researcher at the Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.
before policies for increasing enrollment to 26.9 percent in 2011. This indicates that over one fourth of Chinese young people are university graduates and will be the primary force guiding the future of Chinese society.

At present, this community is facing severe employment pressure and competition. Employment difficulties are affecting the living status and value attitudes of university graduates and causing some graduates to fall into an unfavorable survival situation. In some cases they may even strengthen feelings of dissatisfaction and the incidence of extreme attitudes. In order to fully understand the employment circumstances and value attitudes of university graduates, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Institute of Sociology, Bureau of Youth and Societal Issues in 2010 began a longitudinal study and focus group interview that covered 12 institutions of higher learning (six Project 985 universities and six ordinary universities) with about 6000 graduates participating. The survey has helped us understand such situations of recent graduates as employment and income, life status and consumption pattern, love and marriage, internet behaviors, social and political behaviors, and so on. The survey began in 2003 (the first group of graduates after the implementation of increases to student enrollment). Two major focuses of the research were the employment situation and level of satisfaction of graduates.

1 The Key to Employment Difficulties Lies in Change

When the first group of graduates after the 2003 enrollment increases encountered employment difficulties, both graduates and their parents were caught unaware and found themselves incapable of responding. Enrollment-increasing policies quickly reduced the status of university graduates from “the chosen” to “the most ordinary,” and it happened so fast that almost nobody was able to react in time. Graduates and parents at the time lacked experience in responding to competition on labor markets and had no previous experience to draw from. Labor markets also lacked sufficient channels and information to help graduates find work. Some graduates from affluent families stayed at home and lived off their parents, while others whose families could not support them had no choice but to register as unemployed. Some graduates remained unemployed or became “financially dependent on their parents” for years. In the following years, unemployment among university graduates grew worse by the year, and some graduates and their families developed deep resentment and began to feel highly dissatisfied with enrollment-increasing policies. However, there are currently changes taking place to the primary difficulties graduates experience in finding jobs.