Changes and Countermeasures for Employment of College Graduates Against the Background of COVID-19

Wenqin Feng[1] Yumei Zou[2]

[1] Gongqing College of Nanchang University, Gongqingcheng, Jiangxi, China
[1] Segi University, Kota Damansara, Malaysia
[2] Jiangxi Agricultural University, Nanchang, Jiangxi, China
[2] Corresponding author.

ABSTRACT

The employment of college graduates is a pressing concern for higher education scholars. This research aims to investigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the employment behaviors of graduates in the year 2020, as well as to explore potential solutions to these challenges. To gather insights from job seekers, we interviewed three graduates and one staff member, using a semi-structured approach to collect data. The findings reveal significant changes in recruitment practices and career choices among college graduates. Moreover, the study highlights the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a reduction in job opportunities, increased employment instability, and a decline in the overall employment rate. Faced with these challenges, educational institutions have expanded their support systems and introduced various assistance mechanisms to aid graduates in their job search and career development.

Keywords: College graduates, Job search behaviour, Employment, COVID-19, Countermeasures.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that employment is of significance for college graduates to embark on their careers. The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in terms of spreading speed and global impact (McFarland, Reeves, Porr, & Ployhart, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic is producing unprecedented global health and economic disruptions. Workers and organizations alike are struggling to adapt to "the new normal" (Coates, Cowgill, Chen, & Mackey, 2020; Khullar, Bond, & Schpero, 2020; Rapaccini, Saccani, Kowalkowski, Paiola, & Adrodegari, 2020; Solomon, 2020). Under the influence of the COVID-19 epidemic, the employment of college graduates is facing three pressures: the continuous increase in the number of graduates, the decline of the social economy and the epidemic situation (Jing, 2020). In a certain period of time, the number of people losing jobs will be increasing, and the demand in the employment market for new graduates is greatly reduced compared with the same period last year.

Meanwhile, the number of college graduates this year is 8.74 million, according to the statistics issued by news net from the Communist Party of China (www.cpcnews.cn), with some students continuing their education without entering the job market and others already working in recruitment last fall (Jing, 2020; Na, 2020). Studies have therefore called for a detailed exploration of what measures can be taken to enable those college graduates to be employed during the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, after the Spring Festival, large-scale job fairs in various places were forced to stop, interviews were postponed, and campus job fairs and lectures have been switched from offline to online. At this stage, the employment situation of college students is not optimistic(Na, 2020). Thus, studies are needed to explore the strategies that may enable graduates to transfer from offline employment to online interviews.

The data issued by the Ministry of Education in China has shown that the number of college graduates reached a record high of 8.74 million in 2020, an increase of 400,000 over the same period last year (Jing, 2020; Na, 2020). And the current situation revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic has attacked not only human health but also the world economy, many businesses all over the world are confronted with bankruptcy and workers are forced to leave their positions. U.S. initial unemployment claims sky-rocketed to an unprecedented level due to the COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of mid-March (Bernstein, Richter, & Throckmorton, 2020; Blundell & Machin, 2020; Coates et al., 2020). Thus, while the number of graduates is on the rise, the number of vacancies decline sharply. It is of great significance to explore the changes graduates experience and propose corresponding solutions.

Past literature has also documented that the unprecedented epidemic has exerted adverse impact on employment(Coates et al., 2020). However, universities and colleges do not take strong measures to help graduates fight against the corresponding problems.

A study conducted by Coates et al has shown that 1.9 to 3.4 million of Australian workers were out of work due to COVID-19 and many workers in retail trade, education and training and the arts are also at risk. It is safe to say that college graduates are doomed to encounter big challenges under the background of COVID-19 pandemic(Fana, Pérez, & Fernández-Macías, 2020; Mimoun, Ben Ari, & Margalit, 2020; Montenovo, 2020).

In the previous review of the employment literature, Zhou (Zhou, Xue, Yan, & Wen, 2020) established a prediction model that revealed the main factors that affect the success of college graduates' employment and the quality of employment, but the data is based on the employment information of 2015, more research on context is needed to provide deeper and richer insight into the factors in employment success. There is no previous research using qualitative research method in the field of graduates' employment. This is another research gap the present study is investigating. Toward this end, the goal of this article is to test whether the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic changed job search behavior (i.e., job applications) over time and, in doing so, to advance a broader understanding of events and transitions in job search. Previous researches mainly focused on the statistic number of unemployment graduates and the barriers they encounter from empirical perspective (Bernstein et al., 2020; Coates et al., 2020; Jing, 2020; McFarland et al., 2020; Montenovo, 2020).

This study aims to explore the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the behavior change of graduates' employment in 2020 and propose the countermeasures to tackle the issues. First, explore the changes of graduates' employment behavior; second, to analyze the COVID-19 pandemic's influence on college graduates' employment; and third, to describe the challenges they faced in their job pursuits during 2020. Additionally, the research aims to investigate the strategies that educational institutions have adopted to bolster the employment opportunities of their graduates.

2. THEORETICAL BASIS

This study is theoretically based on job search theory (Faggian, 2021) and event system theory(Morgeson, Mitchell, & Liu, 2015). Event system theory suggests that events can originate at any hierarchical level and their effects can remain within that level or travel up or down throughout the organization, changing or creating new behaviors, features, and events. This impact can extend over time as events vary in duration and timing or as event strength evolves (Morgeson et al., 2015). Thus, based on the theory, we consider the extent to which recognition of COVID-19 pandemic changed graduates' job search during the transition period.

The conceptual map of this study goes like this: college graduates' employment was affected by COVID-19 pandemic. And the countermeasures are taken to fight against the adverse impacts and facilitate the graduates' employment.
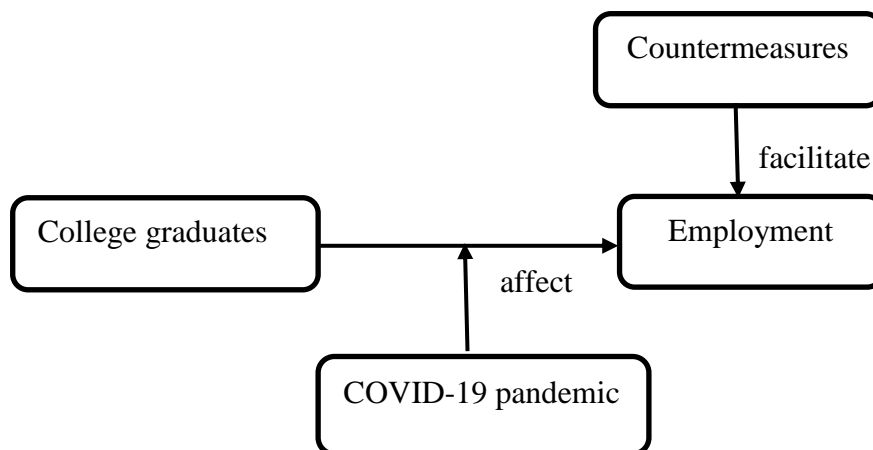
Figure 1 Conceptual map of this study.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

Research design provides the framework and methodology that underpins the research endeavor. In the forthcoming section, we will elucidate the research participants, methods, validity and reliability, and ethics to be considered in this study, outlining how data was gathered, analyzed, and interpreted. This section offers a comprehensive view of the research process, ensuring transparency and clarity in understanding the study's methodology and its relevance to the research objectives.

3.1 Research Participants

Participants in this study are three college graduates and one staff from one comprehensive university in Jiangxi province China. Detailed information of the participants is shown in the "Table 1".

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants

participants	age	gender	job positions	graduation/working time
Student1	22	female	training centre	July 2020
Student2	22	female	Hanzhou training centre	July 2020
Student3	22	male	a private school	July 2020
staff	35	male	employment office	10 years

3.2 Research Methods

A qualitative research method was employed in the present study with small samples of participants. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain opinions from both graduates and the staff working in the employment office.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) pointed out that the interview is the best and most direct way to obtain the information because the interviewing process would yield effective results.

- Interview questions for graduates:

IQ1: Can you tell me something about your experience of employment?

IQ2: Tell me whether COVID-19 pandemic influence your employment or not and why?

IQ3: What did you do to tackle the problems you encounter in job search?

- Interview questions for staff:

IQ1: What changes did employment work experience in 2020?

IQ2: What effect did COVID-19 have on graduates' employment?

IQ3: What measures did the college take to address the problem under the current situation?

3.3 Validity and Reliability

Validity is the extent to which the interpretations of the results of a test are warranted, which depends on the particular use the test is intended to serve. The responsiveness of the measure to change is of interest in many of the

applications in health care where improvement in outcomes as a result of treatment is a primary goal of research (Kimberlin & Winterstein, 2008). Regardless of the qualitative research, validity and reliability are concerns that can be approached through careful attention to a study's conceptualization and the way in which the data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted, and the way in which the findings are presented (S B Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

According to Merriam (Sharan B Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), using multiple sources of data means comparing and cross checking interview data collected from people with different perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same people. To ensure the validity of the study, the researcher interviewed both the graduates and the staff working in the employment office, thus, data were collected from people with different perspectives.

3.4 Ethical Consideration

Ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research involves conducting the investigation in an ethical manner (Sharan B Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

- All the interviewers are voluntary to participate the interview, they are coded anonymously.

- Prior to the interview, the researcher made appointments with each of them and obtain their consent to conduct the interview through the WeChat voice call.

- Data collected were stored in the researcher's personal computer with password.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

In the following section, we will present and discuss the key findings and insights obtained through the interview, shedding light on the most significant observations and their implications for the subject at hand.

4.1 Changes of College Graduates' Employment

This section will examine the various shifts, challenges, and trends affecting the employment prospects of recent graduates, providing insights into how the job market for this demographic is evolving and what factors are influencing their choices and outcomes.

4.1.1 Change of Recruitment Form

Due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, most of the affected countries took several measures, like lockdowns, business shutdowns, hygiene regulations, social distancing, school and university closings, or mobility tracking as a means of slowing down the distribution of COVID-19 (Spurk & Straub, 2020). Government departments at all levels of the country successively issued the epidemic prevention and control circular by strengthening regional isolation to block the transmission of COVID-19 (Huang, 2021). Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education has made it clear that offline campus recruitment should be suspended, undoubtedly, this has brought significant inconvenience to fresh graduates to get access to the employing units. To fight against this issue, universities and employing units has opened new platforms for graduates' employment, the recruitment form has transformed from on-site recruitment to online interview.

As student 1 recalled that she went through three interviews, both online and offline.

> "Because of the epidemic situation, the first interview was online. On the computer, they said that they needed to show their various aspects online or offline. After the first online interview, Then I went to a face-to-face interview in Yushan, that is to say, I went through three interviews."

Similarly, student 2 experienced two interviews, she explained that

> "The first one they interviewed me on the Internet, and then the second one came directly to Hangzhou for a face-to-face interview."

The change of recruitment form provides opportunities for graduates to hunt jobs online through mutual contact between graduates and employers, but the lack of offline contact, even fully communicated online, can make graduates hesitate to take jobs and employers hesitate to hire them. Thus, three students all recalled that the interviews were tough for them, because both online and offline interviews were conducted before they finally assigned jobs.

4.1.2 Change of Occupational Selection

Occupational selection has changed due to the influence of COVID-19 pandemic, graduates originally planning to hunt positions in foreign

trade companies changed their ideas and turned to educational area. Both student 1 and student 2 believed that being an educator is more stable and less impacted by the pandemic. Student 1 explained by saying that "

> "I think the post of teacher, in fact, I have not met many adverse impacts in this regard, although we also cut people here, but the kind of survival of the fittest kind of cut. Then, I heard my roommate say that they were more serious about the foreign trade, that is, the impact of the epidemic on foreign trade is still very big."

Student 2 explained her selection to be a teacher because of fewer impact from the epidemic, "this kind of education will not stop, and will not be affected by the epidemic."

She continued to explain that:

> "The initial plan I had in mind was to pursue a career in foreign trade through my sister's guidance. However, this year's epidemic has had a significant adverse impact on foreign trade. Take, for instance, my hometown's porcelain industry, which my sister was more deeply involved in and faced greater challenges. In light of these circumstances, I reconsidered my options and turned to the alternative path of becoming a teacher."

Furthermore, an increasing number of graduates are opting to compete for government positions or pursue further studies as a means to alleviate employment pressures. The staff at the employment office explained this shift in occupational preferences:

> "Firstly, our civil service units and institutions have expanded their enrollment opportunities significantly. Secondly, the number of graduates pursuing higher education at colleges and universities has surged, with an increase of nearly 40% observed last year. This trend in the educational landscape may potentially influence employment directions. Thirdly, graduates are being incentivized to work in rural areas as per national policy, and numerous job positions are being made available in those regions."

This trend has made it clear that graduates are more likely to hunt jobs in educational areas or government departments which are less affected by COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2 The Impact of COVID-19 on Graduates' Employment

During 2020 many employers have taken the decision to delay or reduce the number of graduates that they are recruiting. This has led to overall numbers of jobs in the formal graduate labor market going into decline in all 21 countries that participated in this research (Institute of Student Employers, 2020).

4.2.1 Reduction of Job Vacancies

Due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, with the continuous delay of resumption time, enterprises must ensure the rights and interests of existing employees while stopping production and business, which leads to the increase of employment costs, the decline of operating profits and the difficulty of capital turnover, so that the demand for new jobs will inevitably sharply reduce. Thus, a sharp decline can be seen in job vacancies. Student 1 and student 3 recalled that "the impact of the epidemic on foreign trade is still very big".

The staff at the employment office explained that job vacancies for graduates have seen a significant decline. He stated, "Despite the ongoing influence of the epidemic, there has been a general decrease of around 6% to 7% on average."

In contrast, Student 3 expressed the belief that "there is still a shortage of teachers here." This perspective suggests that the educational sector has been relatively less affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as classes can be effectively conducted online.

4.2.2 Employment Instability

The labor market is in continuous internal motion, with workers moving rapidly between jobs, unemployment, and nonparticipation even during periods of stable economic activity (Marston, Feldstein, & Hymans, 1976). Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, many economic activities suffer from being suspended or closed, which brought great adversity to college graduates.

Student 2 recalled by saying that "the epidemic may bring some instability, we may feel that it is not safe to stay here, we may want to change jobs or something." Staff from employment office also explained:

> "Due to the epidemic, some students can't say a lot because the factory or the

company on his side can't operate normally or even close down, which leads to the students can't go to work."

He continued to explain that: "maybe after the resumption of work and production began, for our students' employment. Employment work has brought a new change, and it is also a little better to bring work."

4.3 Countermeasures for Graduates' Employment

When it comes to addressing the challenges of graduate employment, there are various countermeasures that can be implemented. The following discussion will delve into a range of solutions to help graduates better cope with employment pressures, including broadening employment channels, and personalized employment assistance. The implementation of these measures serves to alleviate the difficulties graduates face in a highly competitive job market.

4.3.1 Broadening Employment Channels

To guide the graduates to achieve diversified employment through new employment forms and flexible employment methods. The college took some measures to facilitate graduates' job hunting. The staff explained:

> "Online job fair was held in March of 20 years, and more than 90 companies were organized in the school online recruitment platform. At that time, 100 companies were expected. Then only more than 90 companies came, providing more than 3000 jobs."

With the help of online recruitment to expand the employment channels, so that college graduates can get access to more companies. At the same time, employing units can choose satisfactory talents, shorten the distance between employers and graduates.

In addition, college graduates are also encouraged to work in rural areas, being village officials are effective countermeasures for employment. Graduates in practice constantly experience skills and improve their personal ability, but also to find a better job to lay the foundation.

4.3.2 Personalized Employment Assistance

Affected by the epidemic situation, the employment cost of graduates is rising. For students from poor families, the expenses in transportation, accommodation and other aspects may exceed expectations and be difficult to fill. Colleges should timely understand the current situation of poor students' job hunting, give them financial assistance and emotional help, help them devote themselves to job hunting and find suitable positions.

Under the background of COVID-19, most graduates were confined to staying at home, they cannot obtain the outside information timely, which made them very anxious. Student 1 explained by saying that "because at that time the situation was very serious, it is not suitable to go out". Graduates may also worry about the travel restrictions, once going out, they may be not allowed to return their hometown.

To help more students graduate and find jobs, colleges provided personalized employment assistance. Just like the staff mentioned, "Then for those poor graduates, especially for those on-file, one-to-one assistance was provided."

One-to-one assistance was offered to those students without being employed. In addition, job hunting subsidies or rental housing subsidies were provided to students with economic difficulties.

5. CONCLUSION

In 2020, due to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic, all kinds of offline activities, such as on-the-spot recruitment of graduates, which were originally planned, have been suspended. in order to reduce the flow of graduates, universities are strictly forbidden to go to other provinces to develop the employment market, and the current situation of being unable to carry out employment work offline allows universities to graduate, facing the new situation, universities have turned the main channel of graduates' employment to the network platform, which has opened a new mode of graduates' employment during the epidemic.

REFERENCES

[1] Bernstein, J., Richter, A. W., & Throckmorton, N. A. (2020). COVID-19: A View from the Labor Market. *Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, Working Papers*, *2020*(2010). https://doi.org/10.24149/wp2010

[2] Blundell, J., & Machin, S. (2020). Self-Employment In The COVID-19 Crisis. *A CEP COVID-19 Analysis - Centre for Economic*

Performance London School of Economics and Political Science, (003). Retrieved from http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/cepCOVID-19-003.pdf

[3] Coates, B., Cowgill, M., Chen, T., & Mackey, W. (2020). *Shutdown: estimating the COVID-19 employment shock*. Retrieved from http://www.grattan.edu.au/.

[4] Faggian, A. (2021). Job search theory. *Handbook of Regional Science*, 481–495.

[5] Fana, M., Pérez, S. T., & Fernández-Macías, E. (2020). Employment impact of COVID-19 crisis: from short term effects to long terms prospects. *Journal of Industrial and Business Economics*, *47*(3), 391–410.

[6] Huang, R. (2021). Influence of Epidemic Situation on Employment of College Graduates and Informatization Countermeasures. *E3S Web of Conferences*, *235*, 3069. EDP Sciences.

[7] Institute of Student Employers. (2020). *COVID-19: Global impacts on graduate recruitment*. (July), 16.

[8] Jing, J. (2020). New Changes and Countermeasures for Employment of College Graduates under the Background of COVID-19. *Journal of Chaohu University*, *22*, 16–22. https://doi.org/10.12152/j.issn.1672-2868.2020.02.00

[9] Khullar, D., Bond, A. M., & Schpero, W. L. (2020). COVID-19 and the financial health of US hospitals. *Jama*, *323*(21), 2127–2128.

[10] Kimberlin, C. L., & Winterstein, A. G. (2008). Validity and reliability of measurement instruments used in research. *American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy*, *65*(23), 2276–2284. https://doi.org/10.2146/ajhp070364

[11] Marston, S. T., Feldstein, M., & Hymans, S. H. (1976). Employment Instability and High Unemployment Rates. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, *1976*(1), 169. https://doi.org/10.2307/2534049

[12] McFarland, L. A., Reeves, S., Porr, W. B., & Ployhart, R. E. (2020). Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Job Search Behavior: An Event Transition Perspective. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *105*(11), 1207–1217. https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000782

[13] Merriam, S B, & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation (Fourth)*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

[14] Merriam, Sharan B, & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.

[15] Mimoun, E., Ben Ari, A., & Margalit, D. (2020). Psychological Aspects of Employment Instability During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, *12*, 2006–2008. https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000769

[16] Montenovo, L. (2020). Determinants of disparities in COVID-19 job losses. *Nber Working Paper Series*, *53*(9), 1689–1699.

[17] Morgeson, F. P., Mitchell, T. R., & Liu, D. (2015). Event system theory: An event-oriented approach to the organizational sciences. *Academy of Management Review*, *40*(4), 515–537. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2012.0099

[18] Na, J. (2020). *Research on Employment and Entrepreneurship of College Students under the Background of qInternet +q Era*. *150*(Icoeme), 585–588. https://doi.org/10.2991/meess-18.2018.78

[19] Rapaccini, M., Saccani, N., Kowalkowski, C., Paiola, M., & Adrodegari, F. (2020). Navigating disruptive crises through service-led growth: The impact of COVID-19 on Italian manufacturing firms. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *88*, 225–237.

[20] Solomon, A. (2020). When the pandemic leaves us alone, anxious and depressed. *New York Times*.

[21] Spurk, D., & Straub, C. (2020). *Flexible employment relationships and careers in times of the COVID-19 pandemic*. Elsevier.

[22] Zhou, F., Xue, L., Yan, Z., & Wen, Y. (2020). Research on college graduates employment prediction model based on C4.5 algorithm. *Journal of Physics: Conference Series*, *1453*(1). https://doi.org/10.1088/1742-6596/1453/1/012033