



Employment Pressure of Master's Graduates in the Post-Pandemic Era: An Interview Study of Ten Graduate Students

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
employment pressure graduate students; post-pandemic era;	The outbreak of COVID-19 at the end of 2019 not only had a severe impact on China's national economy but also created tremendous pressure on the employment of college graduates. Despite significant progress under the efforts of the Party and government, the overall employment situation remains grim. In order to better understand the employment pressure of master's graduates in the post-pandemic era, this study conducted interviews with 10 graduates of the class of 2021. The findings reveal several issues, including a severe employment situation, shrinking job opportunities, psychological anxiety, and a tendency to prefer stability in job choices. Therefore, it is suggested that the government optimize the employment environment, universities improve employment guidance systems, and individual master's graduates reasonably adjust their job expectations. Joint efforts from all three parties are required to alleviate employment pressure.
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1. Introduction

The so-called "post-pandemic era" does not mean the complete disappearance of COVID-19 or a full return to pre-pandemic normalcy. Rather, it refers to an era in which the pandemic may recur intermittently, with small-scale outbreaks, imported cases from abroad, and seasonal resurgences, thereby producing long-term and profound impacts across multiple sectors (Wang, 2020).

Since its outbreak in late 2019, COVID-19 spread rapidly across China, with all regions entering a first-level public health emergency response. The pandemic disrupted the employment plans of graduates and further intensified the already severe job market. On February 23, 2020, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized at a central meeting on coordinating epidemic prevention and control with economic and social development that

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particular attention should be paid to graduate employment, urging coordinated efforts in graduation, training, and recruitment so that graduates can complete their studies and secure employment smoothly (People's Daily, 2020). Later, at the Politburo meeting on April 17, Xi once again stressed that graduate employment must be a top priority.

At the same time, graduate student enrollment has expanded significantly. The number of graduate students graduating annually increased from 324,000 in 2009 to 510,000 in 2018—an increase of 57.4% within a decade (Pan, Zhang, & Liu, 2020). By 2020, the total number of graduate students in China exceeded 3 million. Combined with the downward economic pressures and the pandemic's disruption, master's graduates faced dual challenges in employment. Indeed, in the 2020 Government Work Report, "employment" appeared 39 times, the highest frequency in history (Li, Sun, Wu, & Shan, 2020).

This study focuses specifically on the employment pressure of graduate students in the post-pandemic era. Through a qualitative case study of 10 graduates, it aims to examine the current state of graduate employment pressure, analyze the underlying causes, and propose targeted countermeasures and suggestions.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm using purposive sampling. In selecting cases, individuals who could provide the most relevant information to the research questions and objectives were chosen. A total of 10 full-time academic and professional master's students from the graduating class of 2021 were interviewed. Their disciplines included education, management, mineral exploration, design, and mechanical engineering, with attention paid to gender differences.

The basic information of the 10 cases is shown in Table 1 (all names are pseudonyms).

- Student A: Female, China University of Geosciences (Wuhan), Educational Economics and Management, Academic Master
- Student B: Female, China University of Geosciences (Wuhan), Educational Economics and Management, Academic Master
- Student C: Female, China University of Geosciences (Wuhan), Education, Academic Master
- Student D: Female, China University of Geosciences (Wuhan), Educational Economics and Management, Academic Master
- Student E: Male, China University of Geosciences (Wuhan), Basin and Energy Resources, Academic Master
- Student F: Female, China University of Geosciences (Wuhan), Education,

Academic Master

- Student G: Male, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Mechanical Engineering, Professional Master
- Student H: Female, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Mechanical Engineering, Professional Master
- Student I: Female, Central China Normal University, Chinese Language Education, Professional Master
- Student J: Male, Shanghai Normal University, Landscape Design, Academic Master

Data Collection Methods

1. Interview Outline Development

Before the formal interviews, the researcher adapted the interview outline developed by Ying (2015) in *An Empirical Study on the Employment Pressure of Full-Time Professional Master's Degree Students*. Two graduates were selected for pilot interviews, after which the outline was revised accordingly to form the final interview protocol.

2. Semi-Structured Interviews and Informal Conversations

Interviews were conducted through both face-to-face meetings and remote voice calls, each lasting approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour. With participants' consent, all sessions were audio recorded, and observations of expressions and tone were noted. Afterward, the recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3. Severe Employment Situation: Pandemic Exacerbates Supply-Demand Imbalance

3.1 Decline in Labor Market Demand

The COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020 had a profound impact on China's economic and social development. The dual effects of economic downturn and pandemic forced many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to reduce recruitment plans. A survey conducted in February 2020 by Professor Zhu Wuxiang at Tsinghua University's School of Economics and Management covering 995 SMEs showed that 22.43% of enterprises planned to reduce staff and cut salaries, while 16.2% intended to suspend operations, directly reducing employment opportunities in the short term (Zhu, Zhang, Li, & Wang, 2020). According to Gao (2020), COVID-19 resulted in an estimated loss of 84 million jobs in the first quarter of 2020 and about 23 million jobs across the whole year.

Interviewees reflected these realities. Student G (Mechanical Engineering, HUST) noted: "The pandemic changed hiring timelines. Internet companies recruited many top

candidates earlier than usual. By the time regular recruitment started, most positions were gone.”

Student H, also in Mechanical Engineering at HUST, added:

“In previous years, many of our graduates went to Huawei, but due to sanctions, Huawei recruited far fewer people this year.”

Similarly, Student I (Chinese Education, CCNU) shared that her goal was to secure a teaching post:

“Because of the pandemic, many schools reduced hiring. Key demonstration schools hardly recruited at all.”

Student J (Landscape Design, SHNU) explained that company downsizing led to *“increased competition, as only highly versatile and top-performing candidates were considered.”*

3.2 Increasing Competition Among Job Seekers

Although domestic pandemic control has improved, international conditions remain severe. Approximately 600,000 overseas returnees entered China’s labor market in 2020. In addition, students who had planned to study abroad but were unable due to visa disruptions also joined the domestic job pool. Furthermore, China produced a record-high 8.74 million college graduates in 2020, 400,000 more than in 2019 (Li, Sun, Wu, & Shan, 2020). The delayed job search of the 2020 cohort overlapped with the 2021 cohort, intensifying competition.

Student A observed:

“Many positions were reserved for the 2020 graduates, so our class of 2021 faced even fewer opportunities.”

Student B, hoping to return to her hometown in Henan, noted:

“In my province’s talent programs, 95% of positions were directed toward the class of 2020, leaving us with little.”

These examples illustrate how the pandemic exacerbated the imbalance between job demand and supply, leaving master’s graduates facing considerable uncertainty in the post-pandemic job market.

3.3 Shrinking Job Opportunities: Differences Across Disciplines

3.3.1 Preference for Internship Experience

Employers raised standards amid intensified competition, placing greater emphasis on internship experience. Science and engineering students, often exposed to research projects, had an advantage over humanities graduates.

Student B (Educational Economics and Management) reflected on her recruitment fair experience:

“Employers really valued off-campus internships. I lacked such experience, which put me at a disadvantage.”

Student C (Education) added:

“My internships were mostly from my undergraduate years. Graduate studies left little time for internships, since most of my efforts went into research papers.”

3.3.2 Limited Demand for Certain Majors

While engineering graduates considered *“which bowl of rice tastes better,”* humanities graduates often worried about *“whether there is rice at all.”* For example, educational economics and education majors mainly sought teaching, administrative, or civil service positions, but increasing enrollment meant intensifying competition.

Student C highlighted the supply-demand mismatch:

“In the national civil service exam, only 60 positions across the country were open to our major.”

Student B, who applied for human resources and administrative jobs, admitted:

“Since my major doesn’t match, I couldn’t answer specialized HR questions well, unlike management majors.”

Student D remarked:

“My friends in computer science had multiple offers with higher pay, while our field has limited options.”

Thus, disciplinary differences significantly shaped job prospects. Science and engineering graduates tended to face less pressure due to higher demand and earlier exposure to projects.

4. Employment Anxiety: The Gap Between Ideals and Reality

4.1 Insufficient Preparation

The pandemic disrupted the crucial preparation period. Student G shared:

“Internet firms recruited early. By the time I applied in September, most opportunities were gone. I only had one research institute offer, which I didn’t want, so I was very anxious.”

Student I noted that the cancellation of the National Teaching Skills Competition in 2020 deprived her cohort of a chance to showcase professional abilities.

4.2 Discrepancy Between Expectations and Reality

Many students cited a gap between their career aspirations and actual opportunities as the main source of stress.

Student C explained:

"Parents and peers expect graduate students to secure good jobs. Seeing my friends succeed while I'm still struggling increases my anxiety."

Student J added:

"I wanted a high-paying position in a real estate company, but due to the pandemic, these positions went to overseas returnees and elite 985 graduates."

Student H, targeting the internet sector, said:

"I aimed for top firms, but many rejected me outright. With only undesirable offers, I was pressured into signing, fearing breach penalties if something better came later."

4.3 Dual Pressure of Graduation and Employment

Graduates balanced research with job hunting. Student E emphasized:

"Publishing papers is essential for further study or research jobs, but the pandemic delayed my progress, limiting opportunities."

Student A admitted:

"I'm more worried about finishing my thesis on time. Without graduation, job hunting becomes impossible."

This demonstrates how academic and employment responsibilities compounded stress.

5. Preference for Stability: Shift Toward Institutional Jobs

The pandemic altered career preferences, with many graduates seeking stability in public institutions (Huang, 2020). Five of the ten interviewees expressed strong interest in civil service or teaching posts.

Student I was determined:

"I've always wanted to become a teacher in a provincial demonstration school. It's secure."

Student B shifted her target from enterprises to civil service:

"Our lack of internships and mismatched majors make us less competitive in business. The stability of civil service is more appealing, especially for women."

Conversely, Student D switched from civil service to enterprises, noting that civil service competition intensified as more students pursued stability.

These accounts reflect the broader trend: post-pandemic, graduates valued job security and risk resistance more than before.

6. Discussion and Conclusion: Strategies for Alleviating Employment Pressure

6.1 Government Level: Optimizing the Employment Environment and Adjusting Policies

As the pandemic is largely under control in China and industries are resuming operations, the government should further optimize the employment environment for master's graduates, strengthen policy adjustments, and encourage rational mobility of talent to broaden job opportunities (Liu, 2011).

First, the state should continue to implement supportive policies for SMEs, ensuring their stable development and ability to provide more jobs. SMEs are the backbone of employment, and private high-tech firms have become a major force in national innovation (Yang & Wang, 2020). Yet surveys indicate that enterprises suffer from shortages of mid- and high-level technical talent compared with universities and research institutes (Zhongguo Association for Science and Technology, 2013).

Second, the government should strengthen policies that guide graduate mobility. While major cities face increasing job pressures, western and remote regions remain underserved. The State Council (2020) issued implementation opinions to expand targeted recruitment, increase grassroots service programs, and encourage graduates to work in less-developed regions. Building on these measures, governments should also publicize grassroots role models, create positive public opinion, and raise compensation for positions in underdeveloped areas to attract talent.

6.2 University Level: Improving Employment Guidance Systems

Universities should enhance the functionality of employment information systems in the context of normalized pandemic prevention. Such systems should integrate job postings, résumé development, test and interview training, psychological counseling, and employment tracking (Guo, 2020). Institutions should also strengthen cooperation with employers, promote university–enterprise and inter-university partnerships, and guide graduates toward policy-supported sectors.

Second, universities must improve employment counseling services. Many interviewees acknowledged that schools provided timely job information and organized on-campus job fairs, which alleviated pressure. However, they also hoped for closer school–employer partnerships and more alumni sharing sessions. Employment guidance departments should regularly survey graduate needs through questionnaires and forums, tailoring services accordingly (Jin, Wei, & Shen, 2020). Additionally, universities should strengthen psychological interventions, helping students reset career plans and manage

expectations in times of crisis (Li, 2020).

Finally, universities should integrate career planning education into graduate curricula. While many institutions have established undergraduate career services, graduate programs are often overlooked. Universities should therefore:

1. Provide systematic career planning education to master's students, fostering realistic career outlooks.
2. Build a professional team of career counselors offering training, interview workshops, and career fairs.
3. Encourage a global perspective while guiding students to adjust expectations and adopt flexible employment mindsets (Ying, 2015).

6.3 Individual Level: Adjusting Employment Expectations

For master's students, self-awareness and adaptability are crucial. They must assess the labor market and their own conditions realistically, improve their ability to gather job information, and adopt pragmatic attitudes toward job searching.

Students should also consciously develop and revise career plans, aligning them with both social needs and personal development (Li, 2019). In addition, they must broaden their horizons, avoid limiting themselves to institutional jobs, and embrace grassroots opportunities. Entrepreneurship, in particular, should be seen as a viable path consistent with government encouragement (Wang & Zhang, 2020).

Only by adjusting expectations, diversifying employment channels, and cultivating innovation can graduates seize opportunities in an otherwise difficult job market.

7. Conclusion

The employment pressure faced by master's graduates in the post-pandemic era reflects the intersection of macroeconomic constraints, policy adjustments, and individual expectations. The findings from this qualitative study of ten graduates demonstrate that the pandemic exacerbated labor market imbalances, intensified competition, and heightened psychological anxiety. Furthermore, disciplinary differences contributed to unequal employment opportunities, with science and engineering graduates generally facing fewer barriers than their peers in the humanities and social sciences.

At the same time, the study highlights a noticeable shift in employment preferences, as many graduates now prioritize stability in the form of civil service and institutional jobs. This tendency underscores the broader influence of crises on risk perception and career planning.

To address these challenges, coordinated efforts are required. At the government

level, policies should strengthen support for SMEs, promote balanced regional development, and create favorable conditions for graduate employment. At the university level, institutions must refine employment guidance systems, integrate career planning into graduate education, and enhance psychological support. At the individual level, graduates need to adopt flexible attitudes, adjust expectations, and consider diverse career paths, including entrepreneurship.

Ultimately, alleviating employment pressure in the post-pandemic era requires a tripartite effort among the state, universities, and individuals. Only through collective engagement can master's graduates better navigate the uncertainties of the labor market and achieve sustainable career development.

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