

China: Graduates Brace for the Toughest Job Market

Ying Lu and Yuan Gao

COVID-19 has taken a toll on the global economy and job market, exacerbating challenges faced by job-seekers. In China, the difficulty for university graduates in landing a job has been increasing in recent years, due to such factors as an increase in higher education (HE) enrollments and an overall economic slowdown. In 2020, universities and colleges in China turned out a record 8.74 million graduates, 400,000 more than in 2019—leading to even stronger competition among them. This situation has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, reducing the number of jobs offered by small- and medium-sized enterprises—the sector hardest hit—to the lowest in decades. To make matters worse, international travel restrictions (along with new study abroad and visa policies induced by the coronavirus and by political frictions, particularly directed against Chinese students), have forced many to abandon their study abroad plans and, instead, to seek to enter the job market in this highly challenging environment.

In the face of such grim prospects, a number of initiatives have been ushered in by the Chinese government in collaboration with higher education institutions (HEIs) to ease employment pressure. These relief policies and measures may be summarized as the expansion of HE enrollment; the reinstatement of “second bachelor’s degree” programs; the development of research assistant positions; and support for entrepreneurship and innovation.

Expansion of Student Enrollment

Widely perceived as an effective measure to ease immediate job market pressure is the policy to further expand the scale of enrollment within HE. In early March 2020, the ministry of education (MOE) published a new policy document aimed at mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on the employment market. According to the document, the scale of enrollments at the master’s level are expected to expand by 189,000, an increase of 23.5 percent over the previous year. The expansion involves some of the leading HEIs, with Tsinghua University, for one, enrolling some 6,110 master students in 2020, up 4.8 percent from 2019. Taking advantage of the added quotas, HEIs in China are not only accepting more students, but also ramping up admission processes and adopting non-traditional selection practices. For instance, graduates whose study abroad plans have been interrupted by international travel bans or hostile immigration policies, have been given the option to apply for master programs at a number of domestic universities, skipping the routinely required entrance examinations.

Reinstatement of “Second Bachelor’s Degree” Programs

With the rapid development of Chinese postgraduate education in recent years, it was decided that the “second bachelor’s degree” program (SBD)—first introduced in the 1980s to allow students to pursue a second bachelor’s degree after obtaining their first—was no longer needed. At the end of May 2020, however, not long after the ministry’s announcement, in July 2019, of the program’s cancellation, the MOE issued a Notice for Higher Education Institutions to Continue Enrolling Students for Second Bachelor’s Degrees, followed by a long list of over 3,400 accredited SBD programs across some 500 HEIs. This reactivation of the program in 2020 is interpreted as a sign of the authorities’ intention to cushion the graduating class of 2020 from some of the immediate job-hunting pressure that they would otherwise face. Not only will students admitted to SBD programs have the opportunity to seek a second bachelor degree, they will also be afforded a further two-year extension of campus life to prepare for future academic and professional pursuits.

Abstract

COVID-19 is posing grave challenges to higher education graduates seeking employment in a job market that has been severely impacted. How will countries cope to help new graduates brace for what is now a very tough job market? China has put in place a number of initiatives to provide both short-term and long-term solutions, and higher education institutions will have to play a key role.

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Ying Lu is deputy director of the International Division and associate research fellow in higher education, Beihang University, China. Email: ly@buaa.edu.cn.

Yuan Gao is head of Global Partnerships of the International Division and a PhD candidate at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Beihang University, China. E-mail: gaoyuan@buaa.edu.cn.

Development of Research Assistant Positions

In June 2020, the ministry of science and technology, the MOE, and four other ministries jointly issued a policy document to encourage institutions implementing research projects to create research assistant (RA) positions for HE graduates. The document specifies that universities, research institutions, and enterprises undertaking national research projects should develop RA positions to offer to HE graduates. The intention is that these contract-based positions (often of a temporary nature) will provide those seeking employment with an income, while giving them the opportunity to familiarize themselves with China's research system and prepare for further academic studies. It is worth noting that the document specifically states that "the number of positions created and the number of graduates employed will count as performance output as monitored by the 'Double World-Class' Project indicators," putting pressure on the 137 "Double World-Class" universities to take direct action. For instance, Beihang University, a leading research university in Beijing, has created 119 RA job openings. Similarly, at both Fudan University and Shanghai University, 150 RA positions have been created.

Support for Entrepreneurship and Innovation

These past five years, a series of guidelines on the promotion of "mass entrepreneurship and innovation" has been released by the Chinese government, as a means of boosting economic growth and creating employment in the modern digital era. Entrepreneurship education—an important means of nurturing entrepreneurship—has seen rapid development at China's HEIs. A 2019 Renmin University report on student entrepreneurship concludes that entrepreneurship education at Chinese HEIs has a positive impact on students' motivation to set up businesses and the performance of their start-ups. In recent months, the government has reemphasized the importance of "mass entrepreneurship and innovation" and the role of universities in various initiatives. However, as an entrepreneurship ecosystem is yet to be properly developed and confidence has been shaken by business closures across parts of the country, it is hard to predict the number of post-COVID job-seekers who will be able to take on such challenges.

These initiatives—some of which may only delay problems or have a temporary impact—are initial efforts to address what is shaping up to be the "coldest winter" for job hunting. While universities may contribute to providing temporary solutions, the current challenges serve as a serious reminder for universities in China and beyond of the need to rethink ways of effectively preparing their graduates for a post-COVID world and helping them better connect with the new job market. ▲