

Left Behind in a VUCA World: Rural Students Struggling Amid China's Urban-Rural Division

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Abstract. In today's VUCA world, university graduates from rural family backgrounds encounter more difficulties in employment. On the one hand, they cannot find a place in big cities; on the other hand, they are reluctant to return to their hometowns. That is closely related to the gap between urban and rural education levels. The rural living environment during their adolescence makes them less comprehensive than children from urban families regarding social skills and personality development. These factors cause them to be disadvantaged in the competition for employment. They most need employment assistance and guidance from the government and the university. They should be the leading target group for the employment assistance policy for university students. This paper describes rural college students' employment plight through the perspective of urban-rural education imbalance. It analyzes the problems and related countermeasures faced by the government and the education sector.

Keywords: Urban-rural Education; University Employment; Rural Areas; Balance.

1. Introduction

In China, a particular group of young people who were born in the countryside and entered university through the college entrance examination, only to find themselves in an awkward situation after graduation: the countryside they can't go back to and the city they can't stay in. With the popularization and development of education, it is common for rural college students to graduate. Many rural college students leave the countryside to work in cities, hoping to change their destiny. But the fact is that city life is far from ideal. Many cruel realities are in front of us. It is difficult for many rural college students to put down roots in big cities, but even so, they are not willing to return to their hometowns again. According to relevant data, in recent years, the unemployment rate of rural university students has exceeded 30%; that is, only nearly 70% of graduates have been able to find jobs successfully[1]. In the process of growing up, they find that the specialties and knowledge they have learned do not necessarily adapt to the needs and changes of society, nor do they necessarily guarantee their employment and income. Secondly, they feel the difference and inequality between urban and rural areas in the university, and they find that they are not only economically different from the children in the cities but also in terms of culture, thinking and vision.

It is imperative to acknowledge that there remains an academic disparity between China's rural and urban communities. The relative shortage of educational resources makes it difficult for rural students to get into double first-class universities. Of course, many outstanding students enter famous domestic universities and become the so-called "children of the humble family", but many rural pupils focus on the second or third grade as their academic level. However, in the face of the current educational status quo of "undergraduates are everywhere and graduate students are like dogs", they do not have an employment advantage.

Educational equity is a crucial driver of social equality because it meets the needs of the vertical flow of society and reduces the gap between different family backgrounds. Promoting equity is a core principle in China's primary education system[2]. Despite the government's various efforts, such as offering voluntary programs for teachers and implementing mandatory nine-year courses, the imbalance between the urban and rural regions due to the deep-rooted rural/urban dichotomy remains largely unresolved. In today's VUCA world, economic volatility, the uncertainty of financial returns to education, complex changes in the job market, and information ambiguity in frequent educational reforms continue to widen the Chinese urban-rural disparities in education.

This paper analyzes the inequality in employment among rural college students and the reasons for this phenomenon. It explains how the Chinese government should take measures to deal with the problem of educational inequality that is becoming increasingly prominent in today's turbulent and unstable society.

2. Economic Disparities and Their Impact on Rural Education: From Financial Strain to Declining Educational Aspirations

Unavoidably, rural schoolchildren in today's society face educational disparities. They bear a heavy burden in the field of education and face unequal opportunities with urban children, which creates a series of dilemmas. Since the 1978 Economic Reform, China's urban-rural economic gap has widened significantly, increasing from 2.51 times in 1998 to 3.11 times in 2002[3]. Despite the government's continued efforts to strengthen financial support for rural education through transfer payments and public welfare actions, economic difficulties remain a significant obstacle to rural students' college completion. In recent years, with the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy and the introduction of various favourable policies, the countryside has also seen rapid development, with infrastructure becoming more and more perfect and villages' upgraded appearance. However, education in the countryside has always been a big problem, and the gap between the countryside and the towns is still huge. Currently, the infrastructure of rural schools is relatively poor, their education funding needs to be improved, the teaching materials facilities are relatively simple, the children are not interested in learning, and they need a wide range of knowledge. At the same time, rural schools do not have much support for curriculum reform, and their teaching methods are much more backward than those in the towns. Because rural schools are geographically remote and the quality of life is not high, they do not attract good teachers, so rural education teachers are not too complete, and most of them are older teachers, which leads to the reason that even if the students work hard, it is still challenging to go up in scores.

Rural households are more susceptible to economic downturns because the temporary jobs they largely depend on are twice as likely to lead to unemployment as permanent workers. Additionally, from 1995 to 2007, the average savings rate for urban Chinese households increased by 23 per cent (from 12 per cent to 35 per cent), while the rural savings rate decreased by 10 per cent (27 per cent to 17 per cent)[4]. More savings and limited access to social safety nets and credit facilities further exacerbate their financial fragility. Economic pressures on rural families create obstacles to the education of peasant children. Due to generally low rural incomes, many peasant families have difficulty in affording high educational expenses, such as school fees, textbooks and extracurricular activities. That leaves peasant children facing many constraints in choosing schools, participating in educational training and obtaining academic tutoring. Due to their limited economic conditions, they often resort to limited resources and support to pursue better educational opportunities.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, many rural families have experienced financial strain. They must reallocate their limited resources to meet urgent needs and cuts to educational spending. The competitive education system in China relies heavily on private tutoring (hagwons). Chinese parents spend an average of 120,000 yuan (US\$17,400)[5]. Notably, for households with high incomes, the figure is over three times greater than for households with low incomes. The inability of low-income families to afford private tutoring continuously affects children's academic performance and long-term educational outcomes.

At the same time, economic volatility in the post-epidemic era undermines the certainty of expectations about returns on education, which in turn affects education investment decisions. The increasing difficulty of securing a job after college due to the trend of degree depreciation has gradually eroded their motivations for education investment. Among middle school dropouts in China, only 7.3 per cent are due to poverty, 63 per cent drop out because of a lack of interest in studying, and 25 per cent drop out due to the influence of the belief that education is useless. Studies in rural China also have shown that the lack of job opportunities for college graduates leads to lower

educational aspirations and higher dropout rates among high school students. This short-sightedness restricts disadvantaged students' access to educational opportunities and hampers future development.

3. From Educational Access to Career Readiness: The Struggles of Rural Students in a Rapidly Changing Job Market

In a highly complex environment, information becomes an essential resource for decision-making. Frequent education reforms in college entrance examinations have created an environment where students and parents must constantly adapt to new rules. The “3+3” elective subjects examination system in the latest college entrance exam reform gave students greater autonomy in choosing schools and colleges. However, it also chooses subject combinations that are more complex and rely on more information. Without sufficient guidance, students’ inadvertent selection of subject combinations may increase the difficulty of being admitted. Benefiting from private tutoring, professional preparation courses, and access to the informed consultant network, affluent students can effectively manage reforms and optimize their strategies to meet new standards.

In contrast, students in rural areas often need capital as prominent as affluent urban families, which means the information they receive may be delayed, incomplete, or second-hand. Research shows that the new college entrance examination reform has imposed a stricter selection based on the family background of candidates, with students from advantaged classes holding a dominant position in this reform. The ongoing information gap continues to decrease the opportunities for rural students to get into top universities[6].

Given that expectations of educational equity ensuring social fairness are deeply rooted in the belief that educational achievements can lead to high-paying, prestigious jobs, the conception of educational equity extends beyond mere access and resource allocation. The evaluation of educational equity should encompass how effectively converted educational achievements into tangible social and economic benefits. However, despite China's efforts to increase access to higher education for rural students through special college admission programs for rural areas, rural students still face challenges in securing decent jobs after graduation.

Research on the employment difficulties of university students has shown that the employment difficulties of university graduates from rural families are the most prominent, especially among undergraduate graduates from rural backgrounds, who are the most difficult to employ. At the same time, the difficulty in finding employment for university graduates from rural families has led to the spread of the “theory of the futility of studying” in some rural areas, which has further reinforced educational inequality between urban and rural areas, squeezed the space and channels for upward social mobility for rural youth, and perpetuated urban-rural socio-economic inequality, thus affecting the harmonious and stable development of society. The low employment rate and low quality of employment indicate employment difficulties for university students from rural families. To enter better workplaces and earn higher incomes, students from rural families encounter more problems than those from urban families. The most sought-after workplaces for university graduates are the public sector (party and government organizations, institutions and state-owned enterprises) and foreign enterprises. The proportion of graduates from urban families entering the public sector (47.8%) is much higher than that of graduates from rural families (31.1%), and the proportion of graduates from urban families entering foreign-funded enterprises (10.4%) is also higher than that of graduates from rural families (2.5%). At the same time, the average initial monthly salary of graduates from urban families (RMB 3,443) was significantly higher than that of graduates from rural families (RMB 2,835)[7].

In a VUCA world characterized by rapid technological advancement, globalization, and shifting industry demands, the skills required for successful employment continually evolve and diversify. However, the station-run public education system—often the default and only education choice for rural students—struggles to keep pace with these changes. Limited by scarce educational resources and a traditional focus on exam results, rural public schools often fail to adequately prepare students

with the practical, interpersonal, and problem-solving skills crucial for success in the modern workforce. To address these gaps, constantly learning new skills and getting new qualifications is vital for career growth and keeping a job in the long run. However, these learning opportunities, such as professional development courses, online certifications, and seminars, are primarily concentrated in urban areas and prestigious institutions. Students from disadvantaged families often face additional challenges, such as tuition fees, living expenses, and the opportunity cost of studying instead of working to benefit from these programs.

4. Existing Solutions and Challenges in Achieving Educational Equity in China

In the past twenty years, the government has created many financial aid programs like scholarships, grants, and subsidies to help reduce the amount of money families in rural areas have to spend. The "Two Exemptions, One Subsidy" policy allows rural students to go to school without charging tuition fees and gives them money for living expenses. The Chinese government has also regularly put money into schools in these areas by providing them with funds and altering how they run. Also, there are specific favoured guidelines for college entrance. For college admission, including more straightforward test score requirements, some spots in universities just for them, and extra help programs to ensure students from the countryside have a fair shot. In the process of comprehensively promoting the integrated development of urban and rural education, the State has actively adjusted its policies to increase investment in education, and local governments have formulated local development plans and goals according to local conditions, bringing historic opportunities for the integrated development of urban and rural education. However, given the problems of student loss, uneven distribution of educational and teaching resources, and gaps in teachers' strength that exist in the integrated development, it is necessary to insist on implementing the new development concept, realizing urbanization locally, adhering to the principle of "giving priority to the countryside", balancing the allocation of teaching resources, and adhering to the principle of flexibility, as well as innovating and perfecting the teaching force, to steadily push forward the integrated development of education in both urban and rural areas, to steady progress has been made in the integrated development of urban and rural education[8].

However, there are still challenges that hinder education for equality for the marginalized groups in China. The financial aid programs assist in minimizing some of the costs but do not cater to other expenses such as private tutoring and getting into appropriate extra-curricular activities[9]. While lowering the admission thresholds would assist rural students, these measures fail to solve the problem of inadequate preparation in earlier stages. Enforcing more targeted and efficient solutions that provide access and financial help, as well as addressing the underlying issues that hinder rural students' prospects of success in school and the labour market, is vital to support the healthy development of education.

Urban-rural integration mainly refers to a social change that treats cities, villages and towns as a unified whole and promotes the joint development of all three through the integration of resources. In contrast, integrating urban and rural compulsory education is a relatively important element of urban-rural integration, and the following points primarily sum up the implications of mandatory integration of urban and rural education. Firstly, integrating urban and rural educational resources is constantly strengthened to maximize the positive and promotional effects of resources and effectively promote the normal development of education in cities and villages. Second, traditional urban and rural education must constantly improve educational equity; there is still an imbalanced situation, and ensuring that urban and rural students receive fair education opportunities is challenging. Therefore, in the future development of urban and rural education, we should continue to strengthen the importance of educational equity to create a relatively fair learning environment for students.

5. Conclusion

The problem of educational disparities highlights the educational inequities faced by rural schoolchildren. They carry a heavy educational burden and lack fair, competitive conditions and equal opportunities compared with urban children. It not only limits their personal development but also weakens the fairness and equality of society. The government and all sectors of society should pay more attention to and support rural education and promote a balanced distribution of educational resources. It should increase investment in rural schools, improve school facilities and the teaching force, and provide a quality educational environment and resources. At the same time, they should promote the establishment of a more comprehensive education system, strengthen the interface and exchanges between rural and urban education, and help farmers' children obtain broader learning opportunities and space for development.

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