

How do graduates adjust to employment?: Recent evidence from the UK and China



Jenny.Chen@uwe.ac.uk

Jenny Chen

CESR, University of the West of England, Bristol

With the advent of globalisation, employees are more mobile than ever before, and as a result, the issue of how to help new employees to settle down and make them productive as quickly as possible has received considerable scrutiny. Jenny Chen has conducted two longitudinal studies of graduates in the UK and China with the aim of tracking their attitudes and behaviours during induction periods and the adaptive outcomes. It is hoped that this study will help to provide practical insights on the strategies that graduates use to adjust to their first jobs, and to identify those factors which may influence their behaviour and attitudes during adjustment.

Profile of participants

Students graduating from two universities, one in the southwest of the UK and one in southern China, were invited to participate in longitudinal online surveys. To recruit UK participants, an electronic email invitation was sent to all 5534 undergraduates three months after their graduation in 2014. In the covering letter, only those who had been newly employed within the previous month were asked to click on a link to complete the survey online. The total number of graduates eligible for this study, i.e. those who had been newly employed, could not be determined. In the end a total of 194 graduates responded to the online survey on their induction experience during employment following graduation and 168 graduates responded to a follow-up survey on their adaptation outcomes. The sample of 194 graduates represented a variety of job sectors (for example, education, manufacturing, public services); none of the sectors accounted for more than 20 per cent of the sample. Healthcare and welfare services represented the largest job sector proportionately (17 per cent). The majority of participants were female (56 per cent) and British (87 per cent) with an average age of 23.5 years. All of the participants were graduates with a university degree.

Using the same research method an electronic email invitation was sent to all 645 undergraduates from two schools of a large university located in southern China in 2014. Altogether, 179 graduates took part in the online survey and 104 participants completed the follow-up survey. The sample of 179 graduates represented a variety of job sectors; Finance and Auditing services were the largest job sector proportionately (49 per cent). All the participants were Chinese. The majority of participants were female (65 per cent) with an average age of 23.3 years. All of the participants were graduates with a university degree or above.

Using regression analysis, we found no significant difference between samples from the two universities in terms of age and gender, but educational background was significantly different: 37 per cent of Chinese respondents had an MA (63 per cent with a BA degree), and all UK respondents were graduates with a BA degree.



Key findings

The findings of the surveys reflect graduates' self-confidence in performing their new jobs, their proactive adjustment activities to cope with their new jobs, their work environment during induction and new employee adaptation outcomes.

Self-confidence in performing new jobs

Most UK (87 per cent) and Chinese graduates (86 per cent) felt or strongly felt that their new jobs were well within the scope of their abilities. Further, the value of past work experience on self-confidence in performing new jobs was widely recognised by both UK graduates (78 per cent) and Chinese graduates (80 per cent). There was no gender difference in self-confidence across the two samples and there were no significant difference in self-confidence across different job sectors for both UK and Chinese graduates.

The main difference between UK and Chinese graduates was that almost half of Chinese graduates (49 per cent compared with 26 per cent of UK respondents) reported that they were overqualified for the job, and in fact, 82 per cent of Chinese respondents indicated that they could have handled a more challenging job than the one they were currently doing. Why did so many Chinese graduates report they were more highly educated than their jobs required? One possible explanation may reside in the massive expansion of Chinese higher education (Bai, 2006). While the expansion of mass education may boost the economy, the issue of over-qualification may pose severe challenges for both graduates and employers. In fact, in this survey the perception of over-qualification was found to link with job satisfaction and turnover intention, suggesting that graduates who felt overqualified were less likely to feel satisfied at work and more likely to want to leave the organisation.

While the expansion of mass education may boost the economy, the issue of over-qualification may pose severe challenges for both graduates and employers

Proactive adjustment activities and coping strategies

Ashford and Black (1996) suggested that proactive activities often used by new recruits include role-modelling, building relationships with managers, monitoring colleagues, positive framing, changing work procedures and negotiating job roles. The results showed that both UK and Chinese respondents reported that they learnt appropriate behaviours through frequently monitoring colleagues and role-modelling senior colleagues. In addition, it was found that the tactics of monitoring and role-modelling were positively related to adaptation outcomes (for example, role clarification and social integration) across both samples, suggesting the more graduates apply these strategies, the more likely they were to settle down. However, in contrast to UK respondents who stated that negotiating job roles and changing work procedures were the least commonly used tactics (less than 12 per cent of UK graduates frequently used this tactic in new workplaces), 59 per cent of Chinese graduates reported that they had tried to alter the work environment to help themselves adjust to the new placement. This result suggests the potential for future research exploring why and how graduates sometimes choose to monitor/role-model colleagues and sometimes choose to

change their environment/role. The different behaviour of UK and Chinese graduates in changing their work environment needs further investigation.

Work environment during induction

It was noted that most organisations offered training for new employees. Both UK and Chinese graduates reported that they had experienced such training. Further, participants from both the UK and China felt that their colleagues had support them personally during the induction process. This finding is consistent with previous research which suggests that formal and structured induction tactics are effective in newcomer adjustment (Chen, 2010; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979).

One quarter of UK graduates (25 per cent) reported that their supervisors did not expect creative behaviours from them, and a further 30 per cent were not sure if they did. A similar pattern held for Chinese graduates - 40 per cent of graduates were not sure about the expectations of their supervisors in terms of creativity. Newcomers are often considered as an important source of new ideas to enable innovation and, in turn, organisational survival (Harris

Universities that are trying hard to enhance students' creative abilities should be aware of the fact that newcomer-driven innovation may not be widely expected at first, especially for graduates early in their careers with limited work experience

et al., 2014), and thus it is surprising that both UK and Chinese graduates perceived that creative behaviours were not widely expected at the workplace. A possible explanation for this result is that employers might expect graduates, especially those with very limited work experience, to develop skills and build trust before showing creativity. Accordingly,

one of the implications is that universities that are trying hard to enhance students' creative abilities should be aware of the fact that newcomer-driven innovation may not be widely expected at first, especially for graduates early in their careers with limited work experience. It may be necessary to improve awareness of when and how to be innovative at the workplace.

Adaptation outcomes

In terms of the question of what constitutes effective newcomer adjustment?, neither conceptual nor empirical studies have achieved consensus, because effective socialisation outcomes may differ across types of employment, organisations, and cultures (Bauer *et al.*, 1998). However, along with the discussion of the organisational socialisation process, concepts such as role clarity, task mastery, social integration, well-being, turnover intention and innovation are often considered as important indicators of newcomer adaptation after organisational entry (Cooper-Thomas and Wilson, 2011; Kammeyer-Mueller and Wanberg, 2003).

According to this study, both UK and Chinese graduates reported very positive adaptation outcomes. For example, 88 per cent of the UK participants reported feeling accepted by work group members; 85 per cent felt confident about their job skills and abilities; 87 per cent reported that they were clear about job responsibilities; and 82 per cent thought that they generated creative ideas. Similarly, 87 per cent of the Chinese participants reported that they felt accepted by work group members; 74 per cent had high task mastery; 80 per cent

reported that they were clear on job roles; and 63 per cent reported that they generated creative ideas.

However, 25 per cent of UK and 26 per cent of Chinese respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they often seriously thought about entering a new and different occupation; and 21 per cent of UK and 26 per cent of Chinese graduates often seriously thought about resigning from their job. The results suggest that efforts should be made to ensure that the students understand the links between subjects, skills and occupational choices. Moreover, both UK and Chinese graduates reported that they felt exhausted at the end of a working day (39 per cent UK and 37 per cent China). This may be a normal reaction to a graduate's first 'proper job' with greater responsibilities and performance demands. However, this finding highlights an opportunity to teach students during their time at university to manage stress, seek support, and most of all, to build their resilience in preparation for work.

This finding highlights an opportunity to teach students during their time at university to manage stress, seek support, and most of all, to build their resilience in preparation for work.

Conclusions

Employability is more than just finding a job – it is about the capacity to maintain employment, achieve job satisfaction and make successful transitions between job roles throughout working life (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). Therefore, while it is essential for graduates to develop technical knowledge at university, it is also important that they learn adaptive and social skills that will support their ongoing employability in an uncertain labour market.

These longitudinal studies served as an initial step in investigating how graduates settle down in their new workplaces. The results show that graduates across both samples seemed well prepared in terms of the scope of their skills and abilities to perform their new jobs. The findings also support the argument that both individual behaviour and the work environment impact on newcomer adaptation (Bauer *et al.*, 2007). For example, behaviour by graduates in monitoring colleagues and role-modelling were positively related to adaptation outcomes in terms of social integration, role clarity, task mastery and innovation; work contextual factors such as formalised and structured induction processes were also found to be beneficial for newcomer adaptation. However, the results also revealed a number of potential issues such as expectations of creativity, a mismatch between education/subject and jobs/careers and indications of early burnout. It is hoped that this study will spur future research to include the views and reactions of not only graduates, but also educators and practitioners, in order to develop a more comprehensive picture of how to facilitate graduate adaptation processes after organisational entry.

References

- Ashford, S. J., and Black, J. S. (1996) Proactivity during organizational entry: The role of desire for control. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 81: 199-214.
- Bai, L. (2006) Dilemmas and challenges in china's move to mass higher education. *The China Quarterly*, 185: 128-144.
- Bauer, T. N., Bodner, T., Erdogan, B., Truxillo, D. M., and Tucker, J. S. (2007) Newcomer adjustment during organizational socialization: A meta-analytic review of antecedents, outcomes and methods. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92: 707-721.
- Bauer, T. N., Morrison, E. W., and Callister, R. R. (1998) Organizational socialization: A review and directions for future research. In G. R. Ferris. (Ed.) *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management* (pp.149-214), Stamford, CT: JAI Press.
- Chen, J. (2010) *The Influence of Organizational Socialisation Tactics and Information Seeking on Newcomer Adjustment: Evidence from Two Studies in China* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), University of Manchester, UK.
- Cooper-Thomas, H. D., and Wilson, M. G. (2011) Influences on newcomers' adjustment tactic use. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 19: 388-404.
- Harris, T. B., Li, N., Boswell, W.R., Shang, X., and Xie, S. (2014) Getting what's new from newcomers: Empowering leadership, creativity, and adjustment in the socialization context. *Personnel Psychology*, 67: 567-604.
- Hillage, J., and Pollard, E. (1998) Employability: Developing a framework for policy analysis. *Research Brief 85*, Department for Education and Employment, London.
- Kammeyer-Mueller, J.D., and Wanberg, C.R. (2003) Unwrapping the organizational entry process: Disentangling multiple antecedents and their pathways to adjustment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 5: 779-794.
- Van Maanen, J., and Schein, E. H. (1979) Toward a theory of organizational socialisation. *Research in Organizational Behaviour*, 1: 209-264.