



Beyond the Ivory Tower: A Case Study on the Early Career Adaptation of Three University Graduates

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ABSTRACT

For college graduates, finishing their academic studies and stepping into professional life is one of the most significant transitions in their personal development. Whether they can successfully achieve this transformation has a profound impact on their future growth. This study conducts interview-based case research on three university graduates' adaptation to early career life. The findings indicate that, to help graduates better adjust to their professional lives, individuals should identify their career positioning through self-analysis; universities should adjust their talent cultivation models according to labor market trends; and enterprises should provide realistic and reliable information to students while designing training programs tailored to the characteristics of newly employed graduates.

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1. Background of the Study

University students are a valuable human resource in China. As the scale of college graduates continues to expand, the number of graduates in 2019 reached 8.34 million, and that of 2020 was expected to reach 8.74 million (People's Daily, 2020). If employment opportunities determine whether individuals can enter the workforce and secure a specific position, then career adaptation and development determine whether they can successfully accomplish role transformation, discover self-worth, and achieve long-term growth (Li, 2007).

Employment marks an indispensable stage for college graduates to enter society. During this phase, they experience not only environmental changes—from campus to workplace—but also transformations in social roles. What awaits them is no longer the serene and orderly “ivory tower” life but rather a complex social environment, repetitive work tasks, and competitive interpersonal relationships (Wang, 2015). Therefore, how college graduates adapt to professional life during their initial



employment stage is a matter of profound significance for society, educational institutions, and the individuals themselves.

2. Research Methods

Previous studies have shown that college graduates generally require about three years to adapt to their early careers, and that factors such as gender, academic performance, and experience as a student leader have no significant impact on career adaptation differences (Huang, 2012). Since this study focuses on graduates in the initial stage of employment, the adaptation period is defined as one year. The interview participants were therefore selected from the 2019 graduating cohort, with no specific restrictions on gender.

3. Case Background

This study includes three cases: Liu Qiang, Ren Yi, and Zhang Lin (**all pseudonyms**). Their basic information is as follows:

- a. Liu Qiang, male, born in 1997, graduated from a college in Xiaogan with a major in International Economics and Trade. He is currently employed in the sales department of a branch under China Gezhouba Group Cement Co., Ltd.
- b. Ren Yi, female, born in 1997, graduated from a university in Northwest China with a major in Advertising. She now works for a technology company in Chengdu, engaged in APP design.
- c. Zhang Lin, female, born in 1997, graduated from a college in Xiaogan with a major in Chinese Language and Literature. She currently works for a new media company in Wuhan as an advertising copywriter.

Data Collection Methods

The data for the three cases were primarily collected through semi-structured interviews and informal conversations. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted via remote video or audio calls. Each interview lasted about one hour. With the consent of the participants, the conversations were audio-recorded, and their expressions and tones were noted. After each interview, the recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

4. From “Student” to “Adult”: Role Transition

Accompanying the transition from school to workplace, the participants stepped out of the “ivory tower” and shed their “student” identities to assume the “adult” roles of working professionals. During this process of role transformation, they gradually

constructed their own understanding of the meaning of work.

Transformation of Professional Role: “From a child who only lives for oneself to an adult who must play a role”

When discussing the meaning of “work,” all three interviewees frequently used the term “adult” to describe their roles, revealing the profound influence of this transition on their self-perception and understanding of professional identity.

Interviewer (Z): What does work mean to you?

Liu Qiang: It means two things. First, I am now completely capable of starting a family. Second, I can face society as a real adult. Work is a mark of true adulthood—you earn your own income and can do what you want.

Ren Yi: (after a pause) It means turning from a child who only needs to care about herself into an adult who has to play a role. Being a student was easy—you just studied, thought about homework and exams, and could use your free time however you wanted. Now it’s different. Every day I have tasks to complete and must be careful when talking with colleagues and bosses. I leave early and come home late, and by night I often feel a deep sense of emptiness.

Zhang Lin: At school, people tolerate your mistakes—you have room to experiment. But at work, there’s much less tolerance. If you make the same mistake repeatedly, you might be eliminated.

While each interviewee emphasized different aspects, social responsibility, personal life, or professional expectations, they all revealed that their behaviors and mindsets were now guided by adult role norms. They had begun to experience their professional lives through the lens of this new identity.

5. Social and Professional Adaptation: “The Learning Never Stops”

Malcolm Knowles (1980) pointed out that adult learning tends to be problem-centered rather than subject-centered. Adults not only focus on what they learn, but also on the *practical value* of learning for their work and life. They seek to acquire knowledge that helps them manage real-life pressures (Han, 2017).

When the three interviewees talked about their early professional experiences, all of them described a process of re-entering learning soon after leaving the “student” role. Except for Ren Yi, both Liu Qiang and Zhang Lin mentioned that their companies employed the traditional “*mentor–apprentice*” system to help new employees quickly acquire essential job skills.

Liu Qiang:

“When I first joined the company, I was assigned a mentor. We signed a one-year

mentorship agreement. I had to learn the company's regulations and procedures, as well as how to issue invoices because salespeople often deal with billing. We observed how senior employees handled their work, and our department manager taught us how to review contracts and reports. Every detail mattered—we couldn't afford mistakes. We spent several months learning those processes.

You might think the salary is decent, but it's not easy to earn. In sales, you face all kinds of strangers. If someone speaks a dialect, communication becomes difficult. You also need to understand people's psychology. There's a lot of skill involved. Since policies and markets keep changing, we must never stop learning."

Zhang Lin:

"My first company had some basic training, but it was very superficial. They briefly introduced company rules and stopped after a couple of sessions. Then senior salespeople were supposed to guide us, but honestly, few were willing to share their core experience—because that's how they make their living. So, I had to learn everything by myself, often studying until midnight after work."

Ren Yi:

"In my company, there was no formal training or mentor system. Since my work in APP design differs from my college major, I had to learn everything from scratch—mostly through online courses. I sometimes feel like I'm being paid to learn, but my skills still have a long way to go."

These narratives demonstrate that even after stepping into the workforce, the learning process never truly ends. The participants' self-driven learning reflects the continuation of their student identities in new professional contexts—a sign of gradual transformation into lifelong learners.

6. The Process of Career Adaptation

After entering a completely new environment, college graduates become full-fledged members of the workplace. On one hand, they desire to integrate quickly into the new environment; on the other, they wonder whether their expectations can truly be met.

Difficulties at the Beginning

Zhang Lin:

"My first project in real estate was really tough. You know how competitive property sales are—if you don't perform, others will replace you. When I joined, one of my colleagues had just been dismissed. The atmosphere was tense. I once made a mistake that caused a dispute involving profits, and although no one blamed me directly, the

tension made me feel very uncomfortable. That incident left a deep impression.”

Liu Qiang:

“My company conducts regular performance assessments that directly affect bonuses. After three months of internship, I had my first evaluation, which included a written test and a presentation. The pass rate wasn’t high—about 90% passed, 10% were reassigned. I was really nervous.”

Navigating New Workplace Relationships

As their professional lives unfolded, the participants became increasingly aware of the social environment of work, particularly the challenge of managing relationships. For new graduates, the primary shift is in interpersonal dynamics—from teachers to supervisors, from classmates to colleagues, and from peer-based relationships to hierarchical ones.

Zhang Lin:

“My first job was at a real estate agency. I was actually hired as a planner, but my manager assigned me to sales instead. I wanted to switch back, but he kept delaying it. The work environment was filled with slick salespeople, which made me uncomfortable. Many clients were either very wealthy or difficult to communicate with. Selling real estate is a huge challenge—it involves complex negotiations and emotions.”

On competition:

“There’s definitely competition among colleagues. I’d call it cruel. You have to balance fairness and self-interest—pursue your own goals without harming others. It’s realistic, but that’s how it is.”

Liu Qiang:

“One of my colleagues had conflicts with his supervisor, which really affected his performance reviews. Since our evaluations are scored by leaders, even small conflicts can reduce your bonus. So, you have to be very careful—never argue with your boss, even if you’re right. Once a disagreement happens, it can cost you your job.”

7. Continuous Adjustment and Adaptation

Graduates full of ideals and ambition inevitably encounter friction between expectations and reality during their adaptation process. An essential task during this stage is to continuously adjust and reconcile themselves with the new environment.

Liu Qiang:

“I’m an introverted person and a bit slow to warm up, but my job is in sales, where

you need to maintain constant interaction with clients. Due to the pandemic, I was recently transferred to a new sales district, and suddenly I had to deal with many unfamiliar clients. I had to appear outgoing and approachable all the time, which was hard for me—it's definitely my biggest challenge.”

Ren Yi:

“I adapted fairly quickly—about a week. My main issue was the lack of professional expertise. My current work is quite different from what I studied in college. I majored in advertising, but now I design mobile applications. At first, I didn't even understand the basic procedures, so I had to start learning everything from scratch.”

Zhang Lin:

“It took me about a year to really adapt. Before that, I was in a bad state—mainly because I failed the postgraduate entrance exam and was disappointed in myself. I even saw a doctor. Besides medication, I actively participated in work and social activities, with support from friends and family. As my work improved and I developed a clearer plan for my future, things got much better. Now I feel stable and positive.”

These experiences reveal that, after leaving the ivory tower, the graduates recognized the gap between student and professional roles. Despite differences in personality and experience, each sought to balance their expectations with workplace realities through personal adjustment.

8. Future Career Development Planning

Although the work environment presented various challenges, all three participants showed a more positive attitude after a period of adaptation. They not only persisted in their jobs but also developed clearer visions for their professional futures.

(1) The Role of Professional Identity

Professional identity refers to an individual's positive evaluation of their occupation. It serves as an intrinsic motivational force in career development (Liao, 2010). Employment satisfaction, on the other hand, reflects graduates' subjective perception of their job status based on multiple factors (Yue, Xia, & Qiu, 2020).

Liu Qiang:

“At first, I cared most about salary and career prospects. Now, after settling down, I care more about my working attitude and how to do the job well. Future development depends on what I achieve myself. Only by performing well can I truly move forward.” When asked whether he felt a sense of belonging, Liu Qiang replied firmly:

“Yes, definitely. I see myself as part of the company. Honestly, I’ve never thought about quitting. I just want to do better and live better. If you’re always thinking about leaving, you’ll never do a good job.”

Ren Yi:

“Our branch office is small—only three people—and I’ve had no formal training. But I really like what I do. I’d give my job satisfaction an 85 out of 100. I just wish I had a more professional mentor. Once you grasp the basics, the work isn’t that hard, and the pay is decent. I just want to learn systematically and work in a more structured environment.”

“When I get recognition, I feel the most fulfilled! Since I hadn’t studied APP design before, I wasn’t sure about my approach. But when my boss praised my work, it made me so happy. That moment of being recognized is priceless.”

Zhang Lin:

“I’m now working in a new media company, which aligns with my career goals. The office is in a cultural and creative park—it’s artistic and vibrant, and I love it. The salary isn’t as high as in sales, but there’s more room for growth. That’s what matters to me.”

For all three, the sense of accomplishment and professional recognition fostered a stronger identification with their roles and a deeper awareness of personal value.

(2) Career Planning and Lifelong Learning

Liu Qiang:

“I used to think sales was all about drinking and socializing, but that’s not true. In my company, even the top managers don’t drink. Success depends on real ability. There’s still a lot to learn—what we studied in school is too theoretical and doesn’t fit today’s workplace realities. I want to keep learning and work my way up—promotion and a raise are my next goals.”

Ren Yi:

“I believe learning is always valuable. It’s impossible to know too much.”

Zhang Lin:

“My career plan is to keep learning, gain more experience, and then look for better opportunities. Step by step, I’ll move upward.”

A recurring theme in their narratives is “learning.” For these young professionals, lifelong learning has become the key driving force in their future career development.

9. Reflection and Suggestions

As the issue of graduate employment continues to attract widespread attention,

how to effectively facilitate the transition of college graduates from school to work—and to help them smoothly adapt to professional life—has become a major concern. Based on the three case studies, this research puts forward several reflections and suggestions to improve this transition process.

(1) For the Individual Graduate

Graduates should not only master professional knowledge and skills but also focus on developing core competencies such as self-awareness, adaptability, and communication. Through continuous self-analysis, they should refine their understanding of personal career values, clarify their motivations and needs, and identify the appropriate field in which to pursue their careers. By doing so, they can actively prepare for both career adaptation and long-term professional growth (Ji, 2004).

(2) For Higher Education Institutions

One of the key challenges for graduates entering professional life lies in translating academic knowledge into practical ability. However, the current university curriculum system often fails to align effectively with workplace realities. The mismatch between the static nature of academic programs and the dynamic demands of labor markets creates a significant gap.

Universities bear a social responsibility that extends beyond campus boundaries (Gao, 2017). Thus, they should:

- a. Plan and adjust academic programs and talent cultivation systems in line with labor market trends.
- b. Strengthen communication with enterprises and employers to establish collaborative mechanisms for joint talent development and employment support.
- c. Implement adaptive reforms in talent training models to ensure alignment with evolving market needs (Ma, 2013).

(3) For Enterprises and Employers

First, organizations should provide authentic and transparent job information during recruitment so that students can form realistic expectations about their future positions and work environments. One interviewee noted that some companies “overly embellish” job descriptions in campus presentations, leading to disappointment and early resignations once reality falls short.

Second, while many companies already conduct onboarding training programs, most are limited to general introductions—such as corporate history, culture, and policies—without addressing the specific needs of newly graduated employees. Enterprises should design targeted and practical training programs that help young professionals

integrate smoothly into their roles and develop the competencies necessary for long-term success (Jiang, 2009).

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