

Data Analysis Research on University Students' Career Decision Making

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Abstract: *This paper reports findings from study on secretarial education students' career aspirations in a Chinese second-tier university to explain why graduates choose career other than being secretaries in private sectors. Adopting social learning theory of career decision making along with data analysis, the findings unveils that individual characteristics, including fallback option and seeing secretarial education as a stepping stone, account for students' choosing of secretarial education major. At the same time, task-approach skills had a significant impact on students for not choosing secretarial career in private companies. Environmental conditions and learning experiences justify students' choice of careers in governmental organization and public sectors. Participants' perceptions about secretarial education programs are discussed along with implications.*

Keywords: *university students', career making, social learning theory*

1. Introduction

In China, it is widely acknowledged that college graduates are crazy about the national civil servant examination and eager to work for government affiliated institutions. It caused severe social problem of delayed employment or even non-employment, in addition to the imbalanced human resources allocation between governmental and private organizations. This problem is especially serious among secretarial education graduates, which accounting for increasing number of graduates given the major expanding. Interestingly, dominant number of these students in second tier universities are cultivated for private companies or organizations. Though there are a large number of literature on proposals in terms of policies levels, university curriculum setting and etc. to enhance graduates' willingness to work in private companies, the underlying reasons for graduates do not intend to work for private enterprises despite graduating from the major serve for this need are largely underexplored.

2. Theoretical framework: social learning theory of career decision making

The underpinning theoretical framework this paper adopted is the social learning theory of career decision making, which explains why people enter education programs or choose a certain occupation at different stages of their lives^[1]. Based on this theory, the four elements leading to one's educational and career decisions are namely genetic factor, environmental conditions, learning experiences and performance skills. Firstly, personal characteristics or genetic factors means individuals are born with specific inherent qualities, such as gender, race and other personal traits. Secondly, environmental conditions comprise the elements usually located outside the control of an individual, including family members, employment market, university level and etc.. The third component is the learning experiences. It can be argued that past learning or working experiences can have a crucial impact on an individual's decision making. Lastly, task-approach skills involve certain cognitive processes and emotional responses towards the intertwined interaction among the three abovementioned factors.

This theory was previously widely used in teaching and teacher education contexts to explore the factors influenced students' decisions of teacher education program and teaching careers. One of the most recent researches done in Indonesia manifests that individual characteristics and external influences may impact students' choices of teacher education program at university level, while the remaining two elements, namely learning experience and task approach skills may affect their decision of giving up teaching as their career after graduation^[2]. A study in India reported that certain number of students enrolled in teach education program viewed this program as a steeping stone to prepare for civil service examinations^[3]. In Cheng, Tang, and Cheng's research in 2014, they identified that when graduates of

teacher education programs perceived lack of abilities or subject knowledge, which falls in the scope of task-approach skills, will more likely to choose career paths other than being a teacher^[4].

Given the rare practical research on career decisions done in secretarial education, this experimental research conducted will borrow the studies from education program but tailor for Chinese secretarial education context. In this study, we went further to dig out the relative impact of these four factors as identified above quantitatively to get more holistic picture.

3. Method

In this study, second tier universities' secretarial education is the focus and one local university in Zhejiang province is selected for this case study. The participants are 100 fourth-year undergraduate secretarial education students (table 1). This university is representative since its aims at preparing students to serve for the local companies and enterprises. However, the employment rate of its graduates is relatively low. It is a pressing need to dig out the factors which influenced graduates' decision tendency.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants (N=100)

Profile	Number
Gender	Women (n=90) Men (n=10)
Age	22-23 years old
Household Register	City (n=30) Countryside (n=70)
Living area	Zhejiang Province (n=85) Non-Zhejiang Province (n=15)

At the time of data collection in data analysis, participants had already fulfilled six of eight semesters of their undergraduate program and were more likely to have clearer career plans on what to do upon graduation when compared with the lower grade students. These participants were first given a questionnaire, in which questions scattered including the factors impact their enrollment of this program, their intention to work for private companies and the components affect their intention. After questionnaire, ten participants were chosen randomly for interviews using open-ended questions to get more well-rounded insights.

The main part of questionnaire (part C) was designed to explore factors impact students' intention to choose secretarial career in private companies. To be specific, items for environmental conditions, learning experiences and task approach skills were designed with a five-point scale in question C3. For example, an item measuring relevance was: the influence from family members and peers (5-strongly impacted, 3-neutral, 1-no impact). The content validity was guaranteed since the items used were to a large degree the rephrasing of different aspects of the framework as defined in the literature.

Interview questions involve detailed questions on students' view on private enterprises, their motivation to be teachers in public schools or taking civil servant examinations and other questions based on the questionnaire results. Students' answers were recorded and coded for further analysis. Moreover, consent forms were collected and anonymity was guaranteed.

4. Findings

4.1. Career plan

In the questionnaire, participants were required to indicate their career choice after graduation in the form of multiple-choice question. Among 100 participants, 79% of them chose government or public affiliated institutions as one of their career path, while only 18% of them tick private enterprises. State companies are second chosen option, which account for 59%. In the interview part, 3 out of 10 interviewees planned to be Chinese teachers in public schools. The statistics unveils that secretarial education students' unwillingness to start career in private sectors.

4.2. Main reasons for choosing secretarial education major

It was interesting to note that participants' reasons for choosing secretarial education program were different from their decision for not pursuing secretarial career, especially in private companies. The

main reason for choosing this major can be explained by personal characteristics, while task-approach skills justifies participants' decision of not pursuing secretarial career. Furthermore, the remaining two factors, environmental conditions and learning experiences, account for their pursuing careers other than field of private companies, say state affiliated institutions. The conceptual framework can be seen in figure 1.

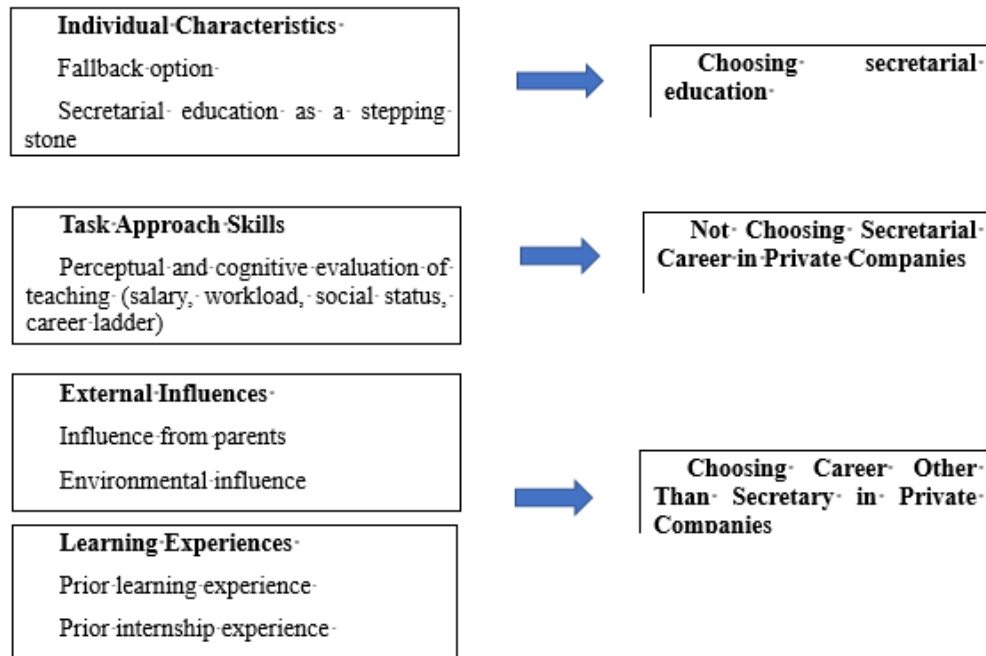


Figure 1: Conceptual framework: Secretarial education major students' career decision making

4.2.1. Individual Characteristics

(1) Fallback option. The question on students' reasons for choosing secretarial education program in this college manifest that more than half of all participants (51%) subjected to the major adjustment, which means they didn't choose secretarial education as their first choice, instead, they were allocated to this major based on their college entrance test score. In the interview, 6 interviewees recalled that they did not get accepted into their ideal program or university. More importantly, this major was the only program admitted them and they had no other choices. "It's a second-tier school after all" is frequently quoted by the participants as reassurance for their admission. This similar finding was reported in teacher education research too^[5].

(2) Secretarial education as a stepping stone. The question on students' initial career consideration upon admission shows that most students (55%) were not considering secretary as their career. Instead, they regarded the secretarial education as a stepping stone to prepare them for state affiliated jobs or work for government. The detailed rationale was uncovered in the interview part. One participant remarked that "I did research after knowing I was accepted in secretarial education program. It belongs to Chinese literature category and being Chinese teacher is one of its career direction. So it was not that bad." This comment was echoed by the other participants who have shown little idea when been accepted and gained knowledge on the career direction through program leaflet and career path development course in the first year of undergraduate study. In this sense, the career path of being a secretary which is self-evidently the core for talent development was downplayed by most students in the first place.

4.3. Main reasons for not pursuing secretarial career in private companies

Table 2 depicted the result of the three factors' influence on students' decision for not pursuing secretarial career in private companies. As shown in this table, task-approach skills had a significantly positive effect on it ($\beta=0.352$, $p=0.011$), which illustrated that students' certain skills, work habits, cognitive process and emotional responses developed partly explain their decision of not working in private companies as secretary. But the other two factors, environmental conditions and learning experiences have no significant impact.

Table 2: Regression Analysis on Employment Willingness

Model	Non-standardized Regressive Coefficient		Standardized Regressive Coefficient	t	p
	B	Standard Error	β		
(Constant)	2.595	0.227	/	11.438	0.000
Environmental Conditions	-0.181	0.137	-0.215	-1.320	0.190
Learning Experiences	0.108	0.093	0.161	1.155	0.251
Task Approach Skills	0.290	0.113	0.352	2.578	0.011
F	3.676 (0.015)				
R2	0.103				

The task approach skills in this study refer to participants' perceptual and cognitive evaluation of secretary career in private enterprise, which including salary, workload, social status and skills compatibility. From the questionnaire, it was evident in the responses that students were influenced by their understanding of current situation and prospect of private industry in general. It was shown in number that 61% participants were largely or comparatively impacted by this factor. In the interview part, a more comprehensive view was generated. Nine out of ten participants explicitly or implicitly mentioned compensation as their major concern. Some examples are: Public servants received much higher benefits and stable income, but working for private companies usually means low salaries. I want to be a teacher in public school, which means better social status and higher salaries. This finding is in consistency with studies done before^[6].

They also raised the concern regarding the limitation of knowledge, skills, abilities and others (KSAOs) development in private sectors. For example, one interviewee mentioned being a secretary in a private company may exert negative impact on skills development since the platform provided would be much smaller when compared with state sectors, such as public-owned enterprises. Additionally, they also pictured the lower social status and heavier workload in private industries. Beyond that, they expressed lack of knowledge about the secretarial career progression pathways and options in private sectors. To certain extent, some interviewees did not know much about the career ladder while others remarked on the lack of information available to them. Subsequently, participants expressed their desire to gain more knowledge about this issue.

4.4. Main reasons for pursuing careers other than field of private companies

4.4.1. External influences

(1) Influences from parents. It should be highlighted that parents have significant impact on students' decisions to choose their future jobs. The questionnaire indicates that more than 40% of students' parents work for private sectors and their jobs ranging from assembly line workers to store owners. Interview part provided explanation of parents' influence on their children's career decisions. Three interviewees recalled that their parents urged them to be public school teachers or work for government sectors, though themselves work in private industry. Their parents see college studies as a stepping stone to have "better jobs", which specifically targeted at government sectors and state-affiliated institutions.

(2) Environmental influences. We found that the whole environmental influences, including difficulties in employment, fueled students' decisions of pursuing careers in public sectors. In the interview part, nearly all interviewees acknowledged the tough employment environment and three of them strengthened their decision to take civil servant examinations given the environmental influences. "I know it's hard. But my degree meets the prerequisite of taking civil servant examination. I want to take a shot. Getting the offer means better jobs" quoted from one interviewee. But when been asked about their knowledge on favorable policies in private sectors, such as graduate subsidy, eight of them confessed they had no ideas of it^[7].

4.4.2. Learning experience

(1) University study experience. Studies report that prior experiences as a key influence in career choosing. From interview, it can be argued that career direction in private sector was downplay by lecturers and professors in secretarial education major, while the possibility of entering public sector was amplified. For example, in the courses like applied writing, lecturer adopted government official documents for students to use as models.

(2) Prior internship experience. Nearly half of students had internship experience, and most of them interned in private companies. Interestingly, participants in the interview commented that internship in private companies was their least choice with no intention to work for long-term. Furthermore, they recalled the unpleasant internship experience in private companies, such as chaotic management and low wages, and expected the well-established system in state-affiliated institutions.

5. Outlook and future directions

Though the data collected were only from one university, the findings contribute to the secretarial education in China especially the rationale of students' career choice. The corresponding measurements should be taken to guide students in career choosing. First, it is highly necessary for universities to adjust course setting to guide students' establishment of correct awareness of private sectors. Second, the government subsidy for graduates entering private industry should be advocated among the students to attract potential talents. Third, the career path in the private sector should be shared and the more holistic view can be gained.

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