Emerging 'Triple Lost' Young Graduates in Mainland China: A Mixed-Method Approach

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Abstract

Recent news media have reported the phenomenon of 'triple lost' young people, who experience job loss and are out of education or training. In the research context, such a group is referred to as NEET—young people who are not in education, employment or training. The NEET problem is expected to be alleviated by the worldwide educational expansion, which offers youth premium education for employment. However, Western and Asian societies witness increasing numbers of NEETs with college degrees (new NEETs, hereafter). As existing studies have focused on lower-educated NEETs and their marginalised labour market experience, these findings do not apply to highly educated NEETs.

Drawing on the China case, this study will adopt a mixed-method approach to investigate the objective and subjective dimensions of the 'triple lost' phenomenon of young graduates (aged 21–29 years). Multiple waves of large-scale representative data will be used to examine how the scale and the socio-demographic characteristics of new NEETs have changed in the last three decades. The national panel survey data will be merged with the region- and year-specific statistics to analyse how the micro- and macro-level factors lead to graduates' NEET status. Additionally, the project will investigate new NEETs' experiences and career aspirations. Big data techniques will be used to analyse their experiences and aspirations expressed in two popular online discussion forums. In-depth interviews will be conducted with new NEET participants of these forums and those not using the forums. The interviews with forum participants will be linked with their sharing in the forums for content analysis.

This study holds three contributions. Firstly, to our best knowledge, this study will be the first to analyse the changes of new NEETs in China over the past three decades. The potential findings will contribute to the knowledge about the changes amongst young adults with an interruption in the school-to-work transition. Secondly, unlike existing studies emphasising NEETs' low education and disadvantaged family background, this study will provide a macro and micro understanding of the emergence of new NEETs, thus contributing to the literature on the phenomenon of new NEETs. Thirdly, this study will use a mixed-method approach to reach new NEETs who are 'hidden' from society. Hence, it will not only give a voice to new NEETs but also enrich the understanding of this emerging group. The findings will provide policy insights for pre-empting and managing the issues of graduates' disengagement from the labour market.