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Towards a Model of Career Guidance and Counseling for University Students in China

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Towards a Model of Career Guidance and Counseling for University Students in China

Abstract

This paper describes the evolution of career guidance and counseling in Chinese universities. In particular it highlights how national and cultural influences in China have interacted with longer-term influences and practices from the West, producing a unique “Five Aspects in One” model of delivery. Current career guidance and counseling practices in Chinese universities are described, and suggestions are made for future directions.

[62 words]

Keywords: Career guidance and counseling; China; Five Aspects in One Model

Introduction

Although career guidance and counseling in higher education institutes in China has a relatively short history, it is already developing its own unique style. Drawing in part from basic theories and practices in Western countries, career guidance and counseling in China is influenced also by cultural traditions, recent economic growth, and social developments. In particular, rapid economic and social changes have affected the career prospects of all university graduates. As a result, it is now recognized that to enhance their employability these students should be guided to plan their study paths deliberately, select their major subjects carefully, and then strive to increase their academic level.

Prior to the 1980s, university students experienced no difficulty obtaining jobs under a national university graduate job allocation system, first implemented 1949. Over the intervening period there was no incentive for universities to develop sophisticated career guidance systems and services, as the number of students graduating each year was not large and employment was not difficult to find. It was not until late 1980s that some higher education institutes began to recommend specific preparation for graduates, for example by meeting with potential employers directly. Career guidance, as the term is currently understood, was not implemented until 1998, with the advent of a graduate 'job self-selection system'. The system has been running for almost fifteen years, and two stages can be observed in its evolution (Sun & Yuen, 2012).

The first stage, from 1998 to 2001, marked the 'employment guidance' period. During this time students were mainly guided in 'how to find jobs' for example, they were coached in how to write application letters and résumés, and how to prepare for job interviews. However, by 1999 pressure began to increase for a more comprehensive service, to match the rapid expansion in enrollment in higher education institutes in China. The number of graduates surged in 2001, with many students in vocational and professional schools graduating after only two years. University students began to experience difficulties and confusion over

choice of major subjects and schools, and felt pressure to plan carefully for a future career. It became obvious that more than ‘find a job’ help was needed, and the scheme developed to the second stage (Zhang, Hu & Pope, 2002).

According to Hao (2013), the second stage began in 2002, and has evolved to the present time. It is the period of ‘career guidance and planning’. In accordance with requirements of the Ministry of Education, all higher education institutes began providing graduates with input in six aspects of education and guidance, namely awareness of career planning, self career development, employability enhancement, guidance for job-hunting, occupation adaptation and development, and entrepreneurship education (General Office of the Ministry of Education, 2007). The input to provide this career guidance included group training, classroom discussions, case studies, mock interviews, group surveys, assessment tools and extra-curricular experiences (e.g., experience sharing, internships, business competitions).

Current Situation in Career Guidance and Counseling in Chinese Higher Education Institutes

Since 1998, career guidance and counseling for university students in China has thus developed rapidly in response to demand. After more than a decade of theoretical studies and practical exploration, scholars have found that theories and practices implemented in the West cannot be copied identically into the context of China (Wu, 2008). China has its own unique conditions, as reflected particularly in prevailing employment conditions, the need for proactive study planning, course structures and restrictions, and competing demands made on career guidance personnel. These aspects are discussed more fully below.

Prevailing conditions

Theories of career guidance and counseling in the West, such as Trait-and-Factor Theory, emphasize the interrelationship between human personality, aptitudes, and job requirements. Career planning for

individuals is considered to be a task of looking for jobs based on one's own strengths and ambitions. University graduates in the West can usually decide where to work and what to do according to their own wishes.

A key difference between China and the West relates to the social situation and labor market. Under the market-oriented economy, the situation in China still reflects considerable variation in cultural and economic developments across different regions and economic sectors. Liu and Long (2009) pointed out that usually the economy develops well in coastal regions such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong but lags behind in western China. Even within the same area, incomes can vary for the same position (such as high school teachers vs. other teachers). It is also evident that gaps exist in income, social security benefits and social reputation in different organizations. For example, in foreign enterprises and national institutions one finds high salary and reputation, but in private enterprises salary is lower and there is less status attached. Factors such as these naturally influence students' choice of employment. When university students in China look for jobs they need to consider not only what they want to do (or are suited to do), but also tend to take into account parents' hopes and expectations, and the views and opinions of others (Long & Huang, 2006).

Tang and Jiang (2004) have pointed out that career guidance in a Chinese context must also take full account of the geographical and economic influences that impact upon a student's choice of career. Location and industry are primary driving forces, often exerting more influence than personal interests or aptitudes. Potential graduates must carefully consider work locations and the availability of particular industries. Counselors need to take into account not only students' personal characteristics, academic performance, career goals, potential for development and family background, but also economic factors in students' hometowns.

Proactive study planning

In the past, Chinese university freshmen were not sufficiently informed in terms of major subject selection and career planning. When they entered higher education institutes, some students chose schools and major subjects purely according to their entrance examination scores (Gao, 2009). For example, candidates with high scores tended to choose ‘popular’ subjects such as finance, management, information and computer technology, and other subjects with impressive titles like ‘international trade’ and ‘e-commerce’. Those with lower scores opted for subjects that they perceive may be easier to pass. Some students enrolled in schools and subjects based purely on the recommendations from teachers, parents or alumni. In addition, some students filed their applications with almost no forethought, selecting subjects they know nothing about and with no understanding of how the subject may help them later with employment.

After entering the university, students may find they simply have no liking for the school or the subjects, or they may lack the ability to study the subjects successfully. For example, those with poor mathematical foundations cannot study finance. Furthermore, due to such factors as imposed quotas and criterion entry marks, some candidates are not admitted to the subjects they are interested in, but instead have to take subjects they may not like. Effective career guidance from the earliest stages must aim to help students become aware of the importance of choosing subjects carefully, with an end goal in mind (Deng, 2006).

Course structures and restrictions

Hao (2013) suggests that Chinese universities often fall short in providing fully comprehensive programs of study, and students cannot enjoy full independence in choosing subjects based on their own interests. Some of the problems arise from over enrollment in particular subjects, limiting the intake each

year. Students may also be restricted when trying to change their major subjects, take electives, or create minors or double majors. This problem is often compounded when multi-campus schools are running different subjects on different campuses (or even in different cities). Many problems in subject selection also arise due to shortage of qualified teachers.

When students are involved in subjects that do not interest them, and are not seen as relevant to them, they will tend to opt out of serious study. Some may develop attitudes and behaviours that are detrimental to future employment. In cases where students find themselves enrolled in subjects they don't like (due, for example, to bad choice, inappropriate advice, or over-enrollment in preferred subject), they should be encouraged still to strive hard with their studies. Or in cases of total mismatch, they should be advised to change enrolment in a timely manner. Effective career guidance from the earliest stages can help prevent (or minimize) some of these systemic problems. At the same time, it is the responsibility of university teachers to stimulate students' liking for their subjects, regardless of whether or not they were already interested and motivated (Yue, Wen & Ding, 2004).

Counselors' multiple roles

Counselors in higher education institutes in China undertake many duties, and often they are responsible not only for career guidance but must also handle psychological counseling, student affairs, alumni affairs, patriotic education, and moral education in each faculty (Li, 2012). If counselors take responsibility for both moral education and career guidance, combining the two can have special meaning and effect in the Chinese context. Chinese university students' moral education focuses on three aspects: the influence of their political conception and convictions, the education of their personal values in life, and the enhancement of social morality (Long, Li & Du, 2013). Counselors have the responsibility to conduct patriotic education as

part of their role, to guide students when considering how best to serve the country and society through their personal career development (Duan, 2013). The intention is to integrate a student's personal development with his or her social and national development. To achieve this, a counselor may, for example, encourage students to travel to poorer regions and rural areas, where the country is most in need of them and their potential input. The inclusion of moral education in career guidance for Chinese universities plays a role in putting national employment policies into effect (Jin, 2012). Counselors' own occupational characteristics and inter-personal qualities are important in facilitating career guidance. Counselors need to serve as leaders who can provide not only guidance on career development, but also educate students to be patriotic.

The multiple roles undertaken by counselors tend to reduce the time available for conducting career guidance. This is problematic, because effective career guidance requires sufficient time to support students in developing their career goals and linking these to their choices of subjects and study path. This may be achieved through application of the "Five Aspects in One" model, as described later (Hao, 2010).

Teacher-Student Career Guidance

Total involvement and all-around attention

Counselors in Chinese university faculties are not the only persons providing career guidance linked to employment preparation for their students. Currently there is a trend towards building a career guidance system in higher education that also involves subject teachers, students, administrative staff, functional departments, faculty leaders and alumni (Wu, Kang, & Mo, 2004). This system necessitates close cooperation among all parties concerned in order to provide an integrated service. According to Sun (2013), at the beginning of the academic year, the deans of different faculties promote their respective specialized subjects to attract students to study; and subject teachers explain in great detail the content, learning methods

and, where relevant, any relationship between content and future careers. Finally, at the end of the course of study, subject teachers and counselors have input to career guidance, for example by providing employment information, modifying students' résumés, introducing internships, recommending employers and so on. Issues often discussed include how to deal with relationships with the boss and other employees, how to treat job-hopping, and how to better serve employers and contribute to the community.

Subject teachers and counselors pay special attention to those students with poorer academic results, or with insufficient financial resources. The progress of these students is tracked, with the setting up of specialized employment files, and they are provided with relevant employment information, individual counseling, financial assistance, internship recommendations, and employer referrals. Such practical help is effective in guiding students who might otherwise find the processes daunting (Gao & Huang, 2009; Li, 2012).

Students' involvement

A study by Sun (2013) found that students in Chinese universities are encouraged to participate actively in career guidance through two approaches: student societies (found in all universities) and peer guidance. One example of a society related to career guidance is the *Student Career Development Association (SCDA)*. This is a distinctive approach that reflects an emerging trend of involving students themselves in implementing aspects of career guidance. One of the strong features of SCDA is that the whole operation (development, implementation of career activities, connection with society) is independently managed by the students. Within faculties, Student Employment Support Groups help counselors who are responsible for career development by collecting employment information, updating job-search websites, organizing recruitment activities, and assisting in contacting employers. Students involved in employment work do so

voluntarily to serve other students and employers, while at the same time building up their own capabilities and acquiring useful knowledge of career paths. It is a good example of self-education, self-management and self-service by students in higher education institutes in China (Sun 2013).

Services and activities provided by SCDA include: career-related investigations, employment information, testing and evaluation activities to identify students' aptitudes, assisting campus job fairs and recruitment talks, lectures, internal training, competitions, publishing magazines and reports on career and employment matters, holding career activities focusing on career ethics, career planning, career competencies, and interview skills (Sun Yat-sen University, 2009).

Alumni's involvement

Career guidance can also include facilitating a contact between current students and alumni. Many universities invite their alumni back to give introductory sessions to help students find their own career path successfully. It has been suggested by Sutton and Gifford (2011) that university students can gain inspiration from alumni, and can be helped by them to understand better the relevance of academic subject choices to their future employment. Alumni may also help freshmen and other students discover ways of studying hard for academic excellence.

It is also relevant to note that some alumni are potential employers of graduates, since many enterprises operated by the alumni recruit new employees from their alma maters. Chinese graduates, especially those from outstanding universities, have a genuine love for their alma mater, and are therefore willing to look after the interests of later generations of students. The universities always encourage the alumni, through initiatives such as Alumni Recruitment Campaigns (Li, 2013; Wang & Zhang, 2012); and they also raise funds from their alumni and provide the alumni with updates of school development.

Wang (2009) has pointed out that in some universities the functions of a Career Center have merged with the Alumni Affairs Office. This reflects the perceived value of linking alumni resources with the career counseling system.

Training of counselors

In general, universities in the Chinese mainland have not yet established career guidance and counseling as a strong area of study. Nor have they established a unified ongoing professional training system for counselors. For this reason, at present, counselors often lack specialized higher-level training (Lan & Wang, 2010; Sun, Yuen & Hao, 2012). However, the University Career Center now has a responsibility to provide professional training for counselors involved in career guidance every year. This is commonly done through regular training sessions (most of which are in the form of lectures and courses) and through academic exchanges. It is recognized that training for personnel in career guidance should put adequate focus on planning a career path for counselors (Jin & Fan, 2002).

Five Aspects in One Model

As described above, in the Chinese university context it is not unusual to find a combination of potential problems resulting from students' having made bad choices of a study path, restrictions on entry to some courses, counselors' multiple roles, and lack of time for adequate student support. The key feature of the "Five Aspects in One" model is that it is designed to deal *in an integrated manner* with students' major subjects selection, planning for employment, enhancing employability, vocational development, and successful career entry. This integrated approach not only promotes students' personal growth and success, but also lays a foundation for serving the country and society. Specifically, career guidance for university

students should include the following aspects:

- ✧ *Selecting major subjects to study:* It has been found that if students choose their major subjects and course carefully, based on their genuine interest and a desire to focus on a given occupation, it is easier for them to be successful (Hao, 2010). Before entering universities, it is considered that students should have a good understanding of the subjects offered, and their own interest in specific fields. They can then choose study paths according to their interest and aspirations, rather than the opinions of others (parents and teachers), scores on the university entrance examination, or purely on the basis of popularity of a subject. There are implications here for improving the way that universities communicate with feeder secondary schools and colleges. Preparing students for entry to university should be a joint process shared by schools and the institutions.

When students enter university, abundant information should be available to help them make appropriate choices during the initial stage. It is necessary for counselors, subject teachers and faculty leaders to discuss the employment opportunities associated with each major, the effect of changing majors, and the options for double degrees. All preparatory work is the foundation for career development and career success in the future.

- ✧ *Planning for employment.* It is important that students not only have interest and motivation to study specific subjects, but they also need to understand how achievement in these subjects has leverage to better employment and career prospects in particular geographical regions in the future. Counselors have the responsibility to make any poorly motivated students aware of the reality that abandoning their studies and wasting time is never sensible and can negatively affect their future prospects. These students should strive hard to improve their studies or transfer quickly to other subjects, or perhaps enroll for courses that will strengthen their examination skills. As a last resort, they may need to redirect

their career path to another industry.

It must be noted, however, that not all subjects taken by university students should be regarded as purely 'functional' in terms of career path. Often, subjects offered at university are not intended to contribute directly to preparation for a particular field of employment, but rather are designed to enrich and expand the knowledge base and cultural awareness of students thus contributing to their all round development (Hao, 2012). It is relevant to note that researchers have found that studying enrichment subjects at university does not, of itself, result in significant differences in long-term career development. For example, Yue, Wen and Ding (2004) discovered that while there are salary differences among graduates in different industries, there are no significant differences in salary among graduates who have previously studied different subjects.

In order to broaden the whole-person development of students, most universities encourage them to take part in extra-curricular activities, internships, field visits, supported or organized by the university, student associations, professors and alumni. Participation in these activities is a common experience for students, and can stimulate and motivate their interest in vocational and occupational issues (Hamilton, Norton, Fardig, & Harrington, 1977; Rubin, Bommer, & Baldwin, 2002). The general consensus is that extracurricular activities appear to promote students' personal, educational, and vocational development (Holland & Andre, 1987).

- ✧ *Enhancing employability.* Attention has to be paid to increasing students' employability (Hao, 2012). While major subjects studied at university are keys to employability, other qualities in students are also very important. These qualities include reliability, sociability, initiative, trustworthiness, and team-working skills. Career guidance and education must address these issues, as part of helping students actualize self-values and serve the country and society.

In the current employment situation, due partly to the global economic downturn, it may not be possible to get a satisfying job immediately on graduating, and students must be made aware that they may need to first get a job for gaining work experience, and then select a better job at a later stage. This is so-called “get a job before you choose a job”.

Students’ employability is in many ways linked to their whole-person development, as described above through increasing their range of experiences and competencies. Counselors and subject teachers need to cooperate to combine student affairs with academic affairs. Many activities can be organized that help with this aspect, for example, arranging for students to give presentations, taking part in competitions, internships, etc. Career-related activities such as job fairs, mock recruitment exercises, and career talks can also improve students’ employability (Wang, 2007; Yu, 2011). This system reflects a typical Chinese style in that it emphasizes coordination among different organizations and among people at different levels. It corresponds with the new reformation trends in career guidance for Chinese universities (Sun, 2013).

✧ *Vocational development.* The three aspects analyzed above are the foundations for students’ job-searching and vocational development. Ajzen (1991) and Huang (2011) have discussed a theory of ‘planned behavior’ which recognizes that students’ occupational intention and career development are influenced by three related factors: (i) their favorable or unfavorable attitude; (ii) perceived social pressure on them (subjective norms); and (iii) confidence in their own ability to successfully perform in a chosen field. Students’ attitude toward their major subjects, social pressure, and the enhancement of employability all influence students’ occupational choice and vocational development. Sound vocational development relies upon correct choice of major subjects. A good academic record and enhanced employability provide the preparation necessary for entering employment.

✧ *Successful career entry.* According to Hao (2010), in the Chinese cultural context a successful entry to a career is not just about the ultimate personal success of an individual, but is also related to establishing a mind-set in students that a career should also aid the development of society and contribute to the country. Therefore, university students are encouraged to value careers that foster development of the nation. In Chinese universities, it is the responsibility of career guidance and counseling services to instill the broader meaning of ‘career’ into students’ minds as a way of paving the route for smooth career entry.

According to Sun (2013), career counselors in Chinese universities tend to encourage students to travel to poorer regions or rural areas where the country is most in need of new expertise. This is in keeping with national employment policies, and also makes the career guidance curriculum more real and relevant. This type of activity helps to inculcate appropriate career values, view of life, and sense of social responsibility. Students are able to integrate their personal development with their social and national development (Du, 2006; He, 2007).

Culture and Values

The mechanism of ‘teacher-student career guidance’ is rooted in traditional Chinese culture and practices. On one hand, in China, traditional values of participation, solidarity and collaboration are all features that can be recognized in the way in which career guidance and counseling is now delivered. The total involvement of subject teachers, students, administrative staff and alumni in career guidance presents the traditional culture of solidarity and collaboration. Western systems of career guidance and counseling have thus been processed and modified where necessary to match actual cultural differences in China.

Tu and Zhang (2010) point out that career affairs in any university is an area that always needs

cooperation and coordination among various teaching and management departments, and also calls for participation and support of all staff. The distinctive career guidance system in Chinese universities, with its total involvement of all concerned parties, thus reflects a fusion of Western and Eastern values and practices. This total involvement is guaranteed because of the leaders' strong influence. A centralized system has been a characteristic political tradition in China for a long time, and the educational management system in Chinese universities is affected profoundly by this political model (Guo, 2011). Lu (1992) states that under a centralization system, subordinates are controlled in a passive position and expected to follow the orders or instructions from higher authorities.

Career guidance for university students has earned high respect from the entire nation. As stated in reports prepared by top management in the Communist Party (Hu, 2007) and documents from the Ministry of Education (General Office of the Ministry of Education, 2007), all higher education institutes are required to perform the work of career guidance for university students efficiently and effectively. Therefore, leaders in the university and the faculties are required to pay full attention to the implementation of career affairs. Consequently, the distinctive career guidance system with total involvement and all-around attention is established under the university leaders' instruction and encouragement. This is the underpinning cultural foundation of the "Five Aspects in One" model.

Management Systems

The existing two-level management system in the higher education institutes in China is a school-faculty/department-based system, with the faculties (or departments) as the core and deans as the heads. Xiong, He and Guo (2012) indicated that fundamental primary characteristic of this is a transferring of the management focus and power from the university upper level to the faculty level. The core philosophy

of the management reform is decentralization (Wang, C. F., Han, Liu, & Wang, J. L., 2011). It has been proven that this system is beneficial in terms of motivating faculty initiatives, promoting their development and construction of disciplines, enhancing the quality of teaching and communication among different faculties, and between teachers in different disciplines (Bai, 2012; Zhang, 2010). The two-level management system has influenced the career guidance system accordingly, and a system has been formed where career guidance has the faculty as the main body, and is directed by the Career Center.

Counselors are allocated to all faculties to provide career guidance, with university ‘Career Centers’ playing the role of management, coordination and service provision. In terms of professional accountability, counselors in a particular faculty are ultimately supervised by a deputy secretary. Under the direct leadership of deputy secretaries, faculty counselors are fully responsible for all student-related matters in their faculty, including career guidance, patriotic and moral education, file management, student account management, alumni-related issues and services such as financial assistance and personal counseling. There must be accountability at all levels – counselors have to report to deans, deans to the presidents of universities, and the presidents report to the Ministry of Education (Sun, 2013).

Under the two-level management system, the faculties have greater freedom and more resources for conducting career guidance, according to various needs. It can be seen that this method not only reduces the heavy burden on the Career Center, but career guidance can also be developed more flexibly, and can be better targeted for students in different faculties. The main components of this collaboration are: employment tracking, employment procedures, targeting career guidance, and constructing the curriculum (Hao, Sun & Yuen, 2012). This arrangement facilitates the day-to-day implementation of the “Five Aspects in One” model.

An evolving model

In comparison with the traditional systems of career guidance in the West, the “Five Aspects in One” model as implemented in China has not been operating long, and will therefore be subject to further refinement over time. However, it is obvious the model has already been widely implemented in higher education institutes. The model is clearly conducive to increased synergy, with subject teachers and counselors sharing the same target of helping students develop in an all-rounded manner. All personnel are being encouraged to contribute to students’ knowledge, skills and attitudes that facilitate entry into a chose field of employment and ensure ongoing success. It is better to utilize the collective wisdom, efforts and resources from teachers, administrative staff, alumni, counselors, and students themselves rather than depend on input only from individual counselors.

Advantages of this model lie in the involvement of counselors, subject teachers, alumni and students in career guidance. This arrangement results in an efficient approach to solving the problem of insufficient counseling professionals and resources. It ultimately facilitates the overall development of students in the higher education institutes by improving the process of choosing major subjects, enhancing studies, facilitating employability, and overall vocational development. Students’ involvement in SCDA and peer guidance not only enhances their understanding of employment needs and opportunities, but also forces them to think about their own career planning. The model also integrates patriotism education, career guidance, and students’ personal and social development. Students are encouraged to serve their people and the country. When all concerned parties share this common purpose, it strengthens cooperation, enhances mutual understanding, and establishes professional rapport.

Conclusion

Career guidance and counseling within higher education institutes in China started relatively late

compared to the West, and is still evolving. Theory and practice must suit the national conditions of economic and social development, as well as incorporating Chinese cultural traditions and values. The “Five Aspects in One” model now in operation must reflect actual employment opportunities and career development situation for Chinese graduating students.

At present, the biggest difficulty facing the institutes is lack of personnel trained specifically for career guidance. Currently most practitioners have not received in-depth professional training in this area and are also short of varied work experience on which to draw. The existing teams are also mainly of a young age, and with high mobility and turn-over.

Future Directions

Total involvement of all persons concerned is the essential ingredient for effective operation of the “Five Aspects in One” model. However, counselors’ current lack of in-depth training, and some subject teachers’ reluctance to become fully involved, are considered to be obstacles. The priority for the future is to strengthen training and establish professional standards for counselors (Lau & Fung, 2008). It is also necessary to stabilize the counseling team and avoid rapid turn-over of personnel. In addition, there is a need for ongoing evaluation of the model to determine how it may be strengthened over time (Ma & Liu, 2012; Yu, 2011). It is desirable to conduct more research in this field. At present, there are very few studies on the effectiveness of career guidance and counseling in higher education institutes in China. Existing research efforts are scattered thinly in the domains of education, human resource management, and student affairs (e.g. Liu & Liao, 2011; Zhang & Luo, 2011). There is a shortage of specialized research effort focused on identifying ‘best practices’ in career guidance and counseling for university students. More attention also needs to be devoted to preparing appropriate resource materials necessary for addressing topics related to

planning a career, exploring work options, following a path of study, and dealing with problems in working life.

It can be seen from what has been described above that Chinese universities are on the way to developing a sound model for career guidance and counseling. There is a need to refine the theoretical underpinning of career guidance and counseling by drawing further on theories from Western countries but adapting them to Chinese characteristics. Future developments will continue to shape local policies and practices to suit the evolving Chinese employment situation, while at the same time heeding new theories and practices from the West.

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