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Return to Education Investment in China: A Case Comparison Between Rural and Urban Students[1]

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Abstract

Business English was officially approved to be an undergraduate major in China in 2007, which set off throughout China a boom of establishing Business English programs in universities. Students swarm towards schools with Business English programs expecting their high job prospects after graduation. This study is a follow-up study comparing the return to education for two groups of graduates in Business English, one group graduating in 2013 as the first graduates of Business English in Guangzhou, the other group graduating in 2017. Online surveys were conducted to investigate whether urban and rural students differed in terms of starting salaries, job prospects and further study decisions after they completed the same popular program, and how their family backgrounds might have affected their education decisions. The first survey in 2013 confirmed such a gap between rural and urban students in their jobs and careers; but the follow-up study in 2017 found that a change is taking place: rural and urban graduates are hardly distinguishable in their salaries and career decisions. A comparison of the serial studies suggests a higher rate of return for rural graduates in Business English program. Although this is only a case study for one particular program, it provides a window to rethink how opportunities and challenges surface for rural students amid China's education expansion and urbanization movement.

Keywords: return to education investment, business English, rural students, education decision.

Introduction

In China how to make a wise choice of bachelor program is of great importance to every high school graduate, urban or rural students alike. As early as 1998, China's Ministry of Education began college enrollment expansion following the *Action Plan to Promote Education Towards the 21st Century* (Ministry of Education, 1998), one major objective

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being to improve the gross higher education enrollment rate. The latest figure for 2016 was reported to be as high as 42.7% (Ministry of Education, 2017). University education is no longer a dream for high school graduates. However, a new question arises: how to choose a good program to enhance one's competitiveness and secure a bright future?

For many, that answer is Business English. Business English is one of those popular university programs for years because it combines both language skill training and business orientations, having been a course offered by almost every educational institute in China for the past few decades, but as a degree, Business English was only approved by the Ministry of Education in 2007, firstly in 2007 in the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing and then in the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies in Guangzhou and the Shanghai University of International Business and Economics respectively in 2008. After the first three approvals, more and more Business English majors were approved and up till September 2012, sixty-two universities have their business English undergraduate majors set up and began recruiting students; Moreover, more than 2000 educational institutes are offering business English directions for their undergraduate students (Weng & Weng, 2012). Students swarm towards schools with Business English programs expecting their high job prospects after graduation.

The popularity of Business English programs has a lot to do with their great job prospects, or in other words, high return of investment. Take the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies for example, survey results reveal that,

> *students believed the combination of English and business courses produce graduates more competitive than graduates of traditional language majors, and they enjoy a better job hunting success and are more satisfied about their first jobs… even their English test results are 5%-7% higher than those of English-majored students* (Zhu, 2010).

An online survey (Lin, 2015) aiming to find out about Business English graduates' return of education revealed that rural students received statistically lower first job salaries than urban students, also female students' salaries were lower than male students, and urban students had more freedom of choice when it came to further study or work; whereas rural students were more prone to work right after completing degrees. These findings suggested that rural students still faced a gap of fortune when competing with urban students. If this is the case for a popular program, then rural graduates of other less popular programs could have bigger challenges in the job market. Four years later, with the objective of investigating these urban and rural students' return of education in mind, the same survey was conducted again online targeting at the same programs' graduates in 2017. This study focused on exploring the return to education of degree program in Business English education in China. By comparing the two surveys in 2013 and 2017, more can be learned about education return with respect to urban/rural students and the factors that influence their education decisions.

Literature review

Fang and Zhang (2015, p.107) defines return to education as "*the income obtained by an individual or a society that is due to an increase in education*". They point out there are two types of rates of return. A private rate of return to education measures personal monetary income, whereas a social rate of return to education measures social monetary income.

The Mincer model (Mincer, 1974) is widely used to estimate the rate of return to education.

$$\ln wage = \beta_0 + \beta_1 edu + \beta_2 exp + \beta_3 exp^2 + u$$

In this equation *wage* stands for earnings, *edu* for years of schooling, and *exp* means the years of work experience. β_0 is the intercept and β_1, β_2 and β_3 are regression coefficients, and *u* is the residual error. The calculation result of β1 then reveals the level of rate of return. A β_1 of 0.05 would indicate 5% higher income for someone who receives one more year of education. It should be noted that the Mincerian earnings function only requires subjects' years of education/work experience and annual incomes, and not detailed educational cost, which reduces the difficulty on data collection. However, the Mincerian rates of education cannot reflect wage differentials by education levels.

Table 1 summarizes previous studies in China on return to education using the Mincer model. The table tells us that:
(1) from 1988 on, the general trend of rates of education return has been on the rise gradually, except for slight drops reported in 2000 and 2002 (Sun, 2004; Hou, 2004). Liu and Xiao (2009) believed China's rates of return to education is catching up with those of developed countries (Liu & Xiao, 2009), as Pscharopoulos (1985) recorded the gap between the two decreased from 12% in the 60s to 6% in the 70s.
(2) Li and Li' study (1994) suggests each additional level of education generates higher return, which is consistent with empirical findings elsewhere in the world.
(3) Findings by Jamison and Gaag (1987) and Li and Li (1994) indicate rural students' rates of educational investment are much different from those of urban.
(4) There exist distinct gender differences (Lai, 1998; Zhao, 2006; Sun, 2004; Hou, 2004).

There are other methods that can be adopted to examine rural worker's economic returns to schooling (Zhu, 2015). Zhu's study used the local kernel method, a non-parametric method, and reported much lower returns to education among rural migrant workers than estimates for urban residents documented in literature. Also, Zhu found that the increase of returns was mainly driven by the substantial increase of female migrants' rates. These findings confirm returns to education can be affected by rural/urban factor and gender.

Few studies have focuses on higher education issue. Fan and Zhang (2015) used a modified Mincer regression with data from China's General Social Survey and reported a

7th to 6th ranking drop in education returns for engineering education among China's tertiary disciplines. However, their conclusion did not differentiate rural students and urban students.

Table 1: China's *Rates of Return* to Education-*Using the Mincer Model*

Researcher	***Research Region***	***Year of Data***	***Conclusion (Rate of Return, %)***
Jamison & van der Gaag (1987)	Gansu Province	1986	Urban: 4.5 (Male), 5.6 (Female) Rural: 10 (Male), 3.74 (Female)
Li & Li (1994)	nationwide	1988	Urban: 3.8 overall primary school: 2.5 (M) 3.7 (F) junior middle school: 3.378 senior middle school: 3.852 tertiary school: 4.484 Rural: 2.5
Wei et al. (1999)	6 provinces	1991	Rural: 4.84 3.96(Male), 3.94 (Female)
Lai (1998)	11 provinces	1995	Urban: 5.73 5.14(Male), 5.99 (Female)
Zhao (2006)		1996	Rural: 6.3 6.9(Male), 4.0 (Female)
Sun (2004)		2000	Rural: 5.13 4.15(Male), 3.89 (Female)
Hou (2004)		2002	Rural: 3.66 3.86(Male), 2.70 (Female)
A special team working for the State Council (2007)		2004	Rural: 7.5 7.1(Male), 9.5 (Female)

Sources: Lu (2004), Liu & Xiao (2009)

Methodology

Previous studies on returns to education show the factors of rural/urban family background as well as gender make a difference. Compared with the literature's macro perspective, this study adopts a microeconomic perspective, by comparing data and information about salaries, family finance and cost of study in universities. The basic research questions concern the monetary income and education cost of rural/urban students: Do students' hometowns (from rural or urban areas) affect their education returns? Does gender or family background also play a role in their education decisions?

To find out the answers to such questions, in 2017 a survey was launched on the most

popular Chinese poll/survey website www.sojump.com and obtained 58 valid responses, accounting for about 10% of the total graduates of the researched institute. This proportion matched the 65 responses (11.4% of total graduates) in my 2013 survey (Lin, 2015). The questionnaire contains questions on hometown, total years of education, first-month salary, personal and family income, tuition loan or subsidy, direct/indirect cost of tuition etc. Considering income is a sensitive question and respondents may give false answers. Sociolinguist Trudgill's (1974) income collection method of categorizing and recoding income is adopted.

The main variable, first-month salary, is considered more appropriate than annual income because for fresh graduates, they begin their first jobs in different months and could have annual income of varied amount from full-time or part-time jobs. Their starting salaries is scaled into categories by RMB1,000, for example, code "1" indicating a pay below 2,000 yuan, code "2" for a pay between 2,000 to 3,000 yuan, onwards until code "8" for all payment over 8000 yuan. These ordinal data are then analyzed with non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests and other descriptive tests using SPSS 18.0, to investigate the following three hypotheses related with the research questions.

1. H_{1a}: There is a difference in starting salaries between male and female graduates.
2. H_{2a}: There is a difference in starting salaries between urban and rural graduates.
3. H_{3a}: There is a difference in choosing postgraduate studies or work between rural and urban students.

Results and Discussion

General description

Table 2: *Survey Respondents*

	Home-town	*%*	***gender***	*%*	***post-grad study or work***	*%*
2013 B.E. graduates	49 urban	75%	17 males	26%	17 study	26%
	16 rural	25%	48 females	74%	48 work	74%
2017 B.E. graduates	19 urban	83%	2 males	9%	9 study	39%
(regular program)	4 rural	17%	21 females	91%	14 work	61%
2017 B.E. graduates	27 urban	77%	5 males	14%	21 study	62%
(dual degree program)	8 rural	23%	30 females	86%	13 work	38%

Note: "B.E." stands for Business English.

In 2017, there were two sub-groups of graduates, the regular program students and the dual degree program ones. The dual degree program was launched back in 2011 as an option for those students who wished to obtain a second degree during their four years of bachelor study. To be qualified for dual degree application a candidate's GPA should rank among the top 25% in their first degree program. The two groups of graduates in 2017 can serve as two controlled groups for comparison while the 2017 graduates combined can be compared with 2013 graduates.

Table 2 gives the composites of hometowns/places of upbringing, gender and after-graduation choice for these students. Urban students have increased to almost four times of rural students. The male/female ratio have dropped to 1:10. This may seem imbalanced at first glance, but it is a normal and representative percentage mix in a foreign language school in China where traditionally girl students outnumber boys. As for post-grad study or work, today more students opt for postgraduate study, 39% (2017) compared with 26% (2014) for regular program, while as high as 62% for the dual-degree program.

Table 3: ***Summary of Years of Education***

	14 yrs	***15yrs***	***16 yrs***	***17 yrs***	***18 yrs***	***More than18 yrs***
2013 graduates	6 cases	2 cases	40 cases	8 cases	5 cases	4 cases
	9.2%	3.1%	61.5%	12.3%	7.7%	6.2%
2017 graduates	0	2 cases	16 cases	0	1 case	4 cases
(regular program)	0%	8.7%	69.5%	0%	4.3%	17.4%
2017 graduates (dual	0	1 case	23 cases	3 cases	3 cases	5 cases
degree program)	0%	2.9%	65.7%	8.6%	8.6%	14.3%

The spectrum of education years in Table 3 reflects complex education backgrounds of students, as it normally takes 16 years to complete a bachelor degree after primary and secondary education in China. Nevertheless, "16" still takes the largest portion in education years. Reasons for the other answers could be late school entry in rural areas (esp. girls), extra years to take college entrance exam again, early school entry in some regions, or special fast-track approval cases.

Results of the three research hypotheses

Table 4: ***Mann-Whitney U Test Results for 2013 Survey***

	Grouping Variable	***Mean***	***Mean Rank***	***U.***	***Wilco-xon***	***Z.***	***Sig.***
Hypothesis 1	male	4.07	33.43	113	708	-2.956	0.003**
(salary diff.)	female	2.91	20.82				
Hypothesis 2	urban	3.61	28.26	123.5	243.5	-2.875	0.004**
(salary diff.)	rural	2.47	16.23				
Hypothesis 3	urban	1.67[a]	30.89	288.5	1513.5	-2.07	0.038*
(post-grad diff.)	rural	1.94[a]	39.47				

Notes:

a. Value "1" stands for choosing post-graduate study and Value "2" stands for work after graduation.

The first hypothesis-gender differences

The Mann-Whitney test in Table 4 showed that in 2013 female students' average salary was statistically (p=0.003) lower than that of male students, their mean differences being 1,100 yuan. This result led one to infer the job market favored male graduates over female ones, but the 2017 survey results suggest gender differences no longer play a role in Business English majors' job prospects (p=0.607 in Table 5, p=0.121 in Table 6).

Table 5: ***Mann-Whitney U Test Results for 2017 Survey (regular program)***

	Grouping Variable	***Mean***	***Mean Rank***	***U.***	***W.***	***Z.***	***Sig.***
Hypothesis 1 (salary diff.)	male	6.0	8.25	8.5	74.5	-0.514	0.607
	female	4.91	6.77				
Hypothesis 2 (salary diff.)	urban	5.09	6.82	9	75	-0.412	0.681
	rural	5.0	8.0				
Hypothesis 3 (post-grad diff.)	urban	1.63[a]	12.26	33	43	-0.479	0.632
	rural	1.5[a]	10.75				

Note: Value "1" stands for choosing post-graduate study and value "2" stands for work after graduation.

Table 6: ***Mann-Whitney U Test Results for 2017 Survey (dual degree program)***

	Grouping Variable	***Mean***	***Mean Rank***	***U.***	***W.***	***Z.***	***Sig.***
Hypothesis 1 (salary diff.)	male	6.5	12.5	4	95	-1.552	0.121
	female	4.62	7.31				
Hypothesis 2 (salary diff.)	urban	4.3	6.5	10	65	-1.866	0.062
	rural	6.0	11				
Hypothesis 3 (post-grad diff.)	urban	1.27[a]	15.58	54	405	-2.411	0.016[*]
	rural	1.75[a]	23.75				

Note: Value "1" stands for choosing post-graduate study and value "2" stands for work after graduation.

The second hypothesis-salary differences

From tables 4, 5 and 6 we can see that back in 2013 urban students and rural students had different salaries after graduation. In Figure 1 it can be observed that for 2013 students in the low salary category from 2,000 yuan to 3,000 yuan, 9 out of 15 samples were students from the countryside, in fact four of them were recipients of student loans. Their average salary was 2,460 yuan and the highest-salaried student was only getting 4,000 yuan. In that year the average starting salary for Guangzhou was 4,013yuan, according to *The Graduates' Job Market Analysis* released by Zhilian Recrutiment (Zhilian Recruitment, 2013). Although they had obtained a bachelor degree in a promising major, their salaries were so low that they would struggle to make ends meet for a long time. In addition, some of them might need to pay back the tuition loan. However, this situation changed in 2017 when no rural graduates took jobs paid under 4,000 yuan. The majority of 2017 surveyed urban graduates were paid about 4,000 to 5,000 yuan, fitting the 4,322 yuan average

starting salary for fresh graduates of Guangzhou (Nanfang Job Market, 2016).

The decrease in the income gaps between urban and rural students (Figure 1) shows a homogeneity trend in graduates' job market. In the past the rate of education return for rural students were not high/sufficient, leaving more room for improvement. Nowadays this is no longer the case, rural graduates have caught up with urban graduates in terms of starting pay.

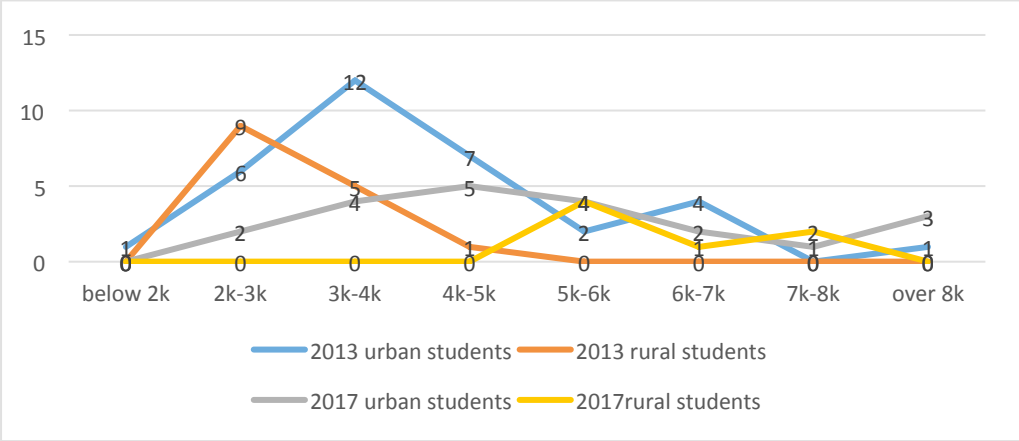


Figure 1: *First-month Salary Survey*

Note: Students who choose to continue to study did not need to provide their first-month salaries.

The third hypothesis-study or work

As seen in tables 5 and 6, although statistically there are no salary difference for 2017 graduates' in gender or hometowns, and no post-grad study difference for 2017 regular B.E. program, the dual degree program students have different choices regarding whether to work or to study, (i.e. continue to invest in education) after graduation, depending on whether they come from city or countryside. While back in 2013 the test showed this decision were highly related with where the student came from.

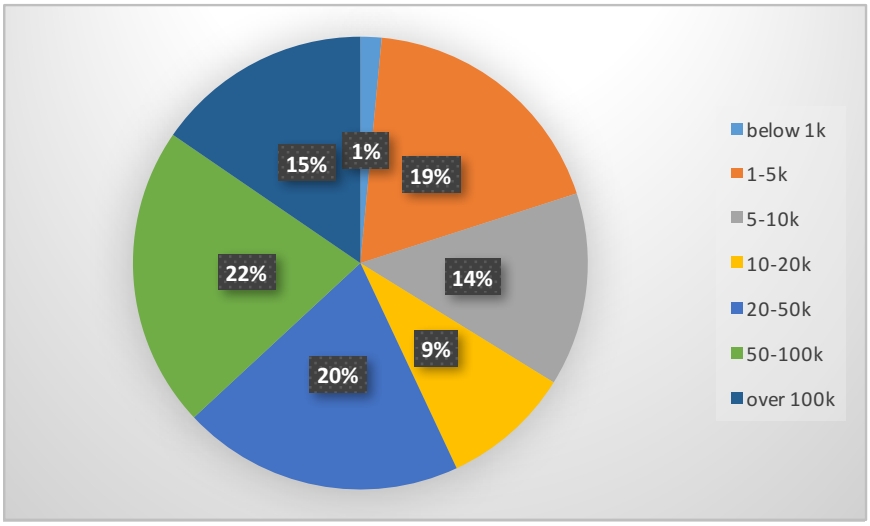
Compared with their urban counterparts, rural students used to start work immediately after graduation. Taking a job is at the same time giving up full-time further study which can be a way to enhance one's competitiveness for brighter prospects. Rural students in the past may have little freedom of choice but to work as early as possible to help relieve the family financial burden. In the 2017 survey a correlation is exhibited between rural background and job-over-study choices in the dual-degree program (sig. difference for hypothesis 3 in Table 6, p=0.016), but not in the regular program (no sig. difference for hypothesis 3 in table 5, p=0.603). This mixed results indicate that change is taking place and urban and rural students are not easily distinguishable in their future life choices. It seems rural students now have more support to invest in their own education.

Discussion on educational cost and benefit

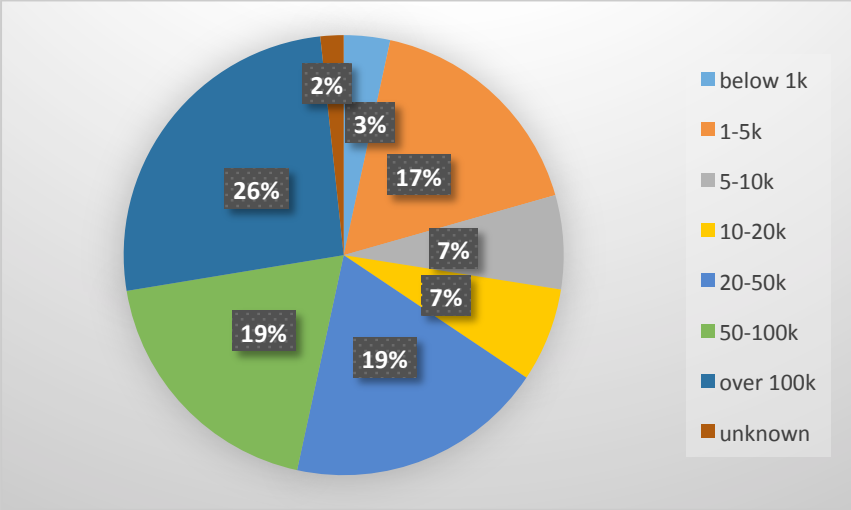
This study also investigates students' direct and indirect cost for tertiary study. Direct

cost consists of the family's payment of tuition fee, accommodation fee, transportation fee and miscellaneous living expenses, no matter where the student comes from. Tuition fee and accommodation fee are fixed at 24,000 yuan for four years. Students' payment for expenses in clothes, stationary, life necessities, even certificate fees, stay more or less at the same level. The significant increase is in the food payment range which rises from 300-500 yuan to 500-800 yuan per month. A rough calculation for an average student to complete the degree would take 50,100-68,900 yuan in 2013 (12,525-17,225 yuan per year), in 2017 he needed to spend 58,100-83,300 yuan (14,525-20,825 yuan per year).

How do the respondents pay for these costs? The answer is most students are supported by their families, both urban and rural. In 2013 90% students said their cost were paid by their own families, the other 10%'s money came from (1) borrowing from relatives, (2) bank loans, (3) part-time jobs or (4) combination of the above means. In 2017 95% students are financially supported by families, and only 5% paid fees with help from the above four additional financial resources. The university's scholarship/study aid or loan can be as high as 18,000 yuan in four years. In 2013 only 11% students received such financial aid from school, but now in 2017 37% students answered they received various amount of study aid. This percentage increase shows a good progress in study aid coverage expansion but at the same time we can see these money is far from enough to cover college fees. In other words, the miscellaneous financial resources provided by the government or private organizations can hardly meet the needs and students still have to rely on family to finish college study. From the figures of family income below, in 2013 this was quite a burden because 34% families' per capita income was less than 10,000 yuan (34%=1%+19%+14%), but somehow this is relieved in 2017 because that figure dropped to 27% families (27%=3%+17%+7%).

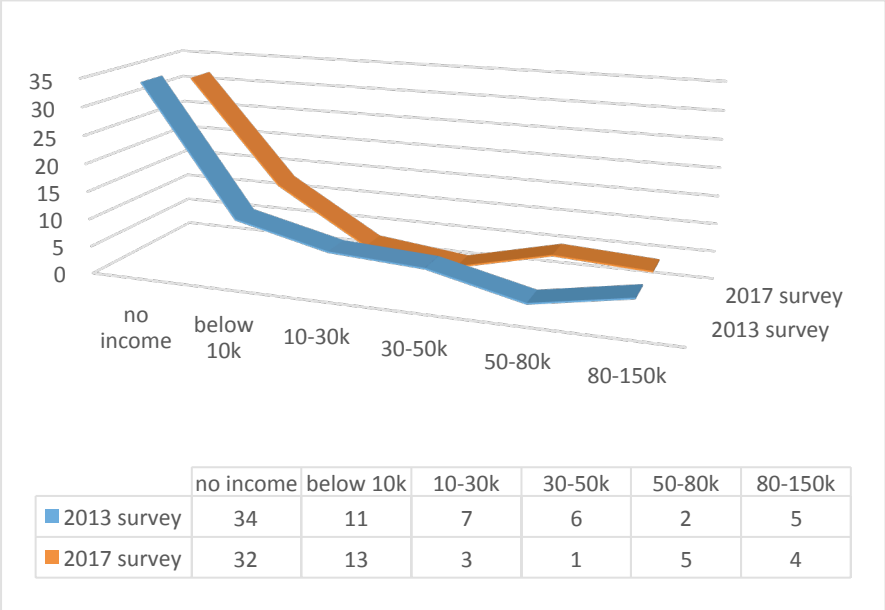


Graph 1: ***Family Income Per Capita in 2013 Survey***



Graph 2: ***Family Income Per Capita in 2017 Survey***

The opportunity cost, which means the possible income that has been given up because time is spent on schooling rather than working, is not directly dealt with in this paper because of difficulty in quantifying the cost. From Table 2 we see a sharp increase of students determined to continue study, so more students believe further education is worthwhile.



	no income	below 10k	10-30k	30-50k	50-80k	80-150k
2013 survey	34	11	7	6	2	5
2017 survey	32	13	3	1	5	4

Figure 2: ***Personal Annual Income in 2013 and 2017 Surveys***

Note: Even a post-grad-to-be respondent may have income and s/he will answer this question about personal annual income. These students account for most of the "no income" answer, though.

Regarding return after tertiary study, from Figure 2 the surveyed personal income, we can see an overall trend of increase in annual income for B.E. graduates. In 2013, the Mann-Whitney U test confirmed an association between salary and where the student comes from. Rural graduates' pay was 1,100 yuan lower than urban graduates. This made

one doubt whether rural students could ever catch up with city counterparts no matter how. However, in 2017 survey, the hypothesis of H_{2a} that rural and urban students have different starting pay cannot be verified, plus the personal income increase trend, we can infer a positive change of education return to the benefit of rural students.

There is, however, a worrisome finding that both 2013 and 2017 rural graduates' work places are megacities like Guangzhou, Beijing, Shenzhen. Several graduates went to first-tier cities like Nanjing, Hangzhou, Foshan and Zhongshan, but none of them chose to go back to countryside hometowns.

Conclusion

In this study we have found a changing trend for rural students' education return. Five years ago, significantly lower pay was given to rural and girl students, significantly more rural students chose work instead of further study. However, in the 2017 survey results there were no statistic differences between rural and city students, girl and boy students. Considering the greater gap rural students have leapt, rural students have a greater rate of education return than urban students.

What's noteworthy is the mixed result for hypothesis three about study or work, somehow rural students may still be restricted by family burden but this is an on-going change, we need more data in the future to support a diminishing gap between rural and urban family backgrounds.

The general cost of education remains stable in tuition fee, transportation fee and miscellaneous expenses, the only rise being food expenses. The majority of students who complete their college education are financed by families. Regarding education investment decision, college graduates have relatively high rate of education return and tertiary education is still vital for students, both rural and urban, to secure a good pay. Studying English is good choice in students' eyes. Professor Weiguo Zhang (Zhao, Liu & Zhang, 2012) in China's Third Forum on Language Economics presented that,

> *"English ability enjoys a high rate of return in China. When all other conditions are the same, an employee with a grasp of English can have an income 48.5% higher than someone who does not know English. Even for someone with just moderate English level, there can be an 8.5% increase in salary. In conclusion, we should still aim at improving English education, despite the great difficulty".*

Although our study did not have such a figure, in this study we can infer a higher rate of return for rural graduates, thus making Business English a good program to choose for rural students.

Finally, China's urbanization movement is also reflected in rural graduates' choice of work and residence, as no rural graduate returns hometown or goes to cities other than megacities or first-tier cities. They represent how rural labor is moving to cities, a signal of urbanization. However, this top quality labor's refusal to go to medium or small sized

cities, not to mention rural regions, is showing that China is facing a real challenge of properly developing medium and small sized cities and achieving real urbanization.

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