

A Study on University Students' Willingness for Local Employment and Its Influencing Factors from the Perspective of University-City Integration

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Abstract: In the context of the deepening integration of higher education and urban development, university-city integration has emerged as a core pathway for promoting regional talent optimization and innovation enhancement. Based on the perspective of university-city integration, this study systematically analyzes the theoretical foundations, current characteristics, and influencing factors of university students' willingness to pursue local employment, constructing a three-dimensional analytical framework encompassing "university - city - individual." The findings reveal that university-city integration influences students' employment decisions through dual mechanisms of resource integration and matching, as well as environmental shaping and guidance. Moreover, employment willingness exhibits structural differences and dynamic evolutionary characteristics among students from different types of universities and disciplinary backgrounds. Key variables influencing employment willingness include the alignment between academic programs and industrial demands, urban economic and cultural environments, personal career planning, and family support. This study provides academic support for deepening theoretical development and advancing practical implementation of university-city integration.

Keywords: university-city integration; willingness for local employment; influencing factors; theoretical relevance; resource integration

Introduction

With the deepening development of the knowledge-based economy era, the integration between universities and cities has increasingly become a core driving force for promoting regional innovation and sustainable development. University-city integration not only concerns the alignment of educational resources with urban needs but also directly influences the employment flow of university students and the regional talent structure. In this context, exploring the formation mechanisms and influencing factors of university students' willingness for local employment holds significant theoretical value and practical necessity. Theoretically, existing research predominantly focuses on macro-level policies or single-dimensional analyses, lacking systematic interpretation of the intrinsic relationship between university-city integration and employment willingness. Practically, clarifying the mechanisms of interaction between the two is crucial for addressing the mismatch between talent supply and demand and for facilitating the synergistic realization of the educational mission of universities and the developmental goals of cities. This study aims to construct a multidimensional theoretical framework, integrating diverse models of university-city integration and the dynamic characteristics of employment willingness, thereby revealing their inherent logic and providing new analytical perspectives and theoretical support for research in related fields.

1. Theoretical Relevance between University-City Integration and University Students' Willingness for Local Employment

1.1 The Connotation and Characteristics of University-City Integration

1.1.1 Definition of University-City Integration

University-city integration is a deeply embedded process involving resources, functions, and spatial structures between higher education institutions and their host cities. Its essence lies in constructing a

symbiotic relationship between the two major social systems of universities and cities, thereby achieving the bidirectional spillover and organic integration of knowledge, talent, and culture. This process transcends mere physical proximity, emphasizing the breaking down of organizational boundaries to form a high degree of coupling between knowledge innovation and regional development needs, ultimately evolving into a functionally complementary regional innovation community^[1].

1.1.2 Main Patterns of University-City Integration

University-city integration manifests diverse pathways in practice. The knowledge-driven model relies on research-oriented universities, promoting the transformation of cutting-edge scientific and technological achievements through the joint establishment of R&D platforms, thereby serving the enhancement of urban industrial capabilities. The talent co-cultivation model emphasizes the collaboration between application-oriented universities and local industries, aiming for precise alignment between human capital supply and market demand through customized training and resource sharing. The cultural immersion model leverages the cultural influence of universities, shaping the city's innovative atmosphere and local identity by opening academic resources and cultural activities to the public.

1.2 Theoretical Interpretation of University Students' Willingness for Local Employment

1.2.1 Relevant Theoretical Foundations of Employment Willingness

The formation mechanism of university students' employment willingness can be analyzed through a multidimensional theoretical framework. The Theory of Planned Behavior posits that behavioral attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control exert a core influence on decision-making intention. The Social Cognitive Career Theory elucidates how personal background and learning experiences ultimately guide career choices through the mediation of self-efficacy and outcome expectations. In contrast, Human Capital Theory emphasizes the role of skill stock, formed through educational investment, in shaping employment expectations, while Labor Market Segmentation Theory points out the objective constraints imposed by regional market characteristics on the choice set from a structural perspective.

1.2.2 The Distinctiveness of University Students' Willingness for Local Employment

University students' willingness for local employment exhibits specific dimensions distinct from general employment decisions. Its core lies in a marked geographical preference, which integrates emotional attachment to the city where they study or their hometown, dependence on social networks, and adaptability to the local lifestyle. Information advantage constitutes a key characteristic; students' close-range perception of the local industrial ecosystem and potential employers effectively reduces their job search costs and decision-making uncertainty. Furthermore, this willingness is often tightly interwoven with significant plans within the individual's life cycle, such as family care responsibilities and long-term settlement considerations, presenting a higher degree of decision-making complexity.

1.3 The Mechanism of University-City Integration's Influence on University Students' Willingness for Local Employment

1.3.1 Resource Integration and Matching Mechanism

University-city integration directly influences employment willingness by constructing a systemic resource network. At the human capital level, the university-enterprise collaborative training model shapes students' knowledge structures to be more aligned with the technological demands of local industries, thereby enhancing their competitiveness for local employment. The integration of information channels provides students with precise industry trends and career opportunities, which reduces information asymmetry in the job market. The accumulation of social capital is also crucial, as the relational networks students build through participation in local projects become an important avenue for accessing implicit employment resources^[2].

1.3.2 Environmental Shaping and Guiding Mechanism

University-city integration indirectly guides employment decisions by shaping both the macro and micro environments. The deepening of cultural identity allows students to develop a spiritual sense of belonging to the city, and this sense of place transforms into an emotional driving force for staying and developing locally. The expansion of professional imagination enables students to form more concrete and positive expectations regarding local career development paths, thereby stimulating their

motivation to remain. The perception of the macro environment is equally critical, as a city image characterized by vibrant innovation and continuously improving quality of life strengthens students' stable and positive assessment of their future development.

2. Status of University Students' Willingness for Local Employment under the Background of University-City Integration

2.1 Differences in Local Employment Willingness among Students from Different Types of Universities

2.1.1 The Case of Comprehensive Universities

Students from comprehensive universities exhibit significantly diverse characteristics in their willingness for local employment. With their complete disciplinary systems and broad-based educational objectives, graduates from this type of institution possess a relatively wide range of employment options. Within the process of university-city integration, comprehensive universities leverage their interdisciplinary advantages to establish multi-dimensional connections with the city's socio-economic system. Graduates in liberal arts tend to choose local sectors such as education, cultural communication, and public services, while science and engineering graduates are more inclined to enter local research institutions and high-tech enterprises. Students generally possess a comprehensive understanding of the local job market, and their employment decisions are often based on a holistic consideration of the city's overall development level and their personal career growth prospects. The strength of their willingness to develop locally shows a positive correlation with the city's tier and industrial diversity.

2.1.2 The Case of Specialized Institutions

Students from specialized institutions exhibit a higher degree of concentration and industry dependence in their willingness for local employment. These institutions have clearly defined talent development objectives, with their academic program structures highly aligned with specific industries. Under the context of university-city integration, specialized institutions typically establish deep collaborative relationships with local enterprises in their corresponding sectors, forming stable talent supply channels. For instance, a significant number of graduates from engineering institutions enter the local manufacturing and engineering technology fields, while graduates from finance and economics institutions primarily flow into local financial organizations. Students' considerations regarding local employment focus more on the degree of industry clustering and professional development prospects. Their willingness for local employment is more directly and significantly influenced by the development status of specific local industries, demonstrating a strong "discipline-industry" linkage characteristic^[3].

2.2 Characteristics of Local Employment Willingness Among University Students from Different Disciplines and Majors

2.2.1 Students in Science and Engineering Majors

The willingness for local employment among students in science and engineering majors is highly correlated with the regional industrial and technological structure. Talent cultivation in these majors possesses a clear application-oriented focus, where the knowledge and skills acquired directly correspond to the developmental needs of local industries. Within the university-city integration environment, science and engineering students gain early exposure to the technological ecosystem and innovation demands of local enterprises through avenues such as laboratory collaborations and project research and development. When making employment choices, they place greater emphasis on the technological level, R&D investment, and equipment conditions of local industrial clusters, with higher requirements for job-specialization alignment and technological innovation platforms. The strength of their willingness for local employment shows a significant positive correlation with indicators such as the agglomeration level of the city's high-tech industries and the quality of its scientific research infrastructure, and their employment stability is relatively prominent.

2.2.2 Students in Liberal Arts Majors

The willingness for local employment among students in liberal arts majors exhibits greater flexibility and adaptability. Compared to their science and engineering counterparts, the application

boundaries of the knowledge and skills acquired in liberal arts are broader, leading to a wider yet more dispersed range of employment options. From the perspective of university-city integration, the employment willingness of liberal arts students is more significantly influenced by factors such as the city's cultural atmosphere, the development level of social organizations, and the growth of the modern service sector. Their consideration of the local job market encompasses not only traditional job-specialization alignment but also soft environmental factors, including the city's cultural vitality, social organizational networks, and developmental inclusivity. Their employment fields are distributed quite broadly, covering areas such as cultural and creative industries, media, and human resource management, resulting in a more complex and multifaceted set of trade-off factors during their employment decision-making process.

2.3 The Dynamic Evolution of University Students' Willingness for Local Employment

2.3.1 Changing Trends Across Different University Stages

University students' willingness for local employment exhibits distinct phased evolutionary characteristics throughout their academic journey. In the initial stage of enrollment, students' understanding of the local job market is relatively vague, and their choice of employment location carries significant uncertainty. As specialized study deepens and familiarity with the city increases, a preliminary career orientation and geographical preference begin to form during the middle stage. By the senior year, through specialized internships and social practice, students develop a more concrete understanding of the local employment environment and career development pathways, leading their employment willingness to become more rational and stabilized. This evolutionary process reflects the complete psychological development trajectory of students, moving from environmental adaptation and professional identity to career decision-making, demonstrating the cumulative and gradual nature of the formation of employment willingness^[4].

2.3.2 Fluctuations Influenced by External Factors

University students' willingness for local employment is subject to fluctuations due to the dynamic influence of multiple external factors. Changes in the macroeconomic environment directly affect students' employment confidence and geographical choices by altering the supply-demand relationship in the job market. Technological transformations within industries drive industrial restructuring, which in turn modifies the employment expectations and geographical preferences of students from different majors. Furthermore, information transmission and experience sharing within social networks continuously reshape students' perception and evaluation of local employment opportunities. These external factors collectively constitute a dynamic influence system, rendering employment willingness not a static state but rather a continuous decision-making process that constantly adjusts in response to changes in the internal and external environment. This process demonstrates clear characteristics of adaptability and plasticity.

3. Investigation into Key Factors Influencing University Students' Willingness for Local Employment

3.1 University-Related Factors

3.1.1 Program Design and Curriculum System

Program design and curriculum systems constitute the fundamental academic framework influencing university students' willingness for local employment. When a university's program structure, talent development specifications, and course content achieve intrinsic alignment with the industrial characteristics, technological structure, and human capital demands of its host city, the local employment compatibility and attractiveness of its graduates are significantly enhanced. This alignment manifests in several ways: incorporating applied knowledge reflective of local industrial features into course modules; linking experimental teaching components with the production processes or technical challenges of local enterprises; and basing graduation project topics on real-world scenarios arising from regional development.

This deep integration effectively reduces the structural gap between students' knowledge and skills and job requirements, thereby lowering their adaptation costs for local employment. From the perspective of Human Capital Theory, this highly targeted investment in human capital raises students' expectations of marginal productivity within the local labor market, consequently strengthening their

willingness to stay. Conversely, if there is a significant misalignment between academic program design and regional economic characteristics, it can lead to structural surplus or shortage in talent cultivation, undermining graduates' comparative advantage in the local job market^[5].

3.1.2 Career Guidance and Service Quality

The degree of specialization and precision in a university's career guidance and services constitutes a key intervening variable shaping students' local employment decisions. A career support system that goes beyond traditional administrative functions and is deeply embedded within the university-city integration network can effectively guide students' geographical employment flow. Its efficacy is reflected in establishing a dynamic database that integrates the demands of local employers, providing career planning consultations based on the characteristics of local industries, and building high-quality platforms—such as internships, practical experiences, and campus recruitment events—that connect students with local employers.

This type of service enhances the accessibility and success rate of local employment by reducing information asymmetry and transaction costs during the job search process. At a deeper level, professional career guidance can lead students to re-evaluate and recognize potential local career development opportunities. It may revise their initial career expectations, which were formed based on incomplete information, fostering more positive and realistic outcome expectations regarding local career paths. The effective functioning of this service system relies on the breadth of its connections and the depth of its interaction with the local industrial ecosystem^[6].

3.2 Urban Factors

3.2.1 Urban Economic Development Level and Industrial Structure

The macroeconomic situation and industrial framework of a city constitute the most critical external driving force behind university students' willingness for local employment. A city's economy, characterized by sustained growth momentum, a diversified industrial structure, and continuous ascension up the value chain, can consistently generate high-quality employment opportunities that are attractive to high-caliber talent. Graduates generally tend to favor cities that can offer positions aligned with their professional backgrounds, providing clear career progression pathways and stable income expectations.

The technological intensity and innovative vitality of a city's leading industries directly determine its capacity to absorb graduates from specific professional fields and the corresponding salary levels it can offer. A city dominated by high-tech industries and knowledge-intensive services, and one that possesses several industrial clusters with regional or even global competitiveness, can generate a powerful talent magnet effect. Furthermore, economic resilience and diversity help mitigate the impact of cyclical fluctuations in specific sectors on the job market, providing graduates with more stable long-term career development prospects, thereby enhancing their sense of security and belonging regarding local employment.

3.2.2 Urban Culture and Living Environment

The cultural attributes and overall living environment of a city indirectly yet enduringly influence university students' willingness to stay by shaping their lived experience and psychological identification. An urban environment characterized by an open and inclusive character, abundant cultural facilities, active social interaction, and high-quality educational and medical resources can significantly enhance residents' sense of happiness and life satisfaction. For the university student demographic, they value not only career development prospects but also their quality of life outside of work. A favorable natural ecological environment, a convenient public transportation system, diverse cultural and recreational activities, and an inclusive social atmosphere collectively constitute what is termed "urban soft power."

This soft power can satisfy graduates' diverse aspirations for "a good life," thereby generating strong emotional attachment. From the perspective of Place Identity Theory, when an individual develops emotional attachment and a sense of identification with a particular geographical space, the psychological cost of relocation increases. Consequently, a superior living environment and cultural atmosphere enhance the city's overall attractiveness through non-economic utility compensation, serving as a significant counterweight to offset the economic or salary advantages offered by other regions.

3.3 Individual and Family Factors

3.3.1 Personal Career Planning and Development Expectations

An individual university student's career anchor and development expectations serve as the endogenous basis for their decision-making regarding employment location. An individual's professional values, achievement motivation, risk preference, and definition of work-life balance collectively constitute the psychological framework for their career decisions. Graduates with an innovation-oriented career anchor may show a stronger inclination towards cities with vibrant innovation ecosystems that offer opportunities to engage in cutting-edge projects, whereas individuals pursuing secure and stable career paths may place greater emphasis on the long-term employment security provided by local, traditionally dominant industries. Their assessment of future development prospects extends beyond starting salary to encompass opportunities for skill enhancement, the transparency of career advancement pathways, and the long-term potential for human capital appreciation.

According to Social Cognitive Career Theory, an individual's self-efficacy regarding achieving their career goals in a specific location (i.e., the belief that they can meet the professional requirements of that place) and their outcome expectations (i.e., the belief that employment there will yield the desired rewards) are key psychological mechanisms driving their employment willingness. These personal-level cognitions and expectations, interacting with the external opportunity structures provided by universities and cities, ultimately shape their preference for employment location.

3.3.2 Family Expectations and Support

The family, as a crucial primary social group, deeply embeds its expectations, resources, and support systems into university students' employment decision-making processes. A family's socioeconomic status, its possessed social capital, and its values regarding different professions and locations constitute the micro-social context for a student's decision. Family members may express preferences for employment location based on considerations for their child's well-being, geographical distance (such as factors related to being an only child), and the overall interests of the family unit. This subjective norm exerts influence through emotional bonds.

Simultaneously, the financial support a family can provide (such as assistance with a down payment for housing or living subsidies) and its social capital (such as local interpersonal networks) can significantly reduce the economic pressure and social integration difficulties a graduate faces when entering the workforce in a specific city, thereby altering the relative costs and benefits of choosing different locations. This form of support, based on family resources, constitutes a crucial aspect of perceived behavioral control. Therefore, a university student's willingness for local employment is often not the result of pure individual rational calculation, but rather an outcome of weighing, negotiating, and even compromising between individual career aspirations and family system factors. This reflects the socially embedded nature of employment decision-making.

Conclusion

This study systematically investigates the theoretical foundations, current manifestations, and influencing factors of university students' willingness for local employment from the perspective of university-city integration, leading to the following conclusions: University-city integration exerts a significant influence on employment willingness through the dual pathways of resource integration and matching, as well as environmental shaping and guidance. Structural differences in employment orientation exist among students from different types of universities and disciplinary backgrounds, and their decision-making process exhibits dynamic evolutionary characteristics. The alignment between academic program design and industrial demand, the urban economic and cultural environment, individual career anchors, and family support constitute the core factors influencing employment willingness. Future research could further focus on the dynamic evolutionary mechanisms of university-city integration, explore the differentiated manifestations of employment willingness under various regional models, and examine how new forms of university-city relationships in the digital era reshape talent mobility, thereby deepening the theoretical framework and expanding practical application scenarios.

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