

Academic Aspirations or Societal Realities: Motivation for Continuing Pursuing Higher Education among Chinese Undergraduates

Huiming Zeng^{1,a,*}

¹*Institution of Education, University College London, London, United Kingdom*

a. huiming.zeng.21@ucl.ac.uk

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Higher education is currently undergoing an unprecedented global expansion resulting in a rising number of individuals with identical degrees entering the labour market. More people are getting advanced degrees to stay competitive, but this has led to credential inflation, which devalues degrees. In China, this issue has been particularly pronounced based on its massive population, with students persisting in the pursuit of advanced degrees despite recognizing the decreasing worth of their degrees. This article delves into the motivations behind this persistence in higher education among Chinese undergraduates and examines the social implications of credential inflation on career opportunities. The study identifies three primary motivations guiding Chinese undergraduates: academic, economic, and family motivations. Notably, economic incentives dominate, driving the majority of students to pursue further education. However, these motivations are often interconnected and play a pivotal role in shaping individuals' decisions about their academic pursuits. The study concludes by offering recommendations for stakeholders in the higher education system, emphasizing the need to prioritize skills over credentials for employers, establish clear learning objectives and diverse curricula for educational institutions, encourage self-reflection among students, and create a supportive environment for parents.

Keywords: higher education, credential inflation, motivation, employability, credentialism

1. Introduction

In the past thirty years, an increasing number of countries have expanded access to higher education, making it a central concern for governments worldwide [1]. This expansion has resulted in a surplus of graduates entering the labor market, leading to intense competition for a relatively stable supply of jobs. Consequently, the overabundance of degree holders has decreased the scarcity of having a degree. This phenomenon, known as credential inflation, has made possessing a degree a prerequisite for entering the workforce, but paradoxically, it has also diminished the value of the credential itself [2]. In China, a country with a large and continuously growing population, a growing number of students persist in pursuing higher degrees despite recognizing the declining value of their chosen degrees. This article aims to investigate the motivations driving Chinese undergraduates to continue pursuing advanced degrees and higher education. Additionally, it will analyze the social impact of credential inflation in China and how it affects career opportunities.

2. Backgrounds and Current State

Over the past few decades, society has undergone a shift worldwide from an industrial economy to what is commonly referred to as a knowledge economy or information economy. The concept of a knowledge-based economy highlights the significance of intellectual skills over physical assets or materials. This underscores the essential role of a strong education for individuals working in such an economy. As knowledge workers gain more personal impact in the information-driven economy, an expanding group of people is inspired to seek advanced education. In contrast to manual labor, where the outcomes are tangible and involve the transformation of materials, knowledge labor involves the transformation of information from one form to another, often yielding less visible results [3]. Consequently, many employers utilize credentials and diplomas as indicators to ensure the quality of their workforce [1]. This strategy is in harmony with the widely accepted principles of human capital theory, which suggest that as an individual acquires more education, their career opportunities become more favorable, ultimately leading to economic expansion [1].

Collins, Cottom, and Stevens stress the role of credentials such as certificates, degrees, and diplomas in accessing elite employment opportunities [4]. Education serves as a "screening" or "signaling" tool to assess a worker's potential for performance in the job market. Employers use education to categorize and evaluate workers to maximize productivity. Consequently, degrees and diplomas assist companies in selecting highly qualified and reasonably compensated employees. As more higher education graduates enter the job market, they often lower their standards to secure employment due to diminishing demand for their skills. This results in higher minimum certification requirements for jobs, termed credential inflation, where educational qualifications lose value over time by receiving increasingly higher academic ratings for work that previously merited lower grades. Governments and families are making substantial investments in higher education to ensure that potential laborers can secure a job with a distinctive educational background.

China's Higher Education strategy of 1999 substantially broadened the scope of formal education and witnessed significant growth in the number of higher education graduates over a decade, increasing enrolment from 4% (around 3 million students) to 24% (approximately 27 million students) among 18-22-year-olds in a decade [2]. In 2019, Regular Higher Education (RHE) had 17,508,204 undergraduate students, five times more than Adult Higher Education (AHE) students (3,413,174). The primary goal of this expansion was to deliberately offer "enhanced access" to the emerging urban middle class, establishing higher education as the main route to upward social mobility [5]. "Elitist ideology," manifested in the state's use of the gaokao, the official university entrance exam, underlies the democratization of higher education in China [5]. In Chinese society, elite status is associated with established professions, driving the phenomenon of over-education among graduates.

The master's degree is increasingly gaining popularity and has evolved into a prerequisite qualification in China. In China, enrolment in master's degree programs has witnessed significant growth, surging from 145,443 in 1995 to 1,793,953 in 2013 [6]. Master's degree education also plays a pivotal role in training upcoming experts. It serves not only as a route to a doctoral degree but also as a vital qualification offering ongoing education for professionals. The requirement for a master's degree as a prerequisite is now commonplace for many entry-level positions. Blagg views the master's degree as the "modern equivalent bachelor's degree" for young professionals, indicating that having a master's degree is increasingly becoming a fundamental precondition for entry into the job market [7]. Moreover, master's degree programs are expected to give students a competitive advantage and readiness to join the workforce in numerous emerging areas. Many students aim to set themselves apart from those who only have a bachelor's degree in the competitive labor market. In these circumstances, numerous master's degree programs align with the career prospects available, serving

as a way for university graduates who do not immediately enter the workforce after graduation to improve their chances of finding employment.

3. Motivation Analysis

This essay will use Li and Bray's categorization method for motivations related to higher education. They categorized personal motivations into academic, economic, social & cultural, and political categories [8]. Academic motivation involves the desire to attain educational credentials and advance professionally, while economic motivation encompasses considerations related to scholarships, the estimation of economic returns on education, and career prospects. Social & cultural motivation reflects a desire for cross-cultural experiences and knowledge, while political motivation involves factors like commitment to society and the aspiration for increased political status and influence.

This paper refines and streamlines Li and Bray's four categories into two: Academic motivation and Economic motivation. Furthermore, this paper incorporates a Family motivation category, which encompasses motivations originating from family members, notably parents. This category holds particular relevance within the scope of this article. Given that the study does not encompass the consideration of studying abroad, there is no necessity to delve into matters associated with acquiring an understanding of foreign societies or undertaking political commitments in other societies.

It is also noteworthy that the motivations delineated above are not mutually exclusive; they often intersect. For instance, students may choose to pursue a particular degree to acquire academic knowledge to enhance their competitiveness in the job market. This decision is influenced by both academic and economic motivations.

3.1. Academic Motive

The primary academic motive is the motivation to acquire additional academic knowledge, theory, and development. To put it differently, it aims to fulfill academic aspirations and address academic issues. According to Maslow, Intrinsic motivation is driven by the desire for self-discovery and personal development. It includes personal growth, work value, achievement, and progression [9]. Therefore, the academic motive is primarily an instinctual drive rooted in self-improvement. For instance, certain undergraduate students develop specific interests during their studies and aspire to delve deeper into those areas. Pursuing a master's degree is a viable choice for such students as it allows them to gain more specialized knowledge. According to Kasworm and Hemmingsen, a master's education is considered instrumental in enhancing the knowledge and skills of professionals and is inherently more specialized compared to undergraduate education [10]. Consequently, a master's degree is often regarded as a pathway and foundational step toward earning a Ph.D. Research by Wu indicates that some students opt for a master's degree in the UK due to their belief in the superior quality of education provided by British universities [11]. This choice is driven by the academic motive to access higher-quality education. Furthermore, other research suggests that students pursue a master's degree to change fields from their undergraduate majors [12]. Consequently, these students are more inclined to select a new major during their master's degree studies. Nevertheless, not all students pursue advanced degrees solely driven by academic motives; other motivations frequently intersect with their academic intentions. Jung's research illustrates that certain students aspire to acquire more practical content and knowledge through their higher education, to develop transferable skills that are directly applicable to their job search [13]. This demonstrates a convergence of academic motives and economic considerations.

3.2. Economic Motive

Economic motivations consistently serve as a prominent driving force behind the pursuit of higher degrees. The first rationale underlying this motivation is the belief that obtaining an advanced degree translates into improved career prospects, higher salaries, and enhanced living conditions. According to Maslow, extrinsic motivations are rooted in the drive to fulfill individual deficits. These motivations are more outcome-focused, hinging on the anticipation of rewards, which may include potential benefits, social status, and external reinforcements [9]. Consequently, economic motives are characterized as extrinsic motivations, emphasizing outcomes rather than the educational process itself. Tomlinson's research shows that participants have expressed the conviction that higher educational qualifications can significantly augment their human capital and provide a distinct advantage in the labor market [14]. Furthermore, some participants contend that pursuing a higher education degree holds positional value and offers a competitive edge in terms of employment opportunities [14]. This sentiment is further exacerbated by the phenomenon of credential inflation, where some students feel compelled to continuously seek additional certificates to maintain a competitive edge in the job market. It is evident from student responses that they are eager to leverage their university's institutional reputation and status as a means to gain a competitive advantage in the labor market. Other studies corroborate these findings, with participants highlighting their previous educational background as a potential hindrance to their future careers [13]. For example, they perceive their undergraduate degrees as less competitive in the job market or consider their undergraduate institutions less renowned. Consequently, for these individuals, the reputation of the institution takes precedence, leading them to pursue master's degrees at well-known institutions in pursuit of better employment opportunities and career advancement.

The second rationale behind the economic motive is the perception of a higher degree of spending on defense. This perspective entails viewing advanced education as a means to mitigate potentially negative labor market outcomes resulting from a lack of pursuit of higher education. For instance, some students may opt for a master's degree due to uncertainties about their future employment prospects, believing it to be a valuable investment for averting unemployment. Substantial evidence supports the notion that students are cognizant of the limitations imposed by a lack of higher educational qualifications, which could curtail their future opportunities [14]. Additionally, the choice to pursue a master's degree may be influenced by undergraduate students' inability to secure employment after graduation, particularly during the COVID-19 era. In such circumstances, some college graduates find pursuing a master's degree the only viable option due to a dearth of job opportunities within their previous academic backgrounds. Consequently, for many individuals, a postgraduate qualification serves as a means of distinguishing themselves from a large pool of individuals holding undergraduate degrees.

3.3. Family Motive

The family motive represents a compelling force originating from family members, with parents exerting the most significant influence in Chinese culture. In the contemporary global landscape, characterized by the knowledge economy and the prominence of human capital theory, these influences have become pervasive, particularly in China. Virtually all Chinese parents subscribe to the 'education gospel,' which posits that education can effectively address a wide array of social, economic, civic, and moral challenges. Consequently, China's culture prioritizes education as a hidden driving force behind individuals' pursuit of higher education. As exemplified in Zhai and Cao's research, one participant recounted how their parents encouraged them to pursue not only a master's degree but also a PhD, despite being aware of the relatively modest return on investment [15]. For these parents, the attainment of a higher degree by their child brings immense satisfaction.

It is noteworthy that parents from different social classes harbor distinct perceptions of higher education, which subsequently shape their children's attitudes and aspirations. Middle-class parents view higher education as a means to achieve financial success and social advancement, a reflection of their own experiences where a college degree guaranteed stable employment [6]. Conversely, working-class parents have gradually lost sight of the advantages of higher education [6]. This trend may be attributed to their lack of personal exposure to higher education, which inhibits their recognition of the long-term economic and cultural benefits it offers. Constrained by limited cultural capital, they tend to adopt short-term, monetarily-focused perspectives, often disregarding the broader, enduring benefits of higher education. Consequently, the children of middle-class parents are more inclined to pursue higher education and advanced degrees when compared to their counterparts from lower-class backgrounds. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that another contributing factor may be the financial constraints faced by lower-class parents, who often struggle to afford the steep tuition costs associated with higher education and advanced degrees. Thus, the variation in educational aspirations is not solely attributable to differences in cognition and mindset; rather, it reflects the intrinsic societal inequalities that prevail.

4. Suggestion

The knowledge economy and human capital ideology have expanded higher education. This led to more graduates entering the job market, causing employers to emphasize credentials. Job seekers then pursue additional degrees, resulting in credential devaluation. This article explores three motivations for advanced degrees: economic, academic, and family. Economic incentives are the primary driver, but intrinsic motivation leads to more meaningful decisions. Therefore, consider intrinsic motivation when making important choices. Having evaluated these motivations, there are three suggestions for fostering a societal shift away from credentialism and for nurturing an educational environment that encourages students to pursue higher education driven by intrinsic motivation.

4.1. Employers-Emphasizing Skills over Credentials

To effectively contend with the pressing concern of credential inflation and the overreliance on extrinsic motivation for higher education within the contemporary workforce landscape, employers must undertake a pivotal shift in their operational paradigms. This transformation necessitates a deliberate diminution of the pronounced emphasis placed on traditional academic credentials in the evaluation of the prospective candidate. Instead, employers should prioritize the assessment of skills that employees have acquired independently to mitigate the perpetuation of academic qualifications competition. Moreover, it is incumbent upon employers to duly acknowledge the inherent limitations of a solely credential-centric approach. It is manifestly evident that a mere collection of credentials and degrees is intrinsically incapable of comprehensively capturing the multifaceted facets of an individual's qualitative attributes and inherent capabilities. cannot fully reflect an individual's overall quality and abilities.

Consequently, employers must demonstrate a discerning and holistic approach when evaluating potential employees. This imperative calls for the implementation of diversified and multifaceted methodologies for candidate assessment. Rather than rigidly adhering to a singular mode of evaluation, organizations should avail themselves of an assortment of tools and methodologies that encompass both objective metrics and subjective evaluations, thereby ensuring a comprehensive understanding of an individual's aptitude, potential, and suitability for the designated role. For example, structured interviews, skills assessments, job simulations, and behavioral assessments. This multifarious approach not only serves as a countermeasure to the detrimental effects of credential inflation but also facilitates the identification of candidates whose intrinsic talents and abilities may

be obscured by an exclusive fixation on formal educational qualifications. In summary, the adoption of a diversified and inclusive approach to candidate evaluation represents a pivotal step towards fostering a more equitable and effective labor market, one that values individual merit and potential over mere credential accumulation.

4.2. Institutions-Clear Learning Objectives and Diverse Curricula

The second suggestion pertains to academic institutions and educational programs, emphasizing the paramount importance of transparently articulating their learning outcomes and educational objectives. To effectively manage the expectations of prospective students, it is incumbent upon these institutions to communicate these essential facets of their offerings explicitly and comprehensively. This is crucial because a significant number of students enroll in programs without a thorough comprehension of the curriculum [13]. Frequently, they apply to various programs in different institutions and fields, and their selection is often influenced by factors such as time, cost, and the reputation of the institution, rather than being aligned with their academic interests. Some students even encounter curriculum misalignment with their expectations within the master's program.

To bridge the gap between students' expectations and the actual curriculum, higher education institutions should first develop diverse curricula that offer a broad spectrum of educational experiences. Then they should clarify learning objectives and quality standards, thereby providing prospective students with a lucid roadmap of what to anticipate in terms of intellectual development and skills acquisition. This transparency is instrumental in guiding students toward informed decisions regarding their educational journey. Last, academic institutions should adopt versatile teaching strategies that cater to the diverse needs and learning preferences of their student body. It can enhance the educational experience and promote a deeper alignment of students' expectations and the actual content and outcomes of their chosen programs.

4.3. Student Reflection and Supportive Parenting

The third suggestion pertains to both the perspectives of students and their parents. From the student's standpoint, engaging in self-reflection is imperative. This involves spending time reflecting on their interests, passions, and long-term goals. Such introspection serves a dual purpose: firstly, it assists them in identifying their genuine desires, as opposed to succumbing to societal expectations. Secondly, it enables students to attune themselves to their inner convictions rather than solely adhering to parental and societal dictates without self-consideration. Consequently, it is advisable to encourage students to explore a diverse range of subjects and participate in extracurricular activities. This can help them discover their true interest and passions beyond what is traditionally considered "prestigious" or "high-paying", thereby preventing them from blindly conforming to mainstream ideals.

From the perspective of parents, fostering a supportive home environment assumes paramount importance. This environment should encourage children to explore their interests, ask questions, and make mistakes without fear of censure. Parents should not pressure or plan their children's career choices, as this can hinder independent thinking and cause resentment. Instead, parents should listen to their children's aspirations and interests through open-ended questions to understand their thoughts and emotions about education and future opportunities. Furthermore, parents should avoid comparing their children to others. Each child has unique strengths and interests. Celebrating effort, curiosity, and passion is more important than focusing solely on academic grades. Encouraging intrinsic motivation and a love for learning is crucial for a fulfilling educational journey. Parents play a vital role in nurturing these qualities.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study has illuminated the multitude of factors that influence the pursuit of higher education among Chinese undergraduates. Three primary motivations have been thoroughly examined: academic motivation, economic motivation, and family motivation. It is noteworthy that economic motivation stands as the predominant driving force for the majority of students. Nevertheless, these factors, often intertwined, assume a pivotal role in shaping individuals' determinations about their continued academic endeavors. Recognizing and comprehending this intricate interplay is of paramount importance in the ever-evolving landscape of higher education. Additionally, this essay offers advice from three distinct perspectives: employees should prioritize skills over credentials, educational institutions should establish clear learning objectives and diverse curricula, students should engage in self-reflection, and parents should create a supportive environment. This research contributes significantly to understanding the intricate dynamics that underlie educational decision-making, underscoring the necessity for an environment in which intrinsic and extrinsic motivations can coexist harmoniously, thereby fostering holistic growth.

References

- [1] Waters, J. L. (2009). *In Pursuit of Scarcity: Transnational Students, 'Employability', and the MBA*. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 41(8), 1865-1883.
- [2] Guan, S. and Blair, E. (2022). *Adult Higher Education as both an 'Opportunity' and a 'Trap': Student Perceptions on Credentialism in China*. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 44(3), 362-375.
- [3] Powell, W. W. and Snellman, K. (2004). *The Knowledge Economy*. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 30, 199-220.
- [4] Collins, R., Cottom, T. M. and Stevens, M. L. (2019). *The Credential Society*. Columbia University Press.
- [5] Mok, K. H. and Marginson, S. (2021). *Massification, Diversification, and Internationalisation of Higher Education in China: Critical Reflections of Developments in the Last Two Decades*. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 84, 102405.
- [6] Liu, D. and Morgan, W. J. (2020). *Why do Students enroll for Postgraduate Education in China? The Influence of Gender and Family Habitus*. *Gender and Education*, 32(2), 177-193.
- [7] Blagg, K. (2018). *The Rise of Master's Degrees: Master's Programs Are Increasingly Diverse and Online*. Urban Institute.
- [8] Li, M. and Bray, M. (2007). *Cross-border Flows of Students for Higher Education: Push-Pull Factors and Motivations of Mainland Chinese Students in Hong Kong and Macau*. *Higher Education*, 53(6), 791-818.
- [9] Maslow, A. H. (2013). *Toward a psychology of being*. Simon and Schuster.
- [10] Kasworm, C. and Hemmingsen, L. (2007). *Preparing Professionals for Lifelong Learning: Comparative Examination of Master's Education Programs*. *Higher Education*, 54(3), 449-468.
- [11] Wu, Q. (2014). *Motivations and Decision-Making Processes of Mainland Chinese Students for Undertaking Master's Programs Abroad*. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(5), 426-444.
- [12] O'Donnell, V. L., Tobbell, J., Lawthom, R. and Zammit, M. (2009). *Transition to Postgraduate Study: Practice, Participation and the Widening Participation Agenda*. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 10(1), 26-40.
- [13] Jung, J. and Li, X. (2021). *Exploring Motivations of a Master's Degree Pursuit in Hong Kong*. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 75(2), 321-332.
- [14] Tomlinson, M. (2008). *'The Degree is not enough': Students' Perceptions of the Role of Higher Education Credentials for Graduate Work and Employability*. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29(1), 49-61.
- [15] Zhai, K. and Cao, K. (2022). *Determinants of Chinese Students' Increasing Pursuit of UK's Taught Master Degree under the Third Wave of International Education Mobility*. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 1-15.