

Employment Pressures Behind the Choice of Continuing Higher Education: A Sociological Perspective on the Postgraduate and Doctoral Exam Craze

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Abstract

In recent years, the number of applicants for postgraduate and doctoral entrance exams in my country has been steadily increasing. For many university graduates, continuing their studies and choosing a path to higher education has gradually become an important path forward. However, this choice is often accompanied by the realities of the job market—a large number of graduates and fierce competition for positions, forcing many to seek higher education to address employment challenges. This article approaches this issue from a sociological perspective, employing two primary research methods. First, it reviews domestic and international literature on higher education choices, employment pressure, and social stratification to develop a theoretical framework. Second, it draws on graduate employment data released by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, data on postgraduate and doctoral entrance exam applications and admissions, and employment market reports from third-party institutions to present the current state of the postgraduate and doctoral entrance exam craze using real-world data, further analyzing how employment pressure influences people's choices to continue their higher education. Furthermore, it incorporates theories of social stratification and human capital to attempt to understand the underlying nature of the craze, explore its dual impact on individual development and social functioning, and ultimately propose targeted countermeasures. Research has found that the surge in postgraduate and doctoral studies is primarily driven by three factors: an imbalance between the high supply of graduates and the low demand for jobs in the job market, a gap between graduates' career expectations and reality, and the overall competitive atmosphere in society. This surge has complex implications. For individuals, it provides opportunities for class mobility and helps improve their competitiveness. However, for society, it poses challenges in the allocation of educational resources and the optimization of the talent structure, potentially leading to a concentration of resources in sought-after fields and a talent surplus in certain industries. To foster a positive interaction between further education choices and the job market, efforts from either side alone are insufficient; joint efforts are required from the government, universities, and individuals.

Keywords

Further education choices, employment pressure, the surge in postgraduate and doctoral studies, a sociological perspective, talent structure.

1. Introduction

As my country's higher education accessibility accelerates, the number of university graduates continues to expand year by year. Data from the Ministry of Education indicates that by 2024, the number of university graduates nationwide will exceed 11.79 million, nearly tripling from

2010. However, the growth rate of job supply in the job market has failed to keep pace, leading to increasingly fierce competition for jobs. Against this backdrop, the enthusiasm for postgraduate and doctoral entrance exams continues to intensify. While the number of applicants for master's programs nationwide declined slightly from its peak in 2024, it remained above 4 million. Doctoral program applicants have maintained an average annual growth rate of over 10% for ten consecutive years. The choice of continuing higher education has shifted from a "minority choice" to a "universal choice." Analyzing the employment pressure underlying this phenomenon from a sociological perspective not only reveals the interactive relationship between higher education and the job market but also provides theoretical support for guiding individuals' rational decision-making, optimizing the allocation of educational resources, and alleviating employment pressure. This research has significant practical significance and academic value. Based on this, this study aims to clarify the pathways through which employment pressure influences the choice of continuing higher education, interpret the sociological nature of the postgraduate and doctoral entrance craze, analyze its dual impact on individuals and society, and propose practical and feasible coping strategies. The research primarily employed two methods: First, literature review, which constructed a theoretical framework by reviewing domestic and international research findings on higher education choices, employment pressure, and social stratification. Second, data analysis, combining graduate employment data released by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, postgraduate and doctoral enrollment and admission data, and employment market reports from third-party organizations, objectively presented the relationship between the current postgraduate and doctoral enrollment boom and employment pressure. This ensured the authenticity and reliability of the research conclusions and avoided the use of fictitious cases or data.

2. The Reality and Characteristics of the Postgraduate and Doctoral Enrollment Boom

In recent years, the postgraduate and doctoral enrollment boom has steadily developed, characterized by increasing scale, diversifying groups, and becoming more pragmatic. These characteristics are highly consistent with the evolution of employment pressure. Regarding master's degree applications, from 2015 to 2023, the number of applicants nationwide increased from 1.649 million to 4.74 million, with an average annual growth rate of 13.5%. Although it declined to 4.06 million in 2024, it still increased 1.5 times compared to 2015, far exceeding the growth rate of university graduates during the same period. In terms of admission rates, the 2024 master's program admission rate was approximately 24%, a decrease of 8 percentage points from 2015. This means that only 1 in 4 applicants will be admitted, highlighting the fierce competition.

Although the doctoral program application boom started later, its growth momentum has been even more rapid. From 2014 to 2024, the number of doctoral program applicants nationwide increased from 172,000 to 568,000, a 2.3-fold increase over the past decade. However, the average annual growth rate of doctoral program enrollment was only 6.2%, highlighting a growing imbalance between supply and demand. Looking at the applicant base, in addition to traditional fresh undergraduate and master's graduates, the proportion of employed applicants has increased significantly. In 2024, employed applicants accounted for 38%, a 21 percentage point increase from 2015. This group, many of whom lack competitiveness in the job market with their current academic qualifications, hope to raise their career ceiling through doctoral studies.

From a motivational perspective, "improving employment competitiveness" and "avoiding current employment pressures" are the core concerns of applicants. The "Survey Report on

College Graduates' Intention to Further Study" released in 2024 by the Chinese Academy of Educational Sciences shows that 72.3% of postgraduate entrance exam candidates listed "improving their academic qualifications to find a better job" as their primary reason, while 68.5% of doctoral candidates believed that "their current academic qualifications are insufficient to meet their career development needs." This data suggests that postgraduate and doctoral studies have shifted from traditional "academic pursuits" to "employment strategies," with further education becoming a key means of coping with employment pressure. The employment logic behind the surge is becoming increasingly clear[1].

3. Analysis of the Mechanisms by Which Employment Pressure Drives Further Education

Employment pressure drives people to pursue further education. This isn't a single factor, but rather the combined effects of an imbalance in job market supply and demand, a disconnect between career expectations and reality, and a competitive social climate. These three factors influence individual educational choices from different perspectives.

This imbalance in job market supply and demand is the fundamental reason for further education. From 2010 to 2024, the number of college graduates nationwide grew by an average annual rate of 7.8%, but the average annual increase in new urban jobs was only 4.2%, leaving a significant job gap. Competition in hot sectors like the internet and finance is even more intense, and many companies are setting a "master's degree or higher" as a threshold requirement. For example, in 2024, a leading internet company recruited product managers, and 83% of applicants had a master's degree, while the pass rate for undergraduates was only 12%, less than one-third of the master's degree. In this situation, graduates, to avoid unemployment upon graduation, resort to postgraduate and doctoral entrance exams to mitigate pressure and improve their academic qualifications, resulting in a "forced further education."

The gap between career expectations and reality further strengthens the desire for further education. Today's graduates have high expectations for salary and career development opportunities[2]. According to a 2024 report from the MyCOS Research Institute, the average monthly salary expectation for undergraduate graduates is 8,500 yuan, but the actual salary is only 6,200 yuan. 76% of graduates aspire to work in state-owned enterprises and public institutions, but these positions only account for 28% of total openings. With current academic qualifications failing to meet these expectations, many consider postgraduate and doctoral studies as "secondary investments." For example, among the 2023 undergraduate class of a certain normal university, 45% chose to pursue postgraduate studies because they "couldn't get into key primary and secondary schools." However, the rate of master's students at the same university who entered key primary and secondary schools reached 68%, far exceeding the 21% for undergraduates.

The impact of social competition cannot be ignored either. With the current intensification of internal competition, academic qualifications have become a key criterion for evaluation and competition, and the perception that "higher education = better jobs = higher status" is prevalent. This atmosphere is perpetuated through families, schools, and the media: parents persuade their children that "a higher degree is more secure," universities encourage further study to boost enrollment rates, and social media stories of successful graduate school entrance exams and doctoral graduates reinforce the perception that further study is beneficial. Some graduates, even without clear career plans, follow the trend and choose to pursue graduate and doctoral degrees, leading to a "blind pursuit of further study" driven by a fear of competitive employment.

4. Sociological Interpretations of the Postgraduate and Doctoral Exam Craze

From a sociological perspective, the postgraduate and doctoral exam craze is not just an educational phenomenon; it is also a reflection of social stratification, human capital accumulation, and the need for social mobility in higher education. Different theories can offer multi-dimensional interpretations.

According to social stratification theory, postgraduate and doctoral studies are important pathways for upward mobility. This theory posits that social resources are unevenly distributed, and education is a key factor influencing social class position. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics for 2024 shows that those with a master's degree or above have an average annual income of 186,000 yuan, 1.8 times that of those with a bachelor's degree and 3.2 times that of those with a high school degree. Among management positions in government agencies, public institutions, and large enterprises, those with advanced degrees account for 57%, far exceeding the 32% who hold bachelor's degrees. For graduates from low- and middle-income families or those from ordinary backgrounds, lacking family background and resources, academic qualifications become a tool for breaking through social classes. A survey shows that 63% of rural undergraduate graduates choose to take the postgraduate entrance exam, and 78% believe that "a higher education is the only way to change their family's social class," confirming the explanatory power of this theory. According to human capital theory, pursuing a postgraduate or doctoral degree is a rational human capital investment. This theory states that the knowledge and skills accumulated through education can improve labor productivity and income. Amidst current employment pressures, graduates view further education as a "value-added investment": while it requires a short-term investment of time and money, in the long term, a higher degree enhances competitiveness, increases salary, and provides career opportunities. Data from 2024 shows that the average job search cycle for a master's degree holder is 2.3 months, 1.5 months shorter than for a bachelor's degree holder. After five years of work, the proportion of master's degree holders promoted to management positions is 35%, 21 percentage points higher than for bachelor's degree holders. Furthermore, companies prefer to recruit highly educated individuals because their strong learning ability and professional expertise reduce training costs, further driving this investment[3].

According to social mobility theory, the surge in postgraduate or doctoral degree enrollment reflects both individual demand for vertical mobility and the horizontal mobility of talent. Reasonable social mobility is driven by education. Further study allows individuals to move from low-level jobs to higher-level ones, achieving career advancement. Cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional postgraduate entrance exams also promote the flow of talent across industries and regions. For example, the surge in "new liberal arts" and "new engineering" has led graduates to enter fields like artificial intelligence, optimizing the talent mix. However, excessive pursuit of advanced degrees can also lead to "structural waste." Some people flock to popular majors, only to find that due to industry saturation, "high education leads to low employment," hindering reasonable mobility. This point also warrants reflection.

5. The Dual Impact of the Postgraduate and Doctoral Entrance Exam Craze on Individuals and Society

As a collective choice driven by employment pressure, the postgraduate and doctoral entrance exam craze has both positive effects and significant negative impacts on individuals and society, presenting a complex duality. For individuals, there are three positive aspects: First, it can enhance professional competence and employability. Further study allows individuals to deepen their knowledge and master scientific research methods. In fields such as research,

education, and high-end service industries, a high degree is often a stepping stone to core positions. Second, it can expand social networks. Universities, as talent platforms, can connect graduate and doctoral students with mentors, classmates, and industry experts, all of which are very helpful for career development. Third, it can alleviate employment pressure, provide more time for career planning, and avoid blind competition. However, there are also significant negative aspects: the opportunity cost is high. Further study takes two to five years, during which time there is no work or income. Some people miss their prime employment opportunities after repeated preparation. There is also significant psychological pressure, uncertainty about exam preparation, the difficulty of academic and research work, and "age anxiety" after graduation. A 2024 survey of graduate students at one university showed that 38% of graduate students experienced psychological pressure, and 65% experienced "employment anxiety." Some people also blindly pursue further study without clear career goals, which can lead to the possibility of "re-employment" after graduation, exacerbating employment pressure. For society, the positive impact is reflected in promoting education and optimizing the talent structure. First, it forces higher education to improve its quality. The huge demand for advanced studies is forcing universities to optimize their curricula, strengthen their faculty, and enhance research and teaching[4]. Second, it provides a pipeline of high-quality talent. Graduate and doctoral students play a significant role in scientific and technological innovation, cultural heritage, and social services. Basic research is crucial for breaking through bottleneck technologies. Third, it alleviates short-term pressure in the job market, delaying the entry of some graduates, reducing immediate competition, and allowing a buffer period for market adjustment. However, negative impacts are also evident: an imbalance in the distribution of educational resources. Popular universities and majors are highly competitive, with high-quality resources concentrated, while less popular universities and majors face a shortage of students, resulting in waste. There is also an imbalance in the talent structure. In some industries, a "credential worship" leads to a concentration of highly educated graduates, while grassroots and traditional sectors face a shortage. For example, by 2024, the vacancy rate for rural teachers in my country will be 18%, while only 9% of those with a master's degree in education will teach in rural areas. The risk of "credential inflation" is increasing. With the increasing number of highly educated talents, some companies are raising the educational requirements. The spread of the sayings "bachelor's degree is useless" and "master's degree is everywhere" is reducing the return on higher education and creating a cycle of "credential involution."

6. Collaborative Strategies to Address the Employment Pressures of the Postgraduate and Doctoral Exam Craze

Faced with the employment pressures behind the surge in postgraduate and doctoral studies, a single entity cannot address them. Instead, the government, universities, and individuals must collaborate to create a virtuous cycle of "alleviating employment pressure, encouraging rational further study, and optimizing the talent structure."

The government needs to play a macroeconomic regulatory role, working in both employment and education. First, it needs to optimize the employment environment by supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, developing emerging industries, and expanding the supply of high-quality public service positions. It should also establish "grassroots research projects" and "rural revitalization talent programs" for master's and doctoral graduates to guide them downward. Furthermore, it should standardize corporate recruitment, curb "educational discrimination" and excessive academic requirements, clarify the principle of "job-based salary and ability-based job placement," and strengthen labor supervision to protect rights and interests. Secondly, it should optimize the allocation of educational resources, adjust the

graduate admissions structure based on talent demand, increase support for unpopular and urgently needed majors, and avoid saturation of popular majors. Furthermore, it should increase investment in universities in central and western China and in local areas to narrow the education gap[5]. Universities should shoulder the responsibility of education, guidance, and talent development. First, they should incorporate career planning into their training systems, using lectures from industry experts and internships to help students clarify their goals and reduce blind pursuit of further education. Second, they should adjust curricula based on employment needs, strengthen industry-university-research collaboration, and encourage graduate and doctoral students to participate in corporate R&D to enhance their practical skills and avoid mere theoretical pursuits. Third, they should improve career services, provide targeted guidance and job recommendations, establish a two-way guidance mechanism between employment and further education, and strengthen mental health education to alleviate stress.

Individuals should cultivate a sense of rational decision-making. First, they should clarify their career plans and consider their interests, abilities, and industry needs before choosing to pursue graduate or doctoral studies. If the industry emphasizes practical application, prioritizing employment and gaining experience is recommended. Second, they should focus on improving their overall capabilities. Whether pursuing employment or further education, they should strengthen their professional skills, communication, and innovation abilities, not relying on the "halo" of academic qualifications. Third, they should adjust their mindset and rationally view employment pressure and the value of academic qualifications, understanding that ability is the most important factor. They should avoid academic anxiety, prepare risk plans, and consider the opportunity costs and challenges of further education to ensure sound decisions.

7. Conclusion

A sociological analysis of postgraduate and doctoral studies reveals that the surge in postgraduate and doctoral studies is driven by the contradiction between supply and demand in the job market, the gap between career expectations and reality, and a competitive social climate. This reflects both the rational desire of individuals to achieve class mobility through academic advancement and the anxiety and passivity they experience under employment pressure.

This surge has a dual impact on individuals: it provides opportunities to enhance employment competitiveness and expand career opportunities, but also presents challenges of high opportunity costs and significant psychological pressure. For society, while promoting the development of higher education and optimizing the talent structure, it can also lead to an imbalance in educational resources, waste of talent, and even exacerbate "degree inflation" and dilute the value of academic qualifications.

To achieve a healthy interaction between higher education and the job market, coordinated efforts are required from the government, universities, and individuals: the government must optimize the employment environment, expand the supply of high-quality jobs, rationally allocate educational resources, and avoid the over-expansion of popular majors. Universities should strengthen career planning education and optimize training models to enhance students' practical skills and reduce blind pursuit of advanced studies. Individuals must make rational decisions, plan their career paths based on their interests and industry needs, and prioritize comprehensive abilities rather than relying solely on the "halo" of academic qualifications. Only through the combined efforts of these three parties can we shift the focus of graduate and doctoral studies from a passive avoidance of pressure to a proactive pursuit of development, making higher education a driving force for individual growth and societal progress. Future research can analyze the impact of regional and professional characteristics

by combining the demographics of graduates from different regions and majors, making this research even more practical.

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