

# Research on the Motivation of College Students to Take the Postgraduate Entrance Examination from the Perspective of Social Stratification

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**Abstract:** From the perspective of social stratification, the motivation of college students to take the postgraduate entrance examination is not merely a personal choice but deeply embedded in the logic of class structure and the reproduction of cultural capital. This paper first analyzes the social motivations behind college students' taking the postgraduate entrance examination from the two dimensions of class transition and class defense, and then proposes three guiding strategies: precise career education, resource allocation to the disadvantaged, and weakening utilitarianism to return to interests. The research shows that rational understanding and differentiated guidance of the motivation for taking the postgraduate entrance examination can help promote educational equity and social mobility. The full text aims to provide theoretical references and practical paths for college career education and postgraduate examination guidance.

**Keywords:** Social stratification; Motivation for taking the postgraduate entrance examination; Class transition; Guiding strategies; Educational equity

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## 1. Introduction

The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China pointed out: "Education is the major issue of the country and the Party. What kind of people to cultivate, how to cultivate them, and for whom to cultivate them are the fundamental issues of education. In recent years, the popularity of taking the postgraduate entrance examination has been continuously increasing, and the behavior of college students taking the postgraduate entrance examination has also developed from individual academic choices to a common social phenomenon. From the perspective of social stratification, the motivation for taking the postgraduate entrance examination of students from different class backgrounds shows obvious differences. Upper-middle-class students are more inclined to take the postgraduate entrance examination to consolidate their existing advantages, while lower-class students hope that taking the postgraduate entrance examination can help them achieve social class transition. If this motivational differentiation is not scientifically guided, it may further

solidify the original class structure. Therefore, from the perspective of social stratification, clarifying the deep motivations of college students' taking the postgraduate entrance examination and proposing targeted guiding strategies has theoretical significance and practical value.

## **2. Motivation for taking the postgraduate entrance examination of college students from the perspective of social stratification**

### **2.1. Class transition and academic aspiration competition**

With the increase in social competition pressure and the pursuit of higher academic qualifications, many college students choose to take the postgraduate entrance examination to delay their entry into the workplace. For students from the lower-middle class in society, taking the postgraduate entrance examination is regarded as the main channel to break through the limitations of their original family's economic and cultural capital. In the context of inflation of academic qualifications, the competitiveness of a bachelor's degree has continuously weakened under the circumstances of declining family background, and a postgraduate degree has become a new threshold for entering high-quality career fields<sup>[1]</sup>. These students tend to have a strong desire for upward mobility and expect to obtain a stable social status and a higher quality of life through a higher academic qualification. Their motivation for taking the postgraduate entrance examination shows a clear instrumental rationality feature, that is, using academic qualifications as a lever to make up for the inherent deficiencies in their family background and win a place in the fierce competition of society.

### **2.2. Class reproduction defense strategy**

In contrast, the motivation for taking the postgraduate entrance examination of students from the upper-middle class is more manifested in the defense and reproduction of class status. Their original cultural capital and social relationship networks have brought them certain competitive advantages. Taking the postgraduate entrance examination is not to "overturn", but to avoid going down. In the trend of continuous improvement of the degree of academic qualification in elite professions, a postgraduate degree has become a basic requirement for maintaining the existing class identity. In addition, some students choose to take the postgraduate entrance examination due to the expectations of their families for "respectable careers" and delaying employment and improving the starting point of the first employment. This motivation can be reflected through risk avoidance and advantage consolidation, rather than through survival pressure.

## **3. Guiding strategies for the motivation of college students to take the postgraduate entrance examination from the perspective of social stratification**

### **3.1. Precision in career education**

Higher education institutions should abandon the traditional "one-size-fits-all" approach to career education. Based on differences in the motivation for postgraduate studies among students from different social class backgrounds, they should adopt stratified and categorized precise guidance strategies. For students from the lower class who are mainly focused on social mobility, career education should focus on helping them establish a rational understanding. While affirming the value of the postgraduate path as an upward channel, it should also avoid glorifying the postgraduate program as the only necessary path<sup>[1]</sup>. Schools can introduce industry mentors and organize career experience activities to enable students to have a systematic understanding of the actual development prospects and academic requirements of different career paths. This will prevent the phenomenon of blindly following the trend of postgraduate studies due to information asymmetry. For middle and upper-class students, they need to be guided to break away from the mindset of solely relying on "degree insurance" and combine the decision of postgraduate studies with their long-term academic enthusiasm and career goals. They should avoid regarding postgraduate education merely as a means of social class protection. The core of precise career education lies in enabling each student to make a reasonable choice based on sufficient information, which is in line

with their own conditions and development goals, rather than being constrained by class inertia<sup>[2]</sup>.

### **3.2. Resource bias toward the weak**

The essence of the postgraduate competition is a resource battle, consisting of economic investment, information acquisition, tutoring opportunities, and psychological support. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are clearly at a disadvantage in these resources, such as being unable to afford high tutoring fees, lacking internal academic guidance within their families, and having narrow information channels. Therefore, each university should establish a special mechanism for postgraduate support and precisely allocate resources, including setting up special postgraduate scholarships to reduce or subsidize the materials and registration fees for economically disadvantaged students, setting up free postgraduate basic courses and learning method workshops to shorten the distance from paid tutoring, and establishing “peer mentors” to provide targeted assistance through already-graduated postgraduate students, exchanging experiences and information. Additionally, attention should be paid to the psychological pressure of disadvantaged students, conducting group counseling and one-on-one consultations to alleviate their anxiety of “not being able to afford to fail”. Resource allocation bias does not create new inequities; rather, it ensures relatively equal opportunities for students from different backgrounds to compete through compensatory distribution, thereby truly fulfilling the positive role of postgraduate entrance examinations in promoting social mobility.

### **3.3. Weakening utilitarianism and returning to interests**

Currently, there is an excessive utilitarian trend in postgraduate motivation, which not only aggravates students’ anxiety of internal competition but also distorts the original intention of postgraduate education, “cultivating high-level research talents”. Guiding strategies have a third dimension of rebuilding students’ perception of the significance of postgraduate education and moderately escaping pure instrumental rationality. Universities should use course teaching, academic lectures, and research practice as the main forms to help students establish genuine interests in academic research and professional deepening, and not merely view postgraduate studies as a stepping stone. Specifically, in the lower grades, set up inquiry-based learning projects to enable students to experience the process and charm of academic work in advance, during postgraduate mobilization, appropriately highlight academic interests and professional identity, and not simply exaggerate employment pressure and academic competition. At the same time, social opinion and university evaluation systems should also be adjusted, reducing the single emphasis on “high school postgraduate pass rate”, and focusing on the quality of students’ long-term development. Only when postgraduate studies return to “individualized and rational choice” rather than “general social pressure”, can the dual goals of individual growth and social talent cultivation be truly achieved<sup>[3]</sup>.

## **4. Conclusion**

Social stratification has a profound impact on the motivation of college students to pursue postgraduate studies, and students from different social class backgrounds exhibit two differentiated motivational structures of “transformation” and “defense”. If this difference is ignored, uniform postgraduate guidance policies will backfire and even inadvertently strengthen existing class barriers. The three strategies proposed in this study - namely, the precision of career education, the biasing of resources towards the disadvantaged, and the weakening of utilitarianism and the return to interests - aim to promote the return of the original intention of postgraduate entrance examination education through cognitive correction, resource compensation, and cultural reshaping. In the future, universities should pay greater attention to the influence of social structural factors behind the postgraduate entrance examination behavior, and use more detailed institutional designs to help develop education fairness substantively.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

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