

Research on British Postgraduate Study Experience and Its Implications for China's Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This research delves into the experiences and perspectives of Master's students from the United Kingdom to gain profound insights into the effects of their postgraduate education. Employing qualitative research methods, including in-depth personal interviews, The essay aims to comprehensively comprehend the intricate details of their educational journeys. The study encompasses a diverse array of postgraduate students, each hailing from varied backgrounds and pursuing a wide range of academic disciplines. The findings shed light on their sources of motivation, adept time management strategies, influential factors shaping their education, personal growth trajectories, aspirations for an ideal postgraduate education, and their plans beyond graduation.

KEYWORDS

Postgraduate education; Student experience; Qualitative research; Influential factors

1 Significance of the Research Topic and Overview of Its Current Status Worldwide

In 2022, the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China systematically planned education as a fundamental and strategically pivotal support for the comprehensive construction of a socialist modernization country, which holds significant strategic importance and far-reaching effects. According to the "2022 National Statistics Report on the Development of Education" released by China's Ministry of Education, the total enrollment in various forms of higher education reached 46.55 million, an increase of 2.25 million from the previous year. The gross enrollment rate for higher education was 59.6%, an increase of 1.8 percentage points from the previous year. There were 3.6536 million graduate students, an increase of 321,200 from the previous year, representing a growth of 9.64%. Among them, there were 556,100 doctoral students and 3,097,500 postgraduate students currently enrolled[1]. Nowadays, higher education has already entered a stage of mass development[2]. With the continuous expansion of enrollment in major universities, the expansion of graduate programs has also become an inevitable trend. The quality of postgraduate education, as an integral part of higher education, has garnered significant attention.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Ministry of Education has propelled Chinese higher education into the "era of assessment" through the assessment of undergraduate teaching quality at Chinese universities. Zuoyu Zhou and Tingyong Zhou have proposed, "Taking students' study experiences as an important monitoring basis for higher education and integrating it into higher

education assessment activities is of great significance to achieving the purpose of higher education quality assessment[3]. " Student study experience refers to "students' understanding and experiences of the interactions between themselves and people, events and things in the university environment." This encompasses students' experiences during both in-class and extracurricular activities. Looking at China's existing assessment activities, whether government-led assessments, assessments by intermediary organizations, internal self-assessments by universities, or popular university rankings, they all focus on input indicators and rigid criteria (such as student quality, university reputation, faculty strength, library resources, and research conditions). However, the assurance of educational conditions and resources does not necessarily lead to improved educational quality. Traditional evaluation methods can be seen as a paradigm primarily focused on resource input evaluation, lacking analysis of core elements that truly reflect educational quality[4]. American scholar M. Frazer believes that the quality of higher education primarily refers to the quality of student development, which includes what students have learned, what they can do, and their attitudes during their entire learning process[5]. Therefore, how are students' learning conditions during their university years? In which aspects have they developed? To what extent have they developed? Furthermore, as carriers of higher education, to what extent do universities promote student development? What positive impacts does university education have on student development? Answers to these questions are fundamental in evaluating the quality of higher education and are the primary concerns when assessing the teaching quality of a university.

Research on the study experience of university students first emerged in the United States in the 1960s. Initially, the research primarily focused on students' attitudes toward learning, motivation, interests, and other aspects[6]. However, many scholars later found that factors affecting students' learning engagement and effectiveness extended beyond academic engagement and included various aspects of campus life. This included the way courses were scheduled, resource allocation, and efforts to encourage student participation in teaching activities closely related to academic achievement. These scholars' viewpoints promoted the development of theories related to the study experience[7]. This article compares the development of research on the study experience of undergraduate and graduate students in the United Kingdom, a developed country, with the aim of providing insights and guidance for the development of postgraduate education.

1.1 Research on the study experience of British postgraduate students

In 2007, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in the United Kingdom introduced two surveys targeting postgraduate students' teaching and research experiences: the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES). The PTES is conducted annually and focuses on all higher education institutions offering postgraduate education, primarily from February to June. In the UK, postgraduate taught programs mainly include MSc degrees and Postgraduate Diplomas (PgD). It systematically and humanely collects feedback from current postgraduates regarding their course learning, teaching by faculty, and their own learning experiences. The survey results show to what extent the school's courses meet the students' needs, ensure that current postgraduate programs are suitable for 21st-century students, and aim to enhance course attractiveness for future students. The survey results are primarily for improvement purposes rather than ranking, and the responses are kept confidential. The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), on the other hand, is conducted biennially and focuses on research postgraduates. It primarily occurs from March to May[8]. This survey is not only about student satisfaction but also gathers feedback on the student experience during their research education. The feedback helps higher education institutions enhance the quality of research postgraduate education and serves as a basis for relevant higher education policy

formulation.

1.2 Research on the study experience of American college students

In the United States, long-term surveys on education quality assessment have been conducted, with one of the most representative surveys being the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ), developed by Indiana University in 1979. This questionnaire covers various aspects such as student participation in activities, reading and writing abilities, satisfaction with the college experience, the college environment, and the acquisition of knowledge and skills[9]. It has accumulated rich experiences in assessing student engagement and stands out among many higher education quality assessment methods, providing a unique perspective on higher education quality.

In 2000, the United States officially implemented the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) nationwide. This survey applies to all colleges and universities, targeting students at four-year colleges and universities. It occurs annually. Unlike the prevalent university rankings at the time, which emphasized external factors like input, output, and reputation, NSSE emphasizes indirectly assessing teaching quality at schools through students' learning experiences. It primarily aims to understand how students learn and what they gain from their learning.

In 2002, the University of California officially implemented the University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) at its various campuses. This survey mainly focuses on the experiences of research university students in various aspects, including academic and co-curricular experiences, learning attitudes, study habits, time utilization, self-awareness, and goals. Its results are mainly used for campus accreditation, student services, and long-term planning recommendations[10].

1.3 Research on the study experience of Chinese college students

In 2001, Professor Zuoyu Zhou from Beijing Normal University introduced the College Student Report Questionnaire (CSRQ) from the United States and adapted it to the Chinese context, creating the "Chinese College Student Study Experience Questionnaire." It consists of four parts, including students' background information, activities related to learning during their college years, perceptions of the campus environment, and self-reports on what students have gained during college[11]. This adapted questionnaire has been widely used in China, offering a new perspective on evaluating higher education quality through the study experiences of college students.

To reveal the learning and growth patterns of Chinese research university students, Tsinghua University introduced the NSSE survey. After localization and cultural adaptation, it became the Chinese version of NSSE-China. Since 2009, this survey has been conducted annually among undergraduate students nationwide, resulting in the "Tsinghua University Undergraduate Teaching and Learning Situation Survey Report 2009[12]." In this report, five cross-campus comparison indicators highlight the importance of teacher-student interaction in the talent development process, showing significant differences between Tsinghua and American students in this regard [13]. Researchers like Xiuping Wang analyzed data from the College Student Learning Situation Survey in Beijing universities, examining six dimensions: learning goals and motivation, learning attitudes, learning anxiety, learning strategies, self-assessment, and evaluation of teaching. They conducted differential comparisons among student groups from different schools, majors, grades, genders, and academic performance[14].

2 Research Objectives, Main Contents and Key Issues to be Solved

In the post-pandemic era, the massification of higher education has brought about a series of issues, particularly in the field of postgraduate education, which have become increasingly prominent. These issues include difficulties in graduate employment, a decline in the quality of postgraduate education, and a decrease in the value of graduate degrees. At the same time, the expansion of higher education presents a significant challenge: how to ensure the quality of postgraduate education.

The current state of domestic research indicates that there are some issues with the evaluation of the quality of postgraduate education. Firstly, we often focus more on conditional evaluation and process evaluation, using pre-defined indicators for measurement. This means that we typically examine factors such as the source of students, the education process, the quality of theses, the faculty team, and ideological and political work at universities while overlooking the actual experiences and needs of individual students.

Secondly, quality assessments in higher education often overly rely on external conditions, such as university reputation, resources, and research capabilities. This can neglect the subjectivity of students in the educational process and their actual experiences in learning, growth, and development. Evaluations should place more emphasis on students' needs, including intellectual development, skill enhancement, and spiritual elevation.

The viewpoint put forward by UNESCO underscores the importance of learners, viewing learners and their needs as key participants and beneficiaries of higher education reform. If learners' needs are neglected, higher education may lack a soul. Therefore, by conducting surveys of the study experiences of graduate students in school, we can gain a better understanding of their learning processes, development status, and needs, providing valuable information and recommendations for improving the quality of postgraduate education.

This research aims to answer the following key questions:

2.1 What is the current status of study experiences among graduate students in the United Kingdom?

2.2 What significant characteristics are associated with the study experiences of graduate students in the United Kingdom?

2.3 What similarities and differences exist in the study experiences of different groups of graduate students in the United Kingdom?

2.4 What are the reasons for variations in the study experiences of graduate students in the United Kingdom?

2.5 What factors influence graduate student study experiences?

By conducting comprehensive research into the study experiences of graduate students in the United Kingdom, the aim is to contribute valuable insights and innovative perspectives to the ongoing reform efforts in postgraduate education. The goal of the research is to facilitate a harmonious integration of higher education expansion with a relentless commitment to elevating educational standards. This collaborative approach seeks to bridge the gap between increased access to postgraduate programs and the continuous enhancement of educational excellence.

3 Research Methods, Technical Route, Experimental Scheme to be Adopted and Feasibility Analysis

3.1 Research methods

This research will employ a qualitative research method aimed at gaining an in-depth

understanding of how the study experiences of postgraduate students in the United Kingdom influence higher education. Qualitative research will involve conducting individual interviews to explore the perspectives, experiences, and feelings of the research subjects, providing a deeper level of insight into the research.

3.2 Technical route

To ensure the rigor and depth of the research, this study will be divided into four main steps within the technical route:

3.2.1 Literature review and research framework construction

Firstly, the researcher will comprehensively review relevant policies, literature, and journal materials through online resources such as the official website of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), Duxiu, Baidu Scholar, and others. This step will help construct the theoretical framework of the research and also understand the most recent research developments to provide a foundation for subsequent research.

3.2.2 Questionnaire design

At this stage, the researcher will refer to widely used questionnaires on college student study experience, as well as the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) in the United Kingdom. These questionnaires will support the design of interview questions, ensuring their comprehensiveness and depth.

3.2.3 Individual interviews

The researcher will conduct individual interviews with approximately 20 postgraduate graduate students from several universities in the United Kingdom. These interviews will be conducted in a semi-structured context to capture participants' unique experiences and perspectives. Interview results will be documented and organized in detail for subsequent analysis and paper writing.

3.2.4 Data analysis and paper writing

Finally, the researcher will analyze the results of individual interviews and integrate them into the key questions the research aims to address. This step will cover in-depth exploration of the content details and themes of the interviews to provide strong research conclusions. Ultimately, researchers will prepare a paper summarizing research findings and insights to answer research questions.

This technical route will ensure methodological rigor in the research while providing comprehensive data and insights into how the study experiences of graduate students in the United Kingdom influence higher education.

3.3 Feasibility analysis

The proposed research methodology is feasible for several reasons:

3.3.1 Availability of resources

Online resources for literature review and access to graduate students in the United Kingdom for

interviews are readily available.

3.3.2 Adaptability

The chosen qualitative research method is well-suited for exploring the nuanced perspectives and experiences of graduate students.

3.3.3 Existing models

The use of established questionnaires like PTES and PRES for questionnaire design provides a solid foundation for the research.

3.3.4 Expertise

Researchers will bring expertise in qualitative research and data analysis to ensure the quality of the study.

Overall, the research methods and technical route outlined are both practical and feasible for conducting an in-depth analysis of the influence of graduate student study experiences in the United Kingdom on higher education.

4 Novelties of the Proposed Topic

Through reviewing the literature, it is evident that research on study experiences initially emerged in the United States, accumulating rich experience in assessing student populations. Questionnaires for this purpose have gradually matured in their development and use. However, research in the United States has primarily focused on undergraduate students, with minimal exploration of the study experiences of master's postgraduate students. The United Kingdom's Higher Education Academy was among the first to research graduate student populations, mainly studying the teaching and research experiences of postgraduate students.

In China, research on student study experience is not extensive and primarily concentrates on undergraduate student populations. There are limited precedents for surveying and researching the study experience of master's postgraduate students. Therefore, this topic draws inspiration from the United Kingdom's PTES and PRES questionnaires to conduct interview-based research on the study experiences of master's postgraduate students in the United Kingdom. This approach provides a unique perspective on educational quality from the standpoint of master's postgraduate students, offering a degree of research significance and innovation.

The novelty of this topic lies in its exploration of a relatively understudied area—master's postgraduate student study experience—informed by well-established methodologies from the United Kingdom. This approach contributes to the broader field of study experiences research, addressing a gap in the literature and offering valuable insights into the quality of postgraduate education.

5 Results of Personal Interview Survey

Based on the conducted interview survey with 20 postgraduate students in the United Kingdom, the following analysis of the research results is presented:

5.1 Basic information

Most respondents chose to answer these questions anonymously, possibly to protect their personal privacy.

Gender Distribution: Male (45%), Female (55%). The relatively balanced gender distribution indicates that pursuing a master's degree in the UK is open to both males and females.

Undergraduate Institutions and Majors: Diverse, including engineering, humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, etc.

Master's Postgraduate Institutions and Majors: Also diverse, covering various master's programs such as business management, computer science, international relations, etc. The diversity in the undergraduate and master's postgraduate institutions and majors reflects students from different backgrounds and fields pursuing master's degrees in the UK.

5.2 Postgraduate education expectations

95% of respondents stated that they chose to pursue a master's degree in the UK to enhance their academic qualifications.

85% of respondents believed that postgraduate education would provide them with more career opportunities.

Expecting more academic and career opportunities was one of the primary motivations for respondents.

5.3 Time Management

70% of respondents established daily study plans and set learning goals to ensure efficient time utilization.

60% of respondents joined coursework and research groups to facilitate collaborative learning.

Respondents employed various time management strategies during their graduate studies, indicating a strong emphasis on efficient time management to make the most of their graduate learning opportunities.

5.4 Influential factors

80% of respondents mentioned that mentors and peers had a positive impact on their academic and personal lives, highlighting the importance of mentors and peers.

Additionally, 45% of respondents mentioned individual events and experiences that influenced them, including participation in research projects and internship experiences.

5.5 Growth and changes

75% of respondents stated that their research methods and critical thinking skills improved through their master's studies.

70% of respondents believed that their confidence increased during their graduate careers, indicating that UK master's postgraduate education positively influenced their overall development.

5.6 Ideal postgraduate education

90% of respondents expressed a desire for postgraduate education to be more practical, providing opportunities for hands-on experience.

80% of respondents expected more interaction and guidance from mentors, reflecting students'

expectations for a more comprehensive educational experience.

5.7 Suggestions for postgraduate education

65% of respondents suggested providing more practical projects and internship opportunities.

55% of respondents recommended improvements in academic support and mentor guidance. These suggestions can guide higher education institutions in the UK in enhancing postgraduate education.

5.8 Post-graduation plans

85% of respondents indicated having clear career or academic plans after completing their master's degrees, reflecting that most UK master's postgraduate students have defined goals and plans for the future.

To sum up, the results of this interview survey indicate that UK postgraduate education positively influences students' personal and career development while providing academic knowledge. However, there is still room for improvement, including better meeting students' needs, offering more practical opportunities, and enhancing mentorship and academic support. These improvements can contribute to elevating the quality of postgraduate education and addressing the challenges posed by the post-pandemic era.

6 Insights for the Development of Higher Education

In summary, the results of this interview survey provide valuable guidance for the development of higher education. Through comprehensive quality assessment, diverse curriculum and practical opportunities, strengthening the role of mentors and peers, cultivating comprehensive qualities, and providing career planning and development support, universities can better meet student needs, improve the quality of education, produce more competitive graduates, and promote the sustainable development of higher education. These measures will also help address the challenges posed by the popularization of higher education while ensuring educational quality.

Appendix: Interview guidelines for British postgraduate students questionnaire

Thank you for participating in this survey. We would like to understand your experiences and perspectives during your postgraduate studies in the UK to improve the quality of education in the future. Please answer the following questions honestly.

6.1 Basic information

- Name (optional):
- Gender:
- Date of Birth:
- Undergraduate Institution and Major:
- Master's Institution and Major:

6.2 Expectations for postgraduate education

- Why did you decide to pursue a Master's degree in the UK initially?
- What improvements and opportunities did you expect postgraduate education to bring to you?

6.3 Time management

- How did you manage your time during your graduate studies? (Please describe your daily time management strategies)

6.4 Influential factors

- During your graduate career, which people or events had a significant impact on you? Please provide specific examples.

6.5 Growth and changes

- Through your Master's studies, in which aspects do you believe you have grown or undergone significant changes? (For example, skills, mindset, self-confidence, etc.)

6.6 Ideal postgraduate education

- What does your ideal postgraduate education look like? Please describe what you consider the best combination of academic and student life.

- In comparison to your postgraduate education experience, which aspects do you think need improvement? Please provide suggestions.

6.7 Post-graduation plans

- What specific career or academic plans do you have after completing your Master's studies? Please share your future plans.

Thank you for your participation! Your answers will be very valuable in understanding the experiences and expectations of British Postgraduate students.

Notes on contributors

Xilong Yu is undergraduate of South China University of Technology, and his research field is English education, TESOL and multimedia.

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