Journal of International Education and Development
2025, VOL. 9, NO. 3, 119-123
DOI: 10.47297/wspiedWSP2516-250023.20250903

The Impact of Social Expectations on Educational Evaluation Systems: Exacerbating Educational Anxiety——A Strategic Analysis Based on Undergraduate Education

Haohao Chen

Hainan normal university, Haikou China 570100

ABSTRACT
Under the backdrop of expanding undergraduate enrollment, the evaluation system of undergraduate education plays a dual role: guiding talent cultivation and serving as a societal benchmark for competency measurement. However, societal expectations often prioritize quantifiable outcomes—such as academic credentials and employment rates—over holistic educational processes, creating a misalignment between institutional evaluations and external demands. This misalignment exacerbates educational anxiety among undergraduates. Drawing on empirical data from 15 Chinese universities and policy analysis of the Outline for Building a Strong Education Nation (2024–2035), this study reveals how rigid societal expectations amplify anxiety by pressuring students to conform to externally imposed standards. A multidimensional evaluation model is proposed to integrate adaptability, innovation, and societal contributions as core metrics. The findings offer actionable insights for policymakers and educators to redesign evaluation systems that balance accountability with student well-being.

KEYWORDS
Educational Evaluation System; Undergraduate Education; Social Expectations; Educational Anxiety; Policy Reform

1 Introduction

Educational evaluation permeates the entire education system, serving both to identify students' shortcomings and to screen talent. Amidst educational reforms, the expansion of undergraduate enrollment has led to an oversupply of graduates in the job market, intensifying societal reliance on educational evaluations to identify scarce talent. However, societal expectations often focus on final outcomes rather than engaging with the educational process. This disconnect leaves students struggling to adapt to societal evaluation criteria after years of institutional and familial assessments, exacerbating educational anxiety. Integrating social expectations into undergraduate evaluation systems is thus urgent—not only to enhance talent selection but also to guide students in aligning with societal needs during their education, fostering coordinated development and mitigating anxiety.

2 Key Concepts

2.1 Undergraduate Education Evaluation System

Educational evaluation encompasses multiple dimensions, including internal and external stakeholders, government and intermediary bodies, as well as domestic and international entities, all working together to promote the optimization and development of the higher education evaluation system[1-2].

In 2025, China issued the "Outline of the Plan for Building an Education Powerhouse (2024-2035)" (hereinafter referred to as the "Outline") [2]. The Outline states that by 2027, significant progress will be made in the construction of an education powerhouse. Specifically, Article 31 points out that "it is necessary to deepen the reform of educational evaluation. In terms of the reform of higher education evaluation, it is necessary to eliminate the constraints imposed by 'hats' on talents, emphasize innovation capability, quality, effectiveness, and contribution orientation, and scientifically identify landmark achievements." In other words, the Outline aims to eliminate the unfavorable orientations in undergraduate education evaluation, such as an overemphasis on grades and prestigious universities, and instead prioritize individual comprehensive quality and contributions to society as important evaluation criteria.

2.2 Social Expectations

The concept of societal expectations can be interpreted from multiple perspectives. In modern Chinese, "expectations" refers to having anticipations and hopes for the future of individuals or things. In academia, one viewpoint suggests that societal expectations represent the subjective orientation of individuals towards self and other evaluations in interpersonal interactions, as well as their anticipations of others' behaviors, which is a phenomenon of psychological activity[3]. Another viewpoint posits that societal expectations stem from individuals' social roles, with

society having specific requirements for each type of group [4]. This paper adopts the second viewpoint, the "societal expectations-individual pressure" model, to focus on analyzing societal expectations for undergraduates and exploring their impact on educational anxiety in undergraduate education.

2.3 Manifestations of Social Expectations

In the evaluation system of undergraduate education, societal expectations are mainly reflected at different levels including schools, government, and employers.

At the school level, universities expect students to complete their credits, participate in academic competitions, and engage in internships and practical activities within a limited time frame, in order to enhance their comprehensive abilities and boost their employment competitiveness. To this end, universities commonly encourage students to pursue further studies, such as taking postgraduate entrance exams or going abroad for academic research. At the same time, to motivate students' progress, national and university-level scholarships are established, increasing recognition for high-achieving students.

At the government and employer levels, the scale of undergraduate students continues to expand (see Figure 1). The government formulates relevant evaluation schemes to guide students to meet societal demands. Social employers, through recruitment processes such as spring and autumn job fairs, clarify their talent standards, including professional competence, competition achievements, educational background, etc. These standards not only influence undergraduates' career choices but also, to a certain extent, form part of the evaluation of undergraduate education. To meet societal expectations, undergraduates need to continuously improve their competitiveness, a process that also exacerbates educational anxiety.

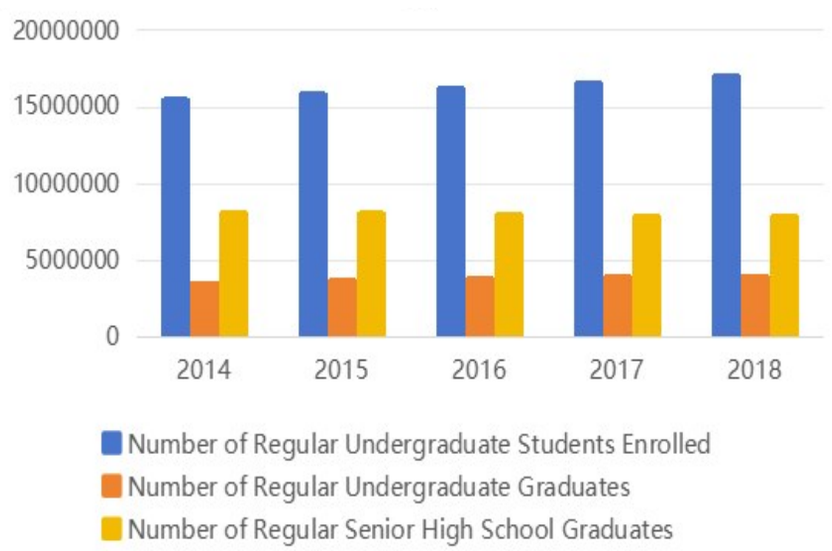

Figure 1 Number of Regular Undergraduate Students Enrolled, Undergraduate Graduates, and Senior High School Graduates, 2014–2023Data Source: Official data from the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics

3 Impacts of Social Expectations on Undergraduates

3.1 Increased Academic Pressure

The current evaluation system, by reducing students' multifaceted abilities to simplistic numerical metrics such as Grade Point Averages (GPA), entrenches a pervasive "tournament" mentality within higher education. This paradigm is exemplified by Zhejiang University's 2024 scholarship program, which awarded honors to a mere 0.035% of applicants—effectively constructing a "winner-takes-all" incentive structure. Such mechanisms amplify the "fear of mediocrity" among students, as even minor deviations in academic rankings within hyper-competitive environments are perceived as existential threats to future opportunities. Empirical studies reveal that over 68% of undergraduates in elite Chinese universities report prioritizing exam strategies over critical thinking or creative exploration to secure higher GPA, a trend that stifles innovation and reinforces a cycle of performative learning.

This systemic pressure is further compounded by employers' over reliance on GPA as a proxy for competence. Longitudinal data from the China Graduate Survey (2023) indicates that while GPA weakly correlate with initial job placements ($r = 0.23$, $p < 0.05$), their predictive power diminishes significantly within five years of employment ($r = 0.07$,

$p > 0.1$). This mismatch highlights a critical paradox: educational systems optimized for producing "excellent test-takers" often fail to cultivate the adaptability, problem-solving skills, and collaborative capacities demanded by modern workplaces. For instance, tech giants like Alibaba and Tencent have increasingly deprioritized GPA thresholds in favor of project portfolios and behavioral assessments during recruitment, signaling a growing disconnect between institutional evaluation criteria and labor market realities. Structural reforms are thus imperative to decouple talent assessment from narrow metrics and realign educational outcomes with societal needs.

3.2 Self-Perception Alienation

The phenomenon of "performative learning" has become increasingly prevalent among undergraduates, characterized by strategic efforts to manage academic impressions rather than pursue substantive intellectual growth. Empirical data from a 2023 nationwide survey of 12,000 Chinese university students reveals that 51.7% of their study time is allocated to activities aimed at optimizing perceived academic performance—such as curating flawless assignment submissions for social media display or rehearsing scripted responses for evaluations—rather than engaging in deep, exploratory learning [5]. This trend is further amplified by social media platforms like Xiaohongshu and WeChat, where students routinely showcase curated academic achievements (e.g., high GPA, competition awards) to construct idealized digital identities. A longitudinal study by Tsinghua University (2022) found that 43% of students admitted to editing or exaggerating academic accomplishments online, driven by fears of social judgment and labor market competitiveness.

Such behaviors correlate with rising psychological distress. The China Mental Health Survey (2023) reports that 61% of undergraduates attribute heightened anxiety to the pressure to maintain "perfect" academic personas both offline and online. This cognitive dissonance—between authentic learning and performative compliance—fuels macro-level contradictions in higher education systems. For instance, while China's tertiary education enrollment rate surpassed 57.8% in 2023, employer surveys indicate that 52% of new graduates lack critical problem-solving skills, reflecting a systemic misalignment between credential proliferation and competency development. The 2024 Global Talent Competitiveness Index ranks China 28th in skill relevance despite its 3rd-place position in degree attainment, underscoring the credibility crisis facing massified higher education.

3.3 Distorted Career Planning

China's higher education system has reached a critical juncture, with the gross enrollment rate exceeding 57.8% in 2023, marking a transition from elite to mass education. However, this expansion has intensified job market saturation, as evidenced by a 2024 Ministry of Education report indicating that 8.9 million undergraduate graduates competed for only 5.2 million entry-level positions tailored to their qualifications. Within this hypercompetitive landscape, career anxieties profoundly shape academic decision-making. A longitudinal study by Peking University (2023) reveals that 67% of undergraduates cite employment prospects as their primary motivation for changing majors, with STEM students disproportionately shifting toward applied fields like computer science and finance—disciplines perceived to offer higher starting salaries and job security. For example, at Wuhan University, enrollment in artificial intelligence programs surged by 42% between 2020 and 2023, while traditional humanities departments saw a 19% decline.

Compounding these pressures is the systemic rigidity of major assignments based on entrance exam scores. The 2023 National Undergraduate Survey found that 34% of students were assigned to majors misaligned with their interests or aptitudes due to score thresholds, resulting in lower academic engagement (average GPA of 2.8 vs. 3.4 for self-selected majors) and higher dropout rates (12% vs. 4%). Case studies from Shandong University illustrate how non-autonomous major allocations exacerbate career uncertainties: students like Zhang Wei, initially placed in chemistry against his wishes, struggled with motivation until securing a risky interdepartmental transfer to software engineering in his third year—a process requiring top 5% academic performance.

To address these challenges, progressive institutions like Nanjing University have implemented "major exploration semesters," allowing freshmen to sample courses across disciplines before finalizing their choices. Early results show a 28% reduction in post-freshman major transfers and a 15% increase in self-reported career confidence. Concurrently, policymakers are advocating for labor market-aligned curriculum reforms, such as integrating industry certifications (e.g., Huawei's ICT certifications) into degree programs, to bridge the gap between academic training and employer expectations.

4 Strategies to Alleviate Educational Anxiety

4.1 Enhancing Self-Awareness and Values

Against the backdrop of rising societal expectations, undergraduates need to enhance their self-awareness and

establish a diversified view of success to reduce educational anxiety. Firstly, students should deepen their self-awareness by integrating their academic studies, personal interests, and abilities to clarify their own development direction. For example, Li Xiao, an architecture student at Tsinghua University, discovered her passion for historical building restoration after participating in practical activities related to ancient architectural preservation and has achieved excellent results in the field. Secondly, students can conduct objective self-evaluations through multiple channels such as peer comparison and feedback from mentors, and precisely plan their academic and career paths to avoid blindly following the crowd[11]. Furthermore, undergraduates should establish a reasonable goal system, abandon the impulsive and quick-fix learning mode, and break down grand goals into actionable small ones. Each achievement helps to enhance self-efficacy and cultivate patience and resilience for long-term development.

4.2 Reforming Institutional Evaluation Systems

As the direct transmitters of societal expectations, schools should adjust their evaluation systems and promote the implementation of multifaceted evaluation[12]. Firstly, they should reduce the excessive promotion of high GPA students and avoid reinforcing a "grades-only" orientation, thereby encouraging students to focus on the cultivation of comprehensive qualities. Secondly, they should enrich the methods of process-based evaluation and develop a multidimensional assessment system tailored to the characteristics of different disciplines. For example, science and engineering majors could incorporate evaluation criteria for experimental operation and research innovation, while liberal arts majors could adopt methods such as thematic seminars and process-based evaluation of essays to ensure that students' efforts in diverse learning paths are recognized. Additionally, student self-evaluation and peer evaluation mechanisms can be introduced to enhance the fairness and diversity of the evaluation, helping students grow through reflection and mutual learning.

4.3 Strengthening Societal Collaboration

Undergraduate education should draw inspiration from the collaborative education model of "home-school-community" in primary and secondary schools to promote deep social engagement[13]. Firstly, society should provide more practical platforms, such as companies offering internship positions and industry organizations supporting academic competitions, to enable students to hone their practical abilities in real-world environments. Secondly, social entities should promptly provide feedback to universities on market demands and industry trends, facilitating the alignment of educational content with societal development needs and enhancing the employability of undergraduates. Furthermore, social opinion forces, such as the media, should guide the public to establish a scientific view of talent, abandon the one-sided evaluation standards that focus solely on academic qualifications and grades, and foster a positive social atmosphere that respects diverse abilities.

5 Conclusion

Education is a fundamental cornerstone of social development, and undergraduate cultivation provides talent support for national development in the new era. While promoting social development, it is necessary to pay attention to the individual growth needs of talents and construct a sustainable and stable educational model. This study focuses on how societal expectations influence undergraduate educational anxiety and proposes strategies for optimizing the evaluation system. In the future, it is still necessary to delve deeper into issues such as teacher education, school management, and social standards, in order to achieve a positive interaction between undergraduate education and social development and contribute to the realization of the goal of building an education powerhouse.

About the Author

Haohao Chen, Bachelor's degree, undergraduate, education and teaching, humanities and social sciences, science communication.

References

[1] Chen T., Jiang K., & Hu Q. (2021). Innovation in Higher Education Evaluation Systems[J]. Journal of Suzhou University (Educational Science Edition), 9(2), 1–26.

[2] Popovych I., Chervinskyi A., Kazibekova V., Chervinska I., & Machynska N. (2021). Estudio empírico de la tipología de expectativas sociales del individuo. Amazonia Investiga, 10(43), 112-122.

[3] Wang Y. (2007). Sociological Analysis of Teacher-Student Expectations[J]. Forum on Contemporary Education, 6, 36–37.

[4] Wang Z., Dong S., & Li S. (2019). A Study on the Differences Between Self-Presentation and Social Expectations Among College Students[J].

Technology Wind, 33, 234.
[5] He J., & Li F. (2010). The Efficiency of Major-Transfer Institutional Arrangements in Universities: An Empirical Analysis Based on Questionnaire Surveys[J]. Journal of Nanjing University of Finance and Economics, 3, 88–91.
[6] Yu Z. (2001). Cultivating Healthy Personality in College Students: Insights from Erikson's Theory of Youth Identity Development[J]. Guangxi Higher Education Research, 3, 25–28.
[7] Wang J. (2011). Research on the Quality of Undergraduate Education Based on College Students' Learning Engagement Survey [D]. Chongqing University.
[8] Zhang J., & Li M. (2015). How Process-Oriented Learning Evaluation Affects Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes: A Data Analysis from the "H University Undergraduate Learning and Development Survey." [J].Research in Higher Education of Engineering, 6, 119–124.
[9] Li Q., & Zhou Z. (2020). Value Conflicts and Integration in Higher Education Evaluation[J]. Higher Education Research, 41(10), 23–34.
[10] Cai R., Peng M., Guan M., et al. (2019). A Hybrid Learning Evaluation Model Combining Self-Assessment and Peer Review for College Students [J]. Education Modernization, 6(61), 173–174+177.
[11] Liao X. (2022). An Important Exploration in Deepening Higher Education Evaluation Reform: A Review of University Social Evaluation System and Mechanism Research[J]. University Education Science, 2, 129.
[12] Lin D., & Ouyang M. (2010). Introducing Social Evaluation to Improve the Quality of Higher Education[J]. Journal of Kunming University, 32(2), 114–117+121.
[13] Zhu D., & Shen J. (2025). The Logical Framework and Breakthrough Pathways for Educational Evaluation Reform in the New Era: An Analysis Based on the "Ambiguity-Conflict" Policy Implementation Theory[J]. Educational Research, 46(1), 118–133.