Exploring the Meaning of Credentials for Chinese Students from Elite Universities

Huiming Zeng

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University of Oxford

MSc in Education (Higher Education)

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ABSTRACT

In China, higher education has traditionally been viewed as a pathway to social mobility and status. As a result, many students internalise the belief that investing in higher education and earning strong credentials will lead to better job prospects. However, the rapid massification of China's higher education system has led to an oversupply of graduates, outpacing labour market demand. This has caused credential inflation, where degrees have become so common that their value has declined. Consequently, many graduates find that the expected rewards of their educational investment fail to materialise. Credentials, once seen as empowering, are increasingly viewed as sources of stress and limitation. This tension is widely discussed on Chinese social media, where many young people express frustration that higher education has made them reluctant to accept ordinary jobs (those not requiring a degree or requiring a lower degree). However, these discussions and the relevant literature largely focus on general higher education graduates, most of whom come from non-elite universities given their greater proportion in the overall Chinese higher education landscape. This raises a critical question: does holding a degree from an elite university now also make it harder for students to find employment, as they may feel pressured to pursue roles that match their credentials?

This qualitative study explores the meaning of higher education credentials for graduates from China's most elite universities—Tsinghua University and Peking University. It examines whether these elite graduates view their credentials as stepping stones that enhance job opportunities or as constraints that limit them to roles matching their educational backgrounds. The study also investigates the factors shaping both positive and negative perceptions of these credentials.

This study conducted online semi-structured interviews with 18 final-year master's students from Tsinghua University or Peking University. Participants were recruited through my personal network, social media platforms, and participant referrals.

Thematic analysis was employed for data analysis. Findings show that all participants viewed their credentials as beneficial, especially during initial CV screening, where elite degrees acted as powerful entry tickets to the labour market. However, many noted that these advantages faded in later stages of job applications. Most also felt constrained by their credentials, facing unrealistic external idealisation, as others perceived them as exceptionally intelligent and destined for success. These high societal expectations made them hesitant to pursue lower-tier positions. This study also found that career choices were influenced by factors such as family expectations, socio-cultural norms around appropriate jobs for elite graduates, school-based career guidance, and broader socioeconomic conditions. However, most participants reported being either largely unaffected by these influences or gradually learning to detach from them. Those with strong self-agency, intrinsic motivation, and clear goals were better able to resist external pressures and felt less constrained by their credentials, while those lacking these qualities were more likely to be influenced.

This study makes a novel contribution by revealing that elite credentials, while offering advantages, can also impose psychological pressure and limit graduates to socially approved, high-status career paths. It addresses a key gap in empirical research by examining how students with elite credentials in China perceive the value of their credentials during the job search. Additionally, it shifts the focus from viewing students as passive job seekers to recognising them as active decision-makers, highlighting their agency and adaptability when navigating the labour market.

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LIST OF TERMS

HE: Higher Education

HEI: Higher Education Institutions

HCT: Human Capital Theory

HC: Human Capital

PKU: Peking University

THU: Tsinghua University

SOE: State-owned Enterprise

Gaokao: Chinese national college entrance examination

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and Rationale

In China, higher education (HE) has long been regarded as a pathway to social mobility and enhanced status, shaped by Confucian values that link academic diligence to societal respect (Lu & Jover, 2019; Marginson, 2011). This belief persists due to assumptions related to the knowledge economy, where education and skills are believed to drive economic growth (Powell & Snellman, 2004), and human capital theory (HCT), which sees education as an investment that increases an individual's economic value and job prospects (Becker, 1994). Moreover, HE credentials are becoming an increasingly important factor in the labour market, both globally and in China. According to Spence's (1978) job-market signalling theory, credentials serve as a signalling mechanism, enabling individuals to convey their unobservable qualities and abilities to employers. HE also functions as a positional good, as defined by Hirsch (2013), where degrees from certain institutions provide greater social status and long-term opportunities than others. Degrees from prestigious institutions are seen to reflect higher human capital (HC) and employability. As a result, students internalise the idea that investing in HE will secure well-paying, respectable jobs (Tomlinson, 2008).

Nevertheless, as HE continues to expand in China, the HE system has undergone significant massification over recent decades, with the gross tertiary education enrolment ratio rising from 3% in 1990 to 75% in 2023 (World Bank, 2024). This expansion has led to credential inflation, where the value of educational qualifications declines as more people attain higher levels of education (Collins, 2002). As a result, graduates are no longer seen as a "privileged elite" and increasingly seek further distinction, such as more work experience and advanced degrees, to stay competitive. Despite the promise of a prosperous job future, many students find that their substantial effort in obtaining these qualifications does not yield the expected rewards (Kang & Mok, 2022). This discrepancy leaves young people confused and uncertain, facing high

educational expenses and declining job-market returns and growing disillusionment. On Chinese social media, graduates often express frustration at being unable to find jobs they feel reflect their education and dignity. As one noted, 'If I had never been to university, I would have no trouble accepting an assembly line job. But there is no what if' (Lin, 2023, p. 27). This saying suggests that having a university degree can make it difficult to accept a less socially accepted job due to guilt or inner conflict. For many young individuals, educational credentials are no longer an advantage for personal development; instead, they have become a constraint on growth and a source of psychological pressure (L. Zhang & Fu, 2023). In other words, young people who have received HE are often unwilling to settle for ordinary jobs that do not require a degree or require a lower degree. The problem is not that they cannot find employment—most could if they chose to—but rather that they are reluctant to accept positions they perceive as beneath their status, education, and expected compensation.

The perceived constraints and pressures associated with credentials, as discussed above, broadly refer to all graduates, as suggested by the literature. Additionally, based on the stratification of Chinese HE, these challenges are more pronounced for students from non-elite universities. This is because, according to the 2024 National List of Higher Education Institutions (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2024a), China has 3,119 HEIs, yet only 112 universities are included in Project 211, among which 39 universities are in the more selective Project 985. Universities within these projects are widely regarded as elite universities in China. A detailed explanation of these classifications and the stratification of Chinese HE will follow in Section 2.2. Given this structure, most students now attend non-elite universities. Therefore, when the literature refers broadly to all graduates, it is more likely to describe the experiences of non-elite graduates. This raises a critical question: does graduating from an elite university also bring added pressure to find jobs that reflect the perceived value of their degree? In this research, elite universities are defined as highly selective, academically prestigious institutions that attract top students and faculty and consistently rank at the

top of national and international league tables. This definition is used because such universities are generally believed to offer higher-quality education and greater labour market advantage due to their perceived prestige. Moreover, while debates continue over the distinctions between "credential", "qualification", and "degree", these terms are used interchangeably here, as such distinctions fall outside the scope of the study.

Therefore, this research aims to explore how graduates from China's most elite universities perceive the meaning of their credentials – whether as stepping stones to better job opportunities or as constraints limiting them to positions that match their educational backgrounds. Focusing on elite students is crucial, as their experiences may reveal whether even the most "valuable" credentials can create pressure or restriction – pressures likely to be more intense for those from less prestigious institutions. The study also examines the factors contributing to both positive and negative perceptions and whether any sense of restriction is driven by social expectations, personal reluctance, dissatisfaction, or other underlying factors.

This research is also informed by my own experience as a graduate of top global universities. While searching for internships or jobs, I often feel that some jobs, which seem less prestigious or respectable, are not suitable for me simply because I am studying at the University of Oxford. As a result, I sometimes feel that my career choices are restricted to only those that align with the prestige of my elite credentials. This has led me to explore how other students from Chinese elite universities perceive the meaning of their credentials in their job search process.

1.2. Research Questions

- How do graduates from the most elite universities in China perceive the role of their educational credentials in their job search?
  - To what extent do they feel helped or hindered by their credential?
  - What factors do they think influence their job choices?

1.3. Significance of this Research

This research is significant in three ways. Firstly, it addresses a critical gap in the literature. While much existing research focuses on 'overeducation' – the mismatch between degrees and job requirements (Boudarbat & Chernoff, 2012; Chillas, 2010; Tomlinson & Anderson, 2021) – few studies explore how students themselves determine which jobs match and which do not match their degrees and expectations. Put another way, existing literature often positions students as passive participants in the labour market, merely being selected by employers. In contrast, this study views students as active agents who make career decisions, exploring the types of jobs they aspire to and the role their expectations play in the job search process. Furthermore, most research highlights the advantages of educational credentials for employment, arguing that investment in HE provides graduates with positional advantages in the labour market (Tomlinson, 2008). However, this study focuses on the counteracting effects of educational credentials on employment, a notable gap in employability research.

Secondly, this study provides valuable insights for students, their families, and the wider public, encouraging reflection on whether elite credentials necessarily lead to better career prospects and reduced burdens. It may also resonate with students experiencing similar pressures, offering a form of support or validation for their current situation. Thirdly, this research will help HEIs and policymakers better understand how elite students perceive the meaning of their credentials. It urges them to consider solutions for the burdens and restrictions these students face in employment. Moreover, it prompts a critical reflection on why these issues persist and how policies can better support students navigating the job market.

1.4. Structure of this Dissertation

This dissertation is structured into five chapters. Chapter 1 has introduced the

background and rationale for this research, outlining its research questions and significance. Chapter 2 presents a literature review that defines key theories and concepts, introduces the Chinese HE system and labour market to provide context, and offers a comprehensive analysis of existing research both globally and within China. Chapter 3 details the research design, including the study's participants, data collection methods, data analysis approach, research quality and rigour, ethical considerations and researcher's positionality. Chapter 4 discusses the findings, organised by inductive themes identified during data analysis, and links them to the literature to address the research questions. Finally, Chapter 5 addresses the research questions, presents the study's conclusions, highlights its limitations and key implications, and offers suggestions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter first introduces the concept of educational credentials and two key theories for understanding such credentials' value and role. It then presents the Chinese HE and labour market context to provide background for this research. A balanced review of the positive and adverse impacts of credentials on graduate employment is presented, drawing on global and Chinese evidence. The chapter also discusses external influences that shape graduate job choice, including social context, family, and schools. Finally, it explores students' agency in navigating the labour market before concluding with a summary of gaps in the existing literature.

2.1. The Concept, Value, and Role of Educational Credentials

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a "credential" as "any document used as proof of identity or qualifications" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). While the term can refer broadly to any proof of skills, identity, or qualifications, an "educational credential" specifically refers to formal education. For clarity, this dissertation uses "credential" to mean "educational credential".

Educational credentials have been defined and interpreted through various theoretical lenses, each offering distinct explanations of their value and role. HCT is one of the most influential frameworks for understanding the link between education and employment. According to HCT, investment in education improves individuals' knowledge and skills, which raises their employability and productivity (Becker, 1994; Bowman, 1966). From this perspective, graduates of top universities – perceived to provide higher-quality education – are favoured by employers for their greater HC. Credentials thus represent real abilities and are rewarded with better job opportunities.

In contrast, credentialism emphasises the symbolic and exclusionary functions of credentials over their role as indicators of actual ability (Collins et al., 2019). It argues that credential competition reinforces social class divisions (D. K. Brown, 2001), with

degrees acting as cultural currency. In credentialist societies, higher-level or more prestigious credentials grant access to better jobs and higher incomes, not because of skills, but due to their relative scarcity (Hirsch, 2013). Since elite university degrees are scarcer, their holders enjoy a privileged position in the labour market. Employers use credentials to screen candidates, paying a premium for those who possess them. Accordingly, an individual's place in the labour market depends less on absolute merit than on their relative credentials (Bills, 2016). As HE expands, more people compete for these positional advantages (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; P. Brown, 2016), fuelling pressure to accumulate higher credentials or other advantages.

Another key feature of the credentialism discourse is its link to signalling theory (Bills, 2003; Spence, 1978). In labour markets where employers cannot directly assess a potential employee's abilities, they rely on proxies, signals, and prior experience in recruitment decisions (Spence, 1978). In this context, education-based signals—such as grades, degrees, and institutional prestige—help employers estimate a candidate's potential future performance (D. K. Brown, 2001). Therefore, degrees from higher-status universities or higher-level credentials are often seen as stronger signals in the labour market. Degrees function as screening devices to efficiently sort through large pools of applicants.

Educational credentials are formal degree certificates awarded by HEIs. This dissertation adopts two key definitions: from HCT, credentials reflect graduates' skills and knowledge; from credentialism, credentials serve as symbolic screening tools. This study uses both perspectives to explore better how participants understand the value of their credentials, not to endorse both views, but to provide a more nuanced analysis. Although HCT and credentialism may appear at odds, they reflect the reality of how people often perceive their education, combining ideas about both its practical value and its symbolic meaning. Using both lenses allows for a fuller understanding of participants' perceptions. Relying on one theory alone would be limiting: focusing only on credentialism would overlook the real skills graduates gain, while focusing solely

on HCT would ignore the social and symbolic functions of credentials in accessing prestigious jobs.

2.2. Chinese Higher Education and Labour Market

Following the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, China introduced a policy in 1999 to massively expand undergraduate enrolment to address economic and employment challenges (X. Li et al., 2023). This reform marked the start of rapid HE massification in China. University admission rates rose from 7% in 1978 to over 90% by 2020 (L. Zhang & Fu, 2023), with a key turning point in 1999 when the rate jumped from 34% to 56%, symbolising the shift from elite to mass HE (Trow, 1973). Meanwhile, the number of university graduates increased dramatically – from 165,000 in 1978 to 820,000 in 1998, surpassing 1 million annually after 1999 (Gan & Zhu, 2025). By 2025, 12.22 million students are expected to graduate (The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2024b), marking a seventy-fourfold increase over five decades. This rapid expansion was driven by both state policy and a long-standing Confucian emphasis on education (S. Guo & Guo, 2016). The Chinese saying that of all pursuits, studying is supreme reflects the cultural view that academic success is key to a better future (Lin, 2023; Lu & Jover, 2019). From this cultural perspective, attending a top-ranked university is widely seen as a ticket to a prestigious career, social recognition, and upward mobility (Wang & Wen, 2025). Accordingly, more and more people have pursued HE in the hope of changing their destinies.

However, as graduate numbers have outpaced demand for high-skilled jobs, the labour market has struggled to absorb them (X. Li et al., 2023). This mismatch has made it increasingly difficult for graduates to find roles that match their qualifications. Although labour-intensive industries have declined relatively, they still dominate China's economy, leaving many graduates underemployed in positions requiring only a high school education or less. This gap between aspirations and reality fuels frustration and disillusionment (X. Li et al., 2023). Credential inflation has worsened

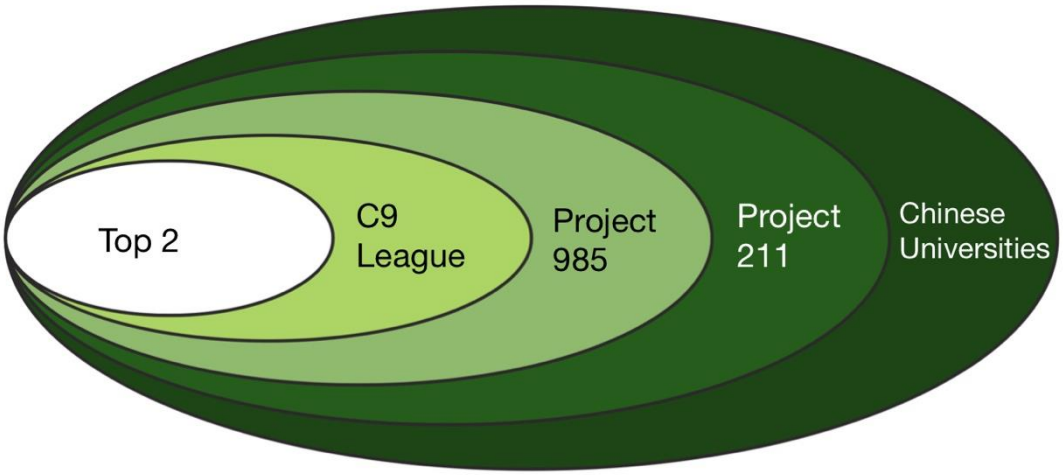
the issue, as employers raise hiring standards due to the oversupply of degree holders. In this context, a degree now serves more as a status symbol than proof of ability. This disillusionment is especially painful for students who were told that academic success would secure better futures (Lin, 2023). Many believed their credentials would change their destinies, only to find that the labour market tells a different story. While most literature addresses this disillusionment among all graduates, this study investigates whether students from China's most elite universities face similar experiences.

Rapid HE expansion has intensified positional competition in the labour market (P. Brown, 2003). The graduate labour market is characterised by "social congestion", with too many candidates competing for too few desirable positions (P. Brown, 2003). To stay competitive, students and their families often invest more in education. However, this inevitably leads to an "opportunity trap": while opting out means losing ground, universal participation eliminates any relative advantage (P. Brown, 2003). This drives demand for additional qualifications, such as postgraduate degrees, specialised certificates and overseas study. By 2023, the number of postgraduate applicants had increased 2.76 times from 2014 (Lin, 2023), further fuelling credential inflation. While P. Brown's research is UK-based and dated, his insights remain highly relevant to contemporary China.

HE expansion has also deepened stratification among institutions and students (Mok, 2016) (see Figure 1). When China launched its 1999 university expansion policy, it invested RMB 27 billion in 34 top universities under the Project 985, with 42% allocated to the elite "C9 League" institutions—especially Peking University and Tsinghua University (Allen, 2017; Fang et al., 2013). These two universities consistently top national and global rankings (see rankings from QS, 2025; ShanghaiRanking, 2024; Times Higher Education (THE), 2024) and are known for academic excellence, research strength and selectivity. From 2008 to 2017, they had the highest *Gaokao* (national college entrance examination) cut-off scores, admitting only top scorers and reinforcing their elite status and societal prestige (Y. Zhang & Zhu,

2024). All C9 universities rank among China's best and the global top 200. Their graduates benefit from strong employer recognition, with degrees seen as indicators of superior ability and education (Bao & Li, 2014).

However, while elite graduates enjoy relative advantages, credential inflation fuels anxiety at every level. Less-qualified students fear their degrees will no longer suffice as they compete with ever-growing numbers of postgraduates, especially as some employers now require advanced degrees (Xue, 2025). Meanwhile, even elite university graduates often face limited opportunities and unmet expectations. Despite the belief that higher credentials ensure better jobs and incomes, many struggle to find suitable work, leading to stress and disillusionment (X. Chen & Yuan, 2024; Xu & Ma, 2024). Therefore, this research explores how elite-university graduates perceive the value of their credentials in the job search: do they feel empowered by the traditional promise that education leads to success or restricted by unfulfilled expectations?



Top 2: Peking University and Tsinghua University, China's most prestigious and selective higher education institutions.
C9 League:an alliance of nine elite Chinese universities, often regarded as China's equivalent of the Ivy League.
Project 985: launched in 1998, is a government initiative that funded 39 top universities to become world-class research institutions.
Project 211: introduced in 1995, aimed to strengthen approximately 116 higher education institutions to support China's social and economic development.

Figure 1: Stratification of Chinese universities (Figure created by the author)

2.3. The Positive Role of Credentials in Graduate Employment

Graduates with HE credentials generally find it easier to obtain a job and often secure better positions than non-graduates, especially those from prestigious universities. This advantage stems from a key assumption in HCT: it is assumed that the labour market is meritocratic, rewarding the most capable and the most highly skilled (J. Robson, 2023). From this perspective, education that aligns with market needs is seen as more valuable. Elite universities typically provide higher-quality teaching and learning resources, broader academic networks, strong alumni support, and better internship opportunities. These factors allow their students to accumulate deeper knowledge and stronger practical skills, making them more competitive and more likely to achieve higher financial returns (Piketty, 2014). Alternatively, under signalling theory (Spence, 1978), some credentials are simply more highly valued by employers regardless of the skill level they directly impart. Either way, it is widely recognised that degrees from more prestigious institutions hold greater labour market value (Friedman & Laurison, 2020). Moreover, global data show that graduates consistently earn wage premiums over non-graduates (J. Robson, 2023). While these premiums may shrink as HE expands (van der Velden & Bijlsma, 2016), the financial returns to HE remain substantial and consistent relative to other levels of education.

Literature from both global and Chinese contexts consistently shows that credentials from elite universities provide significant advantages in the labour market. In the U.S., Katchadourian and Boli (1994) found that Stanford graduates often became part of the occupational elite. More recently, Chetty et al. (2023) showed that admission to an Ivy-Plus college (e.g., Ivy League, Stanford, MIT, Duke, and Chicago) greatly increases students' chances of reaching the top 1% of earners and landing jobs at prestigious firms. Rivera's (2016b) research underscores the symbolic value of elite credentials: top companies typically consider only candidates from prestigious universities or with insider referrals. In other words, applicants lacking this appropriate social capital are excluded from elite job opportunities, creating a closed, competitive environment where only the already privileged ever make it onto the playing field. For example,

students from target elite universities access fast-track hiring channels, while others are filtered out through general HR, where they are rarely given serious consideration (Rivera, 2016d). Recruiters justify this by associating selectivity with efficiency, arguing that focusing only on elite students saves time and costs (Rivera, 2016b). They believe that elite universities' rigorous admissions processes have already pre-screened capable candidates. Recruiters thus equate prestige with general intelligence and fast learning potential. Beyond efficiency, over 80% of surveyed U.S. employers in Rivera's (2016a) study valued school prestige not for curriculum quality but for its cultural and moral symbolism. They view an elite "pedigree" — both school and past employer status — as a marker of personal worth and future success (Rivera, 2016b). Similar patterns appear in the UK. Smetherham (2006) found that institutional reputation provides positional advantage in job competition, while P. Brown et al. (2004) noted that students themselves see elite education as enhancing earning potential. Collectively, this evidence suggests that elite university credentials remain a powerful determinant of labour market success.

Chinese research also affirms the importance of elite credentials. Mok et al. (2016) found that students widely believed a prestigious graduate degree improved job prospects. Similarly, Zheng et al. (2021) showed that as HE expands, returns to elite university degrees (especially from Project 985 institutions) exceed those from less well-known institutions, often outweighing the choice of major. This implies that attending a top university is often more valuable than choosing a popular major. Y. Zhou and Xie (2020) found that top-ranked universities offer significantly higher income returns, while non-elite degrees show little advantage over a high school education, reinforcing an "elite-maintaining" effect. More direct evidence comes from Jia and Li (2021), who studied students who scored just above or just below the *gaokao* cutoff for entering elite universities. Since these students had very similar academic abilities, differing only in whether they attended an elite or an ordinary university, this allowed the researchers to see the real impact of attending an elite university. Using

data from 2010 to 2015, they found that attending an elite university raises graduates' starting salaries by 28.3%–45.6%, with this advantage persisting for years. Similarly, L. Zhou et al. (2024) used a comparable design and 2019 survey data, finding that attending an elite university increased starting salaries by 68.8%, with premiums exceeding 100% for the Project 211 subsample, especially for lower-socioeconomic status students. These findings show that elite universities yield substantial wage premiums and enhance social mobility. Finally, Y. Li's (2017) research also indicates that Project 985 graduates are more likely to be employed quickly and are 1.72 times more likely to enter government or state-owned enterprises (SOEs) than non-elite graduates.

Unsurprisingly, HCT's promise – that HE leads to employability – has been widely embraced. Parents and students, drawn by the prospect of better jobs and futures, invest substantial resources into education. Research shows most students attend university to improve job prospects and quality of life (Ingram et al., 2023). Even those who claim to study for interest often acknowledge that a degree enhances employability, while others see HE simply as a credential that signals status to employers (Brooks et al., 2022). Many studies also show that students believe HE is worthwhile and that earning a degree from an elite university is especially important (J. Song, 2018; Wright & Wei, 2020).

However, credentials alone do not fully determine employment outcomes. In a globalised, massified HE system, family background often plays a more decisive role in social mobility (Mok, 2016). Students from affluent, educated, urban families benefit from greater social and cultural capital, including networks to prestigious internships, leadership roles, and elite study-abroad programmes (Wright & Wei, 2020). Indeed, elite credentials themselves tend to be more accessible to these privileged groups. As P. Brown (2000) noted, the middle classes have long relied on educational and cultural resources to maintain positional advantage in the labour market. Historically, elite credentials have reproduced class privilege and access to lucrative opportunities.

Similarly, in China, since the expansion of HE, attending university is no longer a guaranteed pathway to upward social mobility. Instead, the intergenerational reproduction of social stratification has been further entrenched (Ye & Ding, 2015). The unequal distribution of educational resources across social classes has widened the gaps in educational access, potentially leading to increasing social immobility and even social tensions. Yet substantial evidence shows that access to these selective institutions is far from equal.

More broadly, much research emphasises that graduates' job outcomes are shaped by social structures—networks, wealth, class, race, and gender—that extend beyond credentials alone (J. Robson, 2023). Success in the labour market cannot be attributed to credentials in isolation. Even so, despite declining returns, young people with a degree still have better job prospects than those without one (Mok, 2016).

2.4. The Adverse Effects of Credentials in Graduate Employment

While credentials still matter in the labour market, research increasingly shows their value is diminishing in today's highly competitive and saturated graduate job market (L. Guo & Wang, 2025; X. Li et al., 2023; Tomlinson, 2008). Many students feel that a degree no longer guarantees a good job, higher income, or upward social mobility (Mok, 2016). Although degrees still offer some advantages over non-graduates, graduates increasingly recognise that they must do more to stand out (P. Brown et al., 2004). Tomlinson (2008) found that students no longer expect to secure a graduate-level role on credentials alone, reflecting widespread anxiety about the declining exchange value of their degrees across labour markets. Several adverse effects of credentials have been discussed in the literature.

The first major adverse effect is 'overeducation' and education mismatch. Rapid HE expansion has distorted the supply-demand balance for graduate labour, intensifying competition among graduates. Many graduates struggle to find positions that match

their level of education and end up accepting jobs with lower educational requirements or little connection to their field of study, leading to widespread educational mismatch (S. Song, 2025; Xu & Ma, 2024). In China, Zheng et al. (2021) found that about half of online job seekers are overeducated – years of education exceed job requirements by at least two years, incurring wage penalties of up to 5.1%. Elite university graduates and those living in first-tier cities (China's most economically developed, internationally influential, and highly urbanised cities) face less overeducation and smaller penalties (Y. Zheng et al., 2021). In some cases, elite graduates even earn more in lower-skilled jobs, likely because their capabilities and institutional prestige help them stand out. However, these findings are based on intended job matches from an online platform, not final employment outcomes, and do not confirm whether elite graduates accept roles they perceive as beneath them. Even with lower wage penalties, elite graduates still experience considerable psychological pressure and anxiety during the job search (Y. Zheng et al., 2021).

The growing mismatch between idealised expectations and reality fuels widespread psychological pressure and anxiety. Berlant (2011) calls this "cruel optimism"—the painful disillusionment when promised futures fail to materialise. This pattern is evident globally. In the UK, university students often begin with hopes that a degree will transform their lives, only to find it does not guarantee their desired career or mobility. This gap between aspirations and reality causes distress, yet most still hold on to their faith in education (Ingram et al., 2023). In Russia, many young people face similar disappointment and insecurity as they encounter a job market that cannot match their ambitions, especially without prior work experience (Burlutskaia, 2014). In China, this disillusionment is even deeper. Historically, HE was seen as a secure path to success, with beliefs like "study is the only way out" and the *gaokao* as the gateway to a bright future (L. Guo & Wang, 2025). However, as HE has expanded, credentials have suffered inflation and lost value; unmet expectations lead to frustration and emotional strain, especially for families who invested heavily in education (L. Zhang & Fu, 2023).

The gap between aspirations and the kinds of "ordinary" work graduates end up with often intensifies this disillusionment, especially as they navigate the difficult identity shift from "the pride of the family" to "just another worker". This gap can lead to lasting psychological strain (L. Guo & Wang, 2025; L. Zhang & Fu, 2023).

However, some scholars may argue that one can never be overeducated if they value education for its own sake (Capsada-Munsech, 2017). This highlights the need to clarify the purpose of HE. Traditionally, HEIs serve three core missions: education, research, and public service (Scott, 2006). However, with the mass expansion of HE and graduate oversupply, there is growing pressure on universities to prepare students for employment (Cheng et al., 2021). While this dissertation does not engage in broader debates about the role of HEIs, it acknowledges that employability is one of the key roles of HEIs nowadays. Research shows many students now prioritise, or even solely pursue, HE for better job prospects (Guan & Blair, 2022; M. Li & Bray, 2007; Liu & Morgan, 2016). Therefore, focusing on whether and how HEIs prepare students for the labour market is essential. Within this context, 'overeducation' in this dissertation refers more to an objective perception—when one's level of education exceeds the requirements of their job.

Another adverse effect of credentials is their tendency to narrow students' career choices. Many highly educated young people hesitate to accept positions they view as beneath their credentials, fearing such roles would waste their educational investment and their family's sacrifices. This mindset reflects deeply internalised ideas of status and prestige, reinforced by social expectations. Under pressure to live up to their elite university background, students often view only high-prestige roles as acceptable, drawing sharp boundaries between "desirable" elite work and "ordinary" jobs. Binder et al. (2016) describe this as the "career funnelling" effect: elite universities, rather than opening limitless career options, may actually restrict students' choices. However, students from elite and disadvantaged backgrounds who attend elite universities may face different forms of pressure. For example, students from elite backgrounds may

fear downward mobility, which creates additional stress. In contrast, students from disadvantaged backgrounds may feel a strong obligation to repay family sacrifices by securing prestigious jobs. Moreover, Rivera (2016b) found that many enter competitive industries like investment banking, consulting, or top law firms not because of interest, but to protect their elite identity, stay competitive with peers, meet social expectations, and justify the enormous cost of their education. Elite institutions often promote the idea that their students are "the best of the best", leading students to believe that they deserve only the most prestigious careers (Rivera, 2016c). Schools shape their ideas of what counts as high-status, elite work versus "ordinary" work, so much so that students feel they cannot consider the latter. In Binder et al.'s (2016) interviews, one Stanford graduate cared deeply about education but felt she could not become a teacher because it failed to match her elite Stanford graduate status. (The impact of schools will be discussed further in the next section.)

In China, these restrictive dynamics are particularly pronounced. Thirty years ago, HE was elite education in China, and students proudly saw themselves as part of society's top tier. However, since HE massification, credential inflation has weakened the link between degrees and social status. Despite elite degrees no longer guaranteeing upward mobility, the ideal of elite status remains deeply ingrained (L. Chen & Zheng, 2023). Therefore, many graduates express frustration and unwillingness to accept "ordinary" jobs on social media, with related topics generating over 640 million views (L. Guo & Wang, 2025). Family expectations further make it difficult for students to accept less prestigious work—many feel it is not just their future at stake but the hopes of their entire family (L. Guo & Wang, 2025). With such heavy investments of time and money in education, stepping down into an "ordinary" career feels even more impossible. Public opinion reinforces this pressure – cases like a Peking University graduate selling pork or a doctorate holder working as a delivery driver are widely criticised as wasted education (Xuan, 2024). This further intensifies pressure on highly educated graduates to pursue only jobs that match their credentials. As a result, for many Chinese youth, a

degree no longer facilitates their personal development; instead, it increasingly feels like a constraint and a heavy psychological burden.

However, much of the existing literature in China is conceptual and often blames students' unrealistic expectations or personal flaws. Xue (2025), for example, argues students remain trapped in outdated beliefs and "imaginative illusions" about work, lacking a practical employment outlook despite broader access to HE. Chu et al. (2024) similarly argue that elite credentials may disconnect students from their class background. Imagining themselves at a higher social level, they become overly selective and cautious in their job search, viewing most roles as beneath them and ending up caught between unrealistic aspirations and limited options. Likewise, Gan and Zhu (2025) note that many graduates have little awareness of their true career interests or strengths and struggle to adapt to a rapidly massified HE system. This leaves them indecisive and dissatisfied, unable to find work that matches their expectations. In these accounts, structural inequalities, external factors, and systemic causes all disappear from view. Labour market successes and failures are treated as purely individual responsibilities. Therefore, the next section explores the influence of external factors on employment and examines the role of student agency.

2.5. External Influence and Student Agency on Graduate Job Choice

2.5.1. External Factors Influencing Job Choices

No one makes career decisions without some pragmatic reasoning, which is influenced by their social position, personal experience, and others' influence (Hodkinson, 2009). Many external factors may influence one's job choices, including family, school, economic conditions, social norms, culture, gender, race, age, personal experiences, etc. This review focuses on three main influences: the broader social environment, family, and schools. Given the richness of Chinese literature on social and family factors, this discussion draws primarily from Chinese sources. However, due to limited Chinese

research on universities' influence, relevant international studies are used to illustrate processes that also apply in China.

Broader social factors — including economic conditions, cultural traditions, and social norms — shape graduates' career choices. Firstly, the labour market and socioeconomic structure ultimately determine wages and job availability, not HEIs (J. Robson, 2023). Graduate employability is never absolute; it is a relative commodity because the value of a degree depends on the state of the job market, not on education itself (Guan & Blair, 2022). During labour shortages, even the long-term unemployed may find work; during downturns, even highly qualified graduates may struggle. For example, as China faces mounting economic pressure over the years, many small and large enterprises are closing or laying off workers. This economic uncertainty has become a major concern for graduates, leading them to favour stable jobs that guarantee long-term security (Fan et al., 2022). Many students, therefore, aim for public-sector roles such as civil service or SOE positions, which offer greater job security, better benefits, lighter workloads, and higher social status (Chun et al., 2024; Y. Li, 2017). Thus, labour market conditions play a key role in shaping graduates' career choices.

Social and cultural expectations also exert a profound influence on graduates' career choices. Deep-seated beliefs like those who excel in their studies become officials have long shaped expectations that bright students will aim for civil service or public-sector roles (L. Zhang & Fu, 2023). Similarly, the widespread view that a "respectable" career is an office or white-collar role, rather than manual or blue-collar work, reinforces the sense that managerial roles are more prestigious and preferable (Xuan, 2024). Moreover, after decades of associating HE with upward mobility, society expects degrees to lead to good jobs, making it difficult for graduates to accept lower-status work (L. Guo & Wang, 2025). Some graduates are more concerned about social judgement than the job itself, with some feeling ashamed by comments like, "You studied all those years just to do this?" This underlines that anxiety about social perceptions often steers them away from "ordinary" jobs (L. Zhang & Fu, 2023).

Family also plays a crucial role in shaping students' career choices due to parents' high expectations, substantial sacrifices, and the various forms of capital they possess. In traditional Chinese culture, parents often see their children as a natural extension of themselves, fostering a strong altruistic motivation within families (L. Guo & Wang, 2025). Parents tend to equate a university with better jobs and a better life. However, as HE has expanded, graduates must take positions they once considered beneath them. In reality, a considerable number of young people say they are willing to put aside their pride and take up ordinary jobs, but their families cannot accept this (L. Zhang & Fu, 2023). Some parents still impose notions like "You must not have worked hard enough" or "You're a university graduate—why can't you find a decent job?" This only heightens students' anxiety about their credentials (Lin, 2023). While parental expectations can motivate students, they often exceed both labour market realities and students' own aspirations (Hu & Xu, 2024). Excessive pressure and overinvolvement can result in psychological stress and unhealthy competition.

Moreover, Chinese parents invest substantially in their children's education. Reports show that raising a child to age 18 in China costs about 6.9 times per capita GDP — one of the highest ratios globally — compared to 2.08 in Australia and 4.11 in the U.S. (Liang et al., 2024). This indicates that educational spending accounts for a significant share of household expenses in China and places a heavy burden on families. Therefore, many students grow up witnessing their parents' endured hardships to support their education. Hoping to give their parents a more comfortable life—and influenced by their parents' repeated insistence that they should not follow in their footsteps of difficult, low-status work—many students naturally aspire to more prestigious and less arduous careers (Lin, 2023). Because of this, they fear disappointing their parents or betraying their sacrifices to accept low-status jobs. Coupled with a competitive job market, these high expectations create intense anxiety and pressure.

Parents' capital and background also significantly influence graduates' employment outcomes. Wen (2005) found that students from advantaged families have greater

access to jobs, further study, and higher starting salaries. Many other studies confirm that most students believe parents' economic and social capital greatly affect their job prospects (Bao & Li, 2014; Mok, 2016; Mok & Wu, 2016). This may be because students from wealthier families can prioritise interest over income and benefit from parental networks, which help secure jobs more easily. Indeed, the proportion of graduates receiving parental help with their first job rose from 10.6% to 18.7% after HE massification in China (Mok & Jiang, 2017). Beyond economic and social capital, cultural capital also matters. Parents with higher cultural capital—for example, those who provide a rich educational environment, model professional behaviours, and participate in elite cultural activities—can improve their children's career prospects (L. Guo & Wang, 2025). Moreover, highly educated parents can offer practical, insightful career guidance, helping their children navigate the job market more effectively (X. Chen & Yuan, 2024). Overall, students with greater economic, social, and cultural capital generally have better employment outcomes.

Universities also shape graduates' choices by steering them toward certain career paths. Rivera (2016c) found that although many students enter university with little knowledge of professions like finance or consulting, most end up pursuing these "elite professional services" (EPS) by graduation. Campus culture—through social atmosphere, informal curricula, peer comparisons, and the allure of an elite lifestyle—systematically channels students into EPS firms, even when these may not match their interests. Elite universities reinforce this by partnering with EPS firms that dominate on-campus recruiting, hosting networking events and creating the impression that only these careers are truly desirable (Rivera, 2016c). Since students typically arrive with limited career awareness, they quickly internalise shared assumptions about what is "elite" or too "ordinary", completing a funnelling process that restricts their options (Binder et al., 2016). This reflects Bourdieu's (1996) argument that universities shape students' identities through institutional power — for example, by engaging with certain companies that signal which professions suit people like them. While this may

also relate to elite campuses' social class mix or cultural logics, Binder et al. (2016) show that students at the same elite universities tend to view the same careers as prestigious. This underscores the influence of the university itself on graduates' career decisions.

2.5.2. Student Agency in Navigating the Labour Market

Although external factors influence graduates' career choices, they are not merely passive recipients — they actively participate in the decision-making process. At the very least, they must give their consent to pursue an opportunity, and they can also refuse options presented to them (Hodkinson, 2009). Even if some students lack agency due to unclear goals or unrealistic expectations (Xu & Ma, 2024), many contemporary students show considerable autonomy. Faced with job market disillusionment, graduates often demonstrate agency by adjusting their mindsets and strategies to navigate the labour market more effectively. They recognise that individual abilities matter more than credentials and believe they should choose careers based on their skills and interests (Wang & Wen, 2025). Some value HE for non-employment-related reasons such as academic motivations (M. Li & Bray, 2007), personal growth (X. H. Zheng, 2003), and intellectual enrichment (Jung, 2021). Graduates now also care more about "spiritual fit"–seeking careers aligned with their values and psychological needs–over material rewards (L. Zhang & Fu, 2023). In addition, students' expectations of an ideal career have broadened beyond salary to include comfort, autonomy, low stress, and whether the company's culture and role align with their interests and passions (Xuan, 2024). Some even proactively adjust their career paths and mindsets. For example, one student who initially refused to take an "ordinary" job gradually accepted that being "ordinary" could also lead to personal fulfilment (Xuan, 2024). This process of redefining success and adjusting one's expectations shows that graduates are actively navigating a complex and competitive environment.

Although parental expectations remain influential, contemporary students develop

increasing self-awareness as they grow up and broaden their horizons, especially in today's digitally connected society (Wang & Wen, 2025). This allows them to form their own career goals. In this sense, parents' expectations and students' aspirations shape each other. Of course, parents' reactions matter too — some support their children's career choices, while others pressure them to change their plans, which can cause inner conflicts or family tensions. Even so, this dynamic reveals that graduates have their own views and autonomy rather than simply following parental wishes or societal expectations. In short, while structural forces — including family, school, and society — impose significant constraints, students still have the capacity to make active, conscious choices and adjustments, even within relatively limited options.

2.6. Gaps in the Literature

The research fills a critical gap in understanding how students with elite credentials perceive the meaning of their qualifications in the job search process. Most existing empirical studies focus on non-Chinese contexts, such as the U.S. (Binder et al., 2016), while Chinese research is often conceptual rather than empirical (Chan & Zhang, 2021; L. Zhang & Fu, 2023). Additionally, much of the existing literature emphasises overeducation and labour market mismatch (S. Song, 2025; Xu & Ma, 2024), portraying students as passive participants in their job search. By shifting the focus to students as active decision-makers, this study explores their personal interpretations of their credentials and career choices. Furthermore, limited research specifically examines elite universities; most studies consider HE graduates broadly, without differentiating by institution (L. Guo & Wang, 2025; X. Li et al., 2023; Lin, 2023). Given that gaining a position at elite universities may indicate that students invest significant time, effort, and financial resources in their education, their perspectives deserve greater attention.

While much of the literature highlights the benefits of elite credentials, this study examines their potential limitations. To address the lack of empirical work in China, 18

final-year master's students from Peking University and Tsinghua University were interviewed to understand how they interpret their credentials and what factors shape their career decisions.

3. METHODOLOGY & ETHICS

This chapter discusses the methodology used in this research. It begins by outlining the research design, which employs a qualitative approach and semi-structured interviews, explaining the rationale behind these choices. It then describes participant selection criteria, recruitment methods, and the data collection process, followed by an explanation of thematic analysis. Quality and rigour are addressed through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness framework, which ensures the reliability and validity of a study within a qualitative research context. Ethical considerations are also discussed. Finally, the researcher's positionality is acknowledged. Together, this discussion aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this research and to ensure its trustworthiness and authenticity.

3.1. Research Design

This research employed a qualitative approach to gain a detailed understanding of how graduates from elite Chinese universities perceive the role of their credentials in job seeking. Specifically, it explores whether they feel supported or constrained by their prestigious credentials. Given that this study focuses on students' perceptions and experiences, a qualitative approach is the most suitable, as it effectively captures and describes feelings and experiences rather than predicting or testing outcomes (Bell & Waters, 2018; Durdella, 2019). Furthermore, qualitative research offers a detailed and thorough insight into the personal and contextual elements that shape graduates' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To develop "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 2008) of participants' perceptions, this research requires a nuanced understanding of their experiences. Qualitative methods are well suited for uncovering underlying reasons and factors (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), offering insights into individual perceptions, social and cultural expectations, family influences, and labour market demands—aligning well with the study's objectives.

This research employed semi-structured online interviews with 18 participants to explore their perceptions of their prestigious credentials. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their adaptability. Unlike structured interviews or surveys, semi-structured interviews allow flexibility in question wording and order, enabling follow-up questions based on participants' responses (Punch & Oancea, 2014; C. Robson & McCartan, 2016). Researchers can thus pursue in-depth probing of participants' perceptions and adjust questions according to the flow of conversation (Denscombe, 2014). This approach encourages spontaneity and clarification, leading to a more thorough exploration of the topic. This approach also facilitates the collection of rich, open-ended data on personal feelings, experiences, and opinions, allowing interviewers to probe deeper, clarify misunderstandings, and gain nuanced insights (Hatch, 2002; Opdenakker, 2006). For interviewees, semi-structured interviews offer the opportunity to elaborate on their thoughts and considerations through open-ended questions (Cohen et al., 2017a). Given that the research focuses on subjective perceptions and personal experiences, this method was deemed the most appropriate data collection tool (Flick, 2022). Additionally, non-verbal cues—such as tone, facial expressions, and hesitation—offer valuable context that written responses cannot provide (Bell & Waters, 2018). However, conducting effective semi-structured interviews requires interviewers to possess certain skills and experience, and the lack of standardisation inevitably raises concerns about reliability. Despite these challenges, their effectiveness and common use in social research are well-established, with numerous successful applications in similar recent studies (see examples, Binder et al., 2016; L. Guo & Wang, 2025; Tomlinson & Anderson, 2021).

3.2. Research Participants

This research recruited 18 final-year master's students from Peking University (PKU) or Tsinghua University (THU) who were actively seeking jobs. Selection criteria were: 1) final-year master's students, 2) from PKU or THU, and 3) currently looking for a job (Table 1). Master's students were chosen because most undergraduates at elite

Chinese universities pursue further study before entering the job market. Final-year master's students were selected specifically because they have typically gone through the full job recruitment process and are more likely to have developed clear experiences and perceptions of how their credentials influence their job search. PKU and THU were selected because they are the top two universities in China (see Section 2.2). They were chosen specifically because this research aims to explore the meaning of HE credentials for graduates from China's elite universities, as existing studies have already examined the broader group of non-elite universities' graduates. They were also chosen because if even the most elite universities can impose certain constraints, this is likely even more true for less elite universities.

Due to time constraints and the need for accessibility and identity verification, convenience and snowball sampling were used, acknowledging potential biases (Davies & Hughes, 2014). 8 participants were recruited via direct social media outreach, 6 via friends' reposting my recruitment poster, and 4 through participants' referrals using snowball sampling. This brought the total sample to 18. The sample includes 13 females and 5 males. While gender balance was intended, more females responded through my predominantly female networks and social media. As gender is not central and responses showed little variation by gender, this does not impact validity. The sample also includes 7 participants from PKU and 11 from THU. Despite efforts to balance, more THU students joined due to existing connections and referrals. Since the study does not compare the two universities, this distribution is acceptable, with both groups providing valuable insights.

Participants came from diverse academic backgrounds, leading to a wide range of target industries in their job search. As this qualitative study aims to generate new perspectives and insights rather than broad generalisations, the inclusion of participants with varied backgrounds helps enrich the data by providing diverse responses. Additionally, although several participants were unwilling to disclose their family backgrounds, most appeared to come from materially stable families, without being

exclusively from highly privileged backgrounds. This is beneficial, as highly privileged students may hold atypical views on credentials. For example, they might care less about credentials' impact on employment due to access to family-provided opportunities.

The small sample size was selected because of time constraints and the study's emphasis on gaining a detailed understanding rather than making broad statistical generalisations. Consequently, the findings reflect the experiences of the sampled individuals and are not intended to be broadly generalisable.

A small financial reward (100 RMB) was provided upon completion of the interviews to encourage participation and express appreciation for the participants' time and participation.

Pseudo	University	Major (Research Area)	Gender
Anna	PKU	Law	Female
Cookie	PKU	Journalism and Communication	Female
Cello	PKU	Broadcasting and Television	Female
Daisy	PKU	Pharmacy	Female
Fiona	PKU	Law	Female
Luke	PKU	Diplomacy	Male
Lily	PKU	Financial Management	Female
Bella	THU	Electronic Information (Interactive Media Design & Technology)	Female
Lulu	THU	Psychology and Cognitive Science	Female
Vicky	THU	Electronic Information (Precision Instruments)	Female
Emma	THU	Law	Female
Tom	THU	Materials and Chemical Engineering	Male
Grace	THU	Social Psychology	Female
Hannah	THU	Education	Female
Ryan	THU	Education Economics and Management	Male
Kate	THU	Higher Education	Female
Oliver	THU	Management	Male
Victor	THU	Cyberspace Security	Male

Table 1: Participants' Information

3.3. Data Collection

All interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams to save travel time and resources (C. Robson & McCartan, 2016), as all participants were based in China and busy with graduation and job searching. Conducting interviews online provided greater convenience for both the researcher and participants, allowing interviews to be scheduled flexibly across different locations (Phellas et al., 2012). Additionally, this approach increased participants' willingness to take part in the study. However, online interviews may be less effective than face-to-face ones, as limited access to body language, facial expressions, or eye contact may reduce data richness.

Before the interviews, participants were contacted via email and provided with a Participation Information Sheet (Appendix A) and Consent Form (Appendix B), along with an opportunity to ask questions or seek clarification. Those who agreed to participate received the interview appointment schedule and were required to return a signed consent form. Sending the interview appointment schedule in advance allows for a mutually agreed-upon time slot for the interview, enabling both the researcher and participants to plan their schedules accordingly. To ensure full understanding, both documents were provided in both English and Chinese. Participants were fully briefed and gave informed consent for recorded interviews stored securely on my Oxford OneDrive. They were informed of their right to withdraw at any time and that data would be retained for at least 3 years, per Oxford policy.

The interview questions (Appendix C) were crafted to be open-ended and impartial, aiming to minimise bias and prompt participants to share detailed reflections on their educational and family experiences, views, and how they perceive the impact of their elite university credentials in their job search. Each interview began with a brief time focused on building rapport, ensuring participants felt comfortable expressing their views openly. Establishing trust was especially important in an online setting, where the sense of connection between researcher and participant might be weaker (Orgad,

2005), and non-verbal cues such as body language and facial expressions were harder to interpret. The live video function on Teams helped mitigate this challenge. However, participants who preferred not to turn on their cameras were informed of their right to keep them off. While the interviewer encouraged video use to facilitate rapport, participant preferences were fully respected. Out of all 18 interviews, 6 participants chose to keep their cameras on, while 12 preferred to keep them off. While the absence of non-verbal cues is acknowledged as a potential limitation, having cameras off may have helped participants feel safer and more comfortable, encouraging them to share more openly.

Interviews took place between April and May 2025, each lasting around an hour. All interviews were recorded via Teams for accurate transcription and analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis

This study utilised an inductive approach for data analysis, employing thematic analysis due to its flexibility and effectiveness in exploring complex qualitative data. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process, which includes data familiarisation, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Thematic analysis was chosen for its ability to detect recurring patterns of meaning within the dataset, making it a valuable tool for interpreting qualitative phenomena (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013).

To ensure accuracy and readability, all interviews were transcribed immediately after each session, maintaining data integrity and reducing recall bias. Since the interviews were conducted in Mandarin, transcripts were initially produced in Mandarin to ensure no misinterpretation occurred at this early data analysis stage. Once transcriptions were completed, I printed and thoroughly reviewed the data to enhance familiarity. Using different coloured highlighters, I marked sections that related to my research questions.

These excerpts were then assigned preliminary descriptive codes and systematically arranged in a table based on their relevance. This initial phase yielded approximately 80 codes. Recognising the challenge of manually grouping and analysing such a large number of codes using pen and paper, I transitioned to an electronic mind-mapping tool. This tool allowed for greater flexibility in organising the data, as it enabled me to easily move codes, visually map relationships, and restructure themes as needed. For example, reassigning several codes under a different theme would be cumbersome by hand but could be done quickly and intuitively using the mind map. An example of this process is provided in Appendix D. Following the initial coding, I used the mind-mapping tool to group related codes into broader themes. Some codes were excluded at this stage if they were too marginal or did not meaningfully contribute to the research objectives. Through multiple rounds of refinement, I identified seven preliminary themes, which were subsequently reviewed, renamed, and ranked by relevance. After further consolidation, three key themes emerged, which will be discussed in detail in later sections. To enhance reliability, the study adopted a systematic and iterative approach to thematic analysis, involving multiple rounds of coding and theme validation to ensure consistency and accuracy in theme identification (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Prior to completing the analysis, a thorough review of all themes and codes was carried out to ensure the findings were clear and consistent.

To avoid the loss of meaning and nuance and to limit the influence of my own subjectivity, I postponed translation until after completing all coding and code grouping in the original language. This approach helped minimise interpretation bias that could occur if the data were translated too early. If meaning is misinterpreted at the outset, subsequent analysis may further amplify that misunderstanding, leading to compounded distortion through subjective interpretation. I acknowledged that transcription and translation are interpretative processes, where transcribers and translators may inadvertently introduce their own biases, affecting objectivity (Duff & Roberts, 1997). To minimise this risk, translation tools, specifically Google Translate,

were used to convert Chinese interviews into English, helping to reduce subjective influence. Another reason for using translation tools is that I am not a native English speaker and may not always translate Chinese accurately into English. Additionally, using translation tools helped save time.

3.5. Quality and Rigour

Quality and rigour are central to this research. As there is no universal standard for evaluating the quality of qualitative research (Flick, 2007), this study adopts Lincoln and Guba's (1985) widely recognised trustworthiness framework. Originally designed for qualitative education research, this framework offers a flexible, structured approach applicable across various research paradigms (Shenton, 2004). The framework defines trustworthiness through four key criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which together ensure the study's reliability and validity within a qualitative context.

Credibility, similar to internal validity in quantitative research, ensures that findings accurately reflect participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Essentially, credibility relates to the trustworthiness and accuracy of a study's interpretations based on the original data (Ryan et al., 2013). This study enhances credibility in several ways. First, the literature review identifies research gaps and situates the topic within existing scholarship, aligning with Silverman's (2021) view that strong qualitative research connects meaningfully to prior knowledge. Second, interview questions were developed through a thorough literature review and refined through regular supervisory discussions, ensuring they reflected the research focus rather than personal bias. These meetings with my supervisors also provided external input to reduce subjectivity and clarify interpretations. Third, steps were taken to encourage participant honesty. Participation was voluntary, and interviewees were assured there were no 'right' answers. Early rapport-building helped create a comfortable environment for open, authentic responses.

Transferability, like external validity or generalisability in quantitative research, concerns the applicability of findings to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Unlike generalisability, which extends results to a broader population, transferability relies on whether readers find the findings relevant to their own settings (Shenton, 2004). To support transferability, this study provides rich contextual details and "thick description" of the research design and process, allowing readers to assess relevance and trace how conclusions were reached. As such, the findings may be applicable to institutions with similar scale and student demographics, especially other elite universities.

Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of research findings over time and under varying conditions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It suggests that similar results would be reached if the study were repeated using the same methods. Given the dynamic nature of social contexts, maintaining dependability can be challenging (Silverman, 2020b). To enhance dependability, this study provides a transparent, systematic account of each research stage—including data collection, coding, category development, and data organisation—creating a clear audit trail for assessing methodological reliability (Ryan et al., 2013).

Confirmability ensures that research findings reflect participants' perspectives rather than researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study supports confirmability by acknowledging the researcher's beliefs and assumptions in the positionality section, reflecting on potential biases. As Miles and Huberman (1994) note, acknowledging one's predispositions is key to confirmability. The study also clearly explains methodological choices, justifies selected approaches, and openly addresses the limitations of the methods used.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided every stage of this study in strict accordance with the British Educational Research Association's (BERA, 2018) guidelines. Additionally, the

research received ethical approval from the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) at the University of Oxford (Appendix E), with data collection commencing only after approval was secured. As detailed in the Data Collection section, participants were informed of the study's purpose and provided voluntary consent through signed forms, including agreement to audio recording. All recordings and transcripts were securely stored in a password-protected OneDrive account, accessible only to the researcher. In compliance with the *Data Protection Act* (2018), data will be stored securely until the dissertation is completed, then retained on Oxford servers for three years. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all personal identifiers were removed to protect participants from any potential risks related to disclosing sensitive information.

To minimise researcher bias, interviews used neutrally phrased, non-leading questions, and care was taken to address potential power imbalances that might influence responses. Participants may, either consciously or unconsciously, modify their answers to align with what they believe the researcher expects, which could affect data accuracy (Anyan, 2013). However, the flexible interview format helped mitigate this issue. Follow-up questions allowed participants to clarify and expand on their responses, while the researcher maintained a neutral stance to minimise any undue influence. To further support participants, they were regularly reminded of the study's aims and reassured that there were no correct or incorrect responses. Moreover, to ensure accessibility and allow participants to engage with the research findings, the analysis and results were translated into Chinese.

3.7. Researcher's Positionality

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the main instrument for collecting and analysing data (Ochieng, 2009), making their perspective and position highly impactful. As a final-year master's student at a prestigious university who has also navigated the job market, I share many commonalities with my participants. This insider status may

have led participants to view me as someone who understands their experiences, potentially strengthening rapport and facilitating more open conversations. However, this familiarity may have also resulted in response bias, where participants assumed shared knowledge and withheld certain details or provided less explicit responses. To address this, I frequently posed clarifying and follow-up questions during interviews to ensure responses were fully explored.

Researcher positionality also affects data analysis, as theme identification and interpretation are inevitably shaped by the researcher's own experiences and perspectives (Duff & Roberts, 1997). While I sought to allow themes to emerge inductively from the data, I recognise that my academic background in HE and my similarities with participants influenced how I interpreted the data. Acknowledging this subjectivity is crucial in ensuring transparency in the research process.

Research limitations will be discussed in the conclusion chapter.

4. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings and discussion of the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 18 last-year, job-seeking graduates from PKU or THU, exploring their perceptions of their credentials, factors shaping their career choices, and how they adapt in the job market. This chapter is organised around three key themes: the advantages ("Halo") and constraints ("Shackles") of elite credentials; external influences on career choices, comprising expectations from family, socio-cultural norms, and universities, as well as restrictions from macro-level socio-economic conditions; and elite graduates' self-agency and adaptation to these external influencers. Findings are discussed in relation to existing literature. As interviews were conducted in Mandarin, all quotations are translated. All names used are pseudonyms.

4.1. Elite Credential: Halo and Shackles

This theme explores the benefits and constraints of elite credentials. I use the terms "Halo" and "Shackles" because many participants used these words to describe their credentials. The meaning and specific impacts of these terms will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

4.1.1. The Halo Effect: Advantages in Job Hunting

Participants described their credentials as a "halo", a metaphor that evokes positive qualities such as honour, excellence, and distinction. In their view, elite credentials served as visible markers that immediately set them apart in the labour market. Two main advantages emerged from their accounts.

Firstly, nearly all participants viewed their credentials as an "entry ticket" that helped them smoothly pass initial CV screening and progress to subsequent rounds, including interviews and written tests. Without such credentials, they felt they would not even have the opportunity to compete, regardless of their actual abilities. As Tom explained:

> *"In the labour market, employers look at your credentials first because abilities are hard to measure. They are busy, so credentials are an easy filter – now even computers screen for them." (Tom)*

Credentials thus are perceived to act as efficient screening tools, opening doors in a crowded market, enabling access to opportunities that might otherwise be unavailable. This mirrors Brooks et al. (2022), who found that students across Europe viewed credentials as a necessary "piece of paper" to enter the employment competition. Similarly, here, credentials were largely viewed as providing positional advantage — an edge that comes not from absolute ability, but from standing higher in the educational hierarchy relative to others, consistent with credentialism. This is because credentials from highly selective institutions are often assumed to provide powerful signals of superior status to employers (P. Brown, 2016). Several participants, including Anna and Bella, said employers appeared to assume graduates of PKU and THU were stronger candidates. This aligns with Rivera's (2016a) finding that employers trust elite universities to have pre-screened candidates, saving time and recruitment costs. It also reflects how elite credentials strengthen positional advantage through signalling: employers believe such graduates are more likely to possess the qualities they value (Bills, 2003).

However, 14 participants felt their elite credentials were most useful at the initial CV screening stage, with their impact diminishing in later rounds, where abilities, experiences, luck, and hard work mattered more. This suggests that participants perceive credentials primarily serve as early-stage filters, which reflects the definition of credentials under credentialism (Collins et al., 2019). It also highlights the limits of credentials: an elite credential is not everything and cannot guarantee success. The perceived diminishing value of elite credentials echoes Mok's (2016) finding that an HE degree no longer ensures a good job or higher income. This is evident as most of my participants did not have a smooth job-seeking process; despite holding the most prestigious credentials in China, many experienced struggles and setbacks.

Participants also observed that industries value credentials differently, with government-affiliated positions and SOEs perceived as valuing them the most. Many participants highlighted a unique advantage of holding a PKU or THU degree: eligibility for the targeted civil servant selection programme (定向选调生). According to their explanations, this programme is an exclusive fast-track recruitment system designed for future government leaders, which handpicks top graduates from elite universities. Amid economic challenges and COVID-19, government jobs have become increasingly popular for their security, benefits, lighter workloads, and higher status (Chun et al., 2024). This programme often leads to a faster and more privileged pathway into government positions, often leading to quicker promotions and opportunities to work in national-level government sectors. As a result, many participants saw their PKU or THU credentials as providing a privileged fast-track into the government sector — to some, this was the most significant advantage of their degree. In this study, 7 of 18 participants applied for the programme, and 4 planned to enter the government through it. These accounts reflect participants' understanding of how elite credentials act as tools of social control and selection in credentialism, carrying symbolic value and limiting access to privileged groups (Collins et al., 2019).

Beyond noting these perceptions of the public sector roles, which tend to prefer credentials, many participants observed that private companies, especially tech-driven ones, often prioritise skills and experience. Emma and Victor cited Internet companies that were seen as preferring candidates who can contribute immediately and help improve efficiency. However, Vicky and Kate described a different type of tech-driven private company. They used Build Your Dreams (BYD), a leading Chinese electric vehicle manufacturer, as a representative example. According to Kate, these companies like BYD are "signalling theory believers", meaning they place strong importance on academic qualifications. Kate explained:

> *"When you apply to these companies with a PKU or THU degree, it's like you're guaranteed the job, whether your major fits or not. In these companies, graduates from prestigious universities even earn higher salaries than their line*

managers from less prestigious institutions." (Kate)

This suggests that for these companies, educational background can outweigh role or ability in salary decisions, echoing L. Zhou et al.'s (2024) finding that elite universities confer substantial wage premiums. This also aligns with Rivera's (2016) research on elite employers who view school background as a marker of personal worth and future success. Therefore, participants believed that elite credentials still open doors and may lead to wage premiums, though their value is diminishing. As participants noted, credentials typically come before skills in screening, with elite degrees still seen to provide a clear advantage at this stage.

Secondly, participants viewed PKU and THU credentials as gateways to exclusive opportunities, enhanced resources, and professional networks in the labour market. These included dedicated campus recruitment, fast-track evaluations, and priority access to certain roles – opportunities not available to graduates from other universities. According to participants like Lulu, Grace, and Lily, this often meant greater employer attention, the chance to skip written tests, advance directly to interviews, or receive priority offers. This reflects the clear advantage of elite credentials and aligns with Rivera's (2016b) finding on special employer review teams for target universities. These credentials were also said to provide access to broader networks, giving graduates more chances to connect with industry elites, many of whom are alumni who may prefer to support graduates from their alma mater. Similar to Rivera's (2016b) research, graduates with industry connections, such as alumni support, are more likely to access elite jobs, while lacking such social capital can exclude candidates from the competition. However, Fiona found her bachelor's degree from the top university in her field more valuable than her PKU master's credential, as its stronger alumni network and reputation were perceived to have given her an edge. This highlights that in some contexts, such as highly specialised industries or tightly knit professional fields, major-specific networks sometimes matter more than general university status.

Most participants, especially those from less prestigious undergraduate backgrounds，felt that their PKU or THU credentials opened doors they would not have otherwise accessed. Many said these credentials made it easier to secure internships at top companies. For example, Anna shared that her internship mentor hired her mainly out of curiosity about working with a PKU student, despite her limited relevant skills. Such experiences parallel Gan and Zhu's (2025) finding that in today's credential-focused society, prestigious credentials grant individuals greater access to employment resources and opportunities for self-development and ambition. Participants often described a "snowball effect", where securing a top internship made it easier to gain further opportunities during their graduate job search process, as employers valued the combined prestige of university and prior employers—what Rivera (2016a) calls a candidate's "pedigree". In this study, elite credentials and top internships reinforced one another as powerful signals of value, consistent with signalling theory.

However, the above discussion mainly reflects the credentialist perspective, which views credentials as social signals or gatekeepers, not necessarily proof of competence (Collins et al., 2019). Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to claim that THU and PKU fail to provide students with knowledge or skill development. Several participants shared that their university experience fostered personal growth, broadened their horizons, and taught them self-acceptance. As Cello reflected:

> *"At PKU, sitting in on many courses made me more open-minded and confident, and gave me a sense of freedom and agency beyond societal expectations. I'm truly grateful for this time." (Cello)*

This shows how PKU's education positively changed Cello. It is important to note that Cello had worked for over ten years before entering PKU, so she faced little employment pressure and was able to focus on study and personal development. But her shift in mindset also helped her better navigate her future career. First-time job seekers similarly acknowledged the value of their learning. For example, Bella, who studied game design at THU, credited her knowledge and skills with helping secure her

current job. However, she also noted that THU's strong ties with her employer provided what she saw as access to a fast-track recruitment process, highlighting the role of institutional connections.

The experiences of Cello and Bella reflect both HCT and credentialism: while their learning supported their job search, credentials were described as powerful screening tools. Without these credentials, their abilities might not have been recognised. Most participants saw credentials as symbolic markers of value, consistent with credentialism. Some also recognised that the knowledge and skills they gained played an indirect role in employment, reflecting HCT. They believed credentials without real ability would not be enough. Still, as credentialism suggests, without the credential, they might not have had the chance to apply (Collins et al., 2019). As Anna said, her degree helps the outside world see her abilities more easily. Credentials remained important for making their abilities visible to others.

In general, participants described elite credentials as entry tickets that opened exclusive opportunities, offered privileges and served as a safety net that allowed them to focus on ideal jobs rather than unemployment. Yet participants stressed that PKU and THU graduates no longer have an easy path to employment. Credential inflation means a prestigious degree no longer guarantees an ideal job: participants noted that credentials help in early screening, but later success depends on effort, experience, ability, and luck.

4.1.2. The Shackles Effect: Constraints in Job Hunting

"Shackles" is also a metaphor used by participants to describe the constraints that elite credentials impose during job hunting. As Kate described,

> *"With a THU credential, I feel like I'm dancing in shackles." (Kate)*

This section explores three key constraints associated with elite credentials because they were the ones most commonly raised.

The first constraint is the external idolisation of, and heightened expectations attached to, elite credentials. In China, as PKU and THU are the top two universities, students from these institutions are frequently mythologised by the whole Chinese society. Many participants also noted that these universities promote "hero" narratives that emphasise extraordinary achievements, and society focuses almost exclusively on these exceptional stories. Yet all participants saw themselves as ordinary students who reached PKU or THU through hard work, not as inherently exceptional. This focus on heroic narratives was seen to place them under constant pressure to live up to unrealistic expectations, while the struggles of ordinary students were overlooked. In their view, this dissonance between the societal image of elite graduates and their own self-perception generates intense psychological pressure. The 'halo' intended to symbolise excellence becomes a 'shackle' — a source of anxiety where failure feels unacceptable. This echoes Binder et al.'s (2016) finding that elite university students often feel pressure to live up to the symbolic weight of their credentials.

Social and psychological pressures on elite graduates sometimes extend beyond personal ambition. As many participants revealed, elite credentials shape how others judge them, with employers, families, and society imposing higher expectations and stricter evaluations. For instance, Emma and Lily felt interviewers assessed them more critically because of their credentials, while Victor experienced outright hostility from interviewers without elite backgrounds. Anna's reflection captures this tension:

> *"If I find a good job and do well, people take it for granted. But if I don't, they blame me for not working hard enough. No one questions the university or the structural problems." (Anna)*

Such narratives point to how the prestige of a credential shifts responsibility for career outcomes onto individuals, obscuring structural inequalities or labour market constraints. This reflects Gan and Zhu's (2025) findings that social, family, and institutional expectations impose a significant burden on graduates' job decisions. However, responses to these pressures varied. For some, like Hannah, elevated

expectations served as motivation rather than constraint. This variation underscores that the impact of elite credentials is mediated by individual dispositions, prior experiences, and perhaps the specific cultural or social capital that graduates bring with them. These dynamics will be further explored in a later section.

The second constraint is that elite graduates often struggle to accept lower-level jobs, applying mainly to top firms. As Grace explained:

> *"It makes it hard for me to lower my stance; my THU credential feels as if it has placed me on a pedestal where I cannot step down." (Grace)*

This reluctance stems from how elite credentials raise both external expectations and self-expectations. Graduates feel pressure to meet societal standards and to live up to their own ideals. Oliver shared that he strives to meet the expectations of family, teachers, friends, and himself – a pressure that reflects broader cultural norms. As L. Guo and Wang (2025) observe, Chinese students are taught from an early age to believe in education as the only path to success. This deeply ingrained belief amplifies both societal and self-imposed expectations: once students attain elite credentials, they feel they must pursue equally prestigious jobs to justify the years of effort invested. When those ideal jobs are unattainable, accepting lower-level roles becomes especially difficult, not just practically, but psychologically. Interestingly, self-expectation does not always align with interest. Oliver admitted he might take a job he dislikes simply because it maintains his elite image:

> *"Even if I have no interest in the job and find no meaning in it, I might still accept it because it sounds respectable and helps me maintain my status among my classmates." (Oliver)*

Rivera (2016a) similarly found that elite students often pursue competitive careers to protect their status, not because of genuine interest. Years of hard work and academic achievement also made it hard for participants to lower their sights. Lily said accepting a job anyone could do would make her past efforts feel wasted. Fiona, who pursued a

master's degree to improve her prospects, reflected:

> *"If I end up in a job that doesn't even meet the goals I had with my bachelor's, what was the point of these four years of effort?" (Fiona)*

Fiona's comment reflects Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism – the painful attachment to dreams that the system cannot realistically fulfil. Here, graduates' significant educational investment was described as clashing with a labour market that fails to deliver the returns they expected. While graduates believe their efforts and credentials should lead to appropriate rewards, the job market has worsened, and the supply of graduates now exceeds demand. This mismatch makes it even harder for them to accept lower-level roles.

Interestingly, Anna offered a different perspective, expressing the concern that reflects participants' awareness of broader dynamics of credential spillover and displacement, where elite graduates entering lower-tier jobs may inadvertently raise credential thresholds and reduce opportunities for less-educated job seekers:

> *"If a PKU graduate takes a 3,000-yuan job serving milk tea, what about those with fewer qualifications? Employers will wonder why they should pay more for anyone else." (Anna)*

Anna's view reflects an ethical awareness of how personal choices might reinforce broader inequalities in the labour market. This dynamic mirrors P. Brown's (2003) idea of the opportunity trap, though here inverted: rather than everyone striving upward and failing to stand out, the concern is that if elites accept lower-level jobs, they depress opportunities and wages for those below them, but if they do not accept lower work, sometimes no job is left at all.

Together, these reasons explain why participants limited themselves to prestigious firms or "respectable" roles, supporting Binder et al.'s (2016) finding that elite credentials can narrow, rather than expand, career options.

The third constraint is what participants described as rejection due to perceived overqualification. As Cookie explained:

> *"These days, many top university graduates struggle to find jobs. They fail at top-tier companies because of fierce competition; mid-tier firms see them as overqualified and reject them; and they can't accept lower-tier offers." (Cookie)*

Cookie highlighted the awkward position elite graduates felt they faced in today's job market. Some believed employers may view hiring PKU or THU graduates as risky, questioning their long-term commitment or ease of management. This was believed to lead to a mutual mismatch: elite graduates hesitate to apply to smaller firms, while those firms are perceived to hesitate to hire them. These participant accounts contrast with Zheng et al. (2021), who reported that elite graduates often earn more even in lower-skilled jobs. In this study, however, participants more often reported rejection as overqualified, and many were unwilling to consider lower-tier jobs at all.

However, not all participants felt constrained by their credentials. Some said being PKU or THU graduates did not prevent them from pursuing certain jobs, perhaps because they never considered low-prestige jobs, such as manual labour or widely undesirable positions. Their challenges lay more in choosing between "good" and "less good" jobs. This may explain why some felt unaffected. As Lulu explained:

> *"I've only applied for jobs generally considered good by mainstream standards, so my degree still gives me a clear advantage." (Lulu)*

Many participants viewed the "shackles" as something they believed they could manage internally. As Bella said, the shackles are self-imposed — people do not care about you as much as you think. These participants viewed their university as just one part of their identity and believed it should not become a limitation or a symbol of superiority. But it should also be acknowledged that perceptions of constraint may depend on personal background, education, and life experiences.

In sum, participants described elite credentials as potentially imposing constraints

through societal idealisation, high expectations, reluctance to accept lower-level jobs, and perceptions of overqualification. This reflects L. Zhang and Fu's (2023) finding that credentials can be both less advantageous and a psychological burden. Several participants attributed this to unclear understandings of the current labour market, echoing Xue's (2025) view that students remain trapped in traditional beliefs and "imaginative illusions" about work. As discussed in Section 1.2, these constraints may not arise purely from personal factors — external factors also play a key role.

4.1.3. The Dynamic Relationship Between Halos and Shackles

Bringing together the perception of "halo" and "shackle", a potential chain emerges: the halos may, in some cases, lead to shackles. The initial prestige of elite credentials attracts attention, opportunities, and praise, positive reinforcement that motivates students. Yet this attention often turns into pressure, as students internalise rising expectations reinforced by parents, teachers, peers, and society. What begins as motivation can evolve into constraint through both self-reinforcement and societal reinforcement.

So, is an elite credential more halo or shackle? All participants acknowledged the halo effect, noting they received clear benefits from their elite credentials, especially at the early screening stage. Fifteen participants felt the benefits outweighed the limitations, or that they experienced no significant limitations at all. These individuals tended to believe that the benefits of attending THU or PKU were tangible, while the shackles were mainly about personal perception and psychological pressure, which they felt could be managed or adjusted. In contrast, three participants felt the shackles dominated, bringing mostly external praise without offering much practical help, and created obvious stress, inner conflict, and emotional burden.

However, participants numbers alone cannot prove the halo effect truly outweighs the shackles. It is undeniable that 12 participants reported feeling some degree of constraint,

differing mainly in whether they saw it as minor or substantial. Overall, elite credentials provide graduates with clear advantages, particularly early in job hunting. However, they also bring varying degrees of constraint. The extent of these constraints depends on a range of personal and external factors, which will be discussed in the next section.

4.2. External Influencers on Career Choices: Expectations and Restrictions

This section explores two types of influences on elite graduates' career choices: expectations from significant others and institutions (family, socio-cultural norms, and school) and structural restrictions (macro-level and socioeconomic constraints).

These two types are discussed separately for two main reasons. First, they differ in nature: expectations reflect others' values and cultural norms that shape individuals' motivations, while restrictions are structural and limit the actual range of choices. Unlike expectations, macro-level constraints affect all job seekers and are not easily overcome through personal effort. Second, since all participants mentioned structural restrictions, their significance warrants separate analysis.

4.2.1. Expectations from Significant Others and Institutions

4.2.1.1. Family: Expectations and Conflicts

Eleven participants reported moderate family influence — their parents were supportive but not forceful in guiding their career decisions. This likely reflects their parents' backgrounds. For example, Anna shared that her parents only completed middle school; Lulu and Daisy's parents work in less-developed areas, and Vicky's parents are secondary school teachers with little understanding of her engineering field. In general, these parents were unable to provide practical career guidance due to limited knowledge of the labour market, unfamiliarity with their children's specialised fields and industries, and a lack of social and economic capital in the larger cities where all participants were trying to secure jobs. While they could offer emotional support to

some extent, they were generally unable to provide specific or practical career advice. X. Chen and Yuan (2024) similarly found that highly educated parents are better positioned to offer practical and insightful career guidance, helping their children navigate the job market more effectively. This kind of support was precisely what many of my participants lacked, as their parents did not have the background or capital to provide it. Such differences may contribute to social inequalities, as upper-class parents can offer their children not only emotional support but also valuable practical guidance.

However, many participants noted that even these supportive parents often expressed implicit preferences — for example, hoping their children would stay in major cities (Lulu), work in the public sector (Vicky), or pursue a PhD (Daisy). While such expectations created subtle pressure, they generally did not significantly affect the participants' final decisions. Many felt that they had stronger credentials and a better understanding of their career paths than their parents and thus believed they were better equipped to make decisions independently.

In contrast, six participants reported strong family influence, often expressed as resistance to their career preferences. These parents tended to have sufficient knowledge and social capital, but they guided their children in ways that the participants found constraining. As Cookie shared:

> *"My parents wanted me to follow in their path and stay in the public sector to preserve their social status. But I had my own goals. They didn't understand or support me. It's very painful." (Cookie)*

Cookie's parents have sufficient social capital and knowledge to offer her advice and support, but they direct her toward a path she does not like. As a result, their guidance becomes a source of pain and pressure. Moreover, these parents often had close relationships with their children and had made significant sacrifices for them, which made it harder for the children to say no. There was strong pressure to repay that investment. Grace explained:

> *"My parents sacrificed so much for me, especially my mother—she ties her self-worth to my achievements. I don't want to disappoint her." (Grace)*

This suggests that if Grace fails to meet socially accepted standards of success, her mother would not only feel disappointed in her but also feel that she has failed as a mother, that she has not shaped her "life's work" well. This illustrates how parental sacrifice can amplify pressure on children, who are expected not only to succeed for themselves but also to realise their parents' dreams. As L. Guo and Wang (2025) argue, in the Chinese context, children are often seen as extensions of their parents' lives, carrying the burden of fulfilling parents' unachieved aspirations. Therefore, most of these participants ultimately compromised to meet their parents' expectations. As Grace and Cookie expressed, they were willing to set aside their wishes if it meant making their parents happy. In such cases, the issue was not lack of support but overinvolvement that conflicted with the children's goals, creating pressure and limiting their autonomy.

Yet full support without any resistance was not always helpful. As Emma shared:

> *"I believe hard work needs to be directed towards the right goal, but my parents supported all my decisions without any clear guidance. I felt lost." (Emma)*

This suggests that unconditional support, though well-intentioned, may leave graduates feeling lost due to a lack of clear guidance. Participants like Emma wanted more directional input from their parents, such as suggesting which industries might be good options and which might not, rather than simply agreeing with every decision. Generally, participants hoped for useful and informed advice while also wanting the freedom to decide whether or not to follow it. However, the parents in this study typically fulfilled only one side of this balance: they were either able to offer practical advice but did so in a forceful way, or they were supportive but lacked the knowledge to provide useful guidance. This may suggest a potential correlation between these two dimensions — the ability to give practical advice and the degree of forcefulness in doing so.

Several participants agreed, echoing Mok (2016) and Mok and Jiang (2017), that family capital and background significantly influence graduates' employment outcomes. However, this impact often depends on whether parental expectations align with graduates' own goals. When expectations diverged, especially with strong parental opinions, participants often felt their choices were constrained. For example, even if Cookie's parents had the resources to offer support, misaligned expectations could turn that support into pressure. In contrast, when parental expectations aligned with participants' aspirations, they felt supported, not constrained. For example, Hannah's family members are mostly teachers, so she aspired to become one as well. This aligned with her parents' expectations, so she felt little to no pressure and instead felt supported. Moreover, participants with higher personal expectations than their parents felt less constrained, contradicting Hu and Xu's (2024) findings that parents typically expect more than their children. In this study, six participants said their ambitions, for meaningful or personal fulfilment, exceeded their parents' simpler hopes for safety and well-being.

This points to another interesting finding. Many parents in this study placed high expectations on their children to secure decent, well-paid, and often public-sector jobs, aligning with previous studies (e.g., Lin, 2023; L. Zhang & Fu, 2023). However, this research found that many parents also prioritised their children's happiness and health above career success. This may be due to most participants coming from materially sufficient and stable families, which gave parents greater security and flexibility in their expectations. (Four participants chose not to disclose their parents' occupations.) Another factor may be that none of the participants considered "unrespectable" job options, such as blue-collar manual jobs, which are often viewed as "unrespectable" in mainstream discourse. Therefore, parents did not need to worry about their children choosing socially unacceptable paths. As mentioned in the "halo" section, the elite credential acted as a safety net, offering protection and ensuring that their children were unlikely to end up in jobs considered undesirable or too low-status. This allows them

to focus more on their children's well-being rather than solely on career status.

4.2.1.2. Socio-Cultural Norms: Structural Expectations

Participants noted that society expects elite graduates to secure high-paying, respectable jobs with status, prestigious titles, and national contribution. The majority agreed these expectations influenced them to varying degrees. As Anna reflected, she could only feel truly free after achieving socially recognised success, revealing how deeply such ideals are internalised. In this mindset, freedom is defined not by personal fulfilment but by societal approval. This supports L. Guo and Wang's (2025) argument that Chinese society has fixed views, believing that a university education, especially from elite institutions, should guarantee a good job. These societal expectations reinforce and intensify elite graduates' self-demands, shaping both their career choices and sense of worth.

Several participants described how societal pressures created significant stress and an emotional burden. For example, Kate felt unable to fail under society's gaze, finding the constant need to meet high expectations exhausting. As Kate specifically mentioned, she feared talking about her job and salary in front of relatives because she could not bear their judgement and gossip. Given their high expectations, she worried they would question why a THU graduate had not secured a high-paying job. Lily similarly noted that although her family gave her full financial support, the weight of societal expectations caused her anxiety and fear of falling short. These experiences illustrate how striving to meet societal expectations can create a heavy burden, as they feel compelled to find so-called "good jobs" as defined by society.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that "good jobs" and "respectable jobs" in this research have no fixed definition or universal standard. Based on all participants' responses, such jobs are expected to offer high social status, stable income, job security and strong career prospects. However, individuals may prioritise these factors

differently, so perceptions of a "good job" vary. Despite the lack of a universal definition, China's occupational hierarchy distinguishes between more and less respectable jobs, making it difficult for elite graduates to consider lower-level jobs. As Lulu observed, Chinese culture tends to rank jobs as noble or inferior, creating a strong status hierarchy. This mindset may stem from the legacy of the imperial examination system, which for centuries positioned government service—attained through academic achievement—as the most honourable path to social mobility (Elman, 2013). As a result, even today, jobs involving office work or government positions are widely viewed as high-status, while manual labour and service work are often seen as low-status or undesirable. Victor offered another explanation, pointing to the widening gap between job types in income, stability, and social benefits. Civil servant roles, for instance, offer a steady income and generous benefits, making them highly attractive. In contrast, gig economy jobs such as delivery are often perceived as less desirable due to lower pay, job insecurity, and little career development. These differences signal which jobs are considered more desirable. This echoes Xuan's (2024) finding that white-collar roles in China are considered more respectable than blue-collar work, largely due to their perceived stability and benefits, even when such roles may be low-skilled or offer relatively low pay. Consequently, many elite graduates feel compelled to pursue careers that align with their educational background and long-standing aspirations. However, these struggles vary depending on whether societal expectations align with participants' self-expectations. Some participants felt society expected more than they did, creating stress and inner conflict. Others saw their goals matched society's ideals, actively pursuing conventional success with less emotional strain.

Beyond societal expectations, deep-seated cultural norms also shape elite graduates' career choices. The Confucian ideal that those who excel in learning should serve in government reinforces the belief, shared by many graduates and their parents, that public-sector jobs are superior (L. Zhang & Fu, 2023). This is reflected in the fact that 14 out of 18 participants applied for state-affiliated jobs, such as civil service roles,

SOEs, public schools, and state-owned banks. Most said their parents viewed such roles as more respectable than other fields. This supports Gan and Zhu's (2025) finding that many parents see government jobs as the only "proper" careers, while other jobs are regarded merely as wage labour. This shows that deep-seated cultural norms also shape societal expectations, such as the belief that elite graduates should secure government jobs. These cultural influences can restrict their options or steer them toward specific career paths.

4.2.1.3. School: Career Guidance as Institutional Expectations

Many participants noted that career guidance at THU and PKU strongly promotes public service and national contribution. As Kate shared:

> *"The slogan of THU's career development centre is 'Aim high, enter the mainstream, step onto the big stage, and pursue impactful careers.' The overall message encourages us to join the public sector, so many students feel they have to follow that path." (Kate)*

This reflects how university values, reinforced through official messaging, campus culture, and career services, shape students' career choices and steer them towards specific tracks like the public sector. Such guidance not only presents certain jobs as desirable but also frames them as the right or expected path for elite graduates. This mirrors Binder et al.'s (2016) findings at Stanford and Harvard, where institutional guidance promotes finance and consulting as elite career options. Therefore, under institutional career guidance, students tend to pursue what the university promotes. For some, this is not necessarily because they want to follow these paths, but because they feel they must. As Kate reflected, the constant reinforcement of these values and the collective choices of peers make it difficult to resist, as the cost is too high. The "cost" of resistance is not just about going against the grain but also risking social disapproval, lost status, or a sense of isolation within the university community. Thus, career guidance at elite universities can create implicit pressure that narrows students' perceived options and channels them into certain roles.

However, Victor offered a valuable counterpoint: the focus on public-sector jobs may stem not only from institutional values but also from broader structural realities. In China's uncertain labour market, public-sector jobs offer stability, security, and clear advancement paths. From this perspective, THU and PKU's guidance aligns with what is genuinely desirable and practical for many students. Rather than simply internalising university messaging, students may be making strategic choices to secure positions that match their credentials and reduce risk.

Another notable finding was that many participants perceived that elite graduates tend to prefer stability and avoid risk. As Ryan explained, students from elite universities often have access to secure, reputable career paths and feel little incentive to pursue high-risk, high-reward options, such as joining small but high-potential start-ups. The strong employment guarantees associated with elite credentials make stable choices like public-sector jobs not just attractive but rational. This may help explain why so many THU and PKU graduates are drawn to government roles and state-affiliated enterprises: these paths allow them to convert their credentials into secure, socially respected careers without unnecessary risk.

4.2.2. Structural Restrictions in the Labour Market

4.2.2.1. Job Hunting Approaches in Constrained Times

All participants emphasised how macro-level socioeconomic conditions significantly shaped their job search, making this a distinct and powerful theme. They felt constrained by economic decline, hiring freezes, and an oversupply of graduates resulting from China's rapid HE expansion (see section 2.2). As Tom put it,

> *"The economy is in decline; the job market is tough. Many companies don't even have headcount; no matter how hard you work or how good you are, it doesn't help." (Tom)*

Tom's words capture the frustration and helplessness many participants felt, pointing

to the erosion of the meritocratic ideal — the belief that hard work leads to success. This aligns with J. Robson (2023) and Guan and Blair (2022), who argue that the labour market and socioeconomic structure ultimately determine job outcomes. Even the most capable graduates felt powerless in the face of limited opportunities. Anna offered a striking metaphor:

> *"Job hunting today feels like picking a seat on the Titanic. The ending is already bound to be bad, but everyone still has to try for a better seat." (Anna)*

Anna's metaphor vividly illustrates how participants saw themselves caught in a losing battle, forced to compete fiercely for marginal advantages, despite knowing that the broader situation offers little hope. It reflects the structural determinism they perceived, feeling small and constrained within forces too large to overcome.

Participants shared two main examples of the broader context's impact. Firstly, several participants observed the same finding as Gan and Zhu's (2025) research, that classmates with weaker undergraduate records who entered the workforce earlier had secured better jobs than they could now, even after investing in postgraduate study. This made them question the logic of education as a reliable path to better employment, as the oversupply of graduates has devalued credentials that were once highly prized, exposing education's limits as a solution in a saturated job market.

Moreover, participants noted that employers today want it all; they expect graduates to have strong credentials, abilities, experience, and skills, yet they are unwilling to pay more. The imbalance between rising supply (graduates with increasingly impressive backgrounds) and declining demand has allowed employers to raise their standards. As Anna said, in some industries,

> *"Everyone is from THU, PKU, or even top universities worldwide like the Ivy League or Oxbridge, so a THU or PKU credential can feel worthless." (Anna)*

This underscores how elite credentials, once a differentiator, are believed to have lost

much of their signalling power in industries flooded with similarly qualified applicants. Employers' ability to raise the bar reflects their strengthened position in a market where talent supply outstrips demand, showing the extent of credential inflation; even the most prestigious universities' credentials hold limited value in some sectors.

Together, these examples illustrate how structural conditions constrained graduates' agency. Participants' narratives reflect the tension between individual agency and structural constraint. It seems like graduates are striving within a system where their agency is deeply circumscribed, their optimism tempered by structural realities.

4.3. Elite Graduates' Self-Agency and Adjustment to External Influences

This section explores elite graduates' self-agency and their adjustment to the influences discussed above. It examines how they react to external expectations from significant others and institutions, distinguishing between those who are indifferent to outside opinions and those more influenced by them. It also considers how elite graduates adapt to structural constraints, demonstrating agency even within limited circumstances.

4.3.1. Responding to External Expectations

Participants responded to external influences in different ways: some were largely indifferent to external opinions, while others remained concerned about social evaluations.

The majority of participants said they either did not care about others' views or had gradually learnt to stop caring. For them, external influences were merely reference points, not a determining factor. These individuals shared key traits like strong self-agency, clear goals, and high intrinsic motivation. As Bella said,

> *"One should not let social conventions and societal expectations change their sense of self-worth." (Bella)*

This mindset shows participants have their clear understanding of self-worth, allowing them to focus on personal aspirations rather than living up to societal standards. This aligns with Wang and Wen's (2025) finding that career decisions based on skills and interests are more important than salary alone. For example, Hannah aspired to be a public middle school mathematics teacher despite being told she was "overqualified" for the role, as her goal was clear and meaningful to her. Similarly, Anna shared:

> *"Other people's views and society's opinions are of no real help to me. I only care about my own happiness." (Anna)*

Anna's focus on happiness reflects a shift towards valuing personal fulfilment. This aligns with L. Zhang and Fu's (2023) finding that today's graduates increasingly value spiritual fit—that is, seeking work that aligns with their personal values and psychological needs. Anna's reflection also suggests that external opinions no longer offer reliable promises of advantage and thus have lost much of their persuasive power for contemporary graduates. In other words, since traditional expectations no longer guarantee the rewards they once promised, many graduates see little reason to continue chasing them. This contrasts with Rivera's (2016b) finding that elite graduates often prioritise material rewards, where salary is central to job satisfaction. In this study, only 5 out of 18 participants said salary was their top non-negotiable factor in job hunting. The majority placed greater importance on other aspects—such as opportunities for growth, skill development, health, location, stability, and sense of meaning—all of which are more in line with L. Zhang and Fu's (2023) concept of spiritual fit.

Oliver offered another reason why he no longer cares about others' opinions, including his parents', because financial independence as a social media influencer has given him the freedom to choose his own path. He noted that as people mature and gain financial independence, they gradually distance themselves from societal and familial expectations. His insight highlights that many graduates still care about external expectations simply because they depend on their parents, live within the school environment, and are surrounded by constant expectations. In this context, such

concern is not unusual—it reflects their current stage of life.

In general, participants who were less concerned with external opinions and demonstrated strong self-agency, clear goals, and intrinsic motivation were less likely to view their credentials as shackles. Even when they did feel constrained, they generally believed the "halo effect" of their credentials outweighed the limitations. As discussed in Section 1.2, shackles often stem from external idealisation, societal expectations, and perceptions of overqualification — all of which are largely shaped by external views. Therefore, graduates less influenced by these pressures tended to feel less restricted by their elite credentials.

However, some participants responded very differently to external influences: they cared deeply about others' opinions; therefore, societal expectations had a strong impact on their career decisions. These participants were also more likely to view their credentials as shackles. Some even believed the shackles outweighed the halo or felt very little of the halo effect at all, as they were overwhelmingly focused on the restrictions and pressures associated with their elite backgrounds. As Cookie said,

> *"External evaluations are impossible to escape for me, because deep down I can't rid myself of vanity." (Cookie)*

This highlights how the need for recognition and approval made societal judgements feel inescapable. It reflects Xuan's (2024) view that because university students are at a critical stage of seeking self-identity, they hope to integrate into their immediate environment and realise their self-worth within it. As a result, their career views, ideals, and choices are directly shaped by the beliefs and support of their significant others. In Cookie's case, her need for external recognition and validation led her to be pressured to find a high-paying, socially acceptable job for elite graduates.

Beyond personal vanity, participants heavily influenced by external expectations often shared traits: weaker self-agency, unclear goals, and lower intrinsic motivation,

regardless of family background. For example, Lily admitted,

> *"I'm not someone who wants to work hard for its own sake. All my efforts are to meet external standards, not driven by inner motivation." (Lily)*

For her, external validation was the primary driver of her efforts, and the PKU credential only amplified the pressure because it raised others' expectations even further. What worried her most was not whether she could find a job, but how others would perceive and judge her. Grace also noted that lacking clear personal goals made her more likely to follow external opinions. This highlights how unclear direction, combined with the symbolic weight of elite credentials, can heighten sensitivity to societal expectations, echoing Xuan's (2024) finding that students without clear career plans often default to socially endorsed paths over personally meaningful ones. Their career decisions become driven less by personal interest or meaning and more by the desire to secure jobs that are seen as respectable or worthy of their educational status.

In sum, others' expectations influence elite graduates' career choices. However, the extent of these influences depends on how much individuals value them. For those with strong self-agency, clear goals, and high intrinsic motivation, external pressures tend to have limited impact, and they are more likely to view their credentials as a halo rather than shackles. The opposite is generally true for those with lower agency or greater concern for external opinions.

4.3.2. Adjusting to Structural Constraints

All participants entered THU or PKU with high expectations, believing an elite credential would secure a bright future. However, the reality of the job market proved far more challenging. Surprisingly, only Bella described her job search as relatively smooth and successful. The other 17 participants reported their experience in starkly negative terms, using words such as 'unsmooth', 'disappointed', 'frustrated', and 'defeated'. These emotions reflect the gap between their initial aspirations and the

difficult structural conditions of the current labour market, as discussed in the previous section.

This broken promise, the failure of elite credentials to guarantee success, left participants facing difficult choices. Yet rather than remaining passive or resigned, many demonstrated self-agency by rethinking their career goals and adapting their strategies to the realities they encountered. One notable response was a shift away from the traditional pursuit of "decent" or socially expected jobs. As discussed in Section 1.2.2, participants increasingly prioritised spiritual fit and psychological well-being over external markers of status or prestige.

Alongside this reorientation of values, participants adopted various practical strategies to cope with the gap between their expectations and job market realities, regardless of their levels of self-agency or motivation, as structural constraints impact everyone. Consequently, everyone must find ways to adapt, whether they possess strong self-agency or not. Some, such as Vicky and Fiona, moved their focus from high-prestige firms and began to accept applying for lower-tier jobs, roles they described as less competitive and more likely to offer fair treatment. They noted that this shift involved letting go of societal expectations. Others, like Daisy, opted for a PhD after facing unsatisfactory job offers. Both paths reflect a desire for greater stability and security in an uncertain job market. These trends reflect Fan et al. (2022), who argue that growing socioeconomic uncertainty leads graduates to favour stability and security over traditional symbols of career success.

Beyond these immediate strategies, many participants undertook a deeper process of redefining what it means to hold a respectable or well-matched job. They rejected the notion that a top university degree obliges them to pursue high-paying, high-status careers simply to meet societal expectations. Instead, they began to embrace the idea that success should be defined on their own terms. For example, Lulu described this shift as a kind of personal awakening:

> *"I need to set aside my identity and think about who I truly want to become." (Lulu)*

Similarly, Cello reflected on the importance of moving beyond rigid standards:

> *"Don't box yourself in with a single standard. We are the ones with agency — we can break free and redefine success." (Cello)*

This growing openness to self-defined success signals an important transformation in how graduates relate to their credentials and career choices. For some, it arose from challenges like failure or mental health struggles during their pursuit of socially recognised paths. For example, Anna experienced depression and anxiety during her job search, leading her to prioritise her well-being and values over societal expectations. For others, such as Cello, the shift came from gaining broader perspectives. Her postgraduate education at PKU exposed her to politics, history, and philosophy, helping her realise that life is about more than meeting external expectations. These experiences strengthened their self-agency, allowing them to focus on personal fulfilment rather than societal or familial standards, which ultimately helped them navigate their careers more effectively.

These findings offer a nuanced reflection on Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism, the attachment to ideals believed to ensure a better life, even when they hinder true well-being. For elite graduates, this ideal has meant believing that their credentials would guarantee high-status jobs or societal approval. However, amid a challenging labour market and declining value of elite credentials, many participants are questioning these ideals. Rather than remaining trapped in a cruel optimism tied to securing "ideal jobs" as defined by societal standards, they are shifting their focus toward personal fulfilment and self-defined success, moving away from societal expectations that no longer deliver on their promises. This suggests that cruel optimism may weaken when promised rewards lose credibility, allowing new values to take root. However, while many participants acknowledged that their credentials do not necessitate prestigious jobs, none had "unrespectable" career options, indicating their

limited experience, making it easier to downplay the importance of traditional status.

Overall, while the promise of elite credentials has weakened in the current socioeconomic climate, graduates continue to assert their agency within constraints. They are reorienting their values, adopting practical strategies, and redefining success through personal meaning rather than societal expectations.

5. CONCLUSION

This conclusion first addresses the research questions based on the research findings. It then discusses the implications of the research and outlines the study's limitations, offering suggestions for future research.

As a reminder, this research's research questions are:

- How do graduates from the most elite universities in China perceive the role of their educational credentials in their job search?
  - To what extent do they feel helped or hindered by their credential?
  - What factors do they think influence their job choices?

To address the research questions, this study found that all participants perceived their elite credentials as beneficial, particularly during initial CV screening. Elite credentials served as powerful entry tickets, granting privileged access to job opportunities. This aligns with credentialism and signalling theory, where employers tend to interpret elite credentials as signs of high-quality education and well-prepared candidates. However, many participants reported that the advantages of their elite credentials diminished in the later recruitment stages, where factors like abilities, experience, effort, and luck were perceived to play a more decisive role. A notable advantage mentioned by several participants was the eligibility for the prestigious targeted civil servant selection programme, which remains a highly competitive career path in contemporary China. These findings support credentialism's view of credentials as symbolic and exclusionary, rather than direct indicators of ability.

Despite the advantages, most participants also felt constrained by their credentials. High societal expectations and public idealisation of elite graduates made them hesitant to pursue lower-tier roles, creating psychological pressure to meet external ideals that often clashed with their self-perceptions. Some participants also encountered overqualification, with employers rejecting them as too qualified and less stable for

certain roles. Nevertheless, many participants believed that such limitations were largely psychological and self-imposed pressures that could be mitigated through mindset adjustment and self-reflection. Thus, while constraints exist, they may not significantly impact all individuals in the same way.

This study's novel contribution lies in revealing that elite credentials, while advantageous, can simultaneously impose burdens and psychological pressure. In particular, they may restrict graduates' career choices to a narrow set of socially approved, high-status, elite paths. Overall, while the benefits of elite credentials were found to outweigh the limitations, the study highlights that these limitations do exist and deserve recognition.

This study also found that family expectations, socio-cultural norms regarding appropriate jobs for elite graduates, school-based career guidance, and macro-level socioeconomic conditions are significant factors influencing graduates' career choices.

Most participants reported moderate family influence, mainly through emotional support rather than direct pressure. However, this may be due to their parents lacking the knowledge or resources to offer practical career guidance. Interestingly, the study found that even when parents provided both emotional and practical support, misalignment between parental expectations and personal goals could still cause stress. Despite this, many participants noted that their parents now prioritised their happiness and health over career success, even if parents still hoped their children would secure stable, well-paying jobs. Societal expectations, influenced by Confucian values that equate education with prestige, added emotional pressure on graduates, as many participants expressed a desire to meet these expectations. This research also found that THU and PKU are perceived to promote public sector jobs as ideal, shaping graduates' perceptions of what constitutes a "respectable" job and steering their career choices accordingly. Together, these familial, societal, and institutional influences can both restrict and direct elite graduates' career decisions, leading them to pursue paths based

more on external expectations than personal desires.

At a macro level, socioeconomic conditions such as economic downturns and increasing competition in the labour market further limit graduates' options. A shrinking number of available jobs and a growing supply of qualified candidates make job hunting increasingly difficult. Many participants expressed a sense of powerlessness in the face of these structural challenges.

However, the study also revealed how elite graduates navigate external influences. While parental expectations, societal pressures, and school guidance were present, the majority of participants reported being largely unaffected or learning to detach from these influences over time. These participants demonstrated strong self-agency, intrinsic motivation, and clear personal goals, which helped them resist external pressures and made them less likely to perceive their credentials as shackles. In contrast, those with weaker self-agency, unclear goals, or low intrinsic motivation were more likely to be shaped by external expectations, as they lacked internal standards and sought validation from others.

Structural constraints were a different matter. Graduates could not simply ignore or dismiss them, as these affected everyone in the labour market. Nonetheless, even under these conditions, many graduates still found ways to assert agency. A notable trend emerged: instead of strictly pursuing socially prestigious or "well-matched" jobs, graduates increasingly prioritised psychological well-being and personal fulfilment. By adjusting expectations, they became open to lower-tier jobs and let go of the belief that their career must match the prestige of their credentials. Through these adjustments, graduates began to redefine what constitutes a "successful" or "respectable" job. They embraced the notion that success should be defined on their own terms, not solely by societal standards. These adaptive strategies demonstrate how, even amidst structural constraints, elite graduates actively work to assert agency and navigate an increasingly complex and competitive labour market.

Based on the findings, this research offers both general and specific implications for various actors. Generally, this research suggests that students, their families, and the wider public should critically reflect on whether elite credentials necessarily lead to better career prospects. When everyone unquestioningly assumes that elite credentials guarantee career success, they risk overlooking both the limitations and potential burdens associated with such qualifications. This assumption may also neglect the actual knowledge and learning gained, as well as other purposes of HE, such as its academic and intellectual value. In a saturated labour market with rising credential inflation, even elite degrees do not guarantee career success. Without a clear understanding of these limitations, elite graduates may experience emotional distress and frustration if their outcomes do not meet the high expectations associated with their academic background.

Therefore, specifically, this research encourages students and their parents to move beyond a single, prestige-based definition of success, especially one solely tied to the perceived return on elite credentials. Instead, they should be encouraged to embrace more diverse, personal standards of success that align with individual values and aspirations. Furthermore, the study recommends that university career centres offer more individualised, diversified career guidance, supporting a broader range of career possibilities and providing tailored assistance that respects students' unique goals and circumstances. Finally, this research urges policymakers to acknowledge the psychological strain and structural challenges faced by elite graduates in today's labour market. Policies should be developed to alleviate these pressures—for example, by improving job-market transparency, expanding high-quality employment opportunities beyond traditional elite sectors, and promoting more inclusive definitions of career success across education and employment systems.

This research has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the small sample size limits generalisability, emphasising the necessity for further investigation (Davies & Hughes, 2014). The recruitment method—relying on personal contacts,

social media, and participant referrals—may have contributed to sample homogeneity. Participants found through social media often had slightly larger followings, which made them more visible. This visibility bias may mean they are more socially active or self-selecting in ways that do not represent the broader student population. Additionally, snowball sampling through referrals may have further limited diversity, as participants tend to refer friends with similar backgrounds or perspectives. The study primarily serves an exploratory purpose, as it may not fully encapsulate the breadth of student perspectives and experiences. Moreover, all participants were drawn from two geographically proximate elite universities, making their experiences highly context-specific and less applicable to other contexts. However, broad generalisability was never the goal of this qualitative research. Second, participants' responses may have been influenced by their emotional and situational context, such as the stress of graduation and job hunting, which could have led to more pessimistic views. To address this, interview questions were designed to prompt reflection and allow for a more nuanced understanding of their experiences.

Third, depending solely on semi-structured interviews as the data collection method restricts the depth of understanding (Partington, 2001). A longer data collection period could have increased response quality by giving participants more time to reflect and by building stronger rapport, encouraging richer and more candid discussions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997). But time constraints also prevented the use of additional methods, which might have offered complementary perspectives, as different approaches can reveal varied aspects of a phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2017b). Fourth, researcher bias remains a potential concern, as personal perspectives and experience may have influenced the interpretation of participant narratives (Silverman, 2020a). Independent data analysis increases the risk of subjectivity, but regular discussions with my supervisor helped provide external oversight and refine interpretations. Finally, the study does not consider factors like gender, social class, academic major, or performance, which may shape perceptions of credentials and career choices. Despite

these limitations, this research offers valuable insights into how elite graduates across disciplines and career paths view their credentials, adding fresh, nuanced perspectives to the literature on credentialism and graduate employment.

Future research could improve sampling methods by employing random sampling techniques and including participants from diverse academic majors and socio-demographic backgrounds. This would help mitigate selection bias, increase sample diversity, and enhance the validity and generalisability of the findings. Subsequent studies could also expand beyond THU and PKU to include graduates from other elite institutions, such as Project 985 and 211 universities, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how graduates from different regions and institutional types perceive their credentials and navigate the job market. Additionally, examining factors like gender, social class, location, and industry context could reveal how these shape perceptions and job search experiences. Focusing on specific sectors may offer deeper insight into how credential value is interpreted in different labour markets. A longitudinal design could further enrich the research by tracking how perceptions and career outcomes evolve over time, beyond the final year of study.

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7. APPENDICES

7.1. APPENDIX A: Information Sheet

University of Oxford
Department of Education
Researcher: XXX
Supervisor: XXX

Exploring the Meaning of Credentials for Chinese Students from Elite Universities?

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: [EDUC_1383059]

1. Introductory paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

2. Why is this research being conducted?

This research aims to explore how graduates from China's most elite universities perceive the role of their educational credentials in their job search. Specifically, it examines whether they view their credentials as stepping stones that enhance job opportunities or feel constrained to pursue only positions that align with their educational background, status, and sense of dignity.

3. Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to participate because you are a final-year master's student at Peking University or Tsinghua University and are currently seeking employment. Additionally, around 17 other participants will be recruited.

4. Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the research, without giving a reason, and without negative consequences, by advising me of this decision. The deadline to withdraw any information you have contributed to the research is July 1st, which is approximately six weeks before the dissertation submission date. If you choose to withdraw, all data related to you will be removed from my dissertation and permanently destroyed.

5. What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

If you agree to participate in this research, you will be invited to attend a one-on-one online interview via Microsoft Teams. You may choose whether to keep your camera on during the interview; however, at the beginning, I will need you to turn it on briefly to verify your identity such as showing your student card. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your perceptions of your prestigious university credentials impact your job search, your socio-economic status, and your overall experience of the job-seeking process. The date and time of the interview will be scheduled based on your availability, and it will last approximately one hour. You may pause or stop the interview at any time.

May 2025

With your consent, the interview will be audio- or video-recorded and transcribed for data analysis. After transcription, you will have the opportunity to review the transcript and request any revisions if desired. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form and return it to me.

6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

There are no identified physical or emotional risks associated with this research. While the study itself does not involve a particularly sensitive topic, if you ever feel uneasy or uncomfortable, you have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. The researcher will take all necessary measures to preserve confidentiality and privacy. All collected data will be pseudonymised in the research output. However, since participants are exclusively selected from Peking University and Tsinghua University, your institution will be mentioned in the dissertation. All data will be securely stored with password protection, and only the researcher will have access to it.

7. Are there any benefits in taking part?

You will receive a reward of 100 yuan upon completion of the interview. To facilitate this payment, you may choose your preferred method—such as WeChat Pay or Alipay, which are commonly used in China, or a traditional bank transfer. You will be asked to send either your payment QR code (for WeChat Pay or Alipay) or your bank details to me via email. These payment details will be used solely for the purpose of issuing the reward. As payment information is considered sensitive personal data, it will be handled with strict confidentiality and stored securely. This data will be kept in the same secure location as the interview transcripts and audio recordings—within my Oxford Nexus 365 OneDrive account, which is password-protected and institutionally managed. Providing payment details is entirely voluntary, and you may opt out of receiving the reward if you prefer not to share this information. For more information on data handling and security measures, please refer to Question 8 of this form.

Moreover, your participants will contribute to a deeper reflection on whether prestigious credentials genuinely enhance job prospects, and how such credentials shape the experiences of elite students in contemporary Chinese society. The research findings may also help elite Chinese universities gain a better understanding of students' authentic perceptions and experiences during the job search process, enabling them to provide more targeted and effective support.

8. What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

In general, I am interested in your perception of how your credentials from top universities in China affect your job-seeking process—whether they have a positive or negative influence. I am also interested in your job-seeking experiences and mindset when searching for a job. The information you provide will contribute to answering my research question: How do graduates from the most elite universities in China perceive the role of their educational credentials in their job search? Additionally, I aim to explore the following sub-questions: 1) To what extent do they feel helped or hindered by their credentials? 2)What factors do they believe influence their job choices?

During the research process, all recorded interviews and transcribed scripts will be securely stored in my Oxford Nexus 365 OneDrive account, which provides encrypted storage with daily backups. At the end of the research project, all recorded interviews, transcripts, and informed consent forms will be transferred to my OneDrive account for secure storage for three years. All data will be retained for a minimum period of 3 years after the end of the project, following the University of Oxford

policy. The collected data will not be reused. Only the researcher and the research supervisor will have access to the data. The findings will be presented in a dissertation.

9. Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

The research is intended to be written up as a master's dissertation and deposited on ORA with open access. I may develop publications and presentations based on this study. The participants will not be identified from the outputs.

10. Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance website at https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights.

11. Who has reviewed this research?

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: EDUC_1383059**)**.

12. Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact me, XXX or my supervisor, XXX and we will do our best to answer your query. I will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

The Chair, Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee; Email: student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk, Department of Education. University of Oxford. 15 Norham Gardens. Oxford, OX2 6PY

13. Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact: XXX

Department of Education, University of Oxford

15 Norham Gardens, OX2 6PY

University Tel: 01865 274024

7.2. APPENDIX B: Consent Form

University of Oxford
Department of Education
Researcher: XXX
Supervisor: XXX



Consent to take part in Exploring the Meaning of Credentials for Chinese Students from Elite Universities?

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: **EDUC_1383059**

Purpose of Study: This research aims to explore how graduates from China's most elite universities perceive the role of their educational credentials in their job search. Specifically, it examines whether they view their credentials as stepping stones that enhance job opportunities or feel constrained to pursue only positions that align with their educational background, status, and sense of dignity.

	Please initial each box if you agree with the statement
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet version for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point until **01/07/2025**, without giving any reason.	☐
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	☐
I understand that I will not be identifiable from any publications reports, or presentations.	☐
I consent to be audio or video recorded.	☐
Use of quotations: Please indicate your preference (select *one* option): a) I do not wish to be quoted. **or** b) I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs if I am not identifiable.	☐ ☐
I give permission for you to contact me again to clarify information.	☐
I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	☐
I agree to take part.	☐

_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of participant	Date	Signature
_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature

7.3. APPENDIX C: Interview Questions

I. Building Rapport & Understanding Background

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself, including your background, university, and what you are currently studying?

II. Introducing the Job Search Process

2. When did you start thinking seriously about your job search, and what motivated you to begin looking?

3. What types of jobs are you currently considering or applying for?

4. How have you approached your job search so far?

5. What are the most important factors influencing you when evaluating job opportunities?

6. How would you describe your experience with job applications and recruitment processes so far?

7. Have you noticed the popular discussions on social media or among peers about "credentialed unemployment" or "Kong Yiji's long shirts"?

    · If so, how do you understand this discussion and the social phenomenon behind this discussion?

    · Do you feel a sense of agreement, resonance, or is it something you find hard to understand?

III. Role of Educational Credentials in the Job Search

8. How do you think your degree or university background influences your job search experience?

9. Have there been situations where you felt your credentials gave you an advantage? Could you describe them?

10. Have you faced any restrictions related to your educational background while applying for jobs?

    - If so, what are the causes of this restriction?

IV. Perceptions of Job Suitability and Career Expectations

11. How do you personally define what makes a job "suitable" for someone with your educational background?

12. What do you think are the biggest factors influencing how you and your peers make career choices?

13. Have you ever felt pressure—socially or personally—to pursue jobs that align with your degree?

14. How do you feel about the idea of taking a job that you like but may not fully align with your level of education and underutilise your knowledge?

V. External Influences on Career Decision-Making

15. Has your family influenced your job search?

    - If so, in what ways? Do you think their expectations are shaped by their own education background or social status?

16. Have you felt any explicit or implicit pressure or restrictions from them when

considering job opportunities?

17. In what ways do you think social expectations shape how graduates from elite universities perceive job opportunities?

VI. Future Outlook & Reflection

18. Do you feel that your education gives you more flexibility in job choices, or do you feel constrained by expectations?

19. Do you think the role of educational credentials in employment is changing in China? If so, in what way?

20. If you could go back and give advice to yourself in your first year of university, what would you say about career planning?

21. Is there anything I may not ask you, but you want to talk to me?

Mandarin Version of Interview Questions

一、建立信任与了解背景

1. 能简单介绍一下你自己吗？比如比如名字、就读大学、所学专业，目前是几年级以及研究方向。

二、了解求职过程

2. 你是什么时候开始认真考虑找工作的？当时是因为什么原因开始求职的？

3. 你目前在考虑或申请哪些类型的工作？

4. 到目前为止，你是如何开展求职的？

5. 在评估工作机会时，对你来说最重要的因素有哪些？

6. 你觉得自己目前的求职和招聘经历是怎样的？

7. 你是否注意到社交媒体或同龄人中关于“学历失业”或“孔乙己的长衫”的讨论？
    - 如果有，你是如何理解这些讨论及其背后的社会现象的？
    - 你是否对这些话题产生共鸣，还是觉得难以理解？

三、教育背景与求职的关系

8. 你认为你的学历或大学背景对你的求职经历有何影响？

9. 有没有什么时刻让你觉得你的学历背景带来了优势？能否描述一下？

10. 在求职过程中，你是否因为学历背景而受到一些限制？
    - 如果有，你认为这些限制的原因是什么？

四、对职业匹配度和职业期望的看法

11. 在你看来，什么样的工作才算是“匹配 ”你这样的教育背景？

12. 你认为有哪些关键因素影响了你和同龄人的职业选择？

13. 你是否曾感受到社会或个人层面上的压力，要求你从事与你所学专业相符的工作？

14. 如果有一份你喜欢但可能与学历不完全匹配、难以发挥你所学知识的工作，你会怎么看待这样的选择？

五、职业决策过程中的外部影响

15. 你的家庭对你的求职过程是否产生过影响？

- 如果有，体现在哪些方面？你觉得他们的期望是否受到他们自身的教育背景或社会地位的影响？

16. 在考虑工作机会时，你是否感受到来自家人的明确或隐性的压力或限制？

17. 你觉得社会期望如何影响了来自名校的毕业生对工作的认知和选择？

六、对未来的看法与反思

18. 你觉得你的教育背景让你在职业选择上更灵活，还是反而受到了一些期望的限制？

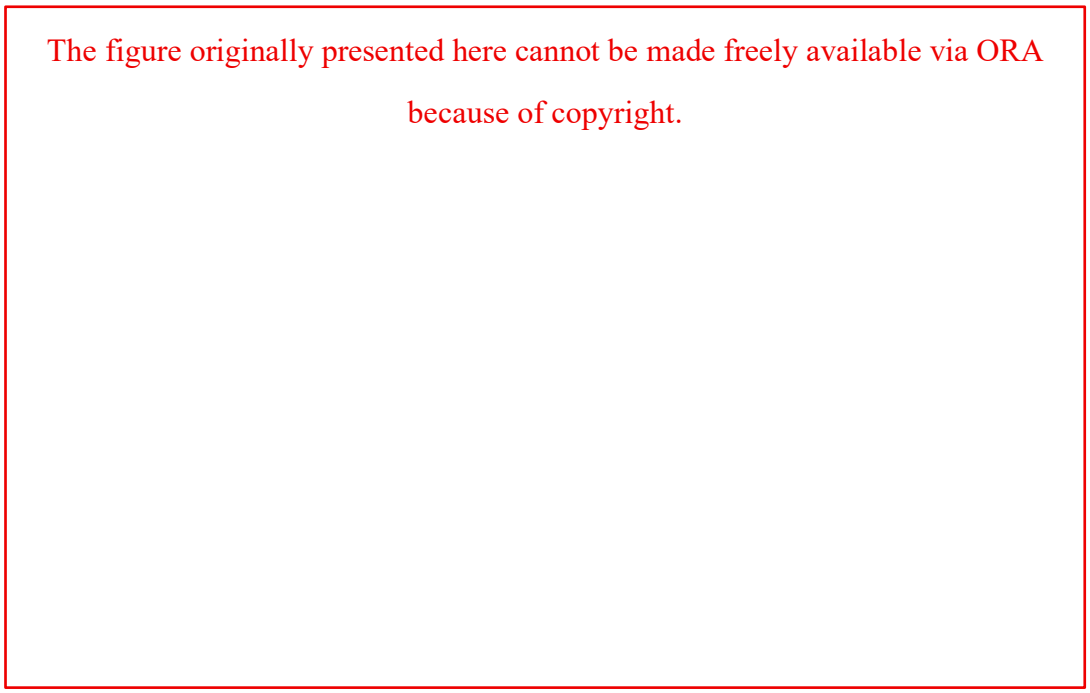
19. 你认为在中国，教育背景在就业中的作用正在发生变化吗？如果是，体现在哪些方面？

20. 如果你能回到大学一年级，你会给自己什么关于职业规划的建议？

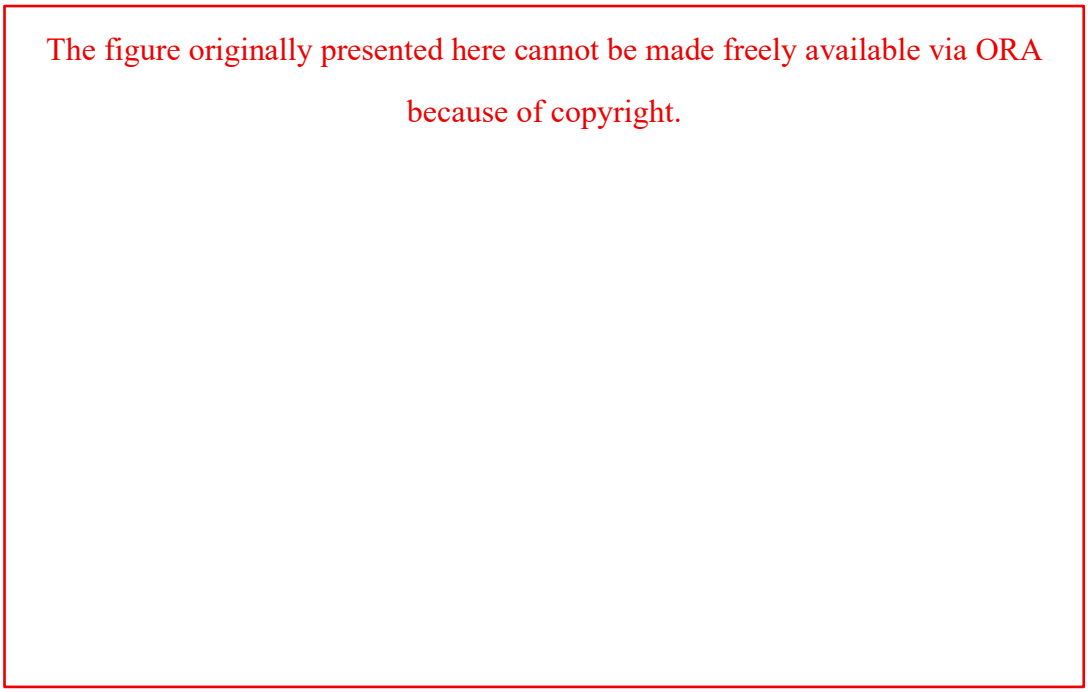
21. 最后，你有没有什么我们还没聊到、但你觉得特别想讲出来的经历或观点？

7.4. APPENDIX D: Mind Map Example

Original version in Mandarin



Translated version in English



7.5. APPENDIX E: CUREC Approval Letter

Education (Educ) DREC
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY

Applicant:
Principal Investigator:
Department: Education

Study title: Exploring the Meaning of Credentials for Chinese Students from Elite Universities
(Version: 2.0)

Ethics reference: Education (Educ) DREC - 1383059

Dear XXX,

On behalf of the Committee, I confirm that the above research study described in the application and other supporting documentation submitted to the committee has been carefully considered on behalf of the Education (Educ) DREC in accordance with the University's regulations and policy for ethics approval of research involving human participants, human tissue and/or personal data. The opinion is as follows:

Opinion of Research Ethics Committee: Favourable Opinion

Subject to the following conditions:

Decision Date: 20 May 2025, 00:27

Opinion End Date: 6 Oct 2026

If favourable, insurance-provided indemnity arrangements will be in place between the decision date and opinion end date and you may now commence your study activities. Should you plan to continue the research beyond the end date above, it is your responsibility to ensure that you request, and receive, an extension (via amendment) from the committee for indemnity to remain in place. You may be required to provide a justification.

Please note the following:

Amendments: Should there be any subsequent changes to the reviewed study, applications for amendments can be made via the Oxford Ethics Application System (Worktribe Ethics).

Reports: Studies considered by OxTREC are expected to submit an *annual progress report* on each anniversary of study approval, until the study is completed. An end of study report is also required.

Audit: This study may be selected for audit at the discretion of the Research Governance, Ethics and Assurance Team.

Data safety: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all data collected during the course of the study is stored and transferred safely and securely in accordance with University requirements. Further guidance and advice are available from the Research Data Team. Additional information is available at https://researchsupport.web.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics

Yours Sincerely

Education Ethics Officer