

# Motivation for Studying Abroad: The Utilitarian Trend of Educational Expectation

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**Abstract.** The utilitarian trend of studying abroad motivation has been widely discussed, but the existing research on the systematic causes of this trend is still insufficient. This article will analyze the manifestation, formation mechanism and multi-dimensional impact of studying abroad utilitarianism on individuals, the education system and society from the two levels of external market and individual internal cognition. According to the analysis of this article, utilitarianism is mainly based on three aspects: the overwhelming academic orientation, the full penetration of the logic of "cost performance", and the marginalization of academic research. The external cause is rooted in the signal distortion of the labor market, and the internal cause is that the school selection standard is reversed to "return first". Based on this, this article puts forward suggestions from three dimensions: at the individual level, pre-study counseling can facilitate cognitive restructuring among individuals; at the institutional level, reforms should the education evaluation system and market signal mechanism to weaken the "sheepskin effect"; at the psychological level, efforts should be made to enhance the students' mental health system and alleviate anxiety. These measures aim to provide a theoretical framework for the rational return on the value of overseas education.

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, the market for studying abroad has continued to recover, and the topic of studying abroad has become a wave of upsurge in the education sector. With the deepening of globalization and the increasing development of the economy, more and more studies begin to pay attention to the economic problems behind studying abroad. In China and other emerging economies, the strong competition for employment, the widespread inflation of academic qualifications, and the serious evolution of education have made people eager to seek ways to beautify their resumes so as to stand out from the crowd. Among them, studying abroad is a popular choice to achieve the goal of gilding. Based on this phenomenon, the employment market has overpursued the label of "returnees", creating an increasingly utilitarian culture of studying abroad. Studying abroad has been transformed from personal growth to academic gold plating, and education has been simplified into the calculation of the output ratio.

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Based on the above problems, this paper analyzes three core issues. First, what are the utilitarian manifestations in the process of studying abroad and what are the motivations behind them? Second, what impact does the utilitarian trend have on individual students, education system and society as a whole? Third, it puts forward suggestions and guidance on how to alleviate the utilitarian tendency.

## **2 Utilitarianism in studying abroad and its causes**

### **2.1 Utilitarian performance: from "seeking knowledge" to "seeking use"**

In the current development process of studying abroad, students and parents repeatedly compare the data of "QS ranking" and "average starting salary of graduates" of major colleges and universities, implying that the spiritual core of studying abroad has shifted from "seeking knowledge" to "seeking application" for the practicality of academic qualifications. This is never an individual, short-sighted choice. On the contrary, it has a macro impact and reshapes the entire international education landscape.

Turning back to the last century, international students have been studying in other countries. When choosing target countries and majors, most of them will pay attention to the consideration of college teachers, academic reputation, the matching degree of curriculum and their own interests. However, in recent years, with the rise of the wrong concept of "academic qualifications first", the process of studying abroad has evolved into a "gilded" process. The report on global education trends in 2026 released by Applyboard clearly pointed out that when international students choose to study abroad, their attention to ROI, affordability and employment prospects has increased significantly, but the traditional glory of famous universities has retreated to the second place. Behind this tendency, students' obvious pursuit of return and measurement of the cost-performance of studying abroad are hidden. At the same time, Meti Basirthe, the report partner, said directly: "The decision to study abroad is now, more than ever, a financial calculation" [1]. It can be clearly feel that education has been commercialized as an "investment", and students have been redefined as "consumers", then students and parents always talk about: "Is this money worth it? "It is reasonable.

### **2.2 External causes: market signals**

The external cause of utilitarianism of studying abroad is mainly rooted in the signal distortion mechanism of the market. Understanding this mechanism, it can be understood why utilitarianism is not an impulsive, short-sighted choice, but a systematic and rational choice, with the so-called "rationality" being precisely induced by the distorted signal environment.

First of all, the "sheepskin effect" of the diploma makes the signal override the essence. Under the framework of the signal theory of the economist Michael Spence, the education diploma is a screening tool for the labor market. Its function is essentially a self-recommendation letter that the job seeker transmits to the employer as a signal of self-ability, but the problem is that when the market relies too much on this signal, the "sheepskin effect" is born. Ferrer and Riddell define this effect as: the increase in labor market income related to the acquisition of a degree or diploma, and this increase is independent of the length of education itself [2]. In short, employers are willing to pay for diplomas, but they don't care how many real skills the applicant learned in the process of obtaining their diploma, which leads to the result that "quick doctors" and a regular doctor may enjoy the same treatment in the professional title evaluation. This further shows the naked truth of the market: it is the

title of doctor that counts, not how to get a doctor. Based on this phenomenon, di Stasio and Vande Werfhorst's factor survey experiment on employers in England and the Netherlands provides empirical support for this mechanism: Employers' interview invitation probability for degree holders is significantly higher than that of non completers, and they are willing to pay a higher starting salary for them, because employers expect that degree holders have outstanding professional specific skills and non-cognitive skills.

Secondly, the involution of studying abroad and the decline of returnees' premium form a pair of paradoxes. With the development of higher education from elitism to popularization, as far as China is concerned, according to the data contained in the national statistical bulletin on the development of education in 2024, the gross enrollment rate of higher education in China will have reached 60.80% in 2024, the number of students has already exceeded half [3]. It can be seen that the scarcity of diplomas has been weakening, which has led to the "devaluation of academic qualifications". More and more students have obtained overseas diplomas, and the effect of differentiation is rapidly diminishing. As early as 1979, sociologist Randall Collins predicted this dilemma in the diploma Society: the historical sociology of education and stratification. The Forum on Education Abroad and Lightcast jointly released a research report, reflecting that the experience of studying abroad can indeed bring a quantifiable income premium, especially in the early stage of their career, but at the same time, the report of Apply Broad revealed another side: In 2025, job vacancies in Canada and the United Kingdom decreased by 14% compared with the previous year, and in the United States decreased by 6%, and the success rate of H1B work visa in the United States continues to be low, which further confirms that the gold content of overseas diplomas is at a negative trough [4]. What is more thought-provoking is that this low state did not dissuade foreign students, but gave birth to a stronger impulse to study abroad. Because in this era of "devaluation of academic qualifications", if students do not study abroad, they will lose the opportunity to have overseas college diplomas, which means that they lose the starting line of the resume and take the initiative to withdraw from this signal competition. Thus, a vicious circle can be observed: the more intense the involution, the greater the need for studying abroad; The more students study abroad, the more they will learn.

### **2.3 Internal causes: changes in the ranking of school selection criteria from "academic fit" to "reward priority"**

If the explanation of the external causes is "why utilitarianism is rational", then the question to be answered by the internal causes is: why do individuals place "return priority" over "academic adaptation" in school selection criteria? The driving force of this decision-making logic, from the pursuit of the fit between students and majors to the precise calculation of future investment returns, comes from social anxiety and fear of class mobility. Finally, it solidified into a stable cognitive schema.

First, the balance of decision logic has shifted from "matching" to "computing". Based on the theory of self-determination, the psychological mechanism is the process of external regulation reshaping the value ranking of internal regulation. In the traditional family study abroad decision-making, more emphasis is placed on "matching". What is matching generally includes two aspects: one is their own interests and abilities, and the other is external opportunities. In the current utilitarian trend, the weight of "matching" is accounted for by "calculation". Specifically, Yue and Lu conducted an empirical study on 736 international students based on the expected value theory and self-determination theory. They found that, in an ideal situation, the decision-making of studying abroad should be dominated by "intrinsic value" (interest in knowledge itself) and "achievement value" (pursuit of self-realization), while "utility value" (Instrumental income) is secondary. However, when the external pressure on individuals' shoulders (social anxiety, class competition, institutional

constraints) is strong enough, "utility value" will be activated, and even overwhelm the intrinsic motivation under these pressures [5]. As a result, students' inner self-motivation is increasingly suppressed, from "I like" to "I have to".

Secondly, the fear of class mobility and social anxiety constitute the internal driving force. A follow-up survey based on China's education (CEPS) shows that although the popularization of compulsory education and the popularization of higher education continue to advance, the inequality of educational opportunities still persists, but the expansion of higher education benefits the socioeconomic advantage groups, especially urban residents, and exacerbates the gap of higher education opportunities between urban and rural areas [6]. Economic advantage groups are first composed of middle-class groups. For middle-class and above families, studying abroad is not only an educational investment, but also an accumulation strategy of "cultural capital", that is, in overseas study and life, children gain language ability, living ability, international vision, new social networks, and other intangible capital to pave the way for their advantage in class competition in the future. Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction has been confirmed here: on the surface, educational choice is individual freedom, but in fact it is deeply restricted by class habits. Renqing Dai used grounded theory to conduct in-depth interviews with 12 college students in overseas graduate education. The results showed that the root cause of decision-making was "the internal driving force generated by social anxiety and class breakout", plus the external pressure of "academic degree inflation causing academic degree Involution". In his discovery, he accurately revealed that studying abroad is no longer the luxury of "icing on the cake", but the essence of the essential problem of "providing timely help", which is the ideal state of middle-class families. The so-called "stratum breakthrough" essentially contains a pair of contradictory emotions, the fear of "downward flow" and the desire for "upward transition". Tuxen said in his ethnographic study of overseas students in Mumbai, India: individuals from different social backgrounds have significant differences in their imagination of the value of studying abroad - the elite tend to obtain "foreign marks" through studying abroad to maintain their existing status, while the struggling class hopes to achieve real upward mobility through studying abroad [7]. This motivation model can also be applied to explain the internal differences of Chinese students. When the hidden rule of society is that people will "fall behind if they don't study abroad", anxiety will arise, and the natural result is the inclination of individual decision-making standards. At this time, who can care about "adaptation"? Get the "door opener" first.

### **3 Multidimensional influence of studying abroad on utilitarianism**

#### **3.1 For individual students: weakening ability and doubling psychological pressure**

When studying abroad is utilitarian and becomes a stepping stone for diploma acquisition and career, the first victim is the comprehensive development of students themselves.

From the perspective of ability construction, when students hold the idea of "I want to get a diploma" rather than "I want to learn something", they will naturally cut corners in academic and ability improvement to avoid those challenging cultural interactions. Students' "instrumental ability" develops, and their relative "reflective ability" shrinks.

At the same time, utilitarian study abroad brings more psychological pressure to students. Those students who regard studying abroad as an "investment" are most likely to fall into anxiety. They put all their chips on "return". Once the return is less than expected, they will form a sense of shame of "investment failure", and the psychological account will collapse. A study published by *frontiers in Psychology* in 2024 pointed out that Chinese overseas

students fell into depression after returning home in the post-epidemic era. They experienced "the darkness of success", not only facing the physical displacement from host country to home country, but also coping with the identity tear under Nationalism: Individuals with cross-border experience and global identity are forced to choose sides between "China us" and "Western them" [8]. When they perceive discrimination, individual well-being is significantly reduced. Not only that, in recent years, there has been a wider group of international students in the mental health crisis. A cross-border study of international students in the United States, Britain and Australia found that the depression rate among Saudi students was as high as 40. 4%, which meant that nearly half of the students had diagnosed depression, which was closely related to their past mental history and alienation; The detection rate of depression among British graduate students was 34. 6%, which was mainly caused by economic difficulties, homesickness and communication barriers, and it should be noted that only 13. 1% of these students had sought mental health help [9]. More depressed students choose to bear the pain themselves rather than seek help from the outside world, which is helpless for them who still need to study and live a busy life every day. Another psychological by-product is academic burnout, which is defined as a three-dimensional comprehensive symptom in a 2025 study by *Frontiers in Psychology*: emotional exhaustion, academic alienation, and reduced sense of achievement. In China, 23. 7% of adolescents' severe academic burnout is detected, which is positively correlated with anxiety and depression [10]. When international students regard studying abroad as a task that must be completed, the internal driving force will be greatly weakened, followed by the perception of external pressure being amplified, and when choosing a major, giving priority to "employment prospects" will lose interest and deepen this burnout, which makes them more likely to feel empty and experience academic alienation in the process of learning.

### **3.2 On Education: deviation from origin and waste of educational resources**

The second aspect of the utilitarian impact of studying abroad is the erosion of education itself. The core mission of education is "educating people". Zhankui Wang" revisited Richard Stanley Peters' free education" in his article, pointing out that the goal of education is to shape a "state of human existence" and become a person with rational judgment and overall personality development [11]. When studying abroad is turned into a "diploma production line" by means of tools, purposefulness covers the core of education and ignores the care for individuals in meeting the needs of society. The research published by Zhipeng Wang and Xudong Liu in the *Journal of the National Institute of Education Administration* pointed out that the self-purposeful nature of education originates from the practical care of education for the nature of human existence and takes the attachment of the value of educational tools to the intrinsic value of education as the core connotation [12].

From the perspective of voluntary allocation, utilitarian study abroad causes a huge waste of resources. In terms of education, the educational resources (teachers, academic equipment, libraries, etc. ) invested by overseas colleges and universities have not been fully utilized for the "accelerated degree" projects, and the students are just "naming". At the social level, a large number of resources are invested in "diploma production" rather than "talent training". The industries around language training, study abroad agencies and counseling institutions are booming, while the investment to really promote knowledge innovation and academic progress is relatively insufficient. This imbalance in resource allocation has led to a growing disconnect between education investment and real human capital accumulation [13].

## **4 Countermeasures and suggestions**

First, reshape individual cognition and return to the original intention of seeking knowledge. This is not an empty statement, but requires the joint efforts of families, schools, and social media. Families should abandon the single calculation logic of "return on investment in education", respect their children's personal wishes (children's academic interests and career directions), and reintroduce studying abroad to the growth track of enriching life experience, broadening cognition and learning new knowledge; The study abroad intermediary can add the content of "meaning construction" in the counseling, collect various majors, specialties, teachers and so on from various colleges and universities, guide students to clarify their study abroad motivation, and cultivate a student's intrinsic motivation based on self-determination theory to meet three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and belonging [14]. Therefore, the study abroad counseling should not only provide information, but also help students establish emotional links with the schools and communities they will go to, so as to reduce the psychological isolation of students after they go. At the same time, students are encouraged to deliberately leave some time blank during their study abroad, which can be called "aimless time". For example, taking advantage of this time to participate in a local community activity, which can be manual activities, sports, parties, or attending an interesting course unrelated to their major, or taking a walk in local streets and parks after class or on rest days. These seemingly "waste of time" activities are exactly the way to integrate individual international students into the country of study, which can increase the students' sense of belonging, which is different from the core value of "domestic gilding".

Second, reform the education evaluation system and market signal mechanism. This is the fundamental solution, which directly aims at the "sheepskin effect" mentioned above. First of all, employers should establish a diversified evaluation mechanism based on the ability and potential, reduce the mechanical screening of College Ranking and diploma level when recruiting talents, and pay more attention to the investigation of actual ability, such as the collection of works, project experience and skill test. Government departments can promote the "Diploma plus vocational skill level certificate" system to provide a level playing field for talents with different educational backgrounds.

Third, strengthen the construction of the international students' mental health system. Colleges and universities and institutions for studying abroad should set up mental health services, carry out cross-cultural adaptation training before students go to the country of study, preset the difficulties they may face in studying abroad, help students to be mentally prepared, instead of changing from "treatment of the whole family" in China to "forced to grow up", continue to provide psychological counseling and peer support networks during studying abroad, and set up a "re adaptation" counseling mechanism after returning home. In particular, targeted interventions are required to address the psychological well-being of international students from disadvantaged backgrounds who lack social support, with mechanisms in place to provide timely assistance. According to the research, social support plays a "mediating role" in it, which can help individuals better cope with environmental challenges, reduce loneliness, improve mental health, and enhance the ability of emotion regulation [15].

## 5 Conclusion

Utilitarianism of studying abroad is the projection of the spirit of the times in the field of education. In a society that advocates efficiency, has serious involvement and widespread anxiety, requiring individuals to have the original intention of "seeking knowledge" in the choice of studying abroad seems to be too good an idealized state. However, recognizing the root cause of utilitarian structure does not mean that one can only be forced to accept it, as Hirsch argues that positional competition generates social waste, while elsewhere invoking the risk of a Hobbesian war of all against all. "The hope of education is that it is finally possible for him to transcend instrumental rationality. Perhaps it is an unexpected discovery

in the laboratory, or a sudden awakening in the library. The true impulse of "seeking knowledge" will still wake up.

The utilitarian trend will not disappear overnight. It may be a long process, but at least one can ask oneself one more question in every choice: besides "is it worth it", are there any "likes" and "wants". Paying attention to the development of human potential is the only way to promote the high-quality development of education.

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