RESEARCH ARTICLE

Temporal Acceleration in Consumerist Education: A Study of Chinese Master of Education Students and Global Policy Implications

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Abstract: Through observations and interviews with 36 master's students in education, this study examines how consumerist educational values shaped by academic capitalism influence their temporal experiences. Drawing on timescape theory, it identifies contradictory time dilemmas, including dislocated time flow, time deficits within power structures, disordered rhythms, and conflicts among temporal frameworks. These challenges are shaped by supervisors, curricula, internships, evaluation standards, and employment pressures. Dominated by the logic of speed and efficiency, students develop consumerist orientations toward graduate study, leading to distorted understandings of education and self-growth and resulting in various forms of time alienation. Importantly, their accelerated sense of time is not only a product of individual perfectionism or market ideologies but is closely tied to institutional governance in China's graduate education system. This study advances understanding of students' temporal challenges and offers insights relevant to educational systems in other countries.

Keywords: Master's students in education, consumerist educational values, time, temporality

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, academic capitalism has globally reshaped higher education, compelling institutions and academics to secure market revenues alongside traditional scholarly output (Cantwell et al., 2014; Rhoades et al., 1997; Slaughter et al., 2004). This shift has fostered consumerist values that frame higher education as a consumable product whose worth is measured by degree brand and labour-market payoff (Wang et al., 2019). Emphasising audit metrics and quantifiable outcomes, these values have recalibrated temporal norms within academia, casting "wasted" time as an ethical lapse (Menzies et al., 2007). While prior research has centred on faculty and doctoral students, the temporal experiences of master's students in education remain understudied. As novice researchers requiring substantial time for knowledge accumulation and innovation, these students differ from PhD candidates in their lesser specialization and uncertain academic orientation, resulting in more heterogeneous schedules and distinct time conflicts. Despite China's bifurcated pathways—practical and academic—for education master's students, both cohorts are equally embedded in consumerist timescapes and manifest parallel temporal pressures.

Employing Barbara Adam's (2008) "timescape" framework, this study investigates how consumerist educational values configure the temporal experiences of 36 Chinese master's students in education, with particular attention to their coping strategies and adaptive mechanisms. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, we analyse the multidimensional aspects of their temporal lives—encompassing temporal frameworks, temporality, timing, and rhythm—to reveal how these mediate academic engagement. Findings inform targeted policy recommendations aimed at mitigating consumerism's impact on students' time allocation, learning motivation, and scholarly commitment.

2. Literature Review

Adam (1998, 2004) theorizes time as an institutionalized structure constituted by social networks, relations, and inequalities, assuming distinct meanings across contexts. To capture this complexity, Adam (2004) articulates the "timescape"

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concept, foregrounding time's intrinsic relationality through non-simplifiable elements: timeframe, temporality, timing, rhythm, continuity, sequentiality, and temporal patterns. This resonates with Heidegger's (1996) proposition that individuals inhabit differentiated "temporal landscapes" shaped by social location, space, and identity, wherein access to temporal resources varies asymmetrically. Such perspectives dismantle the hegemony of mechanistic "clock time," repositioning temporality as a dynamic, socially embedded construct that structures experience and agency.

The ascendancy of academic capitalism has eclipsed Humboldtian educational ideals (1767-1836) with consumerist values (Wang & Chen, 2019). Students increasingly construe education as a commodity whose value is realized through exchange—graduation credentials, rapid thesis publication, and grants (Theun Pieter van Tienoven et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2023; Xinyue Chen et al.). This commodification instrumentalizes learning into discrete, outcome-oriented tasks. Notwithstanding scholarly recognition of time's multidimensionality, consumerist logics entrench linear, efficiency-driven temporal regimes (Bennett et al., 2017; Bosanquet et al., 2020; Filip, 2014; H. Lin, 2022; Ylijoki et al., 2003), institutionalizing what Adam (2003) condemns as "speed fetishism." Acceleration becomes the default modality: time must be managed, controlled, and compressed, compelling faculty and students to surrender personal time to systemic demands.

When acceleration exceeds sustainable thresholds, however, its pathologies surface (Rosa, 2013). Empirical evidence documents a perverse inversion: total academic work hours escalate while per-task duration contracts (Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014), corroding deep scholarly reflection and innovation (Vettori, 2023). Workload models chronically underestimate task-time requirements (Vardi, 2009), while temporal fragmentation erodes job satisfaction, productivity, and psychological well-being (Mcinnis, 1996; Menzies et al., 2008). Concomitantly, academics and students report heightened guilt, anxiety, and shame when failing to synchronize with institutional tempos (Lindvig, 2018; Mantyla, 2000). Temporal misalignment is thus privatized as personal inadequacy rather than structural contradiction (Aronson, 2016). Individual coping techniques—prioritization, interruption management—provide merely palliative relief (Judith et al., 2016; Kearns et al., 2007), as they cannot neutralize the foundational impacts of spatial, institutional, and cultural disparities on temporal planning (Bennett & Burke, 2017).

These dynamics acquire distinctive expression among M.Ed. students. Straddling the boundary between knowledge reception (undergraduate) and specialized knowledge production (PhD), they must cultivate research competence while navigating uncertain career trajectories. Compulsory teaching internships lasting six months to one year impose fixed, non-negotiable temporal boundaries (Guo et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2014). Employment precarity further compels credential-maximizing activities—graduate student union work, Party branch activities, and competitions—that fragment time across academic and professional registers (Wu & Lin, 2023). Consequently, M.Ed. students' temporal allocation is polyphonically constrained by multiple, misaligned timeframes, generating unique conflicts.

Despite burgeoning scholarship on faculty and doctoral temporalities (Bosanquet et al., 2020; H. Lin, 2022; X. Lin & Liu, 2022; Ylijoki & Mantyla, 2003), M.Ed. students remain analytically neglected. This study addresses that lacuna by examining how education master's students navigate temporal conflicts and adapt to consumerist timescapes, revealing coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies conditioned by institutional acceleration and diversified career development imperatives.

3. Research Questions and Theoretical Framework

This study employs Barbara Adam's (2008) "timescape" framework, which conceptualizes time as a relational construct comprising non-simplifiable elements that are socially embedded and institutionally mediated. Four dimensions are central to this analysis: (1) time frame—bounded temporal structures (e.g., semester cycles, internship periods) that shape and delimit tasks; (2) temporality—subjective perception, affective experience, and meaning-making of temporal passage; (3) timing—discernment of opportune moments for strategic action (e.g., competitions, job preparation, networking); and (4) tempo—the speed, pace, and intensity of activities across contexts, including the capacity to modulate rhythm in response to competing demands. These interconnected dimensions co-constitute a multidimensional lens through which to examine how temporal experiences are constructed, contested, and negotiated within consumerist higher education.

Based on this framework, semi-structured

interview questions were designed to elicit reflective accounts across three focal areas:

Temporal structuration: How do specific time frames bound your academic and personal activities, and how have these boundaries shifted across different stages of your master's program? This targets the objective architectures that scaffold daily routines and long-term planning.

Experiential variation: In what ways does your perception of time's passage vary across academic stages (e.g., coursework, internship, thesis), and what factors (institutional, peer, personal) shape these meanings? This probes the phenomenological and affective dimensions of temporality.

Strategic synchronization: What considerations guide your timing decisions for engaging in extracurricular activities, such as internships, graduate student union work, or competitions? How do you navigate "right" versus "wrong" times for such investments? This examines agency within accelerated, opportunity-saturated environments.

These questions collectively aim to uncover how education master's students navigate temporal conflicts, adapt to accelerating demands, and construct viable temporal identities amidst competing academic and professional pressures.

4. Methodology

To capture the nuanced, contextually embedded nature of temporal experiences, scholars increasingly favor qualitative approaches (Bosanquet et al., 2020; H. Lin, 2022; Wu & Lin, 2023). This study employed semi-structured interviews and spontaneous informal conversations as primary data collection instruments (DiCicco-Bloom, 2006; Hammersley et al., 2007). Thirty-six M.Ed. students were recruited through purposive and convenience sampling (Suri, 2011) from three universities representing distinct tiers within the Chinese higher education system: a national key university, a provincial key university, and a general comprehensive university. The sample encompassed multiple cohorts and specializations, though senior students were underrepresented due to concurrent off-campus internships and job-search commitments, and reflected the pronounced gender imbalance characteristic of Chinese graduate education in education disciplines.

Interview protocols were systematically developed from an extensive literature review and pilot-tested to ensure capacity to elicit diverse, reflective perspectives (Chenail, 2011), then refined to align precisely with the research focus on

consumerist timescapes. During interviews, the researcher maintained an open, approachable demeanor that encouraged participants to share freely, deploying supplemental questions to deepen emergent insights. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes, was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim; participants received modest gifts and honoraria as appreciation for their contribution.

Crucially, as an M.Ed. student researcher, the author engaged in sustained reflexive participant observation over one academic semester within everyday academic, professional practice, and personal life contexts. This insider positionality enabled documentation of classmates' daily routines, study-extracurricular negotiations, time management strategies, and peer interactions. Informal peer conversations served as supplementary data, enriching and triangulating interview findings to yield a holistic, empirically grounded understanding of temporal conflicts as experienced and managed in situ.

Table 1 Basic Interviewee Information

Research Subject	Gender	Grade	Major	Research Subject	Gender	Grade	Major
A1	Female	1	Primary education	A19	Male	1	Educational management
A2	Female	1	Primary education	A20	Female	1	Higher education
A3	Female	1	Primary education	A21	Female	2	Primary education
A4	Female	1	Primary education	A22	Female	2	Primary education
A5	Female	1	English education	A23	Female	2	English education
A6	Female	1	English education	A24	Female	2	English education
A7	Female	1	Chemistry education	A25	Male	2	Pre-school education
A8	Male	1	Pre-school education	A26	Female	2	Pre-school education
A9	Female	1	Pre-school education	A27	Female	2	Pre-school education
A10	Female	1	Pre-school education	A28	Female	2	Adult education
A11	Female	1	Pre-school education	A29	Female	2	Adult education
A12	Female	1	Pre-school education	A30	Male	2	Higher education
A13	Female	1	Adult education	A31	Female	3	Higher education
A14	Female	1	Adult education	A32	Female	3	Primary education
A15	Female	1	Curriculum and Pedagogy	A33	Male	3	Pre-school education
A16	Female	1	Curriculum and Pedagogy	A34	Female	3	Educational management
A17	Female	1	Educational management	A35	Female	3	Educational management
A18	Female	1	Educational management	A36	Male	3	Higher education

Interviews and coding were conducted in Chinese to preserve semantic nuance. Data were analyzed using a three-tier coding process: (1) distilling key concepts and organizing them into third-level codes, (2) synthesizing these thematically and selecting representative units to illustrate each theme, and (3) refining first-level codes through comparison with existing literature to produce final findings. Theoretical saturation was achieved after analyzing 30 interviews; subsequent examination of the remaining six cases yielded no substantial new concepts, confirming adequacy of the sample and robustness of the coding framework (Table 2). The translated manuscript was subsequently reviewed for semantic accuracy by an English-trained member of the research team.

Table 2 Coding Results for Influential Factors in the Perception of Time Alienation

Third Level Code	Second Level Code	First Level Code
No time to instruct us; No progress; No group meetings; Laissez-faire management; Anxious waiting; Self-indulgence; Playing anxiously	Frequency of Guidance	Multiple temporality experiences triggered by the supervisor's mentoring model
No knowledge gained; The time invested is not proportional to the growth achieved; Not aligned with my research direction; Unpaid and useless labor	Guidance Effectiveness	
Supervisors do not understand the scientific method of research; Supervisor has no research projects; Fear of failing to pass the graduation thesis	Professional Competence	
Boring courses; Low match with expectations; Teacher mechanically reads textbooks; Wasting time; Looking forward to class ending; Low value; Few courses are helpful; Little benefit gained	Courses	
30-40 page PPT assignments; Little help for professional development; Low-quality assignments; Assignments consume too much time; Teachers don't care about the quality	Assignments	
No inspiration; Increasing difficulty in publishing papers; Needing to spend a lot of time learning analytical tools; Academic rubbish; Little time for focused learning	Research	The diversity of tasks generates disorganization of time rhythms
No longer wanting to spend parents' money; Commute time wasted; Mismatch between time invested and income; Feeling exhausted after tutoring	Part-time Jobs	
Regular duty shifts; Distracting attention; Difficulty focusing on one task; Constantly checking phones; Difficulty being fully engaged in one thing	Student Union or Class Management Duties	
Research thresholds; Unclear research direction; Lack of concentrated study time; Fragmented time; No sense of direction; Anxiously waiting for research inspiration	Adaptation and Learning	
Not be evaluated; Seemingly endless; Unable to balance tasks; Taking on miscellaneous tasks; Unpaid labor; Feeling overwhelmed	Research and Internships	The experience of anxiety in multiple time frames dominated by staged tasks
Examinations throughout the country; Graduation anxiety; Time passes too quickly; Insufficient time for preparation; Various time conflicts	Graduation and Employment	

5. Findings

5.1. Multiple temporality experiences triggered by the supervisor's mentoring model

Power asymmetries in supervisor-student interactions—encoded in who waits, who dominates temporal organization, and who is constrained by scheduling—profoundly shape M.Ed. students' temporal experiences (Adam, 1995). Mentoring practices emerged as a critical theme across all interviews, with respondents consistently expressing desire for more systematic and specialized guidance. This need is particularly acute among the large proportion of interdisciplinary students in education programs who require support to adapt to and identify with their new field (Wang & Chen, 2019).

However, most M.Ed. students reported minimal formal (e.g., group meetings) or informal interaction with supervisors. Rather than holding regular discussions (Mao, 2013; Xu & Yan, 2024), supervisors typically directed students toward extensive independent reading to identify research directions. Even when group meetings occurred, discussions remained confined to superficial reading reflections rather than providing in-depth guidance on research paradigms, theoretical frameworks, methodological design, article selection strategies,

reading methods, or techniques for integrating insights into original research. Furthermore, despite the Chinese Ministry of Education's official recognition of diverse dissertation formats—including research reports, case studies, and practical projects—pedagogy programs continue privileging traditional theses for graduation assessment. This narrow focus has led to systematic underemphasis on practical skill development and a corresponding lack of supervisory guidance in applied competencies (Yang, 2015; Li et al., 2024).

Acutely aware of hyper-competitive job markets amid higher education expansion, students sought research accomplishments to enhance employability. Yet without systematic direction, many wasted time on aimless reading and fragmented thinking, inefficiently determining research directions, collecting data, and iterating through dead-end topics. This produced minimal academic progress, leaving them as "academic orphans" trapped in a paradoxical state of chaotic time perception and anxious anticipation—"waiting time" that might never resolve (Lahad, 2019). The temporal structure becomes one of indefinite deferral, where present activity lacks clear trajectory and future breakthroughs remain perpetually elusive.

My supervisor admitted he is no longer actively engaged in academia and advised me not to rely on him for guidance. While I have resorted to self-learning through online videos and academic articles, which has been somewhat helpful, the lack of support has left me feeling isolated. (A2)

Compounding this, supervisors under "up or out" pressures and output demands (Read & Leathwood, 2018; Ylijoki, 2014) frequently delegated research, administrative, or editorial tasks to M.Ed. students. While acknowledging limited research skill benefits, students reported these mandatory, prioritized, and unpredictable assignments encroached on their own research time and eroded temporal autonomy, intensifying anxiety. The tasks often required immediate attention, disrupting planned work rhythms and forcing constant reprioritization. Refusal proved difficult due to Confucian cultural norms positioning student obedience as moral imperative and framing dissent as authority challenge. This prevailing cultural awareness legitimates the displacement of time deficits: supervisors address their own temporal shortages by assigning tasks to students, who consequently experience temporal

deprivation and loss of control. The power differential ensures that supervisors' time crises become students' time dilemmas, creating a cascading system of temporal extraction.

When assigning tasks, my supervisor would ask, "Is three days enough?" or "How many days do you need?" These time constraints forced me to prioritize his tasks. Inefficiency was seen as a lack of competence or poor attitude. (A16)

5.2. The diversity of tasks generates disorganization of time rhythms

Genuine learning should be driven by curiosity and free from instrumental interests (Ziman, 1998). However, under consumerist values, immersive temporal experience and coherent rhythms are frequently lacking. The massification of higher education has saturated the job market with highly educated talent, compelling employers to adopt stricter, multi-dimensional evaluation systems that prioritize "national scholarship winners," "outstanding graduate honors," and "competition awards" (Huang et al., 2024). Consequently, most students enroll in graduate programs to enhance employability rather than realize self-worth, rendering learning a means to competitive advantage. They strive to seize limited-time opportunities—union work, party branch tasks, and competitions—each with distinct temporal demands: party work is urgent and intense while academic research requires sustained, slow effort. Students must adapt to these external time frames without controlling them, creating profound coordination challenges. When unable to successfully negotiate multiple rhythms, they commonly resort to two coping strategies: sacrificing task quality or engaging in hidden truancy.

The first strategy involves sacrificing work quality. Overwhelmed by overlapping demands, students prioritize tasks by expected returns, allocating minimal time to "low-value" activities. This reconfigures temporal rhythm to accommodate high-priority tasks, where urgency overrides deep thinking and prevents appreciation of slow knowledge growth (Kelly, 2020; Bunn et al., 2020). This instrumentalized time constitutes a classic form of non-authentic temporality (Heidegger, 1996), depriving students of opportunities to realize their potentiality-for-being.

It's unrealistic to complete every task with high quality. For one of the courses this semester,

I've been using AI to do my assignments, because everyone knows that the instructor never actually checks them.. (A9)

The second strategy is hidden truancy—appearing present while disengaged (e.g., using phones, completing other assignments). Education master's students face a highly centralized curriculum of nearly 20 courses in the first year with little flexibility. The regular, decentralized rhythm of class time inevitably conflicts with other task rhythms, leading students to utilize class time for urgent priorities. Most stated they deprioritize course grades, which carry little evaluation weight compared to competitions and research achievements, meaning excellent grades rarely yield substantial benefits. Additionally, final assessments typically involve brief open-ended essays that rarely result in failure. Consequently, classes are viewed as low-reward time drains, making hidden truancy a strategic behavior to pursue tangible rewards elsewhere. This conflict between slow-paced classes and rapid progress demands fuels anxiety and future-oriented focus.

Maybe this explains why many students are not interested in class participation or grades. Competitions, publications, and student leadership experience weigh more in scholarship evaluations. Last year, I spoke up in every class and worked hard on my assignments, ranking first in the class, but since I didn't join other activities, I only received a third-class scholarship. (A31)

5.3. The experience of anxiety in multiple time frames dominated by staged tasks

Socially constructed time orders—explicit schedules, behavioral rhythms, and collective cultures—shape individual behavioral norms (Blount et al., 2001). For M.Ed. students, academic and practical lives are embedded in a collective default time frame organized around stage-specific developmental milestones, generating distinct temporal experiences across three stages.

In the first year, students navigate the transition from undergraduate to graduate status, requiring sustained, high-quality study time within a linear framework emphasizing continuity (Ma, 2023). However, a speed culture pervades, where multi-award students are celebrated as role models through campus media and award ceremonies. This institutionalizes a circular temporality centered on short-term results (awards, publications), forming a cycle of "getting results-getting rewarded" that conflicts with the long-term accumulation required by linear time (Adam, 1995). This mismatch exacerbates tension between demands for rapid output and limited knowledge reservoirs, intensifying anxiety and meaninglessness. To mitigate this, some students resort to publishing in low-quality journals ("shuikan") to earn credits for scholarship evaluations.

In the second year, internships structure the temporal order, requiring four to six months of teaching practice. As the final year centers on job preparation, many students balance internships with thesis work. However, the lack of supervision, guidance, and evaluation erodes internships' perceived value (Guo et al., 2016). Despite negative attitudes, students must comply with rigid schedules, producing experiences of time stagnation and uncertainty. Simultaneously, conflicting temporal demands intensify the struggle to manage dual responsibilities within fragmented time.

In practice school, we just do repetitive, low-intellectual activities. I really don't see the point of the internship. It feels like being trapped in a cage, just waiting for time to pass so I can move on. (A30)

In the final year, job hunting structures the dominant temporal frame. As higher education expansion intensifies competition, reducing individuals' sense of control (Mittal et al., 2014), most students extend exam preparation. Campus recruitment offers better salaries and less competition than social recruitment, making this year a critical temporal window. However, exam preparation cycles generate multiple overlapping fixed temporal frames that force students to choose between opportunities, often sacrificing one for another. This decision-making process is filled with tension, rendering optimal timing identification crucial. When temporality is externally driven, it feels less controllable and passes faster, while subjective time frames become fluid, expanding or contracting with anxiety and desire. Uncertainty about exam outcomes exacerbates anxiety, and failure often triggers perceptions of having missed a "right timing," heightening future anxiety about temporal selection.
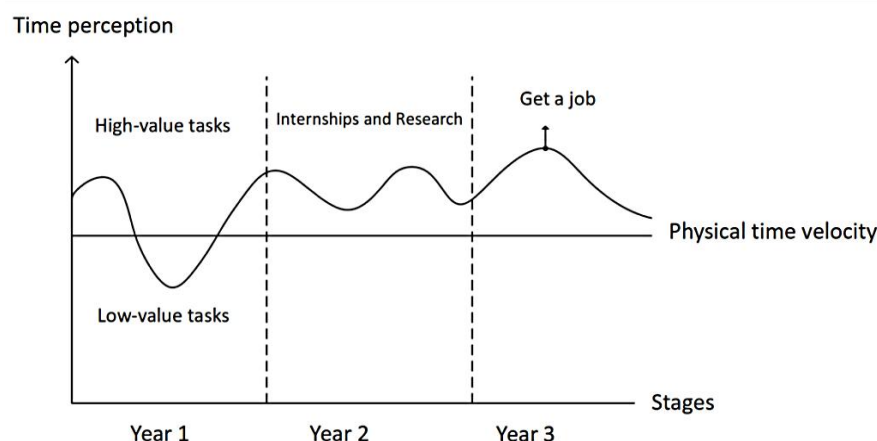
Figure 1 Perception of Time in the Stages of M.Ed. Students

6. Conclusion

This paper reveals that Chinese M.Ed. students experience alienated time perception, disordered rhythms, and conflicts between multiple temporal frames, evoking profound anxiety. These temporal pathologies stem from structural conditions: a hyper-competitive job market, dysfunctional mentoring, irrational evaluation regimes, and an institutional culture privileging speed and efficiency. Under consumerist values and bleak employment prospects, students increasingly construe graduate studies as a utilitarian means to accumulate marketable "commodities"—credentials, certificates, and CV-worthy experiences—to enhance labor market competitiveness (Wu & Lin, 2023). This instrumental orientation compels investment of limited time across numerous potentially rewarding activities, forcing simultaneous inhabitation of multiple, asynchronous temporal frames. The result is accelerated temporality: compressed time perception, intensified activity pace, and constant task-switching aimed at maximizing outcomes within abbreviated periods.

Moreover, graduate student motivation is structured by "waiting"—a temporal mode where present investment sacrifices immediate knowledge acquisition for uncertain future returns. This delayed-return mechanism converts graduate school into extended anxious anticipation, rendering time perception hyper-future-oriented while the present is systematically neglected. Under consumerist logic, time is reified as a quantifiable resource, valorizing only activities yielding immediate, measurable returns. This devaluation leads students to struggle with coursework and internships lacking instant payoffs, generating skepticism about their intrinsic worth and hypersensitivity to time-return imbalances.

Consequently, students experience temporal stagnation—feeling stuck while awaiting future validation—that intensifies underlying time anxiety.

7. Discussion

Both Chinese and Western graduate students experience time anxiety rooted in education's consumerist reconstruction—from slow knowledge exploration to an efficiency-driven race shaped by neoliberal ideology (Bosanquet et al., 2020). Trapped in performance-oriented systems, students struggle to maintain intellectual depth. Reconstructing graduate education's temporal structure and culture requires three integrated policy shifts.

First, supervisors must establish interactive relationships based on temporal negotiation, cultivating positive temporal experiences and appreciation of graduate study's intrinsic value. They should maintain open, composed attitudes toward time, monitor students' academic and emotional states, and provide timely psychological support to help navigate difficulties. Effective supervision should extend beyond thesis milestones to encompass everyday academic and personal interactions that foster resilience.

Second, universities should systematically examine courses to reduce formalistic, repetitive workloads that fragment time and impose frequent deadlines. Course design should emphasize quality over quantity, encouraging creative and practice-oriented tasks rather than those easily completed by artificial intelligence. Simultaneously, universities must establish regular feedback mechanisms ensuring student voices inform dynamic adjustments to teaching pace and assessment. Institutional design should accommodate diverse temporal rhythms across study stages, providing

flexible internship arrangements to prevent clashes with job-hunting periods.

Third, graduate students should proactively clarify their developmental orientation and achieve self-regulation through self-awareness and goal-setting. Excessive pursuit of multiple achievements disperses time resources, trapping individuals in reactive mode within acceleration dilemmas. Only through clear orientation can students balance inner rhythms between study and life, transforming from utilitarian "users of time" into "creators of time" who immerse themselves in temporal flow and rediscover learning's inherent meaning.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Teacher Education, Ningbo University (Approval No.: NBUST20231001-0023) prior to data collection. All procedures involving human participants complied with the ethical standards of institutional and national research committees and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare there are no conflicts of interest.

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Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Declaration

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language editing and grammar checking. The author reviewed and takes full responsibility for the final content of the paper.

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