

A Study on Improving the Quality of Graduation Theses in Academic Continuing Education from the Perspective of Stimulating the Intrinsic Needs of Multiple Stakeholders

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Abstract: Education, technology, and talent are now developing together. This makes improving academic continuing education an urgent task. The graduation thesis is a key part of training students, as it helps improve overall education quality. Writing a thesis helps students enhance their knowledge, skills, and thinking. But currently, the intrinsic needs of people involved, including administration departments, supervisors, and students, are not fully stimulated. Using Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, this paper looks at what these stakeholders actually need and suggests ways to improve the quality of graduation theses in academic continuing education.

Keywords: Intrinsic needs; Academic continuing education; Graduation thesis quality

Online publication: June 30, 2026

1. Introduction

Academic continuing education is closely linked to social production, which is its main feature. Under the background of the integrated development of education, technology, and talent, improving its educational quality is an important approach to continuously optimizing the national human resource structure. In the process of talent cultivation in academic continuing education, the graduation thesis is a very important teaching component that can systematically strengthen students' comprehensive professional abilities. Therefore, improving the quality of graduation theses has become a key point in the reform of academic continuing education and carries important practical significance.

2. How the graduation thesis improves the comprehensive abilities of students in academic continuing education

2.1. As a problem-oriented process for training systematic thinking

The graduation thesis is problem-oriented, which shows most clearly in topic selection. Students need a solid knowledge base in their chosen field and must use what they learned in class and from work to identify meaningful topics. This means reflecting on technical and management issues or areas of personal interest they experience in practice. Then, they must look at these issues through the theories learned in coursework. By doing so, students take charge of the research process. They analyze the subject matter step by step and define the scope and boundaries of their chosen topic clearly. Writing the proposal cultivates systematic thinking. The proposal must explain the background, significance, objectives, route, methods, framework, and innovation of the topic. These parts cover the current research status at home and abroad and show how the topic contributes to the field or socioeconomic development. They list the theoretical and practical problems to be solved, and they specify the main research techniques used, the logical relationships between key variables, and the basic research path. All these forces students to build their writing system from a systematic view. Meanwhile, students consult many references, from which they gain broader, more practical professional knowledge. This widens their horizons. After this full training, their systematic thinking improves greatly.

2.2. As a process of applying integrated knowledge

Students take foundational, specialized, and practical courses. Without synthesis, knowledge stays fragmented as isolated “islands” of information rather than an interconnected web. Such a knowledge structure is rigid. If not integrated, knowledge becomes obsolete or may even decline over time. This contrasts sharply with the fast-evolving knowledge economy, which demands adaptable knowledge. For the graduation thesis, students investigate a specific topic, and they must ground their writing in proper theoretical frameworks. They need to define the connotations and denotations of core concepts. This establishes the exact disciplinary positioning. Students must then handle the relationships between different modules in their field to prevent conceptual confusion during argumentation. Besides, choosing the right technical and analytical tools is essential. It ensures rigor and persuasiveness. Thus, the thesis acts as the “master keystone” that locks all individual educational “components” into place. It builds a complete knowledge network. This improves the overall knowledge structure.

2.3. As a process of enhancing students’ abilities

Abilities differ from professional knowledge. Knowledge is an objective existence, and ability is the level of using knowledge to solve practical problems. This involves applying professional techniques, determining operational procedures, and selecting strategies. Professional knowledge is shown through personal ability, and the graduation thesis is an important process for cultivating personal ability. Using theory to solve problems, students must describe problems objectively and choose the right professional technical means for research. This requires massive data statistics, analysis, and classification skills. It especially trains students’ ability to consult literature and write reviews. Even writing and expression skills get a systematic boost. Later, students unconsciously combine learned knowledge with work practices. This transforms into better work capability, which is the effect of human capital investment through university study.

3. Challenges in managing graduation theses in academic continuing education

Although the graduation thesis component is very important for student cultivation in academic continuing education, its quality management has not achieved the desired ideal effects due to various subjective and objective constraints. This is mainly reflected in the following aspects.

3.1. Weakening quality awareness and management innovation in administration departments

Administration departments of academic continuing education are responsible for overseeing the graduation thesis process, and their awareness of quality and their ability to innovate have a direct effect on the final quality of students' theses. However, in the current development of academic continuing education, the management of graduation theses has shown signs of weakening to different extents ^[1]. First, the standards for graduation theses have been lowered, often unconsciously. Due to the continuous expansion of full-time higher education enrollment, the number of students choosing academic continuing education has gradually declined in recent years. Most universities have experienced decreasing enrollment, while the overall quality of student intake has also dropped year by year. Under such pressure, many institutions have relaxed graduation requirements to attract more students. Some universities even equate the graduation thesis process to a course, where students can obtain a graduation certificate or even a degree certificate as long as they pass, which has led to the diminished importance of the graduation thesis. Second, there is a lack of innovation in graduation thesis management. Faced with new situations where the Ministry of Education continuously issues documents to strengthen the quality requirements for continuing education, most universities still manage graduation theses according to their own established models. They lack the awareness for reform, and their efforts in adopting new measures and systems for management innovation are insufficient, failing to mobilize the enthusiasm of both supervisors and students.

3.2. Generally inadequate attention from students

Currently, students in academic continuing education generally do not attach enough importance to the graduation thesis process ^[2]. Reasons include: First, time shortage. Most adult students balance work and study. Work comes before academic tasks. Thesis quality is often unrelated to salary or career benefits. Some teaching content lacks practical relevance. Many students cannot devote enough time and energy to thesis writing. Second, low cost of learning. Adult entrance exam scores are not high, so admission is easier. Besides, tuition fees are relatively low, making it hard to restrict students' learning behavior effectively. As such, many students get by perfunctorily in different ways, and academic fraud and last-minute patchwork are common. Therefore, encouraging serious participation in the graduation thesis process remains a challenge.

3.3. Lack of effective supervisor constraints

In academic continuing education, the graduation thesis process mainly follows a supervisor responsibility system. Most supervisors are appointed on a part-time basis, and they are usually subject to two constraints when performing their duties. First, there is an insufficient constraint on due diligence. Due to the part-time status of thesis supervisors, they have no personnel affiliation with the academic continuing education department that employs them. At the same time, they have their own daily teaching and research work to complete and clear job responsibility goals at their primary institutions. In comparison, being hired for thesis advising in academic continuing education is mainly based on long-term cooperation and personal willingness.

Although this employment relationship also has clear rights and obligations, it is not mandatory. Once a conflict arises with the supervisor's own primary job, the thesis advising work for continuing education students will be the first to be affected. Under the supervisor responsibility system, once the leading role of the supervisor is weakened, the students' graduation thesis writing will be greatly affected; Second, there are insufficient salary incentives. The administration department pays thesis supervisors according to regulations, and the salary level potentially determines the degree of importance supervisors attach to this task. Relative to their personal income level, every supervisor has a potential standard for satisfactory remuneration, and this standard changes accordingly as the overall income level of the regional education industry gradually increases. If supervisors do not receive satisfactory compensation, they may perform their thesis advising duties perfunctorily. However, the salary level that academic continuing education can afford to pay supervisors is determined by its overall revenue. In recent years, the continuous decline in student enrollment and the fact that tuition standards have remained unchanged for many years have led to a year-on-year decline in the income of academic continuing education programs^[3], making it difficult to offer appointed supervisors remuneration higher than the industry average. This has, to a large extent, affected the importance supervisors place on graduation thesis advising.

4. Analysis of the intrinsic needs of various stakeholders under the framework of needs theory

An individual's intrinsic needs are the driving force behind their behavioral choices, and identifying these intrinsic needs is the prerequisite for mobilizing their subjective initiative. Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory divides human needs into physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs, in ascending order. Self-actualization is the highest level of human needs. The need for self-actualization manifests as a person's desire to do things more perfectly, which is the need for achievement, and the intrinsic desire for personal development, which is the need for growth. The core of self-actualization is the pursuit of the full development of one's potential. Faced with subjective and objective environments, stakeholders such as administrators, supervisors, and students in the academic continuing education graduation thesis process each have their own intrinsic needs to improve the quality of graduation theses.

4.1. Achieving positive results is the main need of administrators

For administrators, achieving good work results through effective management is an important way to realize their own value, and this need becomes even more obvious, especially when they are facing challenges^[4]. At present, universities are facing growing pressure to improve the quality of talent training in academic continuing education. First, pressure comes from educational authorities. The Ministry of Education has issued a series of policy documents that set clear requirements for the teaching conditions and educational objectives of academic continuing education programs in different types of universities^[5]. These policies have undoubtedly played an important role in promoting better educational quality, stricter teaching standards, and more standardized management. Hence, focusing on improving talent cultivation quality has become an unavoidable task for universities^[6]. The Ministry of Education has also put forward higher requirements for the management of graduation theses, demanding spot checks on all graduation theses for which degrees are conferred, and the pass rate of these checks has naturally become the most direct reflection of the quality of a school's graduation theses. Second, the pressure of competition from school development is becoming

increasingly urgent; improving the quality of graduation theses can drive the enhancement of the overall quality of talent cultivation, while also strengthening the school's educational characteristics, building a good social reputation, and consequently promoting the virtuous development of the quantity and quality of student enrollment. Currently, as the reform of academic continuing education continues to advance, academic continuing education must constantly develop its own educational characteristics and core competitiveness through management innovation, which is crucial for the sustainable development of the school's academic continuing education. All these subjective and objective factors compel administrators to take the initiative to reform, introduce new measures, and improve the quality of talent cultivation, including the quality of graduation theses.

4.2. Pursuit of personal improvement is an intrinsic need of students

Academic continuing education students usually have stable jobs and know production management practices. Some are department managers or key members in their companies, so they often have strong practical abilities. However, many are relatively weak in theoretical knowledge and cannot apply theory to guide practice. To improve work performance and gain development opportunities, they choose academic continuing education. In many ways, they are the more motivated group among working adults with a need for stronger theoretical knowledge. Most of them have clear personal plans. They desire to complete their studies successfully while improving themselves. According to Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development" theory, there is a zone of proximal development between a student's current level and the potential level. Academic continuing education helps students enter this zone. It provides tasks that are challenging but achievable through effort. This encourages motivation and taps potential. In the thesis process, writing itself stimulates students' self-improvement enthusiasm. With proper guidance and support, students are likely to develop a stronger desire to learn and grow.

4.3. Achieving self-actualization is a value pursuit of supervisors

Supervisors are responsible for guiding students throughout the entire graduation thesis process, and the degree of effort and attention they put into their work directly affects the quality of students' thesis writing^[7]. Supervisors' sense of achievement comes from students' recognition, active participation, and their own acceptance of the rewards they receive for their work. Together, these factors form supervisors' need for self-actualization. As mentioned earlier, students' initiative must be stimulated so that they can actively accept their supervisor's guidance and provide positive feedback on the supervisor's suggestions. On this basis, the supervisor's sense of value will gradually take shape. Secondly, a competitive mechanism should be established among supervisor teams. Supervisors compete with each other in the final grading of students' theses as determined by the school. Only high-quality theses can be awarded a degree or an outstanding graduation thesis, which also forces supervisors to invest considerable effort to gain the school's recognition. Finally, there is a remuneration incentive. The level of remuneration is an external manifestation of the value of a supervisor's thesis supervision. Therefore, according to the efficiency wage theory, high wages lead to high-quality graduation theses. A supervisor's inner acceptance of the remuneration level is also a factor in the realization of their own value.

5. A path to improve the quality of graduation theses in academic continuing education based on demand response

To effectively improve the quality of graduation thesis writing, higher education institutions' academic continuing education programs must and can proceed from their own practical operating conditions, continuously strengthen institutional development, and build a three-dimensional, closed-loop graduation thesis work system. Guided by the intrinsic needs of supervisors and students, they can effectively stimulate the initiative and enthusiasm of administrators, students, and supervisors.

5.1. Stimulate administrators' need for achievement and strengthen the process management of graduation theses

Strengthening process management is an important foundation for improving the quality of graduation theses. Only by carrying out strict management throughout the entire graduation thesis process can thesis quality be effectively enhanced ^[8]. To this end, the school should fully empower administrators, encourage them to use their intelligence and talents, respect the laws of continuing education development, innovate work measures, and achieve outstanding management performance, thereby satisfying their need for achievement. First, it is necessary to build an efficient graduation thesis management team to provide personnel support for the entire process. To meet the needs of development in the information age, a multi-level, three-dimensional management platform for supervisors and students should be established, including platforms for supervisors, students, the management team, and for supervisor-to-supervisor and supervisor-student communication, ensuring timely and efficient information delivery, problem-solving, and resource utilization. Second, universities should continue to improve and innovate the graduation thesis management system. A strict management system ensures that the graduation thesis process for different majors is carried out according to the same standards. With the rapid development of industries and information technology, especially artificial intelligence, the tools and methods used in thesis writing are changing very quickly. As a result, universities need to regularly update regulations related to topic selection, proposal writing, mid-term review, plagiarism checking, and thesis defense according to new developments and practical needs, while continuously improving quality requirements for the whole thesis process. They should clarify quality standards in the form of regulations, which specify writing requirements, main content, and criteria for selecting outstanding theses, standardize the defense process, and strictly control thesis quality. This allows administrators and supervisors to reach a consensus on quality standards and accurately understand completion quality.

5.2. Meet students' need for growth and motivate their initiative

Students are the main participants in thesis writing. Improving their internal motivation is the key to enhancing quality ^[9]. Administration departments should monitor their learning attitudes and conditions, understand their difficulties in a timely, and work together to develop personalized study plans. This helps encourage their desire for academic growth and self-improvement. Different incentive measures should be adopted. First, universities should strengthen the connection between thesis performance and bachelor's degree awarding. A degree reflects a student's learning ability, and higher thesis standards identify students with stronger academic competence. Thus, students should be required to achieve at least a "Good" overall thesis grade for a degree, encouraging them to put in more effort and strive for better results within their abilities. Second, universities should connect thesis topics with students' actual work. Students should be encouraged to choose

real-world problems from work as research topics. This allows them to apply theory to practice, improve professional abilities, and reduce careless completion tendencies. Third, universities should regularly release staged evaluations of students' thesis progress and quality. This makes the process more open and transparent, and it encourages students to learn from one another and improve together. Finally, universities should strictly control outstanding thesis selection standards. Truly high-quality theses should be promoted as examples. Related supporting materials should be included in students' academic records for employer HR reference. With these measures, students' initiative and active participation can be effectively encouraged.

5.3. Ensuring supervisors' self-actualization and building a high-quality team

Supervisors act as guides, supporters, and facilitators in the graduation thesis process, so maximizing their need for self-actualization is important ^[10]. First, universities should recognize the workload of supervising theses, treat continuing education students equally with full-time students, and reasonably calculate the teaching workload for supervising continuing education students. This should be a basis for assessing supervisors' jobs and promoting their professional title. In this way, supervisors truly recognize the value of their work, and their expectations for self-actualization are met. Second, a healthy competitive environment should be created. To keep thesis quality high, supervisors should not take on more continuing education students than their full-time student average. Those who underperform or face frequent student complaints need to be stepped down promptly, making room for capable supervisors to be recognized. Universities also need to fairly increase supervisor compensation and reward those who mentor outstanding theses. Boosting their sense of belonging this way fosters healthy competition and lifts the standards of the faculty.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the quality of graduation theses reflects how well an academic continuing education program shapes its students. As competition in this field heats up, universities, supervisors, and students must all pull in the same direction. By taking a multi-pronged approach, the quality of graduation theses in academic continuing education can be improved, and a far better talent pool is cultivated.

Funding

“On the Approach to Developing Discipline-Specific Ideological and Political Education in Undergraduate Upgrading Programs in Economics and Management within OBE-Based Academic Continuing Education”; “On the Approach to Developing Characteristic Majors in Academic Continuing Education at Local Undergraduate Institutions: A Case Study of Beijing Union University”

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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