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Progress Conformity in Undergraduate Graduation Thesis (Design) Work: Generation Mechanisms and Educational Intervention Paths

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Abstract: *The undergraduate graduation thesis (design) is a key practical component of the undergraduate training system and an important means of assessing how well students can apply what they have learned in an integrated way, conduct research, and innovate. In the course of thesis work, some students let their task arrangements, pace, and time planning be shaped by their peers, by the experience of previous cohorts, and by the rhythm of supervisory guidance, and a marked tendency toward progress conformity thus emerges. This tendency not only lowers the quality of the finished thesis but may also weaken students' sense of agency, their capacity for independent planning, and their sense of academic responsibility. On this basis, the paper analyzes the observable manifestations of progress conformity in undergraduate thesis work, the mechanisms that generate it, and the damage it inflicts on the educational functions of the thesis, and then discusses intervention ideas and governance paths from the perspective of fostering virtue through education. It argues that thesis supervision should combine value guidance, capacity building, and process management, carry professional guidance through the whole of the educational process, and strengthen students' sense of responsibility, agency, and self-management, thereby raising the overall quality of undergraduate training.*

Keywords: *Undergraduate graduation thesis (design); Progress Conformity; Generation Mechanisms; Educational Functions*

1. Introduction

The undergraduate graduation thesis (design) is a key component of the undergraduate training program and one of the most summative, integrative, and practice-oriented teaching links in the undergraduate phase. As an important assessment task that students must complete before they finish their degree, its quality bears not only on how well students can apply what they have learned in an integrated manner, but also on the overall quality of talent cultivation at the institution [1].

In recent years, national-level oversight of thesis quality in China has been steadily tightened. The Ministry of Education has issued successive institutional arrangements for the sampling inspection of undergraduate theses and designs, incorporating thesis quality into the quality assurance system for undergraduate education [2]. The thesis is thus no longer merely a personal graduation requirement; it has become an important lever through which universities carry out the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education and test the quality of their talent cultivation. Against this background, how to improve thesis quality, optimize process management, and strengthen the effectiveness of supervision has become a major question in a university teaching and education [3].

In the actual supervision of undergraduate theses, however, a common pattern emerges: instead of planning their progress according to their own circumstances, some students set the pace of their thesis work by looking at what their peers are doing, at the experience of previous cohorts, at online information, or even at how much pressure their supervisor happens to be applying. The result is often a thesis written in fits and starts—slack at the beginning, passive in the middle, and rushed at the end—which not only harms the quality of the finished work but also, to a degree, drains the thesis of the educational function it is supposed to serve.

Existing Chinese-language research on undergraduate theses and designs concentrates largely on topic selection, management systems, process supervision, the cultivation of writing ability, and the

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construction of quality assurance systems [4~8]. The phenomenon of "progress conformity" shown by students as they work through their theses has received comparatively little attention, and the logic behind it, the mechanisms through which it operates, and the ways to intervene remain underexplored. This paper therefore sets out, from the perspective of fostering virtue through education and in light of the actual situations encountered in thesis work, to analyze systematically the manifestations, generation mechanisms, and intervention paths of students' progress conformity, in the hope of providing reference for the improvement of undergraduate thesis supervision.

2. Conceptual Definition of Progress Conformity in Undergraduate Thesis (Design) Work

Conformity is a pervasive social-psychological phenomenon and is by no means rare among university students [9, 10]. In the specific context of the undergraduate thesis, students with low self-efficacy readily look to others' progress as a template for their own work rather than plan on the basis of their actual situation.

Accordingly, progress conformity in undergraduate thesis work can be defined as a psychological tendency and a set of behaviors in which, under the combined influence of external factors—the behavior of peers, the rhythm of the group, the experience of previous cohorts, online information, and differences in how supervisors manage their students—and internal factors such as a weak sense of agency, low self-efficacy, and underdeveloped planning skills, students gradually give up independent judgment and arrange the pace of their thesis work mainly by reference to the progress of others.

3. Manifestations of Progress Conformity in Undergraduate Thesis (Design) Work

During the thesis process, progress conformity is a fairly widespread behavioral tendency. It shows itself in several ways. Some students set their own pace by reference to their dormitory mates or close friends; others rely mainly on the experience of previous graduates or on thesis-related experience shared on online platforms. Differences between supervisors in their style of guidance and frequency of follow-up also shape students' planning, giving their progress a distinctly passive, follow-the-crowd character.

4. Generation Mechanisms of Progress Conformity in Undergraduate Thesis (Design) Work

Progress conformity in undergraduate thesis work arises from the interplay of multiple factors, spanning social comparison psychology, real-life pressure, a deficit of agency, and weak psychological adjustment. The inner mechanisms can be summarized in the following four respects.

4.1 Reference Dependence Driven by Social Comparison

During the thesis process, students often find it hard to obtain sufficient, stable, and objective standards for evaluating themselves, and therefore turn to external references to confirm where they stand. Dormitory mates, close friends, members of the same supervision group, previous graduates, and online experience-sharing can all serve as objects of social comparison.

First, the subtle influence of dormitory peers. If roommates take a negative attitude toward the thesis, an individual can easily relax his or her own standards in that group atmosphere and gradually fall into a follow-the-crowd mentality.

Second, the reference effect of the close peer group. When students lack a clear plan of their own, they tend to model themselves on classmates with whom they are close and whose circumstances resemble their own.

Third, differences in the developmental tasks of students within the same supervision group can also distort progress judgments. Some students have their energy split by graduate school entrance interviews, civil service examinations, internships, or job hunting, so that the group as a whole move slowly; this collective lag easily gives other students a skewed sense of what normal progress looks like.

Fourth, the influence of the experience of previous graduates. When students discuss thesis experience with senior students, they readily take them as models and arrange their own progress according to what past cohorts did.

Fifth, the reference effect of online experience-sharing. Students often actively search online

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platforms for thesis experience and arrange their progress accordingly, without pausing to consider the differences between the poster's university tier, disciplinary requirements, and supervisory arrangements and their own foundations.

Sixth, differences among supervisors in management style and the rhythm of guidance also affect, to some extent, how students schedule their thesis work and thus indirectly intensify their tendency to conform.

4.2 Responsibility Transfer under Multiple Task Pressures

While working on their theses, students are usually also coping with one or several simultaneous demands: graduate school entrance examinations, civil service examinations, job hunting, internships, and qualification tests. Under this accumulation of real pressures, some students come to evaluate themselves more negatively and lose a clear sense of their own situation, and progress conformity is one of the consequences. On one side, the uncertainty of the job market weakens the energy students invest in the thesis; on the other, the psychological discomfort of transitioning from student to employee directly impairs their ability to plan and execute. When an individual has no clear expectation of his or her future, anxiety and psychological imbalance readily follow, and the person leans excessively on the group's rhythm in decisions about progress—a conspicuous form of conformity.

4.3 Failure of Self-Planning Arising from a Deficit of Agency

The undergraduate thesis is a comprehensive task that students must complete largely on their own, and it makes considerable demands on their capacity for self-planning and execution. Yet it is precisely at this point that some students reveal a deficit of agency, which provides the internal precondition for collective follow-the-crowd behavior in progress.

A common case is that many students misjudge both their own abilities and the difficulty of the thesis. University years are dominated by coursework, with comparatively little training in practice, research, and self-reflection; once they reach the thesis stage, students often find it hard to assess objectively their capacity to integrate knowledge, to do research, and to execute, and their estimates of the workload and time required go astray accordingly—over-optimistic at first, and then overtaken by real difficulties later.

Another problem that should not be overlooked is that some students have not truly developed independent judgment. University is a critical period in which values mature, yet when faced with important matters many students still habitually defer to group opinion and external information instead of forming their own decisions. In the thesis process, this lack of agency shows up as unclear goals, an unsettled rhythm, and blurred task boundaries, so that following the crowd becomes the default mode of progress.

4.4 Procrastination Diffusion from the Stacking of Weak Academic Preparation and Low Psychological Resilience

Academic preparation and psychological adjustment matter as much as the external environment and student agency in determining whether progress conformity occurs.

Take academic preparation first. Students differ considerably in their foundations in self-directed learning, literature retrieval, research design, and academic writing. Those with weak disciplinary grounding and unformed habits of independent thinking often take a long time to develop a research question and to sort out their research logic; lacking confidence, they look to their peers' progress and imitate others' practices for a sense of security. On the surface this looks like learning from others; in fact, it is an inability to push the work forward on one's own.

Psychological resilience is another threshold. Students who cannot tolerate pressure instinctively want to bypass every obstacle in writing. An undecided topic, incomplete literature, unsatisfactory communication with the supervisor, revision after revision—nearly everyone meets these in thesis writing, but in students with low resilience each one can accumulate into a growing sense of frustration. With no way to regulate their emotions and no willingness to face the problems, the thought that "others haven't finished either" becomes a convenient psychological exit; the thesis is set aside, and procrastination and conformity reinforce each other until delay becomes a habit.

There is also a layer that is easily overlooked: many students have given little thought to the relationship between "growing as a person" and "getting things done," and they lack the experience of

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independently wrestling a complex task to completion. Without training in sustaining a systematic piece of work, students can hardly travel the full chain of "identifying a problem—analyzing it—solving it" in their theses. With both goal orientation and intrinsic motivation absent, people are pushed along by external rhythms, and ending up in progress conformity is almost the natural outcome.

5. The Multiple Losses of Progress Conformity to the Educational Functions of the Undergraduate Thesis (Design)

As a summative, integrative, and practice-oriented teaching link, the undergraduate thesis carries not only an assessment function but also the educational tasks of capacity building, the shaping of responsibility, and the guidance of values. Once students develop an evident tendency to conform in their progress arrangements, however, thesis writing readily deviates from its intended educational track. On the surface, progress conformity appears as converging rhythms and sluggish action; in substance, it exerts a lasting effect on students' behavioral order, psychological state, and the formation of their overall competencies, thereby eroding the educational returns of the thesis.

5.1 Disrupted Process Order: Procrastination Diffusion and Unbalanced Progress

Progress conformity first strikes directly at the order of the thesis process. Because students habitually use peers, past cohorts, or external information as their reference for progress rather than judging on the basis of their own task requirements and research foundation, the scheduling of thesis work readily loses touch with the individual's actual situation, producing the familiar imbalance of slackness at the start, watchful waiting in the middle, and a desperate push at the end. When a student is embedded in a group that is collectively slow, procrastination spreads through mutual watching and mutual influence until the lag becomes general.

This passive mode of writing not only squeezes the time available for collecting materials, sharpening the research question, revising the text, and refining it through reflection; it also gradually turns the thesis into a task to be handed in on schedule rather than a serious process of academic training and comprehensive capacity development. More worrying, when progress falls far behind and graduation pressure mounts, individual students may resort, in order to appear to finish on time, to patchwork writing, plagiarism, or falsified data—improper or even transgressive behavior. These damages the students' own academic integrity and the quality of their development, and it casts a shadow over the reputation of supervisors, the academic atmosphere of the department, and the quality of talent cultivation.

5.2 Setbacks in Psychological Development: Accumulated Anxiety and Weakened Self-Efficacy

Progress conformity is not merely a behavioral deviation; it also reaches deep into students' psychological state. The thesis itself is characterized by a long task cycle, highly integrative demands, and considerable uncertainty about the outcome, so anxiety, tension, and a sense of pressure are common enough during the process. When students use others' progress as their main benchmark, they may relax their own standards because the group as a whole is lagging, and at the same time they may suffer a sharp psychological letdown at key junctures when the gap becomes visible—an emotional experience that swings back and forth.

In this situation, lagging behind stops being a simple matter of time and turns into a psychological burden. The more students feel that they are not making headway, the more prone they are to frustration and self-doubt; and the lower their self-efficacy, the more they lean on external references and put off autonomous action—a vicious circle of "lagging progress, anxiety, and slowed action." Even when students finally manage to finish the thesis, the negative emotions accumulated along the way can still affect their performance in the defense, their preparation for employment, and their overall psychological experience in the final phase of their studies. Progress conformity thus undermines students' confidence in facing complex tasks and stands in the way of their developing stable stress tolerance and problem-coping ability.

5.3 Restricted Educational Goals: Weakening of Responsibility and Blocked Capacity Formation

Looked at more closely, the damage that progress conformity does to the educational function of the thesis runs along two lines: the gradual weakening of students' sense of responsibility, and the obstruction of capacity formation. The value of the thesis lies not merely in producing a passable piece of academic

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writing; what matters more is whether, in the course of research practice, students learn to judge independently, plan proactively, and persist steadily, and whether their overall competencies are genuinely exercised in identifying, analyzing, and solving problems.

The problem is that progress conformity accustoms students, in their time management, task decomposition, and research advancement, to following an external rhythm. In time, their sense of responsibility toward their own academic work loosens, and the thesis comes to look like a stage requirement to be discharged rather than a task to be owned and invested in. Once the sense of responsibility slackens, the cultivation of agency loses its foundation, and the thesis's contribution to independent thinking, autonomous planning, awareness of academic norms, and sustained action is correspondingly discounted.

Furthermore, the thesis stage is precisely the point at which students move from coursework toward a relatively complete research practice and from passively receiving knowledge to actively integrating it. If what they acquire at this juncture is not an independent, self-aware, and responsible research posture but a behavioral habit of dependence, watchful waiting, and following, then the educational value of the thesis as the "closing link" of undergraduate training will hardly be realized.

6. Intervention Logic for Progress Conformity from the Perspective of Fostering Virtue through Education

Fostering virtue through education holds that education should not only transmit knowledge and train abilities but also shape character, cultivate the spirit, and promote the all-round development of the person. Bringing this idea into the supervision of undergraduate theses means that progress conformity should not be treated merely as a time-management problem or an execution lapse; it should be understood and addressed within the framework of students' development as agents, the formation of responsibility, and the cultivation of overall competencies. On this basis, intervention in progress conformity calls for the following shifts in logic.

6.1 From External Urging to the Awakening of Agency

Progress conformity appears on the surface as slow advancement and an unbalanced rhythm; in substance it reflects a weak sense of agency, insufficient independent judgment, and a limited capacity to take responsibility among some students when they face complex tasks. Supervisors should therefore not stop at external constraints such as "pressing for tasks," "watching deadlines," and "chasing progress," but should go further and ask whether students have genuinely developed an agentic understanding of the thesis.

In other words, the focus of supervision should not be simply to push students to "finish on time" but to help them form the self-aware conviction that "this task must be actively planned, steadily advanced, and independently owned by me." Only by extending the focus of supervision from sheer progress management to the cultivation of agency can students' dependence on external rhythms be weakened at the root, so that they genuinely shift from passive execution to active research during the thesis process.

6.2 From Outcome Orientation to Process-Based Education

The thesis carries clear requirements for outcomes, but its educational meaning does not stop at the finished text. For students, the whole process—justifying the topic, searching the literature, building the framework, writing and revising, absorbing feedback, and polishing repeatedly—is itself an important arena for training ability, shaping character, and internalizing academic norms. If supervisors fixate on outcome indicators such as "submitted on time," "passed smoothly," or "satisfies sampling-inspection requirements," the thesis readily degenerates into a task-like, perfunctory institutional arrangement, and its educational substance is thinned out.

Intervention from the perspective of fostering virtue through education should therefore attach greater weight to the educational value carried by the process itself. Supervisors should attend not only to the staged results of students' writing but also to whether, along the way, students have developed a sense of responsibility, a sense of time, respect for rules, academic ethics, and problem-solving ability. Only by making "educating through the process" the guiding principle can the thesis truly become an important occasion for the growth of students' overall abilities and character.

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6.3 From One-Way Urging to Collaborative Support

Progress conformity is not the product of a single factor but the joint result of students' individual conditions, the peer environment, the supervisory style of mentors, and the management mechanisms of the college. Intervention therefore cannot rely solely on the repeated reminders and one-way urging of individual supervisors; it requires a collaborative support system in which mentors, the college, peer communities, and evaluation mechanisms all take part.

Such collaboration does not mean adding another layer of management; it means forming a support network for thesis progress through information linkage and functional complementarity among multiple actors. Supervisors take charge of academic guidance and individual mentoring; the college is responsible for institutional design and process oversight; peer communities provide positive modeling and mutual support; and the process-evaluation mechanism handles node feedback and risk warning. The goal of this multi-dimensional collaboration is not to place students under denser surveillance but to give them more stable and more targeted support for growth, so that progress conformity decreases while the overall educational effectiveness of the thesis rises.

7. Governance Mechanisms for Progress Conformity in Undergraduate Thesis (Design) Work from the Perspective of Fostering Virtue through Education

With the intervention logic clarified, it must be translated into operable governance mechanisms, so that thesis supervision genuinely moves from "passive remedy" to "systematic governance." Around the causes of progress conformity and the educational losses it brings, the following mechanisms can be constructed

7.1 A Mechanism for Cultivating Academic Responsibility and Integrity

Supervision of the thesis should first of all be anchored in value formation, taking academic responsibility and integrity as the foundation of governance throughout the process. Supervisors should move academic-integrity education forward, rather than emphasizing rules only passively when plagiarism checks, external review, or the defense draw near; the awareness of academic norms should be woven into every stage, from topic selection and the proposal through material organization and the writing and revision of the text. Through case analysis, explanation of rules, and warnings drawn from negative examples, students should come to understand clearly the harm of plagiarism, patchwork writing, and falsified data, and to develop, at the level of thought, a reverence for academic bottom lines.

At the same time, supervisors' own attitude toward scholarship, their way of working, and their sense of responsibility exerts an important modeling effect on students. A mentor's rigorous, pragmatic, and responsible style of guidance quietly reinforces students' serious regard for the thesis. In other words, governing progress conformity cannot rely on institutional constraints alone; teachers must also, through their words and deeds, strengthen students' sense of academic responsibility and their research self-awareness.

7.2 A Mechanism of Categorized Diagnosis and Individualized Guidance

Although progress conformity has a collective character, its causes differ from student to student. Some are driven largely by anxiety about employment, some are visibly swept along by the peer atmosphere, and some lag passively because of weak research foundations and poor time-planning skills. Governance therefore cannot apply one uniform mode of advancement; it should establish an individualized guidance mechanism based on categorized diagnosis.

Concretely, at the start of the thesis stage supervisors can, through one-on-one conversations, questionnaire surveys, and staged feedback, gain a fairly systematic picture of students' academic foundations, psychological states, career plans, writing difficulties, and real-life pressures, and build a basic guidance profile on this basis. Different types of students can then be guided differently: those with a weak sense of agency need their sense of responsibility awakened; those with insufficient research ability need stronger methodological guidance; those carrying heavy pressure need help adjusting their pace and psychological support. Only through such targeted individualized guidance can students avoid being dissolved into an undifferentiated group, and can the conditions for progress conformity be weakened at their source.

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7.3 A Mechanism of Peer Support and Correction of Reference Points

Since progress conformity stems to a large extent from inappropriate social comparison and external references, governance should also attend to actively shaping the group environment. Rather than leaving students to form negative references in dormitories, groups, or online settings, it is better to construct a positive peer-support mechanism that corrects erroneous perceptions of progress through constructive group interaction.

On the one hand, supervisors and the college can use learning communities, group exchanges, and staged presentations to help students, in an open, transparent, and moderately competitive environment, see reasonable standards of progress and the real demands of the task, reducing the misconception that "if nobody else has started, there is no hurry." On the other hand, students staged progress should be affirmed promptly; positive feedback strengthens their willingness to act and their confidence in completion, so that they form positive expectations through steady advancement rather than wearing down their initiative in endless comparison and waiting.

It should be noted that the key to a peer-support mechanism is not to create anxiety but to form a positive reference atmosphere. The influence students have on one another should show up mainly as mutual reminders, shared experience, and mutual help with problems, rather than mutual procrastination or comforting one another into rationalizing lag. Only when the group environment shifts from "slowing each other down" to "moving forward together" can progress conformity be genuinely corrected.

7.4 A Mechanism of Whole-Process Evaluation and Collaborative Supervision

Governing progress conformity cannot rely on checks at only two points in time, the proposal and the defense; process management has to be institutionalized. Supervision should cover the whole course of the thesis, with evaluation and oversight running throughout, and clear arrangements for how tasks are decomposed, how feedback is given at each node, how risks are flagged, and how plans are adjusted.

In practice, following the general rhythm of thesis work, supervisors can designate topic selection, proposal, literature review, first draft, mid-term revision, and finalization as key nodes, and set down clearly for each stage the task requirements, deadlines, and quality standards. When students know what to do at each step and to what standard, they are less likely to fall into passivity because the goals are vague.

On the basis of node management, feedback and warning must follow promptly. As soon as a student shows signs of slow progress, abnormal states, or consecutive lags, the mentor and the college should step in early, determine whether the cause is a matter of ability, method, or something else, and adjust accordingly, rather than waiting until problems pile up at the end and then trying to repair everything at once. When necessary, the college's teaching administration, counselors, and mentors can work together, sharing information and dividing tasks, which makes governance more effective in practice.

It should be made clear that the point of process evaluation is not to add pressure to students but to help them build a stable, executable rhythm of progress. With clear stage goals, a moderate support system underneath them, and feedback at every step, thesis supervision can genuinely combine management, education, and service.

8. Conclusion

Progress conformity in undergraduate thesis work is not simply a failure of progress management; it is a complex behavioral tendency formed at the intersection of multiple factors—social comparison, real-life pressure, a deficit of agency, and inadequate preparation. It triggers the diffusion of procrastination, psychological anxiety, and unbalanced progress, and at a deeper level it erodes the educational functions of the thesis in forming responsibility, improving abilities, and shaping academic character.

From the perspective of fostering virtue through education, governing this phenomenon should not stop at external urging and control of outcomes. It should build on the laws of student development and the educational essence of the thesis, shifting the guiding philosophy from progress management to the cultivation of agency, from outcome orientation to process-based education, and from one-way urging to collaborative support. Only by constructing mechanisms for cultivating academic responsibility and integrity, for categorized diagnosis and individualized guidance, for peer support and the correction of reference points, and for whole-process evaluation and collaborative supervision can progress conformity

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in thesis work be effectively alleviated and the important educational value of the thesis as the closing link of undergraduate training be brought into full play.

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