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**Factors Shaping Young Adults Decision-making in Full-time Higher Education:
Insights from Young Adults in Mainland China during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)**

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Abstract

This study investigated factors influencing the decisions of young adults (ages 20-40) in mainland China regarding full-time higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a significant and disruptive social event, the pandemic drastically altered individuals' life trajectories, likely including their educational participation behaviours. By examining this topic, I aimed to understand how the pandemic reshaped decision-making processes and the potential implications these changes had for educational participation. Through a review of existing theoretical frameworks and empirical research, I developed a multi-level theoretical model - encompassing individual, situational, and institutional levels - to guide this empirical investigation. I employed a multi-phased, multi-method qualitative research strategy, which involved three stages of data collection and analysis: Stage A consisted of critical policy analysis; Stage B involved online semi-structured interviews; and Stage C utilised online focus groups conducted via Padlet. The study yielded significant findings from all three levels, and, through triangulation of results, identified three key messages extending the initial framework. These include the critical role of sunk costs, the impact of non-economic factors, and specific characteristics of young adults as a demographic cohort of study, such as the accumulating decision-making costs of participating in full-time higher education during the pandemic, which can interfere with potential participants' judgment in making educational decisions. These insights provide valuable contributions to future educational research and the development of lifelong learning policy and practice for stakeholders in Mainland China, and globally when facing future global crises scenarios.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AMS Academic Motivation Scale

COR Chain-of-Response (Model)

DPS Deterrents to Participation Scale

EPS Education Participation Scale

HE Higher Education

TLT Transformative Learning Theory

PIAAC Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all those who have supported me during the process of completing this dissertation. The successful completion of this work would not have been possible without the contributions and encouragement of many.

I am profoundly grateful to my supervisors, Professor Ellen Boeren and Professor Catherine Lido, for their invaluable guidance, unwavering support, and insightful feedback. Their encouragement and expertise were instrumental in shaping this research and bringing it to fruition. Their dedication to my progress and their willingness to go above and beyond in providing professional guidance have made an indelible impact on both this dissertation and my overall learning experience. I deeply appreciate their high level of efficiency and responsiveness, which ensured that I always had the direction and support I needed to stay on course. I feel incredibly fortunate to have had the opportunity to work under the mentorship of someone so committed to their student's success.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the 20 participants who took part in this study. Their willingness to contribute during the challenging circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic was invaluable. Their patience and cooperation provided essential data and insights that were crucial for the success of this research. Additionally, I appreciate the support from the University of Glasgow, whose technical and informational resources were crucial in facilitating this project under difficult conditions.

A special thank you to my parents, family, and friends for their unwavering support throughout this journey. I am also one of the individuals who decided to pursue full-time higher education during the pandemic, and my parents shouldered considerable stress and uncertainty. Despite these challenges, they

continued to support my decision and career with steadfast encouragement and understanding. I also deeply appreciate the care and encouragement from my relatives and friends, whose support was a source of strength to my research during the time of COVID-19. Their empathy and belief in me were invaluable in helping me navigate this unique and challenging period of my life. I love them all with all my heart.

DECLARATION

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Jingwen Gao

Chapter One Introduction

1.1 Research background.

Recently, the idea of lifelong learning and the industry of adult education have become a more critical driver of innovation, productivity gains, and socioeconomic mobility in the modern, knowledge-based global economy (Schleicher, 2019; OECD, 2021). Due to rapidly developing societies, changing education delivery modes, and evolving individual social and economic needs, providing schooling education only during earlier life stages, may no longer meet the needs of a changeful global market (Desjardins, 2017; Holford & Mohorcic-Spolar, 2012). The World Bank (2019) highlighted in a report that sustained investment in human capital is crucial for enhancing labour productivity, driving economic growth, and reducing poverty levels. Consequently, with deepening globalization, and the rise of the knowledge economy, concepts of lifelong learning and adult education have become pivotal themes in modern society (Boeren, 2016; Milana *et al.*, 2018; UNESCO, 2016). Yet, the development of adult education and lifelong learning is accompanied by challenges, such as ensuring equitable participation opportunities across different demographic groups of learners (UNESCO, 2016; 2019). Despite national and international efforts to boost participation rates, enrolment figures for full-time education programmes among adult learners remain to be further developed in both developed and developing nations. China, which has prioritized lifelong learning as a pillar of its education reform efforts and human resource development strategy, is no exception to this challenge. Therefore, this thesis fulfils and urgent need to better understand factors facilitating decisions to engage in full-time higher education (HE).

Furthermore, the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic from February 2020 significantly impacted the running of many aspects of China, including the educational landscape. Nationwide lockdowns, social distancing measures, and the abrupt shift to online learning modalities erected many unexpected barriers,

but also new opportunities for adults' full-time HE participation. Among the adult learner population, young adults aged 20-40 represent a particularly dynamic group. They are at a stage where HE can profoundly impact their career trajectories, economic stability, and long-term prospects. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unique challenges and opportunities to this demographic, significantly influencing their educational decisions.

Due to the unique circumstances of the pandemic, both the material living conditions and psychological experiences of HE participants have been affected in ways that differ significantly from the norm (Keržič *et al.*, 2020; Cao *et al.*, 2020). Such insights are crucial for informing policies, support frameworks, and outreach strategies aimed at both stimulating motivations and dismantling barriers, to uphold China's longstanding commitment to lifelong learning as an engine of human capital development, as emphasized in China Education Modernization 2035 (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & State Council, 2023) as well as in the literature related to the lifelong education industry in China (Chen, 2022; Luo & Wu, 2023). This is especially vital for ensuring access is inclusive and equitable across diverse segments of the adult population impacted disparately by the pandemic's shockwaves.

Through the investigation of a specific subset of adult education participants, this research endeavours to provide insights into the unique challenges and opportunities they face and contribute a piece to the broader discourse on adult education and lifelong learning within a particular social context. Therefore, this thesis explored factors influencing young adult learners' decision-making in full-time higher education (HE), with 20 participants, using a multi-staged qualitative method to gain insights from young adult participants in Mainland China during the COVID-19 pandemic. For more detailed research questions and research design of my thesis, please refer to [Chapter Four](#).

1.2 Young adults as the focus: Defining the target group and justifying its importance.

In order to ensure a clear and shared understanding of the key terms and concepts central to this research, it is essential to operationalise them at the outset. Establishing precise definitions not only provides clarity but also sets the foundation for the subsequent discussion and analysis. Therefore, placing the conceptual definitions in Chapter One offers a coherent framework for comprehension of the research methods, findings, and discussions that follow.

This section addresses two critical components that form the foundation of this dissertation. First, it offers a preferred conceptualization of ‘adults’ and ‘young adults’, crucial for defining the target population. This conceptualization draws from multidisciplinary perspectives to provide a nuanced understanding of these demographic categories. Next, this section presents a critical synthesis of empirical research related to this group’s participation in adult education, identifying key findings and current research gaps. Finally, this section reviews the educational system of Mainland China, as the research context of this thesis.

Through this analysis, the chapter explored the position of this dissertation within the broader academic discourse and highlighted its potential contributions to the field. To achieve this, a comprehensive literature review was conducted using systematic search strategies across multiple academic databases, including the database of the University of Glasgow Library, JSTOR, ERIC, Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis, as well as CNKI¹ and Wanfang² (the top two literature databases in China Mainland). Key search terms included ‘young adults,’ ‘young adult learners,’ and ‘adult education.’ This rigorous approach to literature selection ensures a robust foundation for defining these key concepts and justifying their relevance

¹ <https://www.cnki.net/index/>

² <https://www.wanfangdata.com.cn/>

to the current study.

1.2.1 The concept of ‘Adult’ and ‘Young adult’.

The concept of ‘adult’ can be broad and complex, often referring to different groups in different contexts, thus, it is difficult to give a precise and universal definition of adult learning participant (Merriam & Brockett, 2011). For instance, in Mainland China (the social context of my research), the legal age is set at 18 years old. However, there are slight variations in this age delineation depending on the specific behaviours targeted. For example, according to labour laws, individuals can engage in legal full-time employment at the age of 16, while the legal age for marriage, as permitted by marriage laws, is 22 for males and 20 for females. On the other hand, some researchers choose to define adulthood from a psychological perspective, for example, Erikson (1950/1977) delineated life stages based on individuals’ psychological development across different age periods. Consequently, as the target population for this study, it is essential to engage in a preliminary discussion on the definition of adulthood, thereby establishing a framework for delineating the research group. Therefore, I proceed to discuss how the concept of adulthood is defined in different contexts, the characteristics of these definitions, and the positioning of my research in relation to the concept of adulthood.

To begin, adulthood in the legal sense varies according to national laws, with the range often focusing on sixteen to twenty, and even up to twenty-five years of age due to different cultural and social backgrounds (Merriam & Brockett, 2011; Cilasun *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, the legal classification of adults varies very much in various contexts. At the same time, even within the same national legal system, the definition of ‘adulthood’ often varies according to the context. For example, when talking about a person being legally an ‘adult’, it usually refers to ‘the age of majority’, but in specific contexts, such as criminal offences, contracts, and medical and educational behaviours, the law usually applies different criteria for

age classification depending on the needs under different contexts. This is also true specifically in the social of China mainland context in this project. According to the Civil Code of the People's Republic of China which has been effective since 2021, China, 'the age of majority' is defined as the population over 18 years old, which means they own the full legal capability (National People's Congress Standing Committee, 2020). However, citizens between the ages of 16 and 18 are also considered to be fully capability if they earn their main living from their own labour. To summarize, the definition of adulthood in the Chinese legal system is 18 years of age, but this threshold may be lowered if certain conditions are met. However, in discussing research on adult HE, solely relying on the legal definition of adulthood to delineate the research population may not be entirely appropriate. On the one hand, while the legal definition of adulthood is clear and precise, it does not adequately reflect the boundaries of my study population, which is young adult learners. At the same time, even considering young participants as part of the adult HE participant group, the definition of adult HE possesses diverse backgrounds, experiences, and needs that extend beyond the scope of legal definitions.

As an individual's social behaviour, sociology and psychology can define a different solution for (young) adults in terms of education from another perspective. The conceptualization of adulthood has evolved significantly over time. It has gradually shifted from a discourse where psychological maturity was primarily considered as an aspect of physiological development (Erikson, 1968) to a more nuanced understanding where psychological maturity, along with its concurrent development within the social context, is discussed as a distinct and complex subject (Arnett, 2000; Côté, 2014). Although this trend is in development, for example, Côté's (2014) study critically examined and challenged the theoretical framework proposed by Arnett (2000), this shift reflects a growing recognition of the multifaceted nature of adult development, encompassing not only biological changes but also psychological growth and social integration (Côté, 2014; Schwartz, 2016). Therefore, defining maturation from a psychological perspective

aligns more closely with the objectives of this project and the research community than utilizing a physiological approach.

Erikson posits that individuals encounter distinct developmental conflicts at various life stages, with the resolution of these conflicts shaping their psychological growth. This framework has significantly influenced the field of adult education, where understanding these stages is viewed as essential for fostering effective learning and teaching practices (Tennant, 2006). Tennant (1988/2019) highlights the importance of applying Erikson's developmental theory to adult learning, emphasizing its relevance since the late 1980s. Therefore, a key question that emerges from this discussion is how Erikson's framework can best be applied to define the concept of adulthood and young adults within the context of this project.

As shown in [Table 1a](#) on the following page, the earliest stage associated with adulthood is 'Young Adulthood' in stage six, but it is only in stage eight that Erikson explicitly employs the term 'Maturity.'

Table 1a A summary of Erikson's eight stages from Erickson's work (1950/1977; 1968).

Stages	Age range	Stage Description
Infancy	0-1	Trust / mistrust
Early childhood	2-3	Autonomy / shame and doubt
Preschool	4-6	Initiative / guilt
School age	7-11	Industry / inferiority
Adolescence	12-17	Identity / role confusion
Young adulthood	18-39	Intimacy / isolation
Middle adulthood	40-64	Generativity / stagnation
Maturity	65-	Go integrity / despair

In Erikson's structure (1950/1977; 1968), young adults own a separate stage. He defines the conflict that needs to be solved at this stage as the conflict between intimacy and isolation. Focusing on young adulthood and the two stages linked to it, adolescence and middle adulthood, it is apparent that the young adults defined by Erikson, as shown in [Table 1a](#), are the group who have faced the conflict of identity self-recognition but have not come to the relative stable stage of production. Therefore, according to Erikson's (1950/1977; 1968) theoretical framework, traversing the stage of adolescence implies that individuals have likely concluded the formation of identity-related ideas and personal decision-making. This establishment of self-awareness enhances individuals' ability to understand who they are and what they want to pursue. However, while Erikson's framework has been widely accepted, it has not been without criticism. Scholars such as Markstrom and Kalmanir (2001) questioned the universal applicability of these stages, particularly across different cultures. They argue that the theory may be overly Western-centric and may not adequately account for diverse cultural experiences of development. Simultaneously, Erikson's theoretical framework regarding gender-related topics remains contentious and offers ample room for further exploration and debate (Gilligan, 1982; Markstrom & Kalmanir, 2001). Feminist critics like Carol Gilligan (1982) pointed out the theory's bias towards male development, suggesting that it may not fully capture the unique

developmental experiences of women. The gender critique, as well as the cultural-background critique, have led to a broader questioning of the theory's inclusivity and representativeness.

Researchers have sought to update and expand Erikson's framework to address these limitations. In Addition to the aforementioned study by Markstrom & Kalmanir (2001) which extends Erikson's framework to different gender groups, Renemark and Hagberg (1997) conducted research based on Erikson's theory within the Swedish social context. Their study simultaneously considered different gender groups and investigated the relationship between social network structures and well-being among the elderly. Similarly, Shin (2018) examined the psychosocial responses of men by integrating Erikson's framework with Confucian culture, which significantly influences Korean society. These critiques and developments do not negate the value of Erikson's original insights but rather enrich the understanding of human development. They underscore the need for a more nuanced, culturally sensitive approach to psychosocial development, one that recognizes the diversity of human experience while still acknowledging the universal aspects of growth and identity formation.

Furthermore, Levinson's (1978) lifecycle framework in 'The Seasons of a Man's Life' (Levinson & Darrow; 1978) suggests multiple stages based on developmental needs. Among these stages, the early adult era spans from 18 to 40 years old. This stage, based on encountered characteristics, developmental tasks, and potential challenges, is further divided into four stages from 'Leaving the family' to 'Settling down' (as illustrated in [Table 1b](#) on the next page).

Table 1b A summary of life structure from Levinson and Darrow's work (1978).

Stage	Age range	Stage description
Leaving the family	18-22	Separating independent living.
Entering the adult world	22-28	Entering work force, establishing new adult relationships.
Age 30 transition	28-33	Reappraising life structure, questioning values and choice of occupation/lifestyle.
Settling down	33-40	Making permanent commitments to career, family, and community.
Mid-life transition	40-45	Questioning past choices and current life structure, feeling restless.
Entering middle Adulthood	45-50	Modifying and rebuilding life structure to address mid-life issues.
Age 50 transition	50-55	Reassessing priorities, and making major life changes if needed.
Culmination of middle adulthood	55-60	Reaching a final life structure before late adulthood.
Late adulthood	60+	Adjusting to new challenges of later years.

Compared to Erikson's (1950/1977; 1968) framework, Levinson's (1978) theory emphasizes a more detailed subdivision of stages, providing a more comprehensive description for each period. While both frameworks address aspects of intimacy establishment, Levinson's framework also focuses on career-related elements, making it appear more comprehensive than Erikson's framework. Additionally, due to Levinson's further stage differentiation, his framework appears more continuous compared to Erikson's binary representation, better reflecting the dynamic changes individuals undergo from leaving their original family unit, becoming independent entities, and forming new families. Importantly, Levinson's framework offers more empirical research support in contrast to Erikson's predominantly theoretical analysis.

McAuliffe (1993) utilized Levinson's theory to explore career transitions in adults,

as well as Zacher and Froidevaux (2021) exemplified the use of systematic reviews and critiques of life-stage-related theoretical frameworks to study the topic of individual vocational behaviours. Another example can be Gibson *et al.* (1998) explored the active sports tourists and the market they represent by applying an age-segmented perspective based on Levinson's framework. Although these applications address topics different from my research, they share a commonality with my study: the pursuit of a research perspective based on the stratification of life stages, which aimed to explore the differences that exist among people of various age groups when addressing the same subject matter.

The life course perspective has emerged as a prominent framework for understanding the interconnectedness of social structures, individual agency, and temporal dimensions in shaping life trajectories. However, this perspective has not been without criticism. Scholars such as Furlong (2016) argue that while the life course perspective offers valuable insights into longitudinal and transitional processes, it often risks oversimplifying the complexities of contemporary youth experiences. Furlong critiques the assumption that life trajectories are neatly structured, highlighting how socio-economic shifts, such as labour market precarity and the erosion of traditional life stages, have rendered these pathways increasingly fragmented and unpredictable. He contends that the perspective's emphasis on normative transitions (e.g., school-to-work or family formation) may inadequately address the lived realities of marginalized youth, who often navigate non-linear, precarious, and context-specific pathways. Such critiques suggest that while the life course perspective provides a useful heuristic for exploring temporal patterns and institutional influences, it requires further theoretical refinement to fully capture the heterogeneity and volatility of contemporary life courses in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape.

These critiques serve as an important reflection for my research. While I focus on young adults and their distinctive differences from other more typical adult groups,

such as middle-aged and older adults, as a rationale for centring the study on this population, I recognize the risks of treating young adults as a homogenous age group with unified characteristics. Instead, this acknowledgement underscores the value of my choice to adopt a qualitative research approach, allowing for a nuanced exploration of individual experiences and the socio-economic factors that shape diverse pathways within the young adult population. By doing so, my research aims to address the heterogeneity and contextual specificity often overlooked in broader frameworks.

Studying the factors influencing young learners' participation decisions in HE during the pandemic holds significant importance. Early adulthood marks a period of rapid change for individuals. On one hand, regardless of whether they engage in full-time employment, legal adulthood grants individuals the beginning of an autonomous social identity, gradually detaching them from their original family unit and instilling an independent presence within society. Simultaneously, on a psychological level, individuals in this stage grapple with identity transformation, constructing social identities, seeking new social relationships, and undertaking familial and societal responsibilities as adults. However, compared to childhood and adolescence stages, which often attract more research attention due to their pronounced physiological and psychological changes, early adulthood is relatively less explored (Bonnie *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, in contrast to middle and old age stages, the former represents a socially recognized, less controversial adult group based on societal cognition, while the latter forms a distinct category due to more apparent factors such as physiological, psychological, and life trajectory, leaving the positioning of young adults somewhat ambiguous between young minors and adults. Consequently, there remains ample room for research on young adults, warranting further exploration.

1.2.2 Background of theoretical and empirical perspectives related to young adult learners.

Based on the characteristics of nontraditional learners as discussed by Cross (1981) and Ross-Gordon (2011), I summarized the following comparison between nontraditional and traditional learners: Nontraditional learners are often financially independent, employed full-time, engaging in educational programmes as part-time students (typified by adult education programmes). They have family responsibilities and obligations (such as marital relationships and childcare duties). Moreover, compared to traditional HE participants, their engagement schedules might be affected, resulting in delayed enrolment or temporary interruptions in their participation (Horn, 1996; Choy, 2002). Despite the growing diversity within today's HE student population, there remains a paucity of research examining the decision-making processes and influencing factors behind young and mid-career adults' re-engagement in full-time tertiary studies after an initial period in the workforce. While existing literature has explored the motivations and challenges faced by mature students or non-traditional learners in general, few studies have specifically focused on the subgroup of individuals aged 20 to 40 who have previously completed a degree or certification programme, transitioned into employment, but subsequently chose to interrupt their careers and re-enter HE as full-time students.

After conducting an extensive search and review of the relevant literature, I have found that this group is generally perceived in existing research as embodying two distinct identities: On one hand, they are viewed as part of traditional students due to their participation in full-time HE programmes; on the other hand, they are seen as part of adult education due to factors such as age, work experience, social relationships, and family life (Kasworm, 2010). This dual identity has been recognized across various studies in HE as well as relevant age spans. For instance, Tinto (2012) highlights that the completion and retention rates of non-traditional students in HE should not be conflated with those of traditional students. Instead,

they require targeted approaches and considerations to address their unique challenges and needs. Similarly, Chung *et al.* (2017) explored how work experience influences the academic performance and resilience of both traditional and non-traditional student groups, demonstrating the complexity of their student identity and the existing overlap between the two. Moreover, O’Boyle (2015) argues that young adult learners often struggle with role conflict between their identities as students and as emerging professionals, which can impact their educational experiences and outcomes. Beyond the field of education, some researchers have also explored the issue of age span, particularly focusing on the distinct stages and identity formation of young adults. The concept of ‘emerging adulthood’ proposed by Arnett (2000) further complicates this dual identity, suggesting that individuals in their late teens through twenties (18-25) are in a distinct developmental stage, neither adolescent nor fully adult. This perspective has been influential in understanding the unique challenges and needs of young adults (Schwartz, 2016). These studies discuss a range of issues that young adults may face, shedding light on the unique challenges and developmental processes characteristic of this specific life stage.

As evidenced by these studies, the distinction between traditional and non-traditional learners is not marked by clear, uniform standards. This is especially true when it comes to the unique life stage of young adulthood, where issues related to individual identity remain an area that requires further exploration. This means neither of the two identities accurately reflects the uniqueness of this group. They have distinctly different life experiences and decision-making patterns from traditional HE participants, and they also differ significantly from typical nontraditional HE participants in terms of their education participation patterns and employment status. As evidenced by these studies, the distinction between traditional and non-traditional learners is not marked by clear, uniform standards. This is especially true when it comes to the unique life stage of young adulthood, where issues related to individual identity remain an area that requires further exploration.

This consequently leads to the underrepresentation of young adults, an atypical demographic, in the data collection and research related to adult education topics. As a result, the unique characteristics and needs of young adults are often overlooked in statistical analyses and studies within this field. On the one hand, the official statistics released by the Chinese Ministry of Education reflect a prevailing perspective that full-time adult participants are grouped together with traditional learners as part of the broader education system. Upon reviewing the Ministry's statistical yearbooks, I found that while they include extensive demographic data, such as regional distribution, types of educational programmes and institutions, and gender, there is a notable absence of specific data on the age composition of participants or other detailed individual characteristics. This means that in a series of reports and studies represented by the data released by the Chinese Ministry of Education, full-time adult participants are still considered as part of ordinary education participants without any special distinction.

Another approach is to consider them as part of adult education. According to Berker and Horn's (2003) National Postsecondary Student Aid Study for 1999-2000 in the United States, researchers studied adult learners' identity perceptions. They found that at least 56% of students aged 24 and above primarily identified themselves as workers, and secondarily as students, while approximately 26% of respondents considered themselves as students but also as working students. Despite the differences in identity perception, both of these groups are typical nontraditional HE participants. However, contrasting with these groups, the remaining 18% of respondents completely abandoned their worker identity and identified solely as full-time students. In both the statistics and subsequent studies based on this research data (Ross-Gordon, 2011), this group is still discussed as part of nontraditional.

This research gap is particularly significant given the unique circumstances and considerations that may shape the decision-making of this cohort. Unlike traditional students who transition directly from secondary education to university,

this population segment has already attained prior educational qualifications and workforce experience. Their motivations to return as full-time students, despite potentially established careers or familial responsibilities, warrant further investigation.

Furthermore, the factors influencing their decision to disengage from employment and reallocate time and resources towards full-time studies are multifaceted, stemming from personal, professional, and socio-economic dimensions. Existing models and theories on educational decision-making may require adaptation or extension to adequately capture the complexities involved in what I labelled as a kind of reverse transition phenomenon.

By addressing this research lacuna through empirical inquiry, valuable insights can be gained to inform HE policies, career counselling practices, and support services tailored to this unique student demographic. A deeper understanding of their decision-making rationale, perceived barriers, and experiences could facilitate more effective interventions to support their academic success and career development trajectories.

This understanding of early adulthood is particularly relevant to my research on young adult learners' participation decisions in full-time HE during the pandemic. The unique characteristics of this life stage directly influence how young adults approach major life decisions such as HE participation. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented challenges and uncertainties, potentially amplifying the complexity of these decisions for young adults. By recognizing the distinct developmental features of this age group, my research can more accurately interpret and contextualize their decision-making processes regarding HE during this crisis. Moreover, the relative lack of research on this age group, as compared to middle adulthood or senior, underscores the importance of my study. It provides an opportunity to contribute to the understanding of how young adults navigate significant life choices in the face of global disruptions. This research can help fill

the gap in the knowledge about this ambiguously positioned group, offering insights that could inform both educational policy and support services for young adult learners in HE, particularly during times of crisis.

At the end of this section, it is necessary to discuss the rationale of applying the concept of ‘adult learners’ instead of ‘non-traditional learners’ or other similar expressions. The choice to use the term ‘adult learner’ rather than ‘non-traditional learner’ in this study reflects its closer alignment with the context of educational policies analysed in my research. Policies related to full-time HE in mainland China during the epidemic are an important part of my research, especially in the critical policy analysis of Stage A to be discussed later. Furthermore, while the term ‘non-traditional learner’ is widely accepted in academic literature to encompass diverse learner populations, such as older students, part-time students, or those balancing work and study (Kasworm & Pike, 1994; Schuetze, 2014; Head *et al.*, 2015), it lacks specific resonance with the policy narratives underpinning this research. The term ‘adult learner’ is thus a more policy-relevant term in this context, as it directly aligns with government reforms and policy measures during the pandemic.

Especially within the context of the education policy system in mainland China, the term ‘non-traditional learner’ (corresponding to the Chinese expression ‘非传统学习者’) is not a commonly used formal concept or expression in policy documents. A direct piece of evidence for this is the fact that a keyword search for ‘non-traditional learner’ in policy document databases yields few relevant results. Regarding the databases used in this study (including both official databases and private data portals), these are an integral component of the research design for Stage A. However, a detailed discussion of these databases will be provided in the subsequent [Section 4.4.2.1](#).

Beyond the consideration of maintaining consistency in the terminology used in

this study to align with the preferences evident in policy documents, the subtle distinctions between the concepts of ‘adult learner’ and ‘non-traditional learner’ remain critical and should not be overlooked. As discussed earlier, the term ‘adult learner’ tends to emphasize the objective identity (especially age) of the learner, whereas the academic definition of ‘non-traditional learner’ places greater focus on the learner’s life and learning circumstances (Weil, 1986; Kasworm & Pike, 1994). Moreover, as an earlier established field of practice and research, the concept of adult education is more prominently featured in earlier academic discussions, such as Boshier’s theoretical framework, which I will elaborate on in the next chapter. In contrast, more recent empirical studies have increasingly adopted the terminology of ‘lifelong learning’ or ‘non-traditional learners’ (Fleming, 2009; Schuetze, 2014; Head *et al.*, 2015). Meanwhile, the concept of adult education has, due to its earlier industrial and academic development, become increasingly narrowed in scope, often associated with informal education types such as part-time education and vocational training.

To reconcile this, I adopt a broader interpretation of ‘adult learner,’ one that incorporates both the early adult educational theories represented by Boshier’s work and the learning and living situations suggested by the idea of ‘non-traditional learners’ and ‘life-long learning’. This dual perspective ensures that the term remains applicable to the policy contexts of my study while retaining its theoretical grounding in the adult education literature.

1.2.3 Justifying China (Mainland) as the research context.

Understanding the broader context of China’s education system is essential for comprehending the factors that influence young adults’ decisions to pursue full-time HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. China’s education landscape is characterized by a unique blend of traditional values and rapid modernization, shaped by historical, cultural, and political factors, resulting in an educational governance structure that markedly contrasts with the governance and autonomy

models prevalent in Western HE (Yang, 2020b). Therefore, the Chinese education system, characterized by its highly competitive and strict entrance exams and significant government regulation (especially on the management of diplomas), plays a pivotal role in shaping the educational trajectories and career paths of its citizens.

Understanding the education system in mainland China and providing a systematic review of this issue is crucial to this research because they provide the necessary context for analysing the factors that influence young adults' decisions to pursue full-time HE during the pandemic. The Chinese education system is characterized by its distinct governance structure, competitive entrance exams, and state-driven policies, all of which significantly shape the educational opportunities and constraints faced by students. These systemic features not only impact individual educational choices but also interact with broader socio-economic, cultural, and political forces, creating a unique environment in which educational decisions are made.

While the introduction chapter here offers a broad overview of China as the research context, it is not the appropriate place for a detailed examination of the Chinese education system. To address this, [Section 3.2](#) will provide a comprehensive analysis of China's education system, focusing on its structure, operations, and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. This separation allows for a more thorough and nuanced discussion that would be difficult to achieve within the scope of the introduction. The purpose of the introduction, therefore, is to establish a foundational understanding of the research focus, guiding readers towards the more detailed exploration presented in later chapters. This structured approach ensures a logical and progressive development of ideas, enhancing the overall coherence of the dissertation.

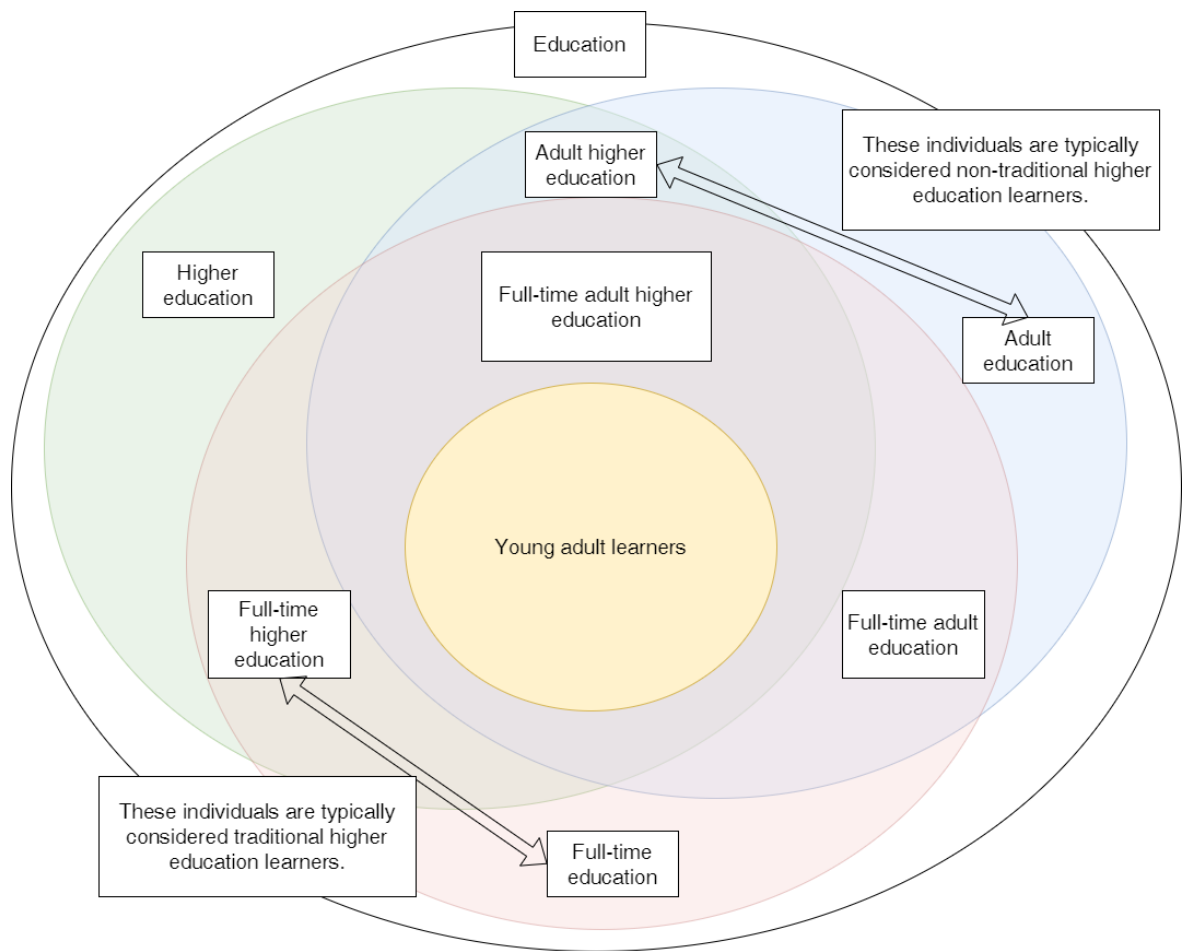
1.3 Research gap and research questions.

The population of young participants of full-time HE, as a very specific demographic category discussed in the previous section, possesses characteristics distinct from other groups. This is largely due to their age, which places them at a transitional stage between traditional education participants and fully integrated members of the workforce. To be more specific, the young adult population is often overlooked in educational research, stemming from two main reasons. Firstly, in studies focusing on non-traditional learners, young adults are often lumped together with adolescent populations due to their age proximity and similarity in social relationships and life statuses to adolescents, compared to older adult groups (Arnett, 2020; Wyatt, 2011). On the other hand, young adults have already transitioned out of the school system, entered the workforce, and gradually achieved economic independence, becoming mature individuals who assume corresponding social roles and responsibilities, distinguishing them from traditional learners. This makes them more characteristic of non-traditional learners than adolescents. Therefore, the group of young adult learners, who are transmitted from traditional HE participants to typical adult learners, inhabit a blurred zone between typical traditional learners and non-traditional learners, lacking more targeted attention.

Because of this atypicality situated between two groups which are more heavily researched, young adults hold significant research significance. They represent a transitional phase in individual identity transformation from traditional learners to non-traditional learners, experiencing challenges, changes, and conflicts in identities. By specifically studying this population, this thesis will enable the field to better understand the process of individual identity transformation within a key educational transition point within the life span, providing a basis for the promotion and development of lifelong learning in the Chinese context, and perhaps more generally.

In the past, research often equated non-traditional learners with part-time, distance, or continuing education learners (Cross, 1981; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kasworm, 1990; Bowl, 2001; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Ross-Gordon, 2011), while overlooking the existence of non-traditional learners in full-time HE (Bowl, 2001; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). In fact, an increasing number of adults are choosing to return to HE on a full-time basis, and their motivations, experiences, and influencing factors may differ from other types of non-traditional learners, warranting a more focused research perspective. To provide a clearer and more intuitive representation of my target research group, [Figure 1a](#) below visualizes the positioning of my research population within the context of education. As illustrated in [Figure 1a](#), the central yellow circle represents the focal group of my research. This group occupies an age segment at the intersection of adult education, HE, and full-time education. On one hand, their position at the confluence of these three educational forms may endow them with characteristics of participants from all three forms. Consequently, research targeting a single educational form (such as the green segment representing HE participants) may not fully capture the unique features and needs of this group. At the same time, as young adults are situated as part of the learners of these educational types, their characteristics and needs may differ from those of other groups, such as senior participants.

Figure 1a Venn diagram of my research focus.



Finally, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has had profound effects on global HE. During the pandemic, universities had to shift massively to online teaching, leading to significant changes in students' learning modes and experiences. This unique context provides a natural experimental setting for investigating the factors influencing individuals' decisions to participate in full-time HE programmes.

Following a thorough review of the literature and consideration of the research gaps, my research project explored more diversified and in-depth information on the topic of 'motivations and barriers of young adults' full-time HE participation during the COVID-19 pandemic'. Therefore, the core research question of this project is:

How does COVID-19 influence the decision-making process of young adults in China (Mainland) regarding their participation in full-time higher education (HE)?

Centred on this core issue, I developed a three-level logic framework through a review of theoretical models and empirical studies related to the topic. The detailed construction process of this framework and the discussion of the relevant literature will be further elaborated in [Chapter Two](#), with a summary of the utilized framework presented in [Section 2.7](#). Generally, I investigated this core question from possible influencing factors based on the three main levels of factors summarised in Section 2.7. They are the individual level, which represents personal factors such as motivations, capabilities, and past experience; the situational level, which encompasses external circumstances like family and work-related factors that are closely related to individuals; and the institutional level, which includes broader societal and organizational influences such as government policies and educational institutions. For a more comprehensive interpretation of my research, please refer to [Chapter Four](#), particularly [Section 4.3](#).

Specifically, this thesis addressed gaps in existing research through the following three aspects. Firstly, my thesis investigated decision-making behaviour in a unique social context. The COVID-19 pandemic, as an extraordinary social backdrop, has profoundly and extensively disrupted normal societal functions. My study situated its core inquiry within the unique macro-environment of the pandemic, providing a research perspective that focuses on the decision-making behaviour of non-traditional potential participants in full-time HE. This not only enriches existing decision-making theories but also offers valuable empirical evidence for understanding the dynamic processes of individual educational choices under extreme circumstances.

At the same time, I explicitly focused on young adult (20-40) non-traditional participants in full-time HE. This group is at a transitional stage between traditional HE participants and non-traditional learners, possessing unique

characteristics and needs. By deeply exploring the traits, requirements, and situations of this group, this study not only addressed the lack of attention in existing literature but also provided new insights into the complexities of identity transitions among educational participants.

Moreover, my thesis focused on full-time education programmes. While full-time HE programmes are a significant focus within the broader field of educational research, they are relatively overlooked in adult education studies. By centring on full-time HE programmes, this study expanded the scope of adult education research and provided a more comprehensive and diverse perspective on HE development. This focus helps to uncover the unique challenges and opportunities faced by non-traditional learners in full-time education programmes, offering valuable references for educational policy formulation and teaching practice optimization.

Through these innovative explorations, this study not only filled gaps in existing literature but also pointed the way for future research, providing valuable insights for educational practitioners and policymakers.

1.4 Research methods.

The research was explorative qualitative research, which employed a novel tri-staged multi-method approach. Three data collection stages were conducted in this project: Stage A, a critical policy analysis; Stage B, semi-structured interviews; and Stage C, a focus group conducted via Padlet. Twenty young adult respondents (n=20, aged 20 to 40), who were full-time HE participants in Mainland China during the COVID-19 pandemic, were invited to participate in this research, with 20 attending Stage B and 17 attending Stage C. Thematic Analysis, as discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was the analytical approach used in all three stages.

The design of this multi-staged method is closely aligned with my research

question and aims. Firstly, adopting a qualitative research strategy allows for an in-depth exploration (Creswell & Poth, 2018), especially the complex experiences and decision-making processes of young adult full-time HE participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. This aligned with the study's aim to understand participants' subjective and diversified experiences and perspectives.

Secondly, utilizing critical policy analysis (Taylor, 1997) as my Stage A to examine relevant educational policies helped me understand how these policies influence non-traditional learners' decisions and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. On one hand, it helped me understand the socio-political context of my target research group during the pandemic. On the other hand, it allowed me to explore how institutional factors within the political and educational systems, manifested through specific policies, influenced the decision-making behaviours of my target group during this period. This dual focus provided a comprehensive framework for examining the interplay between the institutional-level policy impacts and individual educational choices in an unprecedented context.

At the same time, employing semi-structured interviews allowed me to flexibly explore participants' personal experiences and viewpoints while maintaining a degree of structure (Kvale, 2007). This method is particularly suited to capturing participants' unique voices and experiences, aligning with the research goal of gaining deep insights into individual experiences. Additionally, this approach ensured that I maintained a certain degree of control over the pacing of the conversations with respondents. This balance allowed respondents to freely share their experiences of making full-time HE participation decisions during the pandemic while preventing the discussion from diverging too far from my research questions.

Focus groups provide a platform for collective discussion and exchange among participants, facilitating the emergence of new insights and perspectives (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017). This method helped reveal common ideas and divergences,

corresponding to the research objective of comparing different participant experiences. Moreover, utilizing Padlet (a real-time discussion website) to create a real-time online communication platform significantly enhanced the flexibility for respondents to choose their participation times and schedules. At the same time, ensuring a completely anonymous data collection method by Padlet helped my respondents feel more comfortable sharing their personal experiences and opinions. Conducting online focus groups via Padlet represents an innovative approach. A more detailed discussion of this research method, including its advantages and potential drawbacks, will be provided in [Section 4.4.4](#).

Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), applied throughout the research process, provided a unified framework for integrating and analysing information from various data sources. Given that my project employed a qualitative research strategy, the data primarily consisted of extensive textual and conversational information rather than numerical data. By utilizing this analysis strategy, I efficiently and accurately extracted recurring themes and content from this information. This method enabled me to systematically organize and compare the data, facilitating a deeper understanding of the patterns and insights relevant to the research objectives.

It is important to note that both the semi-structured interviews in Stage B and the focus groups in Stage C were conducted online. This approach was adopted because, during the data collection phase of my thesis (2022-2023), neither the UK, where I was based, nor China, where the respondents were located, had fully transitioned to a post-pandemic era. Conducting data collection online not only overcame the geographical barriers between me and the respondents but also provided a safer method of information gathering in the context of the pandemic. For details on the security measures for online data collection, the information processing methods, and further aspects of the research design, please refer to [Chapter Four](#).

1.5 Structure outline.

The structure of this thesis is carefully designed to guide the reader through the various components of the research, starting with an in-depth introduction and concluding with a synthesis of key findings and their implications. [Chapter One](#) provides the foundation by outlining the research background, defining the target group of young adults, justifying the focus on mainland China, identifying the research gap, and specifying the research questions and methods. This chapter concludes with an outline of the thesis structure.

[Chapter Two](#) is dedicated to a comprehensive literature review, covering a range of theories relevant to educational participation, including Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1976; Bourdieu, 1986), among others. This chapter culminates in the development of a theoretical framework tailored to my research.

[Chapter Three](#) contextualizes the empirical studies closely related to my research, as well as a discussion with more details related to the Chinese HE system, especially how the system responds to the COVID-19 pandemic.

[Chapter Four](#) details the research design and methodology, presenting a multi-staged qualitative approach that includes policy analysis, semi-structured interviews, and an online focus group.

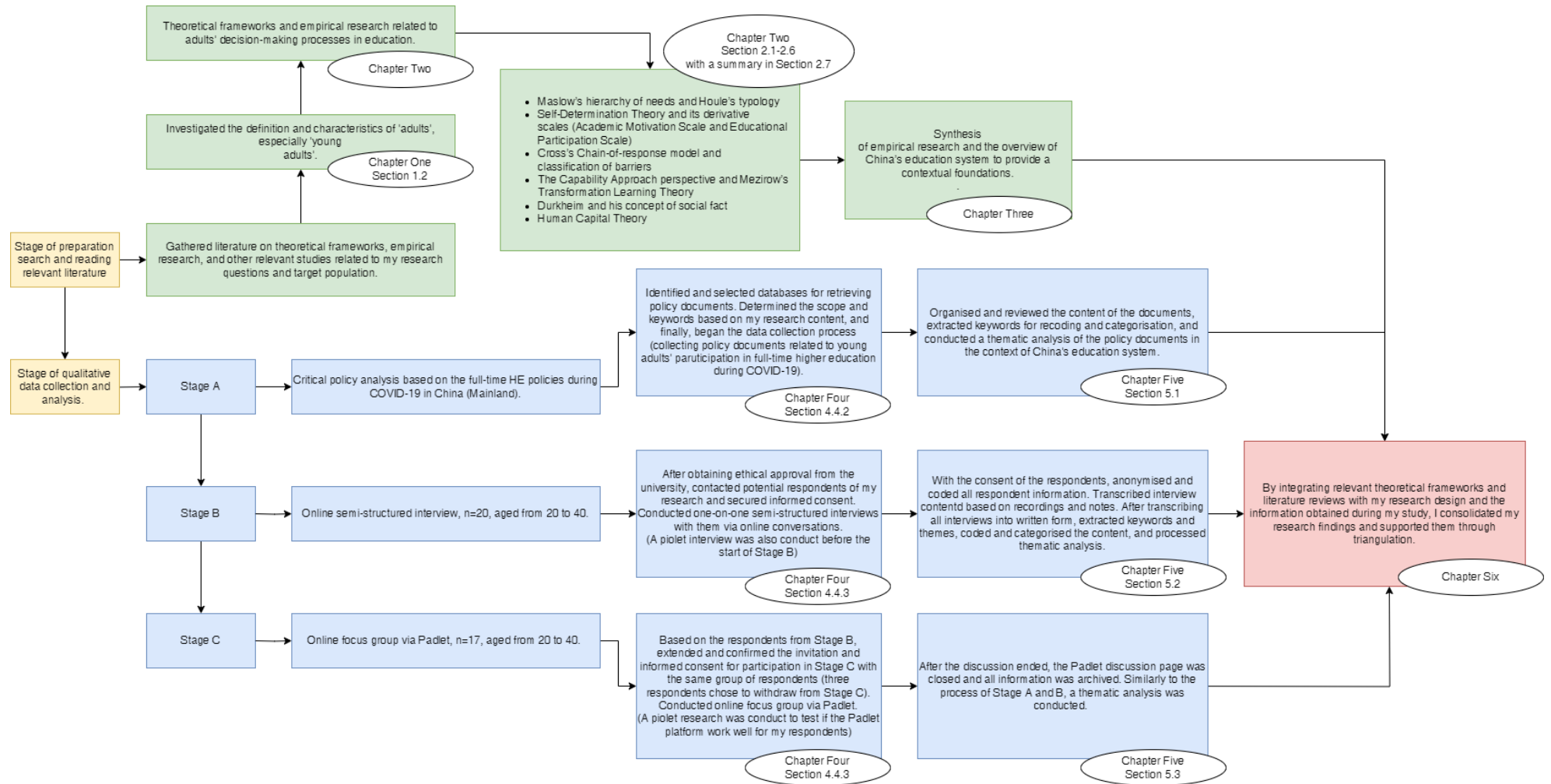
[Chapter Five](#) presents the findings and discussion, organized by each stage of the research, with thematic analyses of policy documents, interviews, and focus group data.

Finally, [Chapter Six](#) concludes the thesis by addressing the research questions, highlighting key discoveries, and discussing their implications for theory and practice. More importantly, this chapter also contains my reflections on the entire

research.

To provide a clearer presentation of my research project, the following [Figure 1b](#) outlines the general process of my research. Each step is annotated with the corresponding chapters/sections, allowing for quick identification and reference. The flowchart visually represents the overall structure and process of my research. The yellow section marks the initiation of the study, serving as the foundation from which the entire research unfolds. From this starting point, the flowchart branches into two main parts. The upper branch, highlighted in green, outlines the literature review process conducted before the commencement of data collection. This section ensures that the research is grounded in existing theoretical and empirical work. The lower branch highlighted in blue, meanwhile, illustrates the process of data collection and analysis, capturing the core activities of my research methodology. Finally, the red section on the right side of the flowchart indicates the concluding stage of the research, where the literature review, data collection, and data analysis culminate in the discussion and interpretation of the findings. This visual guide provides a clear overview of the sequential and interconnected phases of the research.

Figure 1b Flowchart of my research design.



Chapter Two Theoretical Perspectives and Literature Review

Adult education is an important and evolving field that plays a crucial role in fostering personal development and social progress. In recent years, with the impact of globalization and technological advancements, adult education has faced new opportunities and challenges. This section explores some theoretical frameworks related to adult education and elucidates how they can provide valuable insights into understanding the factors influencing the participation decisions of young adults in full-time adult HE during the COVID-19 pandemic in China.

Some of the frameworks discussed in this section, such as Houle's Typology (1961) in [Section 2.1](#) and Cross's (1981) theory in [Section 2.3](#), examine the educational behaviour of adults as a collective group. Meanwhile, certain frameworks like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) in [Section 2.1](#) and Durkheim's (1897/1970) concept of social facts in [Section 2.5](#) originate from broader social sciences beyond the field of education. The reason I still discuss these frameworks in the theoretical section of my research, despite their original focus on either the entire adult population or adult education in general, is that regardless of the specific age group or educational context, there are some common basic principles concerning intrinsic motivations, external influencing factors, and decision-making processes regarding educational participation. By drawing upon these widely debated and extensively explored theoretical frameworks, I gained a more nuanced understanding of the complex factors affecting the educational participation of young adults. While these theories may not be universally accepted or fully empirically validated, they have undergone significant scrutiny, refinement, and expansion over time, incorporating insights from numerous researchers and practitioners. This rich body of discourse provides a valuable foundation for examining the multifaceted influences on young adult participation in education. Furthermore, full-time adult HE, as an integral part of adult

education, is essentially aimed at meeting the continuing education needs of adults. Therefore, exploring the theoretical frameworks in the broader field of adult education helped me consider the educational participation of young adults in the context of the pandemic from a broader perspective, thereby gaining more insightful insights.

To ensure a comprehensive and rigorous approach, I conducted a systematic literature search using key academic databases such as ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. The primary search terms included 'adult education theory,' 'HE participation,' 'young adult decision-making,' and 'COVID-19 education impact.' I focused on peer-reviewed articles and seminal works published within the last two decades, with particular attention to more recent studies addressing the pandemic context. This systematic approach allowed me to identify the most relevant and influential frameworks in the field, which are discussed in detail in the following subsections. By critically examining these selected frameworks, I provided a robust theoretical foundation for understanding the complex factors influencing young adults' educational decisions during this unprecedented time.

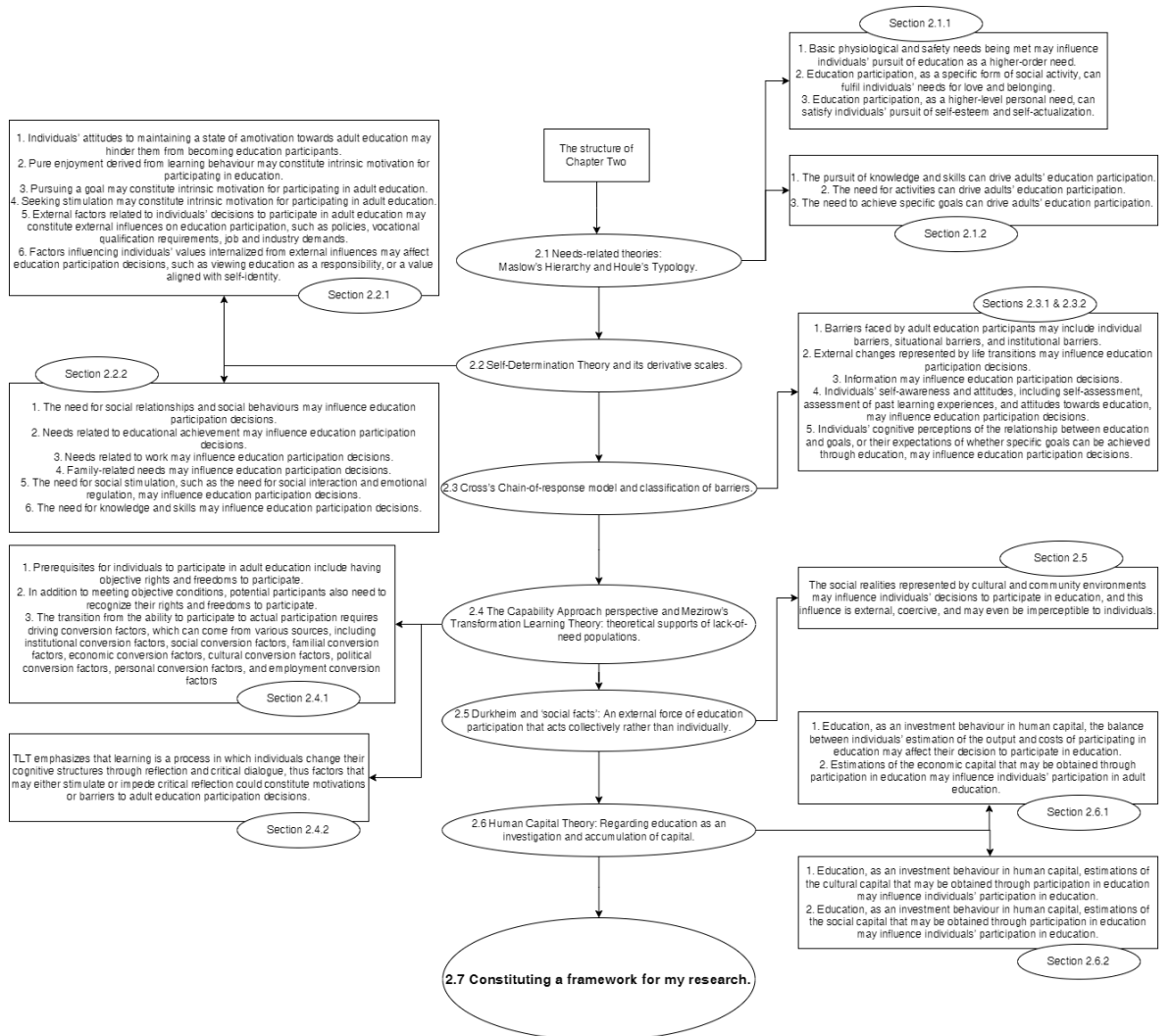
The exploration of adult education participation intersects with numerous disciplines, leading to a diverse array of theoretical perspectives that illuminate different facets of participation behaviour in adult education. As Boeren (2016) discusses in her book on the systematic analysis of theories related to lifelong learning participation, exploring the topic of lifelong learning necessitates considering perspectives at various levels, from individual to macro. Additionally, it requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates knowledge from multiple disciplines such as sociology, psychology, economics, and political science. This interdisciplinary approach allowed for a richer understanding of the complex factors influencing adult learners' engagement in educational activities. For instance, theoretical models, such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and the capability approach (Sen, 1987, 1999/2001; Nussbaum, 2011), do not initially focus on adult education participation as their primary subject of analysis.

However, there has been a widely used theoretical framework to solve specific problems in the field of education (Ahl, 2006; Roosmaa & Saar, 2017; Broek *et al.*, 2023). At the same time, frameworks represented by Houle's Typology (1961) directly address educational participation. Moreover, beyond individual-focused analyses, scholars in the field of economics, exemplified by Durkheim's theory of social facts (1970), adopt perspectives not limited to education, but topics broader such as human behaviours and social science. Generally, different theoretical frameworks across diverse fields and perspectives offer varied insights into the subject of adult education participation. Each framework presents its own perspectives and constraints within research practice. To gain a comprehensive understanding of decision-making regarding adult education participation, Chapter Two will concentrate on examining and synthesizing diverse viewpoints. Each section in this chapter presents a relevant theory under consideration, selected given its historical or pivotal importance, in the field of adult learning and brings it up to date with more current empirical study support, so that it be integrated into my new model in [Section 2.7](#) for use in the triangulation of all data strands.

Therefore, the following section is organized with a broad range of theoretical perspectives, which are shown in [Figure 2a](#) on the next page. In this flowchart, the central axis outlines the primary sections, from Section 2.1 through Section 2.7, forming the core structure of this chapter. Branching out from the main axis, the surrounding boxes summarize the key points of each theoretical framework discussed, highlighting the aspects most relevant to my research. Next to each box is the section number indicating where these points are discussed in detail. Finally, at the end of the chapter, I introduce a conceptual framework of my own ([Figure 2d](#) in [Section 2.7](#)), synthesizing and integrating the relevant theories discussed earlier. This framework served to theoretically underpin my research. It is also important to note that although these selected theories form the primary structure of the review, the discussion remains flexible, incorporating insights from other relevant frameworks to offer a more nuanced understanding of the

topic.

Figure 2a The Outline of Chapter Two.



2.1 Needs-related theories: Maslow's Hierarchy and Houle's Typology.

Two theoretical frameworks, which offer personal and motivational perspectives on adult education participation via a 'needs-based' lens are Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and Houle's Typology (1961) for learning orientation. Before addressing each, the need to address personal and motivational perspectives will be justified using a case study exemplar of 'Alex'. To thoroughly investigate the decision-making process of adults participating in HE, consider a hypothetical scenario: imagine a young adult, 'Alex', who has completed the education and secured full-time employment.

The sudden onset of a global pandemic disrupts Alex's normal life, potentially prompting a re-evaluation of life plans. In such a context, Alex might consider resigning from work to become a full-time HE participant. The essence of this decision-making process lies in Alex's personal behavioural choices. When asked why Alex decided to pursue this path, Alex might likely respond, 'Because I want to...'. Although subsequent sections explore other theoretical frameworks, such as the influence of social structure or ideology on personal choices (Bourdieu, 1986), the primary focus here is on the personal need perspective.

Further to the personal considerations, considering also the motivational perspective and the influence of these needs is core to the thesis. There are several relevant theories beyond the two discussed here, such as McClelland's achievement motivation theory (1961), Vroom's expectancy theory (1964), and Alderfer's ERG theory (1969). These theories also provide valuable insights into understanding human motivation and decision-making and can also be applied to exploring topics related to adult HE behaviours. However, I focus primarily on Maslow's (1943) and Houle's (1961) theories for several reasons. Firstly, compared to other theories, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) offers a relatively comprehensive foundational framework, covering a broad range of needs from basic physiological requirements to self-actualization. This theory not only lays

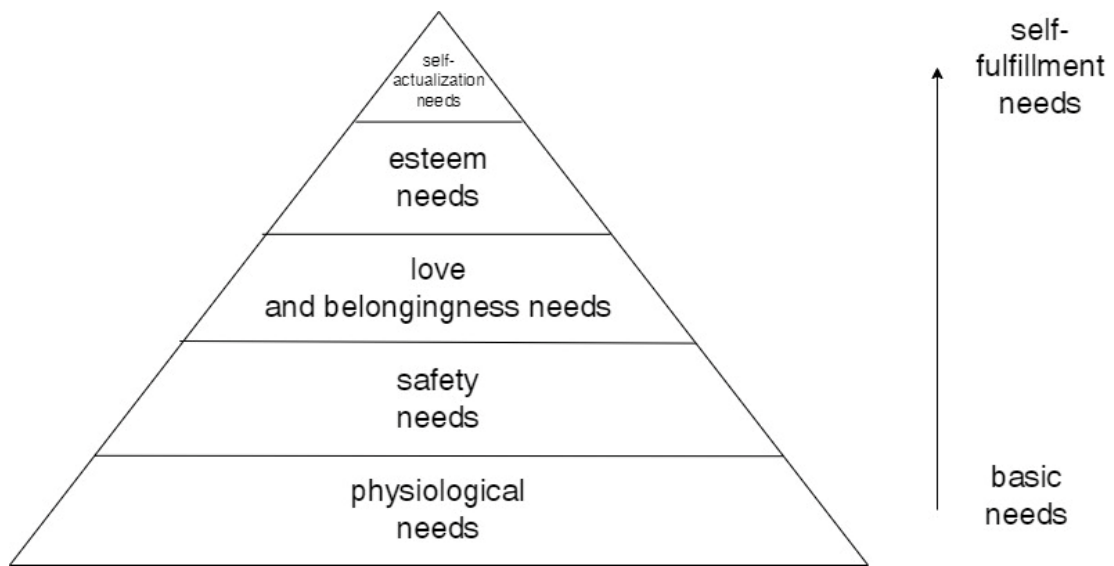
the groundwork for subsequent research but has also inspired numerous theoretical extensions and refinements. For instance, Alderfer's ERG theory (1969) and McClelland's achievement needs theory (1961) can be seen as significant developments based on Maslow's theory. Concurrently, with the deepening of research, scholars have also proposed various criticisms and modifications to Maslow's theory (Geller, 1982; Berl *et al.*, 1984), which are incorporated later.

By focusing on Maslow and Houle's (1961) theories, my goal is to establish an integrative analytical framework that is both comprehensive and specifically tailored to adult education, providing a continuous analytical spectrum from basic needs to specific learning motivations and laying the foundation for more detailed discussions later.

2.1.1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) provides a fundamental analytical framework when exploring participation behaviours in adult education. Maslow classified human needs into five levels (see [Figure 2b](#) on the next page), from low to high, namely physiological needs, safety needs, love and belongingness needs, esteem needs, and. These needs cover the basic physiological needs to the pursuit of self-actualization needs of individuals, as well as the gradual change from material needs to spiritual needs. Therefore, it can provide insight into the psychological dynamics of adult involvement in education.

Figure 2b Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory (1943).



As far as the topic of adult education participation is concerned, it can generally be viewed as a way to satisfy relatively higher-level needs in Maslow's model. For many adult learners, the pursuit of continuing education often stems from a desire for self-actualization. Once a person's basic physiological and safety needs are satisfied, (s)he is more likely to pursue knowledge growth, skill enhancement, and personal development in order to maximize their self-potential. In this regard, adult education becomes one of the means to realize their self-worth, enhance their sense of self-efficacy and gain social recognition. At the same time, participation in adult education also fulfils the need for respect in Maslow's (1943) model. By acquiring new knowledge and skills, adult learners not only increase their sense of self-efficacy but also enhance their self-respect and gain the respect of others. Especially when the participants complete the education programme, their educational achievement, such as earning a degree or certificate, is often seen as a symbol of personal accomplishment and helps to elevate one's status in the profession and society. In addition, the need for socialization is also an important driver of adult learning engagement. Adult education environments provide platforms for communication and bonding with others, fulfilling learners' needs for a sense of belonging and emotional support. Although the discussion is

all about needs, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) also helps to explain a possible barrier to educational participation, which is the situation in an individual's physiological needs are not being met.

Maslow's (1943) model is equally relevant in the particular context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The spread of a widespread epidemic is a relatively specific societal event whose effects are not only long-lasting but also closely linked to the physiological safety of individuals. From this perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic may influence the underlying needs in Maslow's model. At the same time, in terms of the contemporary social situation, the iterative updating of various technologies brings challenges to the labour market (Autor, 2015; Frey & Osborne, 2017). Rapid technological advancements, particularly in areas such as artificial intelligence and automation, are reshaping job requirements and skill demands across various industries (Schwab, 2017). This technological disruption has led to concerns about job displacement and the need for continuous upskilling and reskilling of the workforce (World Economic Forum, 2023). Therefore, the updating of individual knowledge and competence that can be brought about by adult education may become a necessity and a guarantee for individuals to maintain a safe and stable life.

Several scholars have extended Maslow's framework to create new theoretical models specifically tailored for adult education. For instance, Cross (1981) developed the 'Chain of Response Model,' which incorporates elements of Maslow's Hierarchy (1943) to explain adult participation in learning activities. This model suggests that adult education engagement is influenced by a series of psychological, situational, and environmental factors, aligning with the layered approach of Maslow's hierarchy but focusing more on the motivational aspects relevant to adult learners (further unpacked in [Section 2.3](#)). Additionally, as previously mentioned, Alderfer's (1969) ERG theory simplifies Maslow's five levels of needs into three categories, which are existence, relatedness, and growth needs. This theory has shown strong applicability in explaining the motivations of

adult learners. Similarly, McClelland's (1961) Achievement Motivation Theory can be seen as an extension of Maslow's theory, particularly emphasizing the importance of achievement needs in adult learning.

It is noteworthy that Boshier (1977), explored later (in [Section 2.2](#)), delved into the motivations and informational requirements influencing adult education participation. Within this framework, Boshier also established a hierarchical structure, moving from physiological needs, safety needs, love and belongings, and esteem needs, to self-realization, mirroring Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). While Boshier did not explicitly mention a link to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) in his original text, the structure he proposed bears a striking resemblance to Maslow's well-known framework. This similarity in the organization and content of needs, despite the lack of direct reference, suggests a shared understanding of human motivations in the context of adult education participation.

In empirical research on learning and educational participation needs, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) is often regarded as a quintessential theoretical framework for need-driven factors (Ahl, 2006; Merriam & Bierema, 2013). For instance, in the context of HE, Milheim (2012) examined how Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) could be applied to online learning environments. This study proposed a framework for understanding and meeting the various levels of needs of online adult learners, thereby enhancing engagement and effectiveness. This work demonstrates the continued relevance of Maslow's theory in the modern educational technology environment. Lester (2013), through research on college students, discussed how to measure needs within Maslow's theoretical system and compared the influence of different levels. Meanwhile, Gardner (2024) provided a comprehensive discussion on Maslow's needs theory, pedagogy, and the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic, examining how students' learning and participation were affected within the framework of Maslow's theory.

It is noteworthy that, while Maslow's theory has been widely applied in adult education research, it has also faced some criticisms and challenges. For example, Merriam and Bierema (2013) pointed out in their work that Maslow's theory might oversimplify the complexity of human needs and had limitations regarding its applicability across different cultural contexts. Additionally, Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2017), in their book on the motivations of adult learners, expressed criticism of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) for its lack of empirical validation across different regions. Despite these criticisms, the importance of Maslow's theory in adult education research remains undiminished. Rather, these critiques have encouraged further reflection and refinement of the theory by scholars.

In summary, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) offers a foundational framework for investigating the motivations behind adult HE participation in this study. While Maslow's theory may appear relatively simplistic compared to later frameworks, it remains significant due to its status as one of the early classical theories of psychology. Although empirical research solely based on Maslow's theory is scarce at present and has been criticised for its validation under different cultural and social contexts (Bouzenita & Boulanouar, 2016; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017), its theoretical underpinnings are highly relevant to this study. Maslow's framework elucidates why individuals opt to engage in adult education, positing that such participation represents a pursuit of higher-level needs beyond basic physiological requirements (Milheim, 2012; Neto, 2015). This decision to pursue education reflects one's needs for personal growth and fulfilment on the premise of the satisfaction of one's fundamental needs.

2.1.2 Houle's Typology for adult learners.

An early-start theoretical framework that also addresses needs and motivations is Houle's Typology (1961) for adult learners. In general, Houle (1961) classified adult learners into three groups: learning-oriented, goal-oriented, and activity-oriented learners based on his in-depth interviews with 22 adult learners from different

occupations and age groups. Generally, individuals belonging to the learning-oriented group are motivated by a preference for knowledge and skills. Goal-oriented learners, on the other hand, learn for a specific goal, which generally refers to the achievement of non-learning objectives through learning, such as promotion in the workplace or an increase in income. The difference between these two types of learners is that the former cares about learning itself, while the latter cares about the rewards of learning. In other words, there is a causal difference between those who learn because they like to learn, and those who learn because they want to get something in return and choose to learn out of alternative methods. Finally, there are activity-oriented learners, who see learning as one specific choice of many activities, and who are interested in the experience and social interaction that comes from engaging in the activity.

There are commonalities between Maslow's (1943) and Houle's models (1961), as both explain participation behaviours through the needs of individuals, categorise needs and provide ideas for categorising the positive factors of participation. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) is structured as a pyramid, in contrast, Houle's Typology (1961) presents a parallel structure, with three types of oriented learners stemming perhaps from the fact that Maslow's (1943) framework is not specifically tailored to the topic of adult education, which itself occupies a relatively high position within Maslow's theory (1943). The overlap and differences can be seen in Maslow's explanation of social needs and Houle's Typology (1961) of activity-oriented learners are similar, as both cover the motivation that adult education participation as a social activity brings to potential participants. But, in Maslow's model, social needs are only a preliminary surface level of the third tier of needs. Instead, the core needs he emphasises is a deeper level of intimacy, belonging and consequent happiness. Similarly, for Houle's definition of activity-orientated learners, socialisation is only a specific benefit that the activity can bring, along with the experience that education as a form of activity brings to the participants.

On the other hand, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) is more ambiguous in its

formulation than Houle's more specific and contextual classification-learning for promotion at work can be for gaining respect or for self-actualisation in terms of career plans. This vagueness, when used in isolation in empirical research, can easily make the categorisation of motivation more nebulous and general. However, the typology of Houle is also criticised because it is based on the interview of only twenty-two case studies of active adult learners, which is a very small population and makes its reliability questionable (Boshier, 1971; Dia *et al.*, 2005).

In addition to being the basic theory of constructing some theoretical frameworks to be discussed later (Cross, 1981). For example, based on Houle's three-oriented classifications, Boshier (1971) constructed the Educational Participation Scale (EPS) in an attempt to quantify and validate educational participation factors. Another example is Cross's Chain-of-Response Model (1981) which was constructed to analyse seven entries that may play an influential role in an individual's adult education decision-making. Both are further applications of Houle's Typology (1961) to adult education participation practices. Because these contents will be discussed in the following [Sections 2.2.2](#) (EPS) and [2.3.1](#) (Chain-of-response model) respectively, I would first extract some cases that are more closely related to Houle's Typology (1961) to discuss.

For the present research purposes, Houle's Typology (1961) underscores that the impetus driving adult education participation is not singular but encompasses diverse needs encapsulated by knowledge, goals, and activities. The present lens also incorporates research which has further refined the typology in the empirical research (Sheffield, 1962; Boshier, 1971). For example, Sheffield's (1962) study, which involved 453 participants in continuing education in the United States, builds upon Houle's framework and offers further refinement. Sheffield ultimately proposed five points as motivational drivers: learning orientation, desire-activity orientation, personal-goal orientation, social-goal orientation, and need-activity orientation. The learning orientation aligns closely with Houle's original concept. Meanwhile, desire-activity orientation and need-activity orientation extend the

notion of activity-oriented learning behaviours, with the former emphasizing intrinsic motives such as individual interests and emotions, and the latter focusing on extrinsic motives aimed at achieving external goals. Similarly, personal-goal orientation and social-goal orientation further refine the concept of goal-oriented learning behaviours, representing individual and collective goal needs, respectively. This classification approach helps distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic goal-oriented behaviours. Sheffield's (1962) extension of Houle's Typology (1961) has significantly influenced and supported the development of Boshier's initial theoretical framework (1971). Boshier's development of Houle's classification system in the early 1970s, which led to the creation of the Educational Participation Scale (EPS), is another example of the extension of Houle's Typology (1961). It is an attempt to validate Houle's Typology (1961) but further developed as a practical tool for studying learning motivation. Over time, EPS underwent validation, refinements and integrations (Fujita-Starck, 1996; Bye *et al.*, 2007). As the following [Section 2.2](#) focuses on Boshier's Educational Participation Scale (EPS) theoretical framework, particularly his incorporation of the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) in its continual refinement, an in-depth discussion of Boshier's contributions will be reserved for that section.

2.1.3 Summary: Needs theories in current contexts.

While Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and Houle's Typology (1961) of adult learners have been influential in understanding adult education motivations, it is crucial to consider their applicability in contemporary contexts, particularly during unprecedented events like the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than dismissing these frameworks outright or following them straightforwardly, this study examined how they might be adapted or extended in specific social contexts. On the other hand, when theoretical frameworks fail to be effective in particular social settings, this study seeks to discuss the underlying reasons for such ineffectiveness. Indeed, part of the value of conducting research in new contexts lies in validating whether existing frameworks generate similar or different results

in varying circumstances. For instance, while Maslow's hierarchy might need reinterpretation in light of pandemic-induced changes in priorities, it could still offer insights into how basic needs influence learning motivations during crisis periods. Similarly, Houle's Typology (1961) might require expansion to account for new learning orientations emerging from prolonged isolation and increased reliance on digital platforms. A quite essential empirical research case is the phenomenon of 'cabin fever learning' observed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Grenier, 2021).

Rosenblatt *et al.* (1984) focused their research on the phenomenon of 'cabin fever,' defining it as a negative psychological state triggered by dissatisfaction with restrictions in a relatively enclosed living environment. This state is typically characterized by symptoms such as boredom, irritability, and restlessness. Interestingly, this psychological state may not always lead to purely negative outcomes. Although the definition provided by Rosenblatt *et al.* (1984) imbues cabin fever with rather negative connotations, it is interesting to note that in specific environments, the implications of cabin fever can extend further, such as the emergence and study of 'cabin fever learning' behaviours (Grenier, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic period, the policies of social isolation and self-isolation provided just the right conditions for cabin fever learning behaviour. By observing cabin fever learning behaviour during the pandemic, Grenier (2021) suggests that the learning behaviour stems from frustration and boredom with social isolation, rather than learning in the traditional sense out of curiosity, need and external demands. Although the learning behaviour represented by cabin fever learning is mostly focused on the specific forms of adult education, usually non-formal or informal education (Grenier, 2021), participation often starts and ends with the emotional needs of the individual in this particular social context. In other words, individuals may participate in cabin fever learning simply to relieve the boredom and loneliness of social isolation. This situation is difficult to catalogue in the early theories. It overlaps with the activity orientation of the Houle typology, for example, the need for socialization, and is associated with the

learning orientation, as some of these learning behaviours that are processed spontaneously have little relevance to social interaction. This is because the core of cabin fever learning lies in the transfer and detoxification of negative emotions and experiences in a particular social context. This is a complexity that was difficult to predict in earlier theories but does exist in the current era. This means that although Houle's Typology (1961) provides possible answers to the driving factors, it is not a complete framework for the research question. To attain a comprehensive understanding of adult education's involvement in decision-making amid the epidemic, it necessitates the integration of other frameworks.

Overall, while Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) model and Houle's Typology (1961) for adult educational participation offer valuable insights into individual needs and motivations, it's crucial to recognize that decision-making in educational contexts is a more complex process than these early theories might suggest. Modern understanding of decision-making acknowledges the interplay of various factors beyond individual needs, including social, cultural, and environmental influences (Jarvis, 2004; Boeren, 2016). Rather than viewing these early theories as directly and independently applicable in today's social context, it may be more productive to consider them as foundational frameworks that can be built upon and expanded. They offer a starting point for studying motivation from the perspective of individual needs but should be complemented with more recent research that accounts for the complexities of contemporary society. For example, in Alex's case, the decision to engage in HE may stem from a desire to acquire knowledge, enhance future earning potential, or seek emotional fulfilment and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943; Houle, 1961). These diverse needs and motivations, though varied, constitute specific demands from Alex's personal perspective, thus driving Alex's participation decision. Beginning the literature review with a focus on personal needs provides a relatively fundamental and direct entry point and reflects the level of individual cognition and emotion most pertinent to the decision-making process. This approach follows the bottom-up tradition in psychological research, starting from individual experiences and

gradually expanding to broader sociocultural contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). By first addressing personal needs, I can establish a solid foundation for the literature review, paving the way for later exploration of more complex social, cultural, and structural factors, as well as more agencies driven models concerning self-determination.

2.2 Self-Determination Theory and its derivative scales.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) suggested by Deci and Ryan is a crucial psychological framework, focusing on the instinctive motivation and independence of human behaviours. Following the publication of *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behaviour* by Deci and Ryan in 1985, the theoretical framework of SDT underwent gradual refinement. Initially centred on contrasting internal and external motivations, SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) evolved into a comprehensive theoretical system for empirical research. Notably, it emphasized the transition process from external to internal motivation during its refinement. Within the field of education, Vansteenkiste *et al.* (2006) further elaborated on the application of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) to educational settings, emphasizing the importance of autonomy-supportive teaching styles in fostering intrinsic motivation and optimal learning outcomes. Their work highlighted how the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) in educational environments can promote more self-determined forms of motivation.

Subsequent research expanded on the original concepts and applied them to various domains of human behaviour and motivation, such as the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS, Vallerand *et al.*, 1992) and the Educational Participation Scale (EPS, Boshier, 1971). These frameworks represent not just applications but significant extensions of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985), tailored to address particular aspects of adult learning. As such, I discuss them individually in the subsequent [Sections 2.2.1](#) and [2.2.2](#) to highlight their unique contributions and methodologies.

The present section, however, focuses on the core tenets of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and the research that directly expands upon, applies, and validates the fundamental SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) framework. This distinction is not to suggest that AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992) and EPS have diverged from SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985), rather, it acknowledges that these tools have developed into somewhat independent theoretical constructs specifically tailored to investigate adult education.

It is important to note that the studies discussed in this section, while including applications of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) to adult education contexts, primarily build upon the original SDT framework without necessarily culminating in distinct tool systems. These investigations serve to extend, refine, and validate SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) principles within the adult education domain, maintaining a close alignment with the core theoretical propositions of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This approach allows for a comprehensive examination of SDT's (Deci & Ryan, 1985) broader implications in adult education before delving into the more specialized frameworks that have emerged from its application in this field. By structuring the discussion in this manner, I can first establish a solid foundation in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and its general applications in adult education, which will then inform the understanding of how AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992) and EPS have been developed as targeted extensions of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Drawing upon the example of hypothetical participant 'Alex', I delve into the theoretical framework of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) to better understand the motivations and pressures involved in adult education participation. SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) posits that human motivation is driven by the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the case of Alex, who faces societal expectations and pressures to engage in lifelong learning, these three fundamental needs play a crucial role in shaping Alex's decision-making process.

Autonomy refers to the need for self-direction and control over one's own actions.

Despite the external pressures from societal norms and industry standards, Alex's intrinsic motivation to pursue further education will be significantly influenced by the degree to which Alex feels autonomous in this decision. If Alex perceives the decision to engage in further education as self-directed and aligned with personal values, Alex is more likely to experience higher motivation and satisfaction.

Competence involves the need to feel effective and capable in one's activities. For Alex, the societal emphasis on continuous education may enhance the perceived importance of acquiring new skills and knowledge to stay competitive in the job market. This perceived competence can either motivate Alex to pursue further education or if Alex feels inadequate, deter participation due to fear of failure.

Relatedness pertains to the need to feel connected and supported by others. The pressure Alex feels from societal expectations and industry norms can also be seen through the lens of relatedness. Support from colleagues, family, and peers can either mitigate the external pressures or amplify them, depending on whether Alex feels understood and encouraged in the pursuit of further education.

Even before delving into discussions about educational research tools grounded in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) in the subsequent sections (AMS in [Section 2.2.1](#) and EPS in [Section 2.2.2](#)), it is important to acknowledge that SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) itself, even without further extensions, can also support the investigation of educational participation behaviour. A typical example is the study by Gao *et al.* (2022), which investigated adult education motivations and barriers in the construction industry in Singapore. This research applied SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) as one of its key theoretical frameworks and it provides a comprehensive approach to analysing motivational factors, including both intrinsic and extrinsic elements, which aligns well with my aim of exploring specific factors affecting adult education participation. The researcher verified that the three key items that SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) proposed (competence, relatedness, and autonomy) are

shown as evident participation drivers in terms of adult education motivations. This means that individuals who feel competent, autonomous, and connected to others are more likely to engage in lifelong learning activities. It is important to note that this study also discussed motivation and obstacles separately, while what is discussed here is the situation related to motivation. The discussion related to barriers is discussed in the discussion of Cross's theoretical framework.

However, while SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) provides a robust foundation for understanding motivation in educational contexts, it serves as a starting point rather than an endpoint in the evolving landscape of educational psychology theories. Much like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and Houle's Typology (1961), SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) has inspired and informed numerous subsequent theoretical frameworks and research directions in the field of adult education and motivation. Building upon these foundational theories, researchers have developed more specialized instruments to measure and analyse motivational factors in educational settings. Two such instruments that have gained significant traction in the field of adult education are the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS) and the Educational Participation Scale (EPS).

2.2.1 Academic Motivation Scale: a practical tool of SDT-based framework in the field of educational research.

Vallerand *et al.* (1992) further explored and constituted Academic Motivation Scale (AMS) to support the empirical research of education participation. It covers eight scales of motivations related to education behaviour. Like the theoretical framework of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985), AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992) also considers both internal and external motivation. However, it diverges by introducing a third motivational state: amotivation. To be more specific, Vallerand *et al.* (1992) suggest that in addition to being driven by internal and external motivation, individuals may be in a state of no motivation. 'Individuals are amotivated when

they do not perceive contingencies between outcomes and their own actions. (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992: 1007)' In other words, there is no specific motivation as the reason why amotivated individuals have the behaviour.

In addition to adding a state of motivation, Vallerand *et al.* (1992) further refined the categories of instinct and extinct motivation. Among these, instinct motivation (IM) is refined into IM-to know, IM-to accomplish, and IM-to experience stimulation. The structure of this classification looks very similar to Houle's orientation classification, but the content is different. The three represent the intrinsic learning motivations to acquire knowledge and skills, to achieve a certain goal, and to experience a certain stimulus. The three IMs constituted a parallel structure.

The extinct motivation (EM) has also been unpacked, but its classification logic is different from IM. The three classifications of the first group are also parallel structures. From the surface layer to the deep layer close to the individual, they are external regulation-Introjection-Identification, which reflects the process that the influence of EM gradually decreases. EM classification reflects the influence of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) on the construction of AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992). From the external rewards and punishments to the values that become internalized by individuals, it illustrates the transition process where external factors progressively integrate with individual internal factors.

The utilization of AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992) in educational participation coincides with the adaptation and refinement of empirical research across various research contexts (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992; Sobral, 2004; Grouzet *et al.*, 2006; Vansteenkiste *et al.*, 2006; Barkoukis *et al.*, 2008). A prime illustration of this is the evolution of AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992) from its precursor, EMS, which is the initial version of AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992) developed by researchers (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992). Both frameworks represent investigations conducted within different linguistic communities (AMS within an English-speaking community and

the original EMS within a French-speaking community). The scales in the two versions are different. As mentioned above, AMS contains eight scales (three IMs, four EMs, and amotivation, each one has four items). However, there is no embodiment of 'integrated regulation' in EMS. This means there are only seven scales in the version of EMS.

The evolution and application of the AMS demonstrate its flexibility as a research framework. The transition from the original EMS to AMS, particularly the incorporation of integrated regulation, reflects researchers' growing understanding of motivational differences across age groups. This adaptation arose from the recognition that the younger EMS study population may not have fully internalized external factors, necessitating adjustments for the relatively older AMS research cohort (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992). Similarly, given this understanding, the present study does not confine itself to a single theoretical framework. Instead, I adopt a comprehensive approach, synthesizing multiple theoretical frameworks relevant to adult education participation. This strategy constructed a theoretical foundation more appropriately tailored to the current research objectives and population.

AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992) has been applied and validated across various educational research settings, with efforts made to modify it for specific research contexts. For instance, Stover *et al.* (2012) explored the applicability of the Spanish version of AMS (7-scale version) within the Argentine cultural context. Their study involved 723 participants, including both high school and college students. Despite acknowledging integrated regulation in their literature review, the researchers ultimately validated the contents of the 7 scales in their practical application. This decision was also driven by the idea that integrated regulation suits older population better. As a result, the researchers provided two versions of AMS tailored for the Spanish-speaking community in Argentina and high school and college students. While adapting AMS for different groups in the Spanish-speaking community may affect the comparability of related research between high school

and college students, the process of verifying and modifying AMS according to specific research contexts can yield a more suitable research tool that collects more accurate information.

Similarly, Cokley *et al.* (2001) investigated the cross-cultural applicability of AMS within the American societal context. They conducted a study involving 263 college students in the United States, using the seven-scale version of AMS (excluding integrated regulation). However, it's essential to note that their research focus differs from that of the aforementioned study. They were primarily interested in examining the relationship between academic motivation and academic performance among American college students. Their findings supported the effectiveness of AMS (seven scales) and revealed that students with a stronger academic self-concept (which can be roughly understood as a concept related to academic achievement. It is positively related to academic performance, self-esteem and other factors) tended to exhibit stronger internal motivation compared to external motivation. Additionally, they found no significant gender differences, which aligns with the findings of previous research by Vallerand *et al.* (1992).

Findings of the empirical research conducted by Tang and Feng (2004) supported the AMS framework, though AMS is not discussed in the literature review of this research. This, to some extent, provides a blind validation case for the AMS theoretical framework. Their study focuses on the educational participation behaviour of employed young adults (aged 18-26) in urban areas, with a sample drawn from four cities and nine industries in China (n=637). In their investigation of educational participation motives, Tang and Feng identified three main types of decision-making behaviours: self-initiated educational participation based on personal needs, imposed participation driven by social-environmental factors, and participation without clear motivation. It is noteworthy that although the findings of Tang and Feng's study broadly align with the AMS framework, there are distinct differences in the specific content. Their research placed significant emphasis on

employment-related factors. While intrinsic motivations such as the pursuit of knowledge and skills were also explored, the study lacks a discussion on other possible factors, such as emotional and social influences. This focus may be attributed to the study's context in the early 21st century, reflecting the socio-economic conditions of that period. Furthermore, due to its emphasis on employed young adults, the study showed a stronger inclination towards examining job-related factors.

These empirical studies also show limitations within the AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992) and highlight areas warranting further investigation. Firstly, AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992) exhibits variations across different cultural contexts, leading to differences in versions and verification processes. These variations include considerations of gender differences and the effectiveness of integrated regulation, particularly among younger populations. Consequently, the applicability of the seven- or eight-scale versions of AMS cannot be universally assumed and necessitates careful scrutiny based on the specific social context of each study. Therefore, similar to another research framework (EPS) derived from SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) that I will discuss in the subsequent Section 2.2.2, while empirical research validates the efficacy of AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992), my research primarily focuses on the foundational framework comprising three IMs, four EMs, and amotivation (as shown in [Table 2a](#) next page). The consideration of integrated regulation is also pertinent, given that my research encompasses respondents of diverse age groups, as elaborated further in [Chapter Four](#).

Table 2a A summary of the eight-scale AMS version based on Ryan and Deci (2000), with the highlighted section indicating the part removed in the seven-scale version.

Motivation	Regulatory Styles	AMS Scales
Amotivation	Non-Regulation	Amotivation
Extrinsic Motivation	External Regulation	EM-External Regulation
	Introjected Regulation	EM-Introjected Regulation
	Identified Regulation	EM-Identified Regulation
	Integrated Regulation	EM-Integrated Regulation
Intrinsic Motivation	Intrinsic Regulation	IM-to Know
		IM-to Accomplish Things
		IM-to Experience Stimulation

Another point of consideration is the potential blurring of boundaries between internal and external factors as expressed by AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992). For instance, in Cokley *et al.*'s study (2000) of 263 American college students, the construct validity among various AMS factors (seven-scale version) was examined. Researchers discovered that the correlation between IM-to accomplish and identity/introjection was stronger than that between these two extrinsic motivations. Similarly, the correlation between introjection and IMs was stronger than that between introjection and other EMs. This suggests that the demarcation between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation may not be as distinct as previously assumed in AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992). A similar scenario emerged in Stover *et al.*'s verification study (2012) in Argentina, where it was found that the correlation between the three EMs did not adhere to the original logical order (from complete external factors to internalized regulation). Instead, a stronger correlation was observed between external regulation and identified regulation, while introjected regulation had been bypassed, indicating a significant association between completely external factors and rather internal motivation. This phenomenon supports the notion that the distinction between external and internal motivation may be less pronounced than traditionally thought.

In conclusion, AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992), grounded in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985), particularly delves into individual motivation and its practical application within educational research. Its focus on learning motivation revolves around discerning the origin of motivation. AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992) can support my research by probing deeper into the roots of learning motivation, determining whether an individual's motivation stems from internal, external, or unmotivated sources, and the potential influence of this motivation on their decision-making behaviour. For adult HE participation during the COVID-19 pandemic, AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992) offers a more nuanced and comprehensive perspective on the sources of motivation compared to SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Consequently, the pandemic's influence on the eight items delineated by AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992), or potential shifts in participants' perceptions of these items, may serve as influencing factors in their decision-making regarding adult HE participation.

2.2.2 Educational Participation Scale: A tool constructed underlying the influence of Houle's Typology and SDT.

Educational Participation Scale (EPS) is a research tool suggested by Boshier (1971; 1977). Similar to AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992), EPS (Boshier, 1971; 1977) is constantly improving during its development. As mentioned earlier, EPS (Boshier, 1971) was initially influenced by Houle's classification. In the first edition of EPS by Boshier (1971) (Boshier called this version F-form in the follow-up study), its construction is to verify and continue to explore Houle's classification of educational motivation (Boshier, 1971; 1977). The construction is based on the research data of 233 adult education participants, and finally, the measurement table of 48 items is given. Later, Boshier found that there were overlapping and ambiguous parts in the original classification. Therefore, in his research in 1977, he reduced the F-form version to an A-form (alternative form) containing only 40 items. However, this is still not the version of EPS in his empirical research. In his research based on 845 Canadian adult learners in 1991, Boshier finally improved the A-form to 42 items. This version has become a common version in the

subsequent empirical research on EPS. In particular, the role of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) in the improvement of this version of the model is discussed.

As mentioned in [Section 2.1.2](#), when Boshier first discussed the design of EPS, he expanded Houle's three orientations into five. In particular, the activity-oriented and goal-oriented learning behaviours are further classified into internal and external sources. However, this classification lacks systematic theoretical support, and SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) just makes up for this (Boshier, 1991). The improved EPS contains 42 specific drivers, which are divided into six scales, which are communication improvement, social contact, educational preparation, professional advancement, family togetherness, social stimulation, and cognitive interest (Boshier, 1991). These six scales reflect the influencing factors that may drive individuals to participate in adult education, classified by the sources of the influence.

In addition to Boshier's ongoing refinement of the EPS framework through multiple studies, EPS has also been continually applied in adult education research across diverse cultural contexts (O'Connor, 1979; Dia *et al.*, 2005). Throughout this process, the EPS framework has undergone iterative improvements to accommodate varying research backgrounds. These modifications are applied to suit specific research contexts or sample characteristics.

For instance, O'Connor (1979) employed the EPS framework to examine the motivational orientation of nurses engaging in continuing education (n=843). Seven motivation scales were utilized, encompassing compliance with authority, improvement in social relations, improvement in social welfare skills, professional advancement, professional knowledge, relief from routine, and acquisition of credentials. Findings revealed that the obligatory external conditions associated with compliance with authority exerted minimal influence on nurses' drive to participate in continuing education. Instead, the majority of participants pursued continuing education to uphold their professional standards and enhance their job

competence. This study was narrowly focused on professional continuing education within specific industries, rather than encompassing adult education or lifelong learning in a broader context. Consequently, when adapting the EPS content, the adjustments primarily leaned towards aligning with work-related aspects, while attenuating the non-professional factors such as family needs.

Similarly, Dia *et al.* (2005) conducted a study to validate the reliability and efficacy of a modified version of EPS in the continuing education behaviour of community workers in Maryland ($n=230^3$). In this investigation, researchers selected six scales, which are improvement in social relations, professional knowledge, compliance with authority, relief from routine, professional advancement, and improvement in social welfare skills. The findings indicated that all six scales were significantly pertinent to continuing education participation, with the motivation driven by professional knowledge being the most pronounced among the sample population. Similar to the previous study on nurses, this research was focused on the continuing education of community workers, emphasizing occupation-specific concerns. However, unlike the study on nurses, this research did not singularly categorize degree acquisition nor encompass extensive external factors such as policies or regulatory mandates. This discrepancy may be attributed to the distinct industry characteristics of the community service sector, which may have fewer external requirements and rigid regulations compared to nursing positions. Thus, the characteristics of different industries should also be considered in the research and design process.

In addition to adapting EPS to different industry contexts, researchers also consider the living circumstances of the studied groups when applying this framework. In the study by Boshier & Riddell (1978), they introduced a version of EPS tailored for the elderly, which was subsequently employed by Mulenga & Liang

³ In the abstract of this study, the registered sample $n=225$, but the research design chapter showed that the number of samples is 230. At the same time, the research design chapter of this article provides the characteristic information of 230 samples but did not explain why there is a difference between the two numbers.

(2008) to investigate the participation of elderly individuals in open universities in Taiwan region. Unlike the original EPS, which primarily focused on work-related motivations such as professional advancement, the EPS version for the elderly emphasized motivations more relevant to their age group, such as intellectual stimulation, social engagement, and cognitive exercise. This underscores the importance of considering not only external influences but also the unique living conditions of the study participants, which may significantly impact their decision-making behaviour. This consideration becomes particularly crucial in research conducted against the backdrop of specific societal challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where the living and working conditions of the research subjects may be significantly affected.

The EPS theoretical framework has also found support within the Chinese social context. In a study involving 5,798 randomly selected samples of adult participants taking the self-taught HE entrance examination in Zhejiang Province, Li and Wang (2003) adapted the EPS into a Chinese version comprising 70 questions across seven scales. The study identified four main types of motivations for participating in adult HE: a desire for knowledge and skills, career development, social service (recognition and honour related to social identity), and external expectations (influences from social relationships such as family and friends). Importantly, while constructing the Chinese version of the EPS, researchers used this framework to delve deeper into issues related to adult HE participation, yielding further insights based on sociodemographic characteristics. For example, the study examined differences in influencing factors across various age groups and found that younger participants, those under 25, exhibited a markedly stronger orientation influenced by career development compared to those over 36, with a difference of nearly 13 percentage points.

In addition to refining and adapting EPS for various research contexts, empirical studies have also integrated EPS with other research tools to investigate related phenomena. For instance, Lee and Pang (2014) examined the learning motivation

and academic performance of working learners in continuing education in Malaysia (n=159). While they utilized Boshier's 1991 version of EPS, they also incorporated 'The University Student's Motion & Satisfaction Questionnaire 2' (Neil, 2004 as cited in Lee & Pang, 2014: 8). By combining the two, the researchers developed a revised five-scale version of EPS, including personal development, career advancement, social pressure, social and communication improvement, and escapism. Their findings revealed a positive correlation between learning motivation and academic performance across individuals, with intrinsic motivation, particularly personal development, exerting the greatest influence. This aligns with the overarching perspectives of exploring various theoretical frameworks related to the adult education participation decision-making process. Other examples include Boshier and Collins' research (1985) based on the data from 13,442 learners in Africa, Asia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States, Francois' research (2014) focused on 120 non-traditional learners (defined as aged over 24) in the United States, Raghavan and Kumar's research (2008) based on 454 Open University Malaysia students, and Kim and Merriam' research (2004) based on 189 older adults in the United States.

It's evident that regardless of the version used, EPS serves as a potent tool for studying learning motivation, albeit requiring adjustments to its specific items based on the research content and background. Essentially, EPS combines Houle's Typology (1961) and SDT's (Deci & Ryan, 1985) exploration of internal and external motivation, offering a nuanced perspective on the potential influencing factors of adult education learning motivation. Especially, external drivers are further delineated into five categories, education, work, family, socialization, and stress relief/social stimulation, within the framework of EPS.

However, it's worth noting that EPS, like AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992), is often employed in studies of academic performance, which may deviate from my research focus on the decision-making process itself. Academic performance research typically centres on individual participants, overlooking external factors

such as government or company subsidies and educational management systems. While these factors may have less impact on academic performance studies, they are crucial in the context of decision-making. This is evident in studies like O'Connor (1979), which examined nurses' participation in continuing education and specifically addressed policy documents and job requirements, validating the influence of mandatory measures. Though their influence may not be as significant as other factors, considering such external influences is essential for comprehensive research and drawing accurate conclusions. Therefore, in addition to the internal and external motivations classified by EPS, my research also needs to account for external factors such as relevant policies and regulations, as evidenced by studies like O'Connor (1979). Specifically, in Stage A of my study, I delve deeper into these external factors, examining how policy environments and regulatory frameworks interact with individual motivations to influence educational participation.

2.3 Cross's Chain-of-response model and classification of barriers.

Cross as one of the prominent figures in the field of adult education, delves into the study of educational participation, particularly focusing on motivations and barriers. Two of her key theoretical frameworks, the Chain-of-Response model and her classification and analysis of barriers to participation are discussed in this section.

2.3.1 Chain-of-Response Model.

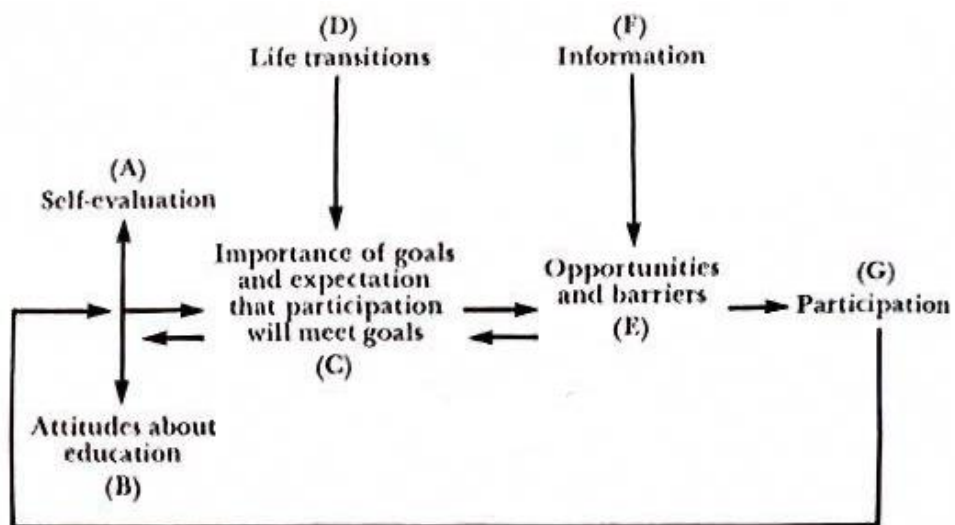
Chain-of-Response (COR) is a model of participation in adult education illustrated by Cross (1981) based on the work of many scholars, such as Kjell Rubenson and Roger Boshier. Therefore, many ideas correspond to other theoretical frameworks discussed earlier, which make the model a comprehensive framework constructed on the basis of those related theories.

Although it is seminal, the book about the COR Model (as well as the classification of barriers) was published in 1981, and some of the theories and studies involved in the book can be dated back to the 1960s. As a result, many points of view tend to analyse the participation behaviour at a psychological level rather than a more collective level, although both are important. This perspective is particularly reflected in Cross's COR Model (1981), which will be elaborated upon in this section, as well as in subsequent discussions, applications, and empirical studies that explore and validate various aspects of the COR Model. Further empirical research and systematic review including Silva *et al.* (1998) applied Cross's model in their study of participation in adult education programmes, demonstrating its practical utility in research. Their findings underscored the importance of considering both individual motivations and contextual factors in understanding participation patterns. More recently, Boeren *et al.* (2010) critically examined Cross's model alongside other participation theories. They argue for an integrated approach that considers psychological, sociological, and economic factors. Similarly, Rubenson (2011) discusses how Cross's model bridges the gap between psychological and sociological approaches to understanding participation. He emphasizes the model's strength in recognizing the interplay between self-evaluation, attitudes about education, life transitions, opportunities and barriers, and information access. The aforementioned studies collectively demonstrate the importance of balancing individual psychological factors with broader social and contextual influences in exploring and understanding the topic of adult education participation. At the same time, this is closely related to the earlier theoretical framework based on individual psychological needs mentioned in [Section 2.1](#). With the continuous expansion of research in recent years, adult education participation is no longer limited to the individual psychological level, and more perspectives will continue to expand in the following sections.

A schematic of the COR Model (1981) provided in the original book is shown below ([Figure 2c](#)). As can be seen from the figure, the model labels seven key entries related to participation in adult education, which are (A) self-evaluation, (B)

Attitudes about education, (C) Importance of goals and expectation will meet goals, (D) Life transitions, (E) Opportunities, (F) Information, and (G) Participation. Although some of the factors (such as C&E) in the figure are in the form of bi-directional arrows. These arrows show the interaction between different items.

Figure 2c Chain-of-Response Model from Cross, 1981.



Broadly speaking, Cross (1981) argued that regardless of the type of adult education one engages in, this act of participation is the result of a series of responses, each step of which is based on the individuals' evaluation of their positions in the environment. In other words, her model connects different influences, external, internal, resistance, and motivative, into the same dimension in a model way. Generally, the COR Model illustrates the potential factors influencing decision-making in adult education participation, encompassing the origins, the progression, and the cyclical nature of the ultimately reached outcome. Moreover, these factors do not exhibit a unidirectional relationship. Next, I will integrate the previously mentioned example of 'Alex' to provide a more detailed analysis of the factors that might influence adult education participation within the framework of Cross's COR Model (1981).

Firstly, for Alex, whether before or after the pandemic, the decision to participate in an educational program involves making certain judgments or predictions. For instance, consider whether Alex wants to participate in the educational programme, whether Alex has the ability to complete it, and what benefits Alex might gain from participation. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, these judgments or predictions may change. Alex might question whether the pandemic would make completing the educational programme simpler or more challenging, or whether the pandemic would affect the benefits of the educational programme. These considerations align with the internal factors in Cross's COR Model (1981). On the one hand, the individual's self-perception, including their competence, self-efficacy, and self-confidence, collectively constitute the set of (A). Simultaneously, self-understanding is closely linked to the individual's attitude towards education (B). On one side, variations in individuals' self-perceptions may lead to differences in their educational attitudes. On the other side, diverse perceptions of education as a concept or industry may also impact their self-perceptions. These two points are closely related to the psychology-related drives mentioned earlier and are at the same level as the personal obstacles (which would be discussed in [Section 2.3.2](#)).

Self-perceptions and attitudes toward education are closely linked with individual expectations (C). While the value and challenges of education can be objectively assessed at a macro level (e.g., social influences discussed in [Section 2.5](#)), individuals have distinct expectations shaped by their self-perceptions and biases. These expectations influence their beliefs about their ability to complete education and the anticipated benefits. In turn, these educational expectations affect attitudes toward education. (C) and (D) involve a complex interplay of psychological factors, including self-evaluation, and external influences like work and earnings, making it difficult to categorize them precisely.

Building on factors like self-perception, education, and earnings, set (E) introduces practical elements such as opportunities and barriers. Even with

positive attitudes and expectations toward education, tangible obstacles (e.g., lack of opportunities, time, geographic isolation, financial constraints) can hinder participation. However, these barriers do not solely influence other factors; individuals with positive attributes may reassess obstacles based on their motivations. For instance, during the pandemic, ‘Alex’ faced challenges like the need for reliable internet and devices but viewed these as minor compared to the benefits of education. This example highlights that both motivations and barriers are subjective and vary by individual. A positive mindset may alter Alex’s perception of barriers, influencing their decision-making. Thus, opportunities and barriers reciprocally interact with the factors mentioned earlier. Discussing adult education participation from a barrier perspective is valuable and deserves further exploration. Therefore, I dedicated [Section 2.3.2](#) in the following part to this topic.

At this level, there is an additional factor that Cross (1981) designated as a set—information (F). In the model, information and its relationship with opportunities and hindrances are depicted as a one-way influence, which is understandable. Information, unlike other sets characterized by two-way influences, is a relatively external factor. In the context of educational participation decision-making, individuals primarily serve as recipients of information. While they may provide information in interactions with others, this does not alter their role as receivers in their own decision-making process. Even when sharing ideas, receiving feedback, and developing new perceptions through ongoing exchanges, individuals remain primarily information recipients in their own decision-making. This perspective highlights the complex interplay between information exchange and individual educational decision-making. At this level, two points are particularly noteworthy. Firstly, an individual’s exposure to information presupposes that the information exists objectively. Second, objectively available information needs to be able to reach potential target groups. This makes the association between objective external conditions and individuals relevant in the COR Model. For example, if the government wants to promote participation in adult education by removing potential barriers, the alternatives can be providing financial subsidies, organising

training for the unemployed or upgrading industries. These behaviours indeed show the institutional barriers in Cross's classification of obstacles, which I will discuss further in [Section 2.3.2](#). However, if these measures only stay at this step, it will be difficult to achieve the goal. Relevant agents need to send these specific messages to the potential participants. Therefore, information plays a role similar to TLT's reflective stimuli and the external-factor conversion factors in a capability approach, which will be further discussed in [Section 2.4](#).

Information and information barriers play a crucial role in related practices. For example, in a Chinese empirical study that I will elaborate further on in [Section 2.6](#), researchers conducted a quantitative analysis of 661 samples to explore potential HE participants' expectations regarding the economic returns of HE (Liu & Qi, 2016). Beyond the discussion of the relationship between economic return expectations and HE participation that I address in [Section 2.6](#), this study also revealed gaps in economic expectations within the same administrative province (which means the uniformity of regional policies and educational systems), specifically, these differences appeared between urban and rural respondents. The underlying cause of these disparities was the variance in access to information among potential participants. This indicates that differences in information reception among individuals regarding objectively existing information can lead to perceptual biases about HE participation, thus influencing their decision-making behaviour.

Finally, participation represented by (G) is not the end of the model on the topic of participation in adult education but feeds back into the internal factors represented by individual attitudes and evaluation mentioned earlier. In other words, if the individual makes a decision to participate the education, this behaviour will translate into being part of the next decision-making process. A positive participation experience makes the individual more likely to act positively in the next participation decision and vice versa. In practice, this is reflected in the correlation between an individual's decision-making behaviour and the

individual's educational experience. This allows for a feedback-like mechanism in the COR Model and allows for a cycle of educational experience -decision-making - participation.

Blair *et al.* (2010) leveraged Cross's COR Model to construct a threshold-of-induction model, shedding light on the cognitive identity transformation in the context of adult learners entering HE programmes in the United Kingdom. This model, tailored to serve adult HE students, distilled four fundamental perspectives encapsulated within the COR framework to aid in their model construction. Firstly, they acknowledged the influence of socio-economic factors on adult education participation, aligning with COR's emphasis on societal influences. Secondly, they recognized that external barriers could impede adult education participation decision-making, echoing COR's consideration of external obstacles. Moreover, Blair *et al.* (2010) highlighted the significance of individuals' self-evaluation and self-cognition, acknowledging that low self-esteem or negative self-perception might hinder educational participation decisions, a viewpoint consistent with COR's emphasis on individual perceptions. Lastly, they underscored the influential role of positive educational expectations, suggesting that individuals' optimistic views on educational prospects could outweigh external obstacles. It's noteworthy that while Blair *et al.* (2010) drew inspiration from the COR Model, they did not directly apply its specific content. Instead, they developed their own theoretical framework by extracting insights from COR. This approach stems from the differing core focuses of their research from Cross's. While Cross's work primarily addressed the decision-making process preceding educational participation, Blair *et al.* (2010) delved into the subsequent self-identity recognition process following adult educational engagement.

In my research project, while I align with the general direction of the COR Model, I also did not directly utilize the original model. As I mentioned earlier, I believe that achieving a comprehensive understanding of adult HE participation during the epidemic requires the integration and collaboration of multiple theoretical models.

Both Cross's COR Model and the forthcoming discussion on barriers in [Section 2.3.2](#) offer valuable perspectives for constructing the model and identifying potential influencing factors. The COR Model can critically support my research from the following perspectives.

Firstly, the COR Model underscores the significance of individual cognition in the decision-making process of educational participation. This encompasses both self-evaluation (a) and the perception of education (b). Additionally, past educational experiences (G) shape and influence this internal cognition and evaluation. Secondly, the COR Model acknowledges the impact of demand on decision-making, particularly through individuals' expectations (C) of educational outcomes. This reflects the individual's desire to achieve certain goals through education. Thirdly, external factors, such as life transitions (D), can introduce demands for educational participation. These transitions bring about changes in individuals' lives, prompting the need for education. Fourthly, barriers to educational participation decision-making (E) is recognized within the COR Model. This is further explored in the subsequent [Section 2.3.2](#). Lastly, the COR Model highlights the importance of external factors, represented by information (F), which may influence individual decision-making processes. These external factors should be considered alongside internal motivations and obstacles.

2.3.2 Classifying the potential barriers with the theoretical framework of Cross.

On the basis of the COR Model, especially for the item of 'barriers', Cross (1981) provides a further classification framework. While the concept of barriers to adult education participation and the idea of thinking about educational participation from the perspective of barriers has been explored by researchers since the 1960s (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013), Cross (1981) built upon this foundation and the COR Model to provide a widely recognized classification framework for these barriers. Her interpretation and classification of barriers have been widely applied and developed in the subsequent empirical research on adult education

participation, especially when discussing this topic from the perspective of negative factors. Therefore, similar to the previous writing logic, I would briefly summarize Cross's understanding of barriers before discussing relevant empirical research cases.

Firstly, the structure of Cross's theoretical framework is based on an individual perspective. Cross (1981) proposes to categorise the barriers that may influence and block potential participants' decision-making into three main types: institutional, situational and dispositional barriers. Generally, institutional barriers are resistance stemming from educational institutions, workplaces, and relevant policies. For instance, barriers to participation may arise when institutions fail to offer suitable timetables for potential participants or policies impose restrictions on organizing. This type of barrier is also very common in other theoretical frameworks and is generally considered to be a typical manifestation of external influences. For example, in Rubenson and Desjardins' study (2009) on barriers to adult education participation and welfare state regimes, they used structural barriers to describe a similar classification to the institutional barriers of Cross, constituting the opposite concept of individual barriers.

Meanwhile, situational barriers are also a type of barrier that comes from the outside. It refers to the barriers to participation that come from the life situation in which the individual is located, such as family relationships and responsibilities. Situational barriers can be seen as a tier between institutional barriers and dispositional barriers, for situational barriers appear closer to the individual's own social ecosystem than institutional barriers.

Finally, dispositional barriers refer to barriers primarily rooted in internal factors such as attitudes and self-perceptions of potential participants. This is similar in principle to self-determination theory as well as the capability approach (discussed in [Section 2.4](#)). In other words, the key to removing the dispositional barriers is whether the individual believes (s)he wants and can participate in

education.

Cross's categorisation of barriers not only provided the project with a perspective on barriers to participation in adult education but also a way of categorising influences into institutional, situational and individual levels. Similar ideas would guide the research design of this project in constant comparison with other theoretical constructs. Similar ideas would guide the research design of this project in constant comparison with other theoretical constructs. However, it is important to note that not all studies have found support for the three-category barrier structure. For instance, Kalenda *et al.* (2020) conducted a study in the Czech Republic that did not identify this specific categorization in their data, suggesting that barrier structures may vary across different contexts or populations. Nevertheless, Kalenda *et al.* (2020) also focused their research on identifying barriers to educational participation, albeit with different findings. This empirical study will be further elaborated upon in the following discussion.

Cross's classification of barriers is not the end point of analysing adult education participation behaviour from the perspective of negative factors. In the follow-up study, some scholars also put forward a further understanding of the classification of barriers. For example, Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) extended their subsequent research into barriers to participation in adult education to include another barrier type which is called information and liquidity barriers. This type is used to refer to barriers to participation in terms of information observability, financial flows associated with participation costs, and individual attitudes towards participation cost inputs. Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) argued that information and liquidity barriers can constitute both an individual barrier factor, like dispositional barriers, and a structural barrier, like situational and institutional barriers.

Cross's categorisation of barriers to participation in adult education can help to assist the empirical research on adult education topics during the epidemic,

especially given that the particular social context of the epidemic may cause greater changes to the ecological position of individuals at all levels in which they live. For example, there is research focused on the nonformal adult education participation motivations and barriers, with specific attention to the inequality issue, in the Czech Republic during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kalenda *et al.*, 2023). Through the systematic classification of barriers to adult education participation during the epidemic, Cross's framework supports Kalenda *et al.* in comprehending the connection between nonformal education participation and educational equity amidst the epidemic, shedding light on potential sources of influencing factors. It was suggested that the array of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic at the national policy level, such as the closure of schools, could result in increased family responsibilities for groups of parents. Consequently, this situation could amplify the situational barriers to parents' participation in education. This, in turn, may have a greater negative impact on female groups who are affected by traditional ways of distributing household responsibilities. At the same time, distance learning channels provided by institutions in response to offline school service closures may, in turn, expose groups with low levels of education to greater barriers to participation, with a similar pattern occurring among older groups of potential participants.

Another instance is the study conducted by Gao *et al.* (2022), as mentioned previously, investigating adult education in Singapore. They explored lifelong learning participation behaviour focusing on both motivation and barriers. Employing Cross's barrier analysis framework, Gao *et al.* (2022) integrated Cross's work into the barrier domain, alongside the driver domain and the amotivation domain from SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and socioemotional selectivity theory, forming the framework for their research on lifelong learning. This illustrates that Cross's barriers analysis can be adapted alongside other theories to construct a more comprehensive exploration framework for educational participation-related topics. Notably, Gao *et al.* (2022) discovered that institutional barriers had a significant influence in their sample from Singapore's construction industry (n=90),

whereas the negative influence of situational and dispositional barriers on educational participation behaviour was less pronounced. The researchers acknowledged in their article that their findings, particularly regarding institutional barriers being the most significant, diverged from many education-related studies where situational and dispositional barriers were deemed more influential. Thus, it is crucial to understand that while Cross's barrier classification can aid research on adult education participation, the role of barriers may vary depending on the research context and sample characteristics.

Similar to AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992, in [Section 2.2.1](#)) and EPS (Boshier, 1971; 1977, in [Section 2.2.2](#)) mentioned above, Cross's theoretical framework has also been developed into a more specific tool for educational research practice. A prime example of this is the construction of the Deterrents to Participation Scale (DPS). The model was constructed by Scanlan and Darkenwald (1984) based on questionnaires from physical therapists, medical technologists, and respiratory therapists in New Jersey (n=479). Scanlan and Darkenwald (1984) extracted six correlates from the information they provided, which are 1) disengagement, 2) lack of quality, 3) family constraints, 4) cost, 5) lack of benefit, and 6) work constraints. All but the sixth factor showed stronger effectiveness in predicting educational engagement behaviour (compared with socio-demographic variables). These six factors represent a detailed elaboration derived from Cross's classification. Disengagement aligns with dispositional barriers. Situational barriers are further subdivided into work-related scenarios, family-related scenarios, and financial costs. Institutional obstacles are delineated based on project quality and its alignment with demand satisfaction. This study significantly expands upon Cross's barrier framework and its application in subsequent empirical research.

However, also as Scanlan and Darkenwald (1984) suggested, the validity of the DPS for a wider population still needs to be validated due to the fact that the target population used in the construction of the model was limited to a selection of

health-related positions. Then, based on the initial discussion of the limitations of the DPS model, Darkenwald and Valentine (1985) conducted a follow-up study. After collecting data from a random sample of 215 households in New Jersey, the six factors of the optimised DPS model are 1) lack of confidence, 2) lack of course relevance, 3) time constraints, 4) low personal priority, 5) cost, and 6) personal problem. Relative to the initial model construction, the new DPS model broadens the sample range further, resulting in more generalised conclusions. With a shift in the study's target population, there have been adjustments to the content of the model. Some changes are relatively minor, such as the transition from the previous concept of disengagement to the new concept of lack of confidence. Researchers argued that while both concepts logically convey the diminished importance of education from a personality perspective, the latter is deemed more suitable for summarizing respondents' states in this type of research within the new edition. Other changes involve complete disassembly and reorganization, as seen in the breakdown and restructuring of family and work-related hindrances into categories like low personal priority, time constraints, and personal issues based on varying manifestations.

The changes between the two versions of DPS diverge from those observed in AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992) or EPS (Boshier, 1971; 1977), as AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992) and EPS (Boshier, 1971; 1977) evolve under the premise of the previous basic versions. The two versions present distinct approaches to barrier classification analysis. The former places emphasis on identifying the sources of barriers, such as individuals, families, jobs, institutions, or financial constraints. Conversely, the latter examines barriers based on their manifestations. For instance, an individual may face a time constraint, with reasons stemming from family, work, personal life, or attitude tendencies.

Whether it is the structure of Corss's barrier classification, or DPS and its extended model for barrier analysis, their effectiveness has also been confirmed in subsequent empirical studies. For example, Van Nieuwenhove and De Wever (2022)

investigated the educational participation needs and barriers of adults with different levels of education in a sample of 20,593 participants from 15 European countries, using data from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). The research applied Cross's three classifications of barriers to education, along with the subsequent inclusion of a new category of information barriers (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013), to guide the study. On the point of barriers to participation, the study found that different educational groups, as well as groups with the same level of education but who actually did (not) participate, differed in the presentation of reported barriers. For example, the most common barriers reported by those with higher levels of education who did not participate were job-related, such as lack of time due to work.

However, it is also in this research that, Van Nieuwenhove and De Wever (2022) found the most frequently reported barrier by less educated, but not engaged participants was 'others.' As the study was based on data from the PIAAC, the researchers were unable to further identify and examine the specific classification of barriers that 'others' could stand in for. The inclusion of Cross's three classifications and information barriers in data collection suggests that what individuals perceive as 'others' likely does not fit into any of the aforementioned categories. This implies that Cross's obstacle classification system may still be incomplete.

In addition to the possible limitation shown by empirical research, another issue can be the neutral individual may be overlooked in Cross's (1981) theoretical framework. Cross's (1981) framework for categorising disorders is constructed on the premise that there is a natural tendency for individuals to engage in adult education (Broek, *et al.*, 2023). To be more specific, if Cross's (1981) theoretical framework of barriers alone is used to examine how to increase participation in adult education, it is intuitive that the three barriers are lowered for potential participants. In this line of thinking, Broek, *et al.* argued, groups that do not have a natural desire for educational participation are overlooked. In other words,

those who are not interested in adult education do not even think about participating in education, much less talk about the barriers to participation, until they are motivated enough to make a change in their attitudes. This also means that simply applying Cross's classification of barriers to guide practice can be risky. For example, in the case cited in their study, government agencies, when formulating policies, may believe that the issue of education participation can be solved by simply removing the barriers (Broek, *et al.*, 2023).

In fact, many subsequent studies also take unmotivated or lack of demand as a manifestation of barriers and discuss them in parallel with the Cross's system when discussing barriers. For example, in a study on adult learning and training published by Desjardins in 2017, he classified individuals into four types in terms of the issue of adult education: no demand group, unmet demand group, partly met demand group, and met demand group. Under this situation, the tendencies of the potential participants are transformed into different demands for education, and the no-interest individuals are discussed as a separate group of the population.

Similar arguments have also been suggested by Vaculíková *et al.* (2023). Their research is a reassessment of Cross's theory of categorisation of barriers based on participation in non-formal education programmes in four countries. Whilst it is possible that again due to the geographical location of the research sample, there may be a lack of generalisability of the findings, this study suggests that it is dispositional barriers that are the main barriers to participation in non-formal education amongst the European adult population, encompassing both worries and needs. The lack of perceived educational need represented by the latter is the key to solving the problem of educational participation amongst the unneeded/neutral population. In other words, Vaculíková *et al.* (2023) did not regard lack-of-need population as a separate group like the research of Desjardins (2017) but regarded lack-of-need as a manifestation of dispositional barriers in the research.

While these studies underscore the significance of addressing individuals with no or low demand in the examination of adult education participation behaviour, from the standpoint of Cross's theory itself, the concept of lack of demand remains inadequately supported theoretically. In response to this limitation, researchers such as Broek *et al.* adopted the perspective of the capability approach to synthesise 109 reviews of the literature and revisit the barriers and motivations to educational participation by using the question of whether or not one is aware of their freedom and ability to participate in education. This leads to an interpretation of the individual's decision to participate within a capability approach and transformation learning theory perspective.

2.4 The Capability Approach perspective and Mezirow's Transformation Learning Theory: Theoretical supports of lack-of-need populations.

As mentioned earlier, groups with neutral attitudes can be overlooked if the focus is solely on motivation and barriers from various sources. It is crucial to notice that many individuals do not have a sense of participation, especially in the absence of external stimuli. They may not even think about the topic of adult education. Therefore, it is not enough to only discuss the factors influencing participation in adult education, like motivation and barriers. The core focus of [Section 2.4](#) is the transformative progression among individuals' states, from a state of neutrality, developing attitudinal dispositions, and finally to the decision-making process. Therefore, I would first discuss adult education participation from a capability approach perspective and then move on to the perspective arising from the framework of transformational learning theory. Although these two theoretical frameworks are two independent theoretical frameworks with great differences, both of them provide theoretical support for participation in adult education when potential participants are regarded as lacking needs and interests.

2.4.1 Adult education participation under the framework of Capability Approach.

The construction of the capability approach was not aimed at education at first. Similar to the theoretical framework of human capital, which will be discussed in [Section 2.6](#), the capability approach initially originated from research in the field of economics. Its core concepts, functionings and capabilities, were first introduced by the economist Amartya Sen in his book *The standard of living* (1987) and developed in depth in his subsequent work *Development as freedom* (1999/2001). Simultaneously, through collaboration with philosopher Martha Nussbaum, a relatively comprehensive methodology of capabilities emerged and can be applied to deconstruct various topics. Thus, initially, I would introduce two fundamental concepts of the capability approach within the topic of adult education participation, while also considering the interplay between institutional and individual perspectives on justice as discussed by Boyadjieva and Ilieva (2017; 2018). Their work bridges the gap between the capability approach and adult education, emphasizing both the institutional structures and individual capabilities.

Functionings and capabilities are two foundational concepts within the framework of the capability approach (Sen, 1999/2001; Nussbaum, 2011). Functionings refer to the various states of 'being and doing' that a person can achieve, such as being well-nourished, being educated, or participating in community activities. Capabilities, on the other hand, represent the real opportunities or freedoms that individuals have to achieve these functionings. Functionings can be either material, such as the money used to pay for tuition, or immaterial, such as the willingness and action of an individual to decide to participate in education. Capabilities, on the other hand, represent the scope and right that individuals have to make choices, or in other words, potential but not necessarily realised functionings. For example, to illustrate the concept of capabilities in this context, capabilities can be savings that can be used to pay for tuition, or the freedom to consider whether

or not to participate in adult education.

In terms of the topic of adult education participation, the two key concepts of capability approach show two states of potential participants. Some individuals have the capabilities to participate in adult education, while others have the functionings to participate. However, the two groups are not totally overlapped. As a result, participation in adult education in fact involves two key steps under the theoretical framework of the Capability Approach (Sen, 1987; 1999/2001). First, whether the individual has capabilities related to educational participation, or whether the individual is endowed with objective conditions that enable him or her to participate freely. Secondly, whether the individual is able to realise that (s)he has such capabilities, and to transform the ability to participate into an actual behaviour of participation.

The first point overlaps considerably with Cross's (1981) discussion on barriers - the removal of barriers to participation provides a guarantee of freedom of participation and thus, ensures that the individual has relevant capabilities. In other words, addressing situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers provides a guarantee of freedom of participation, thus aligning with Sen's concept of capability enhancement. Therefore, I would not go further on this point in this section. Simultaneously, the second point highlights a commonly overlooked challenge: how to facilitate adult education opportunities for individuals who are unaware of their potential or the freedom to engage in such programmes, or who simply lack the demand for adult education. Continuing with the hypothetical individual, Alex: there may be certain discrepancies between Alex's perceptions of participating in adult education and the actual circumstances. For instance, Alex might believe that they lack the ability to successfully complete the programme, or that their irregular work schedule prevents them from finding an educational programme that fits Alex's needs. However, the reality is that Alex's capabilities are entirely sufficient, but only suffering from a lack of confidence. Additionally, relevant educational institutions already offer more flexible

scheduling options, which Alex is unaware of. This misalignment between perception and reality, and the subsequent decision not to participate in adult education, exemplifies the second situation discussed. Importantly, this shift (from the second situation to the first) implies that individuals who initially lacked interest or awareness in adult education may come to realize their capabilities at a certain juncture, transforming this potential into functionings. Understanding the dynamics of this transformation is vital for empirical research, as it emphasises the triggers that prompt them to engage in adult education initiatives in terms of the lack-of-need population.

In the previously mentioned study by Broek *et al.* (2023), they synthesised and analysed 109 relevant literature and ultimately categorised the influencing factors (referred to in the text as conversion factors) that play a role in the transition from capabilities to functionings into the following: institutional conversion factors, social conversion factors, familial conversion factors, economic conversion factors, cultural conversion factors, political conversion factors, personal conversion factors, and employment conversion factors. These factors can be broadly divided into three levels, which bear a notable similarity to Cross's (1981) classification of barriers to adult education participation. Firstly, it is the most external factors from social culture, government and relevant institutions (institutional, cultural, and political conversion factors). Then, there are the factors that exist in the environment between the complete outside world and individuals (social, familial, economic, and employment conversion factors). The last and most instinctive level is personal perception (personal conversion factors), which is highly subjective and diverse. By drawing this comparison, it becomes evident that Broek *et al.*'s (2023) categorization not only complements but also expands upon Cross's (1981) framework by providing a more nuanced understanding of the various levels of factors influencing educational transitions.

These factors, it is important to note that although in many cases they act in a similar role to motivations, they are not mere driving forces, but also carry the

role of activating needs. For example, imagine Alex is unemployed and uncertain about pursuing further education. An unemployment assistance agency could step in, not only by encouraging Alex to join education and training programmes but also by helping Alex realize that Alex has both the right and the capability to participate. This agency's role is not just about providing a push towards participation. It's about awakening a recognition in Alex that education and training are viable and valuable options for the future.

Neither the Capability Approach (Sen, 1987; 1999/2001) discussed here, nor the Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) and will be further discussed in [Section 2.4.2](#)) has given clear and specific items as theoretical support on the topic of adult education participation like, for instance, Houle (1961) did. Instead, they provide possible explanatory theoretical support to explain how concrete influencing factors work in the decision-making process and how those factors interact with each other. A very specific example can be found in the research of Roosmaa and Saar (2017). They investigated the barriers in formal and non-formal education based on the data of Adult Education Survey 2007, including 24 European nations. In this study, the researchers' framework for participation barriers is mainly based on Cross's barriers classification framework discussed earlier (in [Section 2.3.2](#)). To illustrate this more concretely, consider how the Capability Approach (Sen, 1987; 1999/2001) can deepen the understanding of data within the framework provided by Cross (1981) in the research of Roosmaa and Saar's (2017). For example, imagine Alex, who like many participants in Roosmaa and Saar's (2017) study, believes that further education or training is unnecessary because their current job does not require it. Viewed through the lens of the Capability Approach (Sen, 1987; 1999/2001), this belief uncovers the hidden barriers faced by many potential participants, suggesting that for individuals like Alex, the motivation for adult education is often closely linked to their work needs. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the value and significance of adult education extend beyond immediate job requirements. This perception of irrelevance itself represents a dispositional barrier, limiting Alex's willingness to

engage in further education. Furthermore, institutional barriers, such as rigid educational structures or inflexible schedules, can further constrain Alex's capabilities at a structural level, thereby impeding the ability to pursue educational opportunities effectively.

From the perspective of the Capability Approach (Sen, 1987; 1999/2001), the challenge of adult education participation during the epidemic also involves the scope of capabilities and its functionings, as well as the transition between the two. Firstly, an individual's capability may be impacted by the unique social context of the epidemic. This could manifest as structural barriers, such as the suspension of offline programmes, or unmet basic needs stemming from the survival crisis induced by unemployment. The Capability Approach's (Sen, 1987; 1999/2001) focus on capabilities aids in elucidating this aspect. It emphasises that fulfilling functional goals necessitates the presence of competence as a prerequisite. Secondly, individuals need to recognize their freedom and capability to engage in education. By identifying specific sources of demand, such as work, knowledge, or emotional value, they can progress from mere ability to functional realization.

In summary, while the previously discussed theories such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), Houle's Typology (1961), SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and Cross's COR Model focus on factors that directly promote or hinder educational participation, the Capability Approach (Sen, 1987; 1999/2001) offers a fundamentally different perspective on adult education participation. This approach addresses a more foundational question, of how to enable them to view education as a viable option. The Capability Approach (Sen, 1987; 1999/2001) is particularly valuable in understanding the situation of populations not currently interested in adult education participation, as it examines the underlying conditions and freedoms that make educational choices possible. By shifting the focus from immediate motivators or barriers to the broader context of individual capabilities and freedoms, the Capability Approach (Sen, 1987; 1999/2001) complements and

extends the insights gained from other theoretical frameworks, providing a more comprehensive understanding of educational decision-making processes.

While the above discussion primarily focuses on adult education participation and its influencing factors, it's important to note that the Capability Approach (Sen, 1987; 1999/2001) has a broader scope in educational research. The theory is more widely recognized for its contributions to discussions on educational equity and social justice, which are closely intertwined with the focus of this study. Boyadjieva and Ilieva (2017; 2018; 2021) have significantly contributed to this understanding by applying the Capability Approach (Sen, 1987; 1999/2001) to adult education participation from a social justice perspective. Building on this foundation, it's crucial to explore the interplay between capabilities, functionings, educational participation opportunities, and fairness in adult education. Especially, there is a discussion about institution-centred justice and human-centred justice. While both ideas offer valuable insights, they present different challenges and opportunities for understanding adult education participation, which are closely related to my research. The institution-centred view provides a clear framework for policy development and institutional reform but may overlook individual differences in converting opportunities into actual participation. The human-centred view, on the other hand, captures these individual nuances but can be more challenging to operationalize in policy and practice.

In exploring the factors influencing adult HE participation, I considered both institution-centred and human-centred perspectives. Although both perspectives focus on issues of fairness, they represent different viewpoints, which are crucial for a comprehensive investigation of the influencing factors. The institution-centred perspective on justice, derived from Rawls' theory (1971), primarily concerns how social institutions and structures shape the distribution of educational opportunities. In the context of adult HE, this perspective prompts an examination of institutional factors such as educational policies, resource allocation, and admission criteria (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013). For instance, in

Stage A of my research, I analysed relevant policies implemented during the pandemic, and in Stage B, I discussed with respondents how these institutional regulations impacted their decision-making. This perspective helps uncover systemic barriers that might otherwise be overlooked, thereby providing critical insights for policy formulation.

On the other hand, the human-centred perspective on equity, based on Sen's Capability Approach (1999/2001), emphasizes individuals' actual abilities to convert educational opportunities into valuable outcomes. This perspective leads me to focus on personal-level factors, such as prior educational experiences, living conditions, and employment situations (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009). From this viewpoint, I discovered that even within seemingly equitable systems, individuals' actual capacities to participate, particularly the conversion of opportunities into capabilities, can vary significantly. This aspect is more prominently reflected in Stages B and C of my thesis.

2.4.2 Adult education participation under the framework of Transformative Learning Theory

Another theoretical framework that can help the understanding of this kind of conversion is Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (TLT). One of the basic structures of TLT is the idea that individuals have their meaning structures (Mezirow, 1991), which makes individuals believe what the world should look like, and what (s)he should respond to the external environment or others. Based on this foundation, TLT suggests that adult learning behaviour is a process of reflection and transformation. Through exposure to external stimuli, adults begin to reflect on the difference between external stimulus and their own meaning structures, and then experience new knowledge and experience. Finally, the process of learning is complete when the new knowledge and experience are internalised as part of individuals' meaning structures. Therefore, the process of learning is precisely the transformation of meaning structures from the

perspective of TLT (Imei, 1998).

It is not difficult to find on the topic of adult education participation, TLT also focuses on people who are not interested in education. This has also been applied and verified in relevant empirical studies, for example, the longitudinal study of 208 adult learners of English as a second language by King (2000) found that TLT can effectively help adults who were initially uninterested in education to re-examine their learning concepts. TLT framework emphasizes the impact of external stimuli on an individual's existing meaning structures, potentially triggering critical reflection. This approach encompasses all potential adult education participants, suggesting that regardless of initial interest, sufficiently strong external factors can initiate learning through critical reflection.

TLT has undergone continuous validation and refinement in subsequent research. Nohl (2015) further developed the TLT framework by proposing a typology of five phases, emphasizing the spontaneous nature of transformative learning initiation and redefining the roles of crisis, dilemmas, and reflection. Moreover, Hoggan (2016) proposed a metatheory of transformative learning, synthesizing various conceptualizations and offering a more comprehensive framework for understanding the transformative process in adult education. However, as Taylor (2007) noted in his critical review of empirical research on Transformative Learning Theory from 1999 to 2005, rather than merely validating TLT's ability to identify transformative experiences in various contexts, more studies concentrate on the complex role of relationships and the nature of perspective transformation.

Nevertheless, there are researchers who applied TLT as a lens of observation and validated it in different contexts in empirical studies related to educational participation. Except for King's work (2000) mentioned above, for example, Marks *et al.* (2003) explored the topic of the working class's gender norms in relation to their willingness to attempt HE based on a TLT perspective. As a result, the TLT perspective did help the researcher to discover and explain the diversified

willingness to participate. For example, it was found that for a small number of women, a traumatic life-changing event, represented by divorce, acted as a driving force to stimulate participation. Another example is that the idea of being a good parent motivates individuals to learn, but the source of stimulation is different for the two gender groups. Men are more inclined to enhance their income, which motivates learning behaviours, while women are also motivated by the idea of being a positive role model in their community. This has also been applied and verified in relevant empirical studies. For example, the longitudinal study of 208 adult learners of English as a second language by King (2000) found that TLT can effectively help adults who were initially sceptical about education to re-examine their learning concepts. This has also been applied and verified in relevant empirical studies. For example, the longitudinal study of 208 adult learners of English as a second language by King (2000) found that TLT can effectively help adults who were initially sceptical about education to re-examine their learning concepts. This has also been applied and verified in relevant empirical studies. For example, the longitudinal study of 208 adult learners of English as a second language by King (2000) found that TLT can effectively help adults who were initially sceptical about education to re-examine their learning concepts. How TLT does not provide concrete categories or items that may be influencing factors of adult education participation but rather provides an open approach to help subsequent researchers understand the significance of educational participation behaviours from a cognitive and transformational perspective.

This implies that TLT focuses more on elucidating the process of influencing factors, rather than the factors themselves when observing and explaining decision-making behaviour in adult education. TLT thus can support the integration of theoretical frameworks discussing specific influencing factors with empirical research findings. For instance, consider Houle's Typology (1961) of learning orientation mentioned in [Section 2.1.2](#), which includes knowledge, goals, and activities as potential influencing factors in educational behaviour. Taking the individual's desire for

knowledge drives decision-making as the case. TLT offers a theoretical explanation that prospective participants encounter phenomena or viewpoints divergent from their existing cognition, prompting reflection. Eventually, to grasp new knowledge or concepts, they engage in knowledge-oriented learning by critically synthesizing old and new meaning structures.

It is crucial to note that not all transformative learning behaviours result in changes to meaning structures. An illustrative example comes from Eddy's (2001) research, which investigated the meaning of HE from the perspective of an elder named Charlotte. This study was conducted in the United States, focusing on the experiences of older adults returning to HE. Through in-depth interviews, the researcher sought to understand the role of HE at different life stages and the participant's evolving perceptions of HE. The research applied four perspectives to analyse the topic, they are Houle's three typology of education participation, the subject of andragogy, TLT, and the perspective of constructivism. In examining the life trajectories of participants, TLT primarily underpins two key aspects via the study from Eddy (2001). Firstly, it elucidates how significant life events or identity shifts (such as transitioning from wife to widow) prompt individuals to reevaluate their existing meaning structures, echoing the core of TLT. Secondly, the behaviour of education participation and assessing the learning experiences embodies reflective thinking that constituted part of the transformative learning process, even though the participant indicated that engaging in the learning experience failed to influence her old perception.

However, when reviewing TLT from a holistic perspective, it can be seen that Mezirow mainly analyses learning from the perspective of the individual. Although it deals with the interaction between the individual and the environment, the external factors often involved in this issue recently, such as policy, tuition fees, curriculum content, and the labour market, have not emerged explicitly, *let alone* any further exploration of how these factors affect educational participation. At the same time, the TLT model is criticised for lacking clear parameters (Hoggan,

2016). This may leave TLT in a vague psychological theoretical framework with much less practicality. In terms of this point, Hoggan (2016) suggests a model based on the TLT model and introduces six dimensions of the transformation, including worldview, self, epistemology, ontology, behaviour, and capacity. Nonetheless, it still does not depart from the TLT model of thinking based on individual psychology. Especially in the special social background of the COVID-19 pandemic, many external factors have changed significantly as a less conventional source of stimulation, the TLT approach may provide me with great help in understanding and interpreting the experience shared by the respondents. The COVID-19 pandemic has driven transformative learning by presenting a disorienting dilemma, prompting young adults to reassess their beliefs and assumptions. Health threats and economic pressures led many to pursue further education to adapt to changing job markets. Social isolation encouraged introspection, leading to new educational pursuits for well-being and resilience. The shift to online working highlighted the need for digital education. Overall, the pandemic spurred adults to engage in learning across various domains, enhancing personal and professional development in response to unprecedented challenges. The emergence of these new dilemmas and unprecedented situations may trigger transformative learning behaviours, thereby influencing the decisions of potential adult education participants.

2.5 Durkheim and ‘social facts’: An external force of education participation that acts collectively rather than individually.

The various theoretical frameworks mentioned above basically interpret adult educational participation behaviour from the perspective of the individual, in terms of the individual’s motivations and the obstacles one faces. From this perspective, the nature of adult educational participation is an individual decision-making behaviour. However, the individual perspective is not the only interpretation of this topic. For instance, Rubenson and Desjardins’ Bounded Agency Model (2009) integrates both individual and structural factors, recognizing

the interplay between personal characteristics and societal contexts in shaping education participation decisions. Therefore, in the next few sections, I would shift the perspective from the individual to the group.

The first to discuss is Émile Durkheim's theories and the relevance of his theories to the topic of adult education participation. Similar to Maslow's theory (1943) and Sen's theory (1987; 1999/2001), Durkheim's theoretical framework does not concentrate on education per se, although it has been widely applied in this sector. Durkheim's theoretical framework addresses a much broader range of topics and fields of sociology, including criminology, social cognition, morality and social facts, and collective consciousness, and could even be considered one of the earliest key theoretical frameworks for the social sciences to disassociate themselves from the natural sciences. This perspective is reflected in many aspects of his work. For instance, Durkheim (1897/1970) introduced the concept of 'social facts', arguing that social phenomena are *sui generis* (unique in their characteristics) and cannot be reduced to biological or psychological explanations. This perspective challenged the prevailing positivist approaches borrowed from natural sciences (Lukes, 1985). Additionally, Durkheim & Lukes (1982) outlined a distinctive methodology for sociology, emphasizing the importance of studying social phenomena objectively, as 'things', while acknowledging their non-material nature. This approach provided a framework for empirical sociological research without merely imitating the methods of the natural sciences (Giddens, 1971). Within Durkheim's extensive theoretical framework in social science, this section focuses on the concept of social fact. This is because Durkheim's theoretical insights help to explain the existence and potential mechanisms of institutional factors, particularly those expressed through culture and social climate. By delving into these aspects, I can better understand how these institutional elements influence individual behaviour and decisions.

Social fact is one of the core concepts of Durkheim's theoretical framework. It refers to the norms, values, institutions, and social structures of social life, which

are generally applicable to individuals in society, coercive to individuals, and independent of individuals (Durkheim 1897/1970). Specifically, the existing and functioning of social facts are not influenced by the birth or death of a single individual, nor be subject to the will of an individual. At the same time, social facts do not exist in relation to an individual, but rather in relation to the existence of a wide range of social groups. Finally, social facts have a coercive force on the individuals they affect, which means individuals who try to escape from social facts feel resistance.

Here, I once again use the hypothetical participant 'Alex' as a concrete example. For instance, when Alex decides whether to pursue further education after entering the workforce, Alex may experience the pressure of social expectations related to adult education participation, regardless of Alex's personal inclinations. This pressure could stem from the prevalence of the concept of lifelong learning within a particular region or cultural context, or from a collective preference within Alex's industry or position for continually seeking higher educational achievements. However, regardless of the specific origin, these group preferences related to adult education participation exist independently of Alex's individual beliefs or actions. This societal constraint towards lifelong learning affects the entire social group, not just the individual. If Alex chooses not to pursue further education, Alex may face various forms of social pressure or adverse conditions. Such compulsion might manifest as reduced career opportunities, social criticism for being 'left behind,' or even an internal sense of inadequacy. Consequently, even if Alex personally disagrees with the necessity of lifelong learning, Alex cannot simply opt out without affecting Alex's life and career prospects.

However, this Durkheimian view of social facts has been critiqued by several scholars. Latour (2005) argues that this conception of social facts as external and coercive forces oversimplifies the complex, negotiated nature of social reality. He proposes instead an actor-network theory that emphasizes the role of both human and non-human actors in constructing social phenomena. Similarly, Giddens (1984)

challenges the notion of social facts as purely external constraints through his theory of structuration, which posits a dynamic interplay between individual agency and social structures. Furthermore, Bourdieu in his subsequent theoretical framework (translated by Nice, 1977), also refines the concept of social facts by introduces the concept of habitus, suggesting that social norms and practices are internalized and reproduced by individuals, rather than existing solely as external forces.

It is important to mention that the choice of Durkheim's theory of social facts over Giddens' structuration theory is primarily driven by the focus and context of my research. While both theories offer valuable insights, Durkheim's emphasis on the external and coercive nature of social facts (Durkheim, 1970; 1982) aligns better with the institutional and structural barriers to adult education participation. As Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) noted, these barriers often operate at the societal level, transcending individual institutions. This perspective is crucial for investigating how external factors, such as social norms and expectations, shape educational choices and opportunities, especially during the rapid social changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Durkheim's perspective, which heavily emphasizes external factors, has faced criticism. In contrast, Giddens' structuration theory highlights the duality of structure, integrating both internal (agency) and external (structure) factors. This makes Giddens' theory more holistic, aligning it closely with a comprehensive framework, like Cross's COR Model (1981), which considers multiple factors. Based on this understanding, Durkheim's theoretical framework is more aligned with the needs of my research. It allows me to directly explore how external factors might impact young adults' participation in full-time HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. Conversely, Giddens' structuration theory, although comprehensive, is not specifically tailored to the topic of adult education participation. Therefore, while Giddens' theory is referenced in relevant discussions, it does not constitute a separate section in the literature review.

One's decision to participate in adult education may be not an individual's intention, but something external and objective when considering participation in adult education within the framework of Durkheim's theory. In a study led by Tadesse *et al.* (2022) examining the economic circumstances and self-determined learning motivation of Chinese higher vocational college students, a rather radical perspective is presented to characterize the present state of higher vocational education in China. Based on their comprehensive literature review, Tadesse *et al.* (2022) concluded that within the societal context, vocational education in China is commonly perceived as an option for students with comparatively lower personal abilities, weaker academic performance, or more constrained economic resources. Essentially, Chinese graduates from secondary education often lean toward enrolling in general HE when their economic conditions and personal capabilities permit, reflecting the prevailing social trend where not participating in general HE is considered as a sign of poor personal capability. This means that potential participants may be influenced in their decision-making by the presence of the traditional cultural ideology of valuing academics, and thus contributes in part to the preference for academic qualifications, especially HE qualifications, in Chinese cultural society.

Similar to the research logic of the aforementioned example, Durkheim's theoretical framework concerning social facts furnishes theoretical underpinnings and conceptual insights regarding the potential motivations or barriers of collective influencing factors in shaping decision-making behaviour towards adult education participation in my research. On one hand, it offers theoretical support for the external and collective influencing factors epitomized by culture and social ambience. This implies that when scrutinizing decision-making regarding adult HE in China amidst the epidemic, it becomes imperative to consider the alterations and repercussions of the influencing factors embodied by culture and social ambience during this period. Concurrently, it also provides a theoretical rationale for the influence of these factors on the decision-making process, thus augmenting the comprehensiveness of my research framework.

For example, if the situational barriers mentioned in [Section 2.3.2](#) are revisited at the collective level, especially the situation where some women may suffer greater situational barriers from their family responsibilities, it can also be interpreted as a manifestation of the traditional patriarchal social ideology as a social fact that still exists today. Another example can be, even leaving aside the possible attraction of education itself, which is culturally shaped by a preference for academic achievement, is it possible that in an environment where the majority of the population is committed to learning, the decision to participate in education may not come from the culture of identity itself, but rather from the pressure of the social atmosphere. This may also imply that decisions are made to satisfy social needs due to a herd mentality or a collective consciousness.

Concurrently, Durkheim's concept of social facts provides a theoretical rationale for understanding the influence of societal factors on individual decision-making processes. However, empirical research has both supported and challenged this perspective in the context of educational choices.

For instance, Rubenson and Desjardins' (2009) cross-national study of adult education participation found that while societal structures play a significant role, individual agency cannot be overlooked. Their 'bounded agency model' suggests that individuals actively negotiate with social constraints, rather than being entirely determined by them. In the Chinese context, Liu (2018) examined the factors influencing the decision-making process of 71 undergraduates from different social backgrounds and from different types of universities. By extending Boudon's positional theory (1974), the study found that family characteristics as the influencing factor played crucial roles in the decision-making of individuals' HE participation strategies. This suggests a more nuanced interaction between social facts and individual agency in the Chinese HE landscape.

These empirical studies suggest that while Durkheim's concept of social facts remains valuable, a more comprehensive framework is needed to fully understand

adult participation in education. By incorporating these empirical insights, my research offered a more nuanced analysis of the factors influencing educational decision-making in the Chinese context.

2.6 Human Capital Theory: Regarding education as an investigation and accumulation of capital.

In addition to discussing human behavioural motivations from an individual or psychological perspective, some scholars have also attempted to discuss the drivers of behavioural involvement in adult education on a larger, more social level and from an economic perspective. The theoretical framework represented in this is human capital theory. In this section, I will focus on two of these scholars respectively, they are Gary Becker's theoretical framework (in [Section 2.6.1](#)) and Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework (in [Section 2.6.2](#)).

Becker's human capital theory provides an economic framework for understanding investment in education, including adult learning (Becker, 1962). His work emphasizes the role of education in increasing productivity and earnings, viewing learning as an investment in oneself (Sweetland, 1996). In contrast, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital offers a sociological perspective, highlighting how educational attainment is influenced by social and cultural factors beyond mere economic considerations (Bourdieu, 1986). These two scholars were chosen for their significant and lasting impact on educational theory and policy. Becker's work has been foundational in shaping economic approaches to education, while Bourdieu's ideas have been crucial in understanding the social reproduction of educational inequalities (Schuller & Field, 1998). Their contrasting yet complementary approaches provide a comprehensive view of the complex drivers behind adult education participation.

Other notable alternatives could have included Coleman's social capital theory (Coleman, 1988), which emphasizes the importance of social relationships in

educational attainment, or Schultz's (Schultz, 1961) pioneering work on human capital, which laid the groundwork for considering education as an investment in future productivity and earnings. However, Becker's human capital theory and Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital were selected due to their more developed and widely applied frameworks, particularly in adult education contexts. The juxtaposition of Becker's economically driven model with Bourdieu's socio-cultural approach supports my research to enable a nuanced examination of both individual economic incentives and broader societal factors influencing adult learning decisions. This combination provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding the complex interplay between economic motivations and social structures in shaping adult education participation.

2.6.1 Gary Becker's theoretical framework: education as economic investigation.

As an economist and sociologist, Gary Becker's (1976) human capital theoretical framework for explaining adult participation in education focuses on the economic dimension. One of his core ideas about human capital is 'Education and training are the most important investments in human capital' (Becker, 1964/1993: 17). In other words, Becker considers human capital as one of many implements or capabilities that can be used for production. Thus, the decision-making process of whether or not an adult wants to engage in educational participation is transformed in Becker's framework of human capital theory into the process of whether or not an individual wants to make an investment in himself or herself. This can also be proved in his work, for his theoretical construction uses a large number of calculations of the earnings, costs, and rates of return, and he interprets the theory based on empirical data in America.

It should be noted that even for the same expression of human capital, different scholars have different understandings and definitions of it, which is particularly reflected in the different understandings of human capital by economists,

represented by Becker, and sociologists, represented by Bourdieu. To further illustrate Becker's (1964/1993) concept of human capital, consider the case of Alex, assuming Alex is deciding whether to invest in further education. According to Becker's framework, Alex's decision can be understood through an economic lens. For instance, Alex might evaluate the potential return on investment of pursuing a higher degree by calculating how it could increase future earnings or improve career prospects. In this context, Alex sees education as a form of human capital that can be accumulated and transformed into economic benefits, such as a higher salary or a more prestigious job position. From Becker's perspective, the driving force behind Alex's decision to pursue further education is primarily economic. Alex might not be motivated by a love of learning or personal fulfilment but by the expectation that this investment in education will yield measurable economic returns in the form of increased income or better job opportunities. This economic approach to understanding human behaviour underscores Becker's (1976) view that even seemingly non-economic actions, like education, can be analysed through their potential economic outcomes. While the perspective I will discuss next is that of Bourdieu, who is also a prominent scholar within the human capital theory framework, his views differ from those of Becker. Within Bourdieu's theoretical framework, human capital is not solely measured by economic capital, but also encompasses cultural and social capital. Although these other forms of capital can be converted into economic capital, they are distinct types of human capital that are fundamentally different from economic capital. Since I will delve into Bourdieu's relevant concepts in greater detail in [Section 2.6.2](#), I will not explore them further here.

However, this application of Becker's theory has been subject to considerable scholarly debate and criticism. Feminist economists, such as Ferber and Nelson (1993), have argued that this perspective overlooks the non-market benefits of education and reinforces gender inequalities. They contend that education has intrinsic value beyond its impact on earnings, including personal fulfilment and civic participation. Moreover, scholars like Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) have

challenged the narrow economic focus of human capital theory in explaining adult education participation. Critics also point out that Becker's theory may not adequately account for changing labour market dynamics. Furthermore, recent research has shown that the benefits of adult education for older adults extend beyond economic returns. For instance, Merriam and Kee (2014) highlight the positive impacts of lifelong learning on older adults' cognitive function, social engagement, and overall well-being, challenging the notion that education is less valuable for this demographic. From another perspective, the previously mentioned study in [Section 2.1](#) on 'cabin fever learning' behaviour during the pandemic further demonstrates that individuals' educational participation should not be simplistically understood as purely economically driven decisions (Grenier, 2021).

These debates highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of adult education that extends beyond Becker's human capital theory. While economic factors are important, a full analysis must also include social, cultural, and personal influences on educational decisions across demographics. Despite its limitations in addressing the complexity of adult education, Becker's theory remains a key framework for understanding economic incentives in education. By examining its temporal limitations, I better appreciated its application and testing for my research.

To be more specific, Becker's economic perspective on HE participation effectively supports the explanation of many phenomena related to the correlation between HE engagement and economic returns. In an empirical study conducted by Liu and Qi (2016) in a specific province (coding as JS, n=661) in China, a quantitative analysis was undertaken to explore potential HE participants' perceptions of the economic returns from such participation. This study yielded several intriguing findings. In addition to the previously mentioned differences in economic return expectations caused by varying living environments (or differences in accessible information), the research uncovered those respondents generally perceived a

positive relationship between HE participation and economic returns. In other words, the majority of respondents believed that the more prestigious and high-quality the HE institution and major, the higher the economic returns, reflecting a positive correlation between the two. However, the study also revealed that over half of the respondents held expectations for economic returns from HE that exceeded the average levels observed in labour market.

This implies that while Becker's perspective suggests that potential participants make educational investments based on estimated economic returns, these estimates are subjective and may not align with actual economic outcomes. In other words, the interpretation of the relationship between economic returns and educational participation from Becker's viewpoint is based on individuals' estimations rather than objective economic realities. The discrepancy between subjective perceptions and objective realities still requires further discussion, incorporating other influencing factors such as the information accessibility mentioned earlier.

At the same time, the framework is based on the social background in which Becker lived, which was around the 1970s. For example, Becker's work *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education* (1964/1993) is an empirical study based on the American society in the 1960s, which means the conclusion he suggested needs to be interpreted with the social background at that time (Weiss, 2015), such as the difference between women's and men's years of work and the family responsibilities they had to take on was more pronounced in those days than it is today. However, in return, it is inappropriate in itself to ask Becker's theory to apply to other specific social contexts. Becker applies an abductive reasoning approach, and this is not only embodied in his theory on human capital but also in the building of his whole theoretical framework (Heckman, 2015). Unlike induction or deduction in the traditional sense, Becker's reasoning approach is neither to explain phenomena through universal premises, nor to construct a theoretical framework for a

particular phenomenon through a sufficient number of observations, but to arrive at a possible explanation based on a combination of theory and fact through the testing of hypotheses. Thus, as I mentioned earlier, Becker's theoretical framework offers a way of thinking about explaining participatory behaviour. Becker's theory of human capital is not an attempt to give a correct answer, but a possible answer supported by his empirical research based on the situation in America in the 1900s.

This also explores one typical limitation of Becker's theoretical framework as discussed in the previous paragraph. Becker's model is based entirely on economics as a measure. For example, while the cost of investing in human capital contains both time and money dimensions, the former is ultimately unified into an economic dimension by the capacity per unit of time. Moreover, the measure of individual capability used in this system is also economic capability (Becker, 1993). Finally, the return on investment in human capital is also measured in terms of capacity as well as earnings. This is very much in line with Becker's position as an economist and is indeed the economic approach he emphasises. However, a purely economic approach may overlook the specificity of the human as an emotional being. In fact, as discussed in previous sections, some participants in adult HE are not motivated, or only motivated by financial factors. Although participation in HE may bring economic returns for individuals more or less, for participants themselves, 'economic returns' may never be the point. This is supported by many of the theoretical frameworks in the previous section, such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) for dignity and self-actualisation and Houle's Typology (1961) of activity-oriented and knowledge-oriented learners. In those cases, participation in learning is not only motivated by financial benefits, or their learning behaviours are difficult to bring economic returns for they may tend to learn something not related to their work. This is supported by relevant empirical studies. In the review from Rüber *et al.* (2018) of 13 empirical studies of different forms of civic engagement as the reward for adult participation in learning, the researchers found a positive correlation between civic engagement and adult

learning. Although the study was not able to provide further evidence of causality, it suggests that civic engagement as a concrete expression, and the non-monetary benefits such as well-being that lie behind it, are some of the likely benefits that orienting educational participation. This proves monetary gains, represented by income and work skills, are not the only factors that drive adult learning.

At the same time, an excessive focus on and emphasis on monetary gains is also risky for research on the topic of motivation to participate in adult education, especially as reflected in policy-related topics. This means that the relevant institutions may regard economic-related factors, such as work and labour market needs, as the only items linked to adult education participation. Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova's (2018) study, based on the data of Adult Education Survey 2007, critiques Becker's human capital theory, favouring the Capability Approach (Sen, 1987; 1999/2001) as a more comprehensive theoretical framework. They argue that Becker's theory overly emphasizes the economic dimension, linking the benefits of education solely to economic gains. Their research indicates that adult education participation is also driven by non-economic factors. By focusing solely on economic factors, the inclusivity and fairness of adult education may be compromised, hindering its development and the promotion of lifelong learning ideals. The research highlights the importance of considering a broader range of motivations. A broader examination of the literature reveals a rich possibility of motivations influencing adult learning participation. Supporting this perspective are studies such as those by Courtney (1992), Cross (1981), and Boeren *et al.* (2010), Rubenson (2011), along with numerous empirical studies previously mentioned that examine adult education participation across various regions and backgrounds. Throughout different sections, I analyse adult education participation from multiple angles. The theoretical frameworks discussed, such as Becker's human capital model in this section, have been critiqued and identified as having limitations through subsequent development, discussion, and validation. However, by integrating these various theoretical debates and supplements, and through my empirical exploration of full-time HE participation among young adults

in China during the COVID-19 pandemic, I aim to contribute to the understanding and development of adult education participation and lifelong learning across different contexts.

It is important to note, however, that Becker's theoretical framework is not entirely independent of the many individual-based theoretical frameworks mentioned earlier. For example, it may be inappropriate to conclude that Becker's theoretical structure completely ignores the influence of the psychological dimension. Two entry points into Becker's theoretical system can help it make connections to factors at the psychological level. Firstly, Becker indicates the idea that the investment in health in terms of individual performance can also be seen as a form of investment in human capital (Becker, 1993; 2007). This is also discussed in more detail in his subsequent work, such as his article on health and human capital published in 2007. Generally, Becker's construction of the relationship between health and human capital is still based on the life cycle and the total value of productivity that 'health' can create in economic life. If extending this view, the psychological condition, which is one of the many factors influencing health, is linked to the value and income that can be created by human capital. It is less persuasive as Becker's theory does not make a direct link between psychology and motivation to participate in education, nor does it elaborate more directly and further. However, this tends to show a possible link between Becker's theoretical framework and others to some extent.

The other point lies in Becker's idea that he also mentioned that the decision to influence whether or not to go to university (for high school graduates) is related to participants' attitudes towards HE. To be more specific, a person decides to participate in HE not necessarily because (s)he will really gain a return as the majority of people in the data do, but because the person believes (s)he will gain a return, namely, expected income. Conversely, for some people who do not want to participate in HE, it is not because the investment is not worthy, but because of their negative attitudes towards HE. Becker (1993) indicates that the latter

phenomenon is described in many empirical studies as ‘disinterest’. From this perspective, Becker’s work suggested a similar interpretation to the Capability Approach (Sen, 1987; 1999/2001) and SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985). However, neither the investment in health mentioned above nor the expected income, these explanations for the phenomenon of participation or non-participation under the influence of non-economic factors are only derivations based on Becker’s view and there is little straightforward explanation for non-economic participation.

The disputes about Becker’s theoretical framework focus on its position of paying too much attention to economic benefits. On the other hand, Becker provides a very detailed explanatory framework for the economic-related factors. Therefore, I choose Becker’s theoretical framework as one of the supporting frameworks, especially in the economic-related factors. Becker’s theoretical framework is informative in the context of the epidemic. Regardless of whether an epidemic occurs or not, under Becker’s theory the decision to participate in an adult HE program is in fact a decision to make an investment in human capital in the form of HE. Therefore, the possible impact of the epidemic on the return on investment in education becomes particularly important. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has the negative impacts of epidemics on economic development. This may lead individuals to lower their expected returns on educational investments (based on negative market trends), which in turn reduces their willingness to participate. However, this does not mean that participation behaviour is necessarily lower in the social context of an epidemic. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries and regions have enforced remote ways of working and teaching (Hodges *et al.*, 2020). This shift to online modalities has had significant implications for adult education participation. At the same time, Bozkurt *et al.* (2020) conducted a global analysis of educational responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that many institutions rapidly expanded their online learning offerings, increasing accessibility for adult learners who might have previously faced geographical or time constraints. This meant that a large amount of consumption, represented by commuting costs, was lowered, which in turn lowered the cost for individuals to

make educational investments.

At the same time, beyond the original changes in cost and benefit expectations, the occurrence of an epidemic can also create new opportunities in certain industries and technologies. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a surge in demand for medical devices such as masks and testing reagents, as well as for various Internet-based online services. This shift means that individuals may be more inclined to invest in education or training in these emerging fields, seeing them as areas with significant growth potential. These shifts can play a crucial role in shaping the decisions of potential participants about whether to pursue further education, as they may be motivated by the potential for enhanced career prospects in these rapidly growing sectors.

2.6.2 Theory building applying a categorical approach but based on human capital theory: Pierre Bourdieu's human capital theory.

Pierre Bourdieu is considered one of the most influential social scientists of the 20th century. His research covers the fields of sociology, pedagogy, culture, anthropology, etc. and he has developed many important concepts and theories, such as different types of capital, fields, symbols and symbolic violence, etc. According to his article (1986) on the forms of capital, Bourdieu gives a very clear definition of capital, as the accumulation of labour. On this basis, whether capital exists in its materialised form or in its combined embodied form, it requires the accumulation of time. What is important about this definition is that in this context capital is no longer an economic concept and is not tied solely to production or productivity. On this point, the example of a 'gift' mentioned by Bourdieu (1986) to explain the conversion of capital, but placed here also vividly explains the difference between Bourdieu's theory and that of a purely economic approach to society: when one consumes time and money to carefully select a gift, this can be a waste from a narrowly economic point of view, since the cost of the gift will most likely be much less than the economic benefit it can bring. However,

if the discussion is based on Bourdieu's theoretical framework, this behaviour can constitute an investment in social capital, which may yield future benefits in the form of other kinds of capital. In other words, cultural and social capital should be seen as parallel concepts to economic capital, and the waxing and waning of cultural and social capital should not be measured by changes in economic capital.

Building on the aforementioned points, Bourdieu (1974; 1986) argues that there are three very basic forms of capital, each of which has its own mode of institutionalisation in the workings of society, in addition to the objective existence of individual ownership. They are economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital. Given the resemblance between the discourse on economic capital within the realm of economic concepts and Bourdieu's economic capital concept, I would not write too much on economic capital itself. Rather, cultural capital and social capital are two concepts that I would discuss more in detail, especially considering that these two are closely related to adult education participation.

To begin, Bourdieu defines cultural capital as the accumulation of knowledge, skills, and cultural refinement obtained by individuals through educational pursuits, cultural engagements, background, and life experiences (Bourdieu, 1986). Based on this idea, Bourdieu further develops a framework for the states of cultural capital, which are the embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutionalized state.

In the realm of adult education participation, each form of cultural capital elucidates distinct facets of educational attainment. Embodied cultural capital epitomizes intangible gains assimilated by participants themselves, encompassing knowledge, skills, and perspectives acquired through engagement in adult education. This segment of capital becomes an intrinsic facet of individuals as they accumulate educational experiences, fostering the augmentation of their human capital. Conversely, objectified cultural capital includes tangible cultural

items like books and artworks, which can be bought and sold but also hold cultural significance beyond their economic value. In their study on the relationship between adult education participation and family cultural background and resources, Cincinnato *et al.* (2016) operationalized embodied cultural capital as one of the indicators for measuring the degree of educational participation. Finally, institutionalized cultural capital bears direct relevance to adult education, signifying certifications and qualifications obtained through educational institutions and emblematic of cultural embodiment within organizational frameworks. Adult formal education completion, notably the acquisition of degrees, certificates, and qualifications, epitomizes the manifestation of this form of cultural capital.

In contrast to the further breakdown of cultural capital, Bourdieu does not further categorize social capital. Instead, he defines it as the reservoir of resources and support individuals derive from their social networks and interpersonal connections. In other words, social capital represents the aggregate of resources accessible to individuals through their social ties. These resources encompass not only tangible assets like borrowed items or shared venues but also intangible benefits such as opportunities for social integration and affiliation within specific social groups. In the context of adult education participation, engaging in educational endeavours can lead to the accumulation of social capital for participants. Since adult education is inherently a social activity, it facilitates the expansion of participants' social networks, thereby granting them access to a wider array of resources within their social circles.

Bourdieu's theoretical framework, rooted in the concept of human capital, necessitates revisiting Becker's perspective on investment in educational human capital, as discussed previously. However, unlike Becker's focus primarily on the economic returns of educational investment, Bourdieu's framework encompasses a broader spectrum of benefits. In Bourdieu's view, the advantages derived from educational investment extend beyond mere economic capital to encompass

cultural and social capital. Thus, the tripartite presence of cultural capital, social capital, and economic benefits collectively forms the motivational impetus for investing in human capital, namely education.

Bourdieu's conceptualization of cultural capital shares similarities with several theories discussed earlier. Firstly, his notion of cultural capital aligns closely with Houle's concept of learning-oriented learners, particularly in the context of educational participation aimed at accruing the embodied state of cultural capital. Both perspectives seek to elucidate educational participation behaviour through the lens of knowledge and skill acquisition. Similarly, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and social capital, particularly in relation to networks that provide access to privileges, offer a perspective that complements Houle's notion of activity-oriented learners. This approach shifts the focus from merely identifying reasons for participation in educational activities to understanding the underlying social structures and dynamics that influence such participation. However, it's important to note that this correspondence is not entirely precise, as not all activity-oriented learners necessarily prioritize social capital accumulation; while they emphasize participation in activities, it does not imply that educational participation is solely viewed as a social endeavour. Lastly, institutionalized cultural capital is closely linked to the labour market but also intersects with notions of respect and self-realization. It serves as a standardized validation and manifestation of an individual's accumulated cultural capital. This aspect resonates with both Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and participation motivations centered around work income and career advancement. It is important to note that this parallel is my interpretative observation rather than an established theoretical connection, but this potential connection offers an interesting lens through which to view adult education participation motivations.

In Bourdieu's later works (2013), another concept, 'symbolic capital,' is introduced. Serving as a further elaboration and extension of social capital, symbolic capital constitutes a resource derived from social relationships and social

acknowledgement, particularly in discussions related to social class. While the theoretical framework of economic, cultural, and social capital is more prevalent in discussions of Bourdieu's work, symbolic capital also holds significance in my research topic, thus warranting a brief discussion here. Unlike the emphasis on social capital, symbolic capital underscores the resources garnered from social recognition and symbolic value. Consequently, based on the concept of symbolic capital, there are two distinct ways to interpret educational participation.

Firstly, educational participation can also accrue symbolic capital, implying that the pursuit of symbolic capital may serve as a motivation for engaging in education. By enrolling in adult education programmes, participants can earn acknowledgement from others. This recognition may manifest through certificates or prestige, akin to institutionalized cultural capital. Alternatively, it may derive from the status gained by accessing a particular social group due to the educational experience or involvement in a specific project, resembling social capital.

Secondly, the symbolic capital garnered through education offers a yardstick for assessing an individual's capital accumulation by the public. Unlike traditional economic capital, human capital, epitomized by personal skills and social connections, cannot be directly and swiftly appraised by others. However, symbolic capital furnishes a means for the external world to gauge individual human capital. Although, practically, individuals' educational experiences may not entirely reflect their personal abilities or available resources, the external world can roughly generate an evaluation on individuals through symbolic capital. This aspect is particularly crucial in the decision-making concerning adult education linked to employment.

Both Becker's and Bourdieu's conceptualizations of human capital theory have significantly influenced policy-making and public perception. They have become widely recognized metaphors for the relationship between work and education,

built upon a basic narrative of a linear continuum between education, work, productivity, and income (Marginson, 2019). This perspective is particularly evident in many government-level education systems. For instance, in the Chinese mainland educational system, which is the focus of this project, employment data of HE graduates are collected and used as one of the standards for assessing the quality of services provided by HE institutions. This implies that the success of education (especially HE) is often measured by the economic returns of educated individuals, such as employment rates and post-graduation income, within the framework supported by human capital theory, especially within Becker's framework.

In this regard, Bourdieu's theory expands the notion of educational returns beyond mere economic gains to include cultural and social capital. This broader perspective highlights that the benefits of education are multifaceted, encompassing economic, cultural, and social dimensions, which all play a critical role in shaping HE participation decisions. By incorporating Bourdieu's insights into my research, I aim to provide a nuanced understanding of the various factors influencing adult participation in HE during the pandemic, emphasizing that the value of education cannot be solely measured by immediate economic returns.

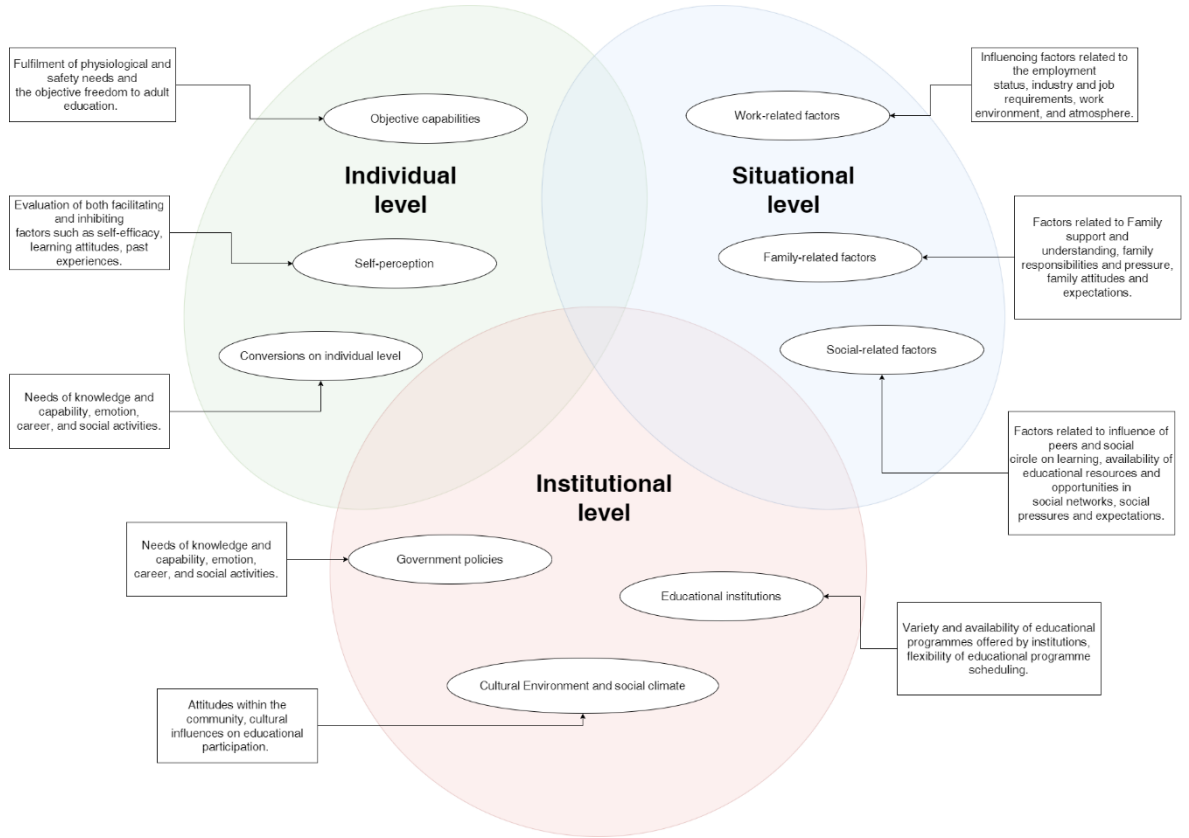
Although social capital and cultural capital, unlike economic capital, present challenges in concretization and quantification, numerous studies have endeavoured to address these issues and explore their relationship with HE participation. For instance, in a study examining the relationship between HE participation and family social and cultural capital in China, Liu (2011) conducted a secondary quantitative analysis based on the data from 18,075 samples across 52 Chinese HE institutions. It ultimately addressed the concretization of social and cultural capital by integrating survey items such as family income, regional income levels, educational achievement and educational experiences within the family. The findings revealed that family social and cultural capital significantly impacts HE participation, with a notable positive correlation between the stock of family

social capital and HE participation. On the one hand, this study highlights the importance of examining family social and cultural capital to promote equity in educational participation. On the other hand, it underscores the influential role that family social and cultural capital play in shaping HE engagement.

2.7 Constituting a framework for my research.

This section analyses and explores the factors influencing young adults' education participation decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis is structured around three levels derived from the synthesis: individual level, situational level, and institutional level. In this section, I use [Figure 2d](#) to elucidate the relationship between this framework and my research, as well as to demonstrate how it integrates elements from various theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter Two.

Figure 2d Theoretical structure guiding my research.



As illustrated in [Figure 2d](#), this multi-level framework consists of three levels: the individual level, represented by the green circle in the upper left; the situational level, located in the upper right; and the institutional level, denoted by the red circle at the bottom. This three-level approach is primarily derived from Cross's (1981) barrier analysis system, but it also integrates elements from other frameworks discussed earlier. The decision to adopt this three-level model to conduct my research was driven by its comprehensiveness, relevance to the pandemic context, alignment with existing literature, and adaptability. These three levels collectively provide a holistic view of the decision-making process, encompassing personal characteristics, immediate circumstances of the potential participants, and broader systemic factors. Given that the pandemic has affected individuals' lives at multiple levels, this multi-level approach is particularly apt for my analysis. This model provides a comprehensive framework that allows for the integration of various theoretical concepts. At the individual level, I can explore personal motivations and perceptions, drawing on theories such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and Deci and Ryan's SDT (1985). The situational level allows me to consider immediate life circumstances, which aligns well with Boshier's EPS (1971) and Cross's situational barriers (1981). The institutional level incorporates broader systemic factors, reflecting Durkheim's concept of social facts (1897/1970) and Becker's human capital theory (1976).

Moreover, this proposed framework finds strong theoretical underpinning in the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979;1986;1994). Bronfenbrenner's model (1979) posits that human development occurs within a complex system of nested environments, each influencing the individual's behaviour. The individual level in our framework corresponds to Bronfenbrenner's microsystem, encompassing personal characteristics and immediate interactions. The situational level aligns with the mesosystem and exosystem, capturing the interplay between different settings and indirect environmental influences. Finally, the institutional level parallels Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem, addressing broader societal and cultural contexts. By adapting Bronfenbrenner's ecological

perspective, this framework provides a comprehensive approach to understanding the full-time HE decision-making process of young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic, accounting for the intricate interplay between individual agency and environmental factors across various systemic levels.

Moreover, constructing this framework is essential to support my research, particularly in validating and extending previously discussed multi-faceted theoretical models. By encompassing a structure from narrow individual-level to broader collective-level perspectives, this framework enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing young adults' decisions to participate in full-time HE during the pandemic. For instance, Mezirow's (1991) TLT can be applied across all three levels, examining how transformative experiences at each level influence participation decisions. Similarly, Bourdieu's capital theory (1986) can help me understand how individual, situational, and institutional factors interact to shape educational opportunities and constraints. Each of these levels interacts with and influences the others, as evidenced in my data collection and analysis, creating a complex decision-making environment. With this foundational understanding in place, the subsequent analysis will delve into the specific structure. Throughout this process, I will continue to employ Alex's example to support the discussion.

From the perspective of Alex, one of the potential full-time HE participants during COVID-19, educational decision-making can be significantly influenced by individual-level factors. Whether these factors act as drivers or obstacles, they underscore how Alex perceives and evaluates Alex's own situation. For instance, Alex's attitudes towards themselves and education, emotional responses, and self-assessment of abilities all play crucial roles. Additionally, Alex's economic conditions, physical health, and learning capabilities, which are all Alex's personal situation, shape Alex's decision-making process regarding educational participation.

Applying the Capability Approach (Sen, 1987; 1999/2001) to Alex's situation, it becomes clear that individuals must objectively possess the ability to engage in further education. This means that the fulfilment of Alex's basic physiological needs, such as safety and stable living conditions, can influence their decision to pursue further education (Maslow, 1943). Once these basic conditions are met, Alex must also be aware of their rights and freedoms to participate in education. This awareness involves Alex's cognitions of Alex's own abilities, evaluations of the difficulty of participating in educational programmes, and Alex's past educational experiences. The Cross's COR Model (1981), SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985), along with the intrinsic motivation aspect of AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992), illustrate the importance of these individual-level factors. For instance, Alex's motivation to engage in further education can be influenced by their intrinsic interest in learning, perceived social needs, or emotional stimuli. These factors may drive Alex to participate in education if Alex finds it enjoyable or socially fulfilling. Conversely, if Alex perceives negative impacts or barriers, such as increased stress or financial strain, these perceptions can deter Alex from pursuing further education. Moreover, the mechanism by which these factors influence participation - through converting capabilities into functional outcomes - reflects the ideas of the Capability Approach (Sen, 1987; 1999/2001) and TLT (Mezirow, 1991). Alex's personal needs, whether stemming from internal desires for self-improvement and knowledge or external social and emotional influences, act as triggers that either facilitate or hinder Alex's engagement in full-time education. This integrated view emphasizes how individual perceptions, capabilities, and external factors collectively impact educational decisions.

Furthermore, Alex's decision-making behaviour can be influenced by the surrounding ecological environment. This primarily involves the direct interactions and contexts that are closely related to Alex's personal life, which is where Cross's situational barriers (1981) often arise. Drawing from AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992), which further differentiates Houle's orientations (1961), along with considerations from Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1976) regarding the outcomes of education,

these influencing factors can be subdivided into work-related needs, social needs, and family-related needs depending on their sources. First, Alex's work situation, industry standards, and the overall atmosphere of the work environment could significantly impact Alex's opportunities and intentions to engage in education. For example, if Alex's job is in an industry that demands high technological innovation, the employment requirements might create external motivations for Alex to pursue further education. Conversely, if Alex works in a field where work experience is valued over formal education, as suggested by Becker's (1976) evaluation on educational investment, this might discourage Alex from seeking additional educational opportunities. Second, family factors also play a role in shaping Alex's decisions regarding educational participation. Family members, as a close-knit part of Alex's social environment, might exert a more significant influence than other external entities. Supportive family attitudes could encourage Alex to pursue further education, while obstructive views or additional family responsibilities could pose challenges. Lastly, social factors are also crucial situational influences on Alex's educational decision-making. Peer pressure and the learning atmosphere within Alex's social circle may either encourage or discourage participation in further education. If Alex's peers value education and actively pursue learning opportunities, this might motivate Alex to do the same. On the other hand, negative social influences could diminish Alex's willingness to engage in educational activities.

Lastly, the factors related to education systems, educational institutions, societal atmosphere, and culture - elements that are relatively distant from individuals - can be classified at the institutional level. To be more specific, these institutional influences can be divided into three main categories. First, policy systems established by education systems and governmental agencies may significantly impact Alex's inclination toward educational participation. For instance, if the government provides subsidies to both individuals and educational institutions, this could objectively reduce Alex's costs associated with participating in education. Additionally, these policies might enhance the availability and quality

of educational services offered by institutions, making it more feasible for Alex to engage in further education. Second, the regulations set by educational institutions and the variety of programmes they offer could influence Alex's decision-making process. The availability of educational programmes that align with Alex's schedule and the appropriate difficulty level can be crucial factors in determining whether Alex decides to participate in further education. If the institution offers flexible scheduling or tailored learning paths, Alex might find it easier to integrate education into life. Lastly, the cultural and societal atmosphere surrounding education can also shape Alex's attitudes toward educational participation. The community's overall ambience and cultural values concerning education may either encourage or dissuade Alex from pursuing further learning opportunities. If the societal culture places a high value on continuous learning and self-improvement, Alex might be more inclined to view educational participation positively.

The preceding discussion of the influencing factors at the three levels primarily focuses on the normalized context. However, in the unique social context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the factors across these levels undergo changes due to the pandemic, thereby transmitting its impact to the individuals they influence - namely, the decision-making behaviours of countless 'Alexes.' For example, the health risks posed by the pandemic, the shift to remote work and online education, changes in the economy and job market, and altered mindset and emotions of Alex in the pandemic context. These factors are at the core of what this project aims to explore.

Chapter Three Empirical Perspectives on Educational Participation.

This chapter serves as a bridge between the theoretical foundations explored in the literature review and the specific research design of this study. To begin with, [Section 3.1](#) reviews empirical studies relevant to my research, moving from global perspectives to those grounded in the Chinese context. This progression highlights broader trends while narrowing the focus to region-specific insights that frame my research questions. Next, [Section 3.2](#) then narrows the focus to the Chinese HE landscapes, offering the necessary background to comprehend the unique challenges and decision-making processes faced by potential adult learners in China, particularly during the pandemic. By juxtaposing Sections 3.1 and 3.2, I create a comprehensive contextual framework that illuminates the interplay between individual decision-making processes and the institutional landscape of Chinese HE. Finally, [Section 3.3](#) reviews recent empirical studies on the COVID-19 pandemic's influence on HE participation, offering up-to-date insights directly relevant to my study. The synthesis of these perspectives provides a robust foundation for my subsequent research design, ensuring that my research is both theoretically grounded and contextually relevant.

3.1 Empirical insights into adult education participation decision-making.

Globally, young adults' decisions to pursue HE are shaped by diverse factors. The first systematic review I will discuss is drawn from the work of Broek *et al.* (2023). This comprehensive review, which primarily employs the capabilities approach, has already been examined in [Section 2.4](#) on the theoretical framework of the capabilities approach. Broek *et al.*'s (2023) comprehensive narrative literature review of 109 articles examining adult learning motivation through the Capability Approach (Sen, 1987; 1999/2001) offers valuable insights relevant to my research question. Their analysis identified eight key categories of conversion factors influencing adult participation in education: institutional, social, familial, economic, cultural, political, personal, and employment factors, providing a

systematic framework for understanding educational decision-making.

However, several key distinctions warrant attention. While their study primarily investigates the effectiveness of participation triggers, my research extends beyond this to examine post-activation barriers. Furthermore, their broad definition of adult learners and inclusion of both formal and non-formal educational settings differs from my targeted focus on young adults in full-time higher education, suggesting that their findings may have limited applicability to my specific research context. Despite these methodological differences, their rigorous analysis - which screened 459 articles to identify 109 relevant studies - provides valuable theoretical foundations. Their emphasis on the complex interplay between individual agency and environmental factors is particularly pertinent to my research context, where COVID-19 has emerged as a significant conversion factor. The pandemic has fundamentally altered both the educational landscape and the broader social environment, potentially influencing how young adults perceive educational benefits and respond to conversion factors. By integrating Broek *et al.*'s (2023) theoretical framework with my specific focus on young adults' HE experiences during the pandemic, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of educational decision-making during periods of significant disruption.

While Broek *et al.*'s (2023) systematic review provides a comprehensive theoretical framework through the analysis of extensive empirical research, examining specific empirical studies in contexts more closely aligned with my research focus offers additional insights. For example, Chesters *et al.* (2020), using quantitative and qualitative data from 256 respondents in Australia, sought to explore the internal and external motivations of adult learners re-entering formal education, as well as the personal and institutional barriers associated with the choice not to pursue formal education. The study identified motivations such as career advancement, personal development, and the desire for stability as the primary drivers for re-engaging with education. At the same time, barriers such as

financial constraints, family responsibilities, and a lack of institutional support hindered participation.

Similar findings can also be observed in Hunter-Johnson's (2017) study on Bahamian non-traditional adult learners, where motivations such as professional growth and personal development were juxtaposed with barriers like financial constraints and family responsibilities. Likewise, Karmelita (2020) highlights the critical role of transition programs in mitigating institutional barriers and fostering successful entry into higher education for adult learners. Falasca (2011) further explores barriers such as institutional inflexibility and offers practical strategies to bridge gaps in access for adult learners. Lastly, Deggs (2011) identifies academic, career-related, and intrapersonal barriers as critical factors impacting adult learners' educational persistence. Collectively, these studies reinforce the interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic factors in shaping adult learners' educational decisions. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of decision-making, where intrinsic aspirations and extrinsic limitations are intertwined. The study particularly examined how potential adult education participants interpret formal education as a specific educational pathway during their decision-making process.

Howard and Davies (2012) also employed a mixed-methods approach to study the willingness of 36 mature learners aged 21-60 to pursue undergraduate degrees as part of their continued engagement with HE. However, their perspective differed from that of Chesters *et al.* (2020), as they focused more specifically on learners' individual perceptions regarding participation in HE. In their study, the researchers identified two key factors influencing the willingness to engage in HE, the learning strategies adopted by participants (particularly how these strategies influenced their past learning experiences), and the perceived connection between educational experiences and the formation of social identity. According to the study, the first factor can be understood as a composite of participants' prior educational experiences, self-perception of their abilities, and expectations

regarding the returns on pursuing HE.

The second factor, however, deserves particular attention. In other words, a significant barrier preventing potential adult learners from engaging in higher education lies in the self-identification of some adult learners as ‘non-learners,’ perceiving traditional full-time higher education as incompatible with their personal or professional identities. Similar findings on the interplay between identity and higher education engagement can be seen in Brunton and Buckley’s (2020) study, which examined how adult learners in Ireland navigated identity shifts during their first year of higher education, revealing struggles in constructing a coherent learner identity. Rozvadská’s (2021) research on adult learners in the Czech Republic underscores how conflicting roles, such as familial and professional identities, can complicate the development of a stable learner identity. Collectively, these studies reinforce the critical role of identity formation in shaping adult learners’ educational trajectories, echoing the challenges described by Howard and Davies (2012). Such findings about identity formation and self-perception are particularly relevant to my research context, as the COVID-19 pandemic may have fundamentally altered how young adults view themselves as learners and their relationship with higher education, especially considering the young adult population may experience the transition between different social identities (as discussed in [Section 1.2.1](#)). The disruption of traditional educational pathways during the pandemic potentially influenced both their learning strategies and identity formation, suggesting that Howard and Davies’ (2012) framework could offer valuable insights into understanding how extraordinary circumstances affect educational decision-making among young adults.

In the preceding sections, I have reviewed a range of empirical studies related to adult learners and HE participation, highlighting their motivations, barriers, and decision-making processes across various contexts. However, my research focuses

specifically on the Chinese context, necessitating a closer examination of studies rooted in or relevant to this region. To provide a contextual bridge, I begin with a comparative study that explores adult learners in both China and the United States to show the specific socio-cultural background.

Chen and Liu (2019) conducted a biographical study comparing the motivations and influencing factors of adult learners in China and the United States (n=30, with 15 participants from each context). This research utilized a broad age range of adult learners, from 20 to 80 years old, with respondents evenly distributed across ten age groups. It also encompassed various types of adult education programmes, including both full-time participants and those engaged in alternative formats.

The findings underscore key differences in the educational decision-making behaviours and personal perceptions of adult learners in the two countries. First, family influence plays a significantly larger role for Chinese learners than for their American counterparts. In China, family background has a stronger effect on learning outcomes and effectiveness, parents often dominate decision-making processes, and family responsibilities and burdens frequently act as barriers to participation. This influence is particularly pronounced among younger learners, where family opinions carry considerable weight. Second, with regard to personal factors, Chinese participants demonstrate a more passive orientation compared to Americans. For example, Chinese learners often engage in education driven by anxiety or negative emotions, or by external pressures to achieve future goals or self-actualization. Conversely, American respondents are more motivated by personal interests and the intrinsic enjoyment or challenges of learning. Lastly, societal factors also show notable divergence. In China, government policies and regulations play a crucial role in shaping educational decisions, while societal status and job-related benefits exert significant influence. By contrast, American participants are more influenced by individual-level considerations.

Therefore, Chen and Liu (2019) conclude that Chinese adult learners are predominantly shaped by situational factors, including family, work, societal, and institutional dynamics, whereas American learners prioritize individual-level factors. Notably, the study identifies generational trends within its broad age sample. Older generations in China and the United States exhibit the most significant cultural differences, while younger participants from both countries display a trend toward convergence, albeit with persistent distinctions. This generational insight emphasizes the importance of further targeted exploration, as shifting cultural norms may be influencing the decision-making processes of younger adult learners.

Notably, the study identifies generational trends within its broad age sample. Older generations in China and the United States exhibit the most significant cultural differences, while younger participants from both countries display a trend toward convergence, albeit with persistent distinctions. This generational insight emphasizes the importance of further targeted exploration, as shifting cultural norms may be influencing the decision-making processes of younger adult learners. Similar findings regarding the predominant influence of family, societal pressures, and institutional factors on Chinese adult learners' educational decisions have been documented in several other empirical studies. Similar findings regarding the motivations and barriers influencing young adult learners in China can be observed in several recent studies. For example, the work of Guan and Ploner (2018), who explored the role of cultural capital and *mianzi* (face) in shaping Chinese adult learners' higher education decisions, emphasizes family and social-circle influence as dominant factors. Guan and Blair (2021) explored the phenomenon of credentialism within Chinese HE, revealing that younger adult learners (aged 25-45) are increasingly driven by the desire for job security and enhanced social status, reflecting broader societal pressures. This aligns with the concept of *mianzi* (face) and the cultural importance of higher education as a pathway to upward mobility. In a more recent contribution to Chinese HE participation research, Wang (2024) explores the correlation between learning

motivation, major selection, and academic performance among Chinese students. While this study encompasses a broader demographic of full-time HE participants, potentially diluting its specific relevance to adult learners, it nevertheless reinforces the critical role of family and social expectations in educational decision-making processes. Collectively, these empirical investigations illuminate the sophisticated interplay between familial influence, economic considerations, and societal expectations that characterize young adult learners' engagement with higher education in the Chinese context. This body of research underscores how traditional cultural values and contemporary socioeconomic pressures converge to shape educational participation patterns.

3.2 The Chinese (Mainland) higher education landscape: Structure, functions, and pandemic response.

China's education system, particularly higher education, is governed by a complex multi-level governmental structure. This institutional framework is crucial for contextualizing my research on China's social context during the COVID-19 pandemic. The education system in China has evolved in tandem with national development strategies, economic policies, and market conditions. The government plays a significant role in shaping and regulating the education market (Hawkins, 2000; Mok, 2005; Guo & Lamb, 2010).

This section provides an overview of the policy framework and current status of adult HE in China in the following [Section 3.2.1](#), especially on its role in individual participation and decision-making. Additionally, [Section 3.2.2](#) briefly introduces measures implemented by China's education system in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, offering a comprehensive depiction of the societal context for my study's target population.

At this point, it is necessary to provide an additional explanation regarding the format of the cited policy documents in this thesis. Given that my research,

especially in this Section and Stage A policy analysis later, relies heavily on references from original policy documents, and considering that most educational policies in China are issued by government agencies such as the State Council and the Ministry of Education, using standard APA citation format could result in repetitive citations of the same sources. Therefore, for the convenience of readers to quickly refer to the original texts, all citations related to policy documents are designated by codes and separately archived in Appendices A and B. To be more specific, [Appendix A](#), which is labelled as Table. CN1, shows the summary of relevant policies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because it is also the list of policies analysed in Stage A of my research, further details regarding the sources and the contents of the documents can be found in [Section 4.4.2](#) concerning the research design of Stage A critical policy analysis, as well as in [Section 5.1](#) regarding the results and analysis of Stage A. On the other hand, [Appendix B](#), which is labelled as Table. CN2, shows the summary of policies before pandemic used in my thesis. In the following systematic review and discussion, I will extensively utilize the content of the policy documents listed.

At the same time, since all formal policy documents used in this thesis and cited from Mainland China are presented as complete web pages on government websites, there are no specific page numbers available. To illustrate this point more clearly, I included a screenshot of the original policy document of [Appendix A](#) - CN 1.1 in [Appendix D](#) as an example. This means that standard APA formatting for page numbers cannot be applied. To facilitate readers' access to these sources, all citations from the original policy documents are marked with either the original article number or paragraph number. This approach ensures that references can be quickly and accurately located.

3.2.1 The political structure of China's educational system related to this research.

The structure of China's education system is vast and complex, encompassing

multiple layers from early childhood education to HE. Understanding the positioning of HE within China’s broader educational framework is essential for contextualizing the specific factors influencing decision-making among young adults engaging in full-time HE. This introductory section will provide an overview of the educational system, with a focus on the intricate placement of HE and its implications for my research.

Generally, the structure of China’s school education system closely aligns with mainstream understanding. The structure of China’s HE system is outlined in [Table 3a](#).

Table 3a Industry regulatory documents have sections on higher education (adapted from the **Statistical Classification of Education, Training, and Related Industries 2020**).

School education	Basic education	Pre-school education	
		Primary education	Regular primary education
			Adult primary education
		Middle school education	Regular junior high school education
			Vocational junior high school education
			Adult junior high school education
			Regular senior high school education
			Adult senior high school education
			Vocational senior high school education
	Higher education		Regular higher education
			Adult higher education
	Special education		

[Table 3a](#) is structured based on the Statistical Classification of Education, Training, and Related Industries 2020, issued by the National Bureau of Statistics of China in 2020, aimed to promote the development of education, training, and related industries. It provides a framework for statistical delineation, standardizing the management and operation of the Chinese education market. As the most recent version available at the time of writing, the document includes not only the

classification and categorization of various educational programmes at the national statistical level but also the codes for these programmes within the Chinese economic industry classification management system (which is important in terms of the ‘SBD’ issue discussed in Stage A later). [Table 3a](#) above captures only the sections of the documents relevant to my research.

From this table, it becomes evident that in the current education management system of Mainland China, regular HE and adult HE are considered parallel categories, together forming the broader directory of HE. This directory is further defined as a branch of school education. Therefore, understanding how regular/adult HE is classified within the Chinese educational framework is crucial for comprehending the system as a whole. However, this also represents a significant challenge I encountered at the early stages of my research, namely, which category the young adults engaged in full-time HE, who are the focus of my research, should be classified under.

Despite using various keyword combinations, such as regular/adult education, education management, governance, policies, and regulations, across both Chinese and English search engines, I was unable to find an official, government-issued definition to place the target population of my thesis. If this issue remains unresolved, there is a risk of omissions when using keywords for policy search and analysis. Therefore, I adjusted my search approach and searched through China’s policy databases (a total of five databases were used, with the selection process detailed in Stage A policy analysis). I focused on documents related to the administration of HE, including daily operational files, admission and graduation management documents, and annual review data.

Eventually, I located a series of documents issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education regarding the national admissions process for adult colleges, including

the most recent 2023 version⁴, published during the writing of this thesis. Although these documents did not provide a definitive description of adult education, they outlined three primary forms of adult education: full-time, part-time, and correspondence education. This indicates that the adult HE category within the Chinese policy framework encompasses my target population. At the same time, after broadly reviewing the context of the relevant policies, I confirmed that full-time HE is also a crucial part of regular HE.

Based on the information above, I confirmed that policy documents generated using either ‘regular higher education’ or ‘adult higher education’ as keywords may be relevant to my current research population. Establishing this connection is crucial to my study, particularly as it directly impacted the first stage of data collection and analysis, Stage A in [Section 4.4.2](#), where the selection process for relevant policy documents takes place. A more direct illustration of this can be seen in [Figure 4b](#), [Section 4.4.2.2](#). From another perspective, the challenges I encountered in determining the positioning of my target population within the policy framework further underscore the lack of informational support for defining this group, highlighting the need for greater attention in this area.

3.2.2 The role of government in the industry of higher education.

In China’s HE landscapes, the government plays a central and influential role, exercising significant control over key aspects of the sector. This influence is particularly evident in the areas of admissions, institutional operations, graduation requirements, and degree management. In this section, I will draw on policy documents to illustrate this background and examine the multifaceted role of the Chinese education management system in shaping the HE market through its powerful regulatory and operational capabilities. Understanding the role of the government, or more specifically, policy information, in HE is crucial for

⁴ See CN 2.16.

interpreting how individuals respond to institutional-level influences, particularly when related policies shift during periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

China's education sector holds greater authority over the operation of the HE industry. This is largely due to the fact that a majority of China's HE institutions are state-funded. This greater authority is primarily manifested in the competitive process for admission candidates and the management of graduation⁵. First off, the Chinese Ministry of Education is directly in charge of the admission of students to universities as well as the awarding and accreditation of degrees, in addition to providing financial assistance for HE institutions' operations, which are empowered by laws and regulations. The admission process is particularly noteworthy, featuring a two-tiered system: a nationwide standardized examination administered by the Ministry, followed by institution-specific assessments, all under ministerial oversight⁶. Summarising the annual policies, prior to the fall admissions cycle, the Ministry publishes comprehensive guidelines detailing registration procedures, examination formats, schedules, locations, and regulatory frameworks. This centralized approach underscores the significant authority vested in the Ministry of Education within China's HE system. The modules of these working arrangements documents connected to the admissions season are essentially the same, but they have adjusted annually in accordance with other pertinent policies and social circumstances that change during the year (for example, as will be mentioned later, the admissions working arrangements during the epidemic period specifically add measures related to epidemic prevention). This means that under the Chinese HE system, the system directly influences the organisation of HE enrolment.

'The national master's degree admission examination is conducted in two stages: the preliminary examination and the retest. Both the preliminary examination and the retest are important parts of the

⁵ See CN2.7-2.12.

⁶ See CN2.7-2.12.

master's degree admission examination. The preliminary examination is organized by the state unified, and the second-round examination is organized by the admission units themselves Some or all of the subjects in the national unified examination are assigned by the Examination Centre of the Ministry of Education, while other subjects are assigned by the admission units themselves.'

(Chapter One, Article 6, from CN2.12, 'Notice of the Ministry of Education on the Issuance of the Regulations on the Administration of National Master's Degree Admissions in 2022')

In addition to the organisation and content of participation in admissions, participants who are eventually admitted to the school need to be reported and recorded in a registration system. The academic registry record system is one of the identity systems closely related to academic education in Chinese society, and it contains functions including, but not limited to, the recording of information on admission to HE, identification of enrolled students, assessment results, changes in student status (e.g. change of major and school, suspension and withdrawal), and graduation information. More specific details on the system's responsibilities can be found in the latest version of the policy issued in 2017⁷.

'Schools shall implement the management system of electronic registration of higher education academic qualifications, improve the management methods of academic qualification information and complete the electronic registration of students' academic qualifications in a timely manner in accordance with relevant regulations.'

(Chapter Seven, Article 35, from CN2.14, 'Regulations on the

⁷ See CN2.14.

management of students in general higher education institutions’)

This academic registry record system is a crucial component of the massive government system’s involvement in the field of HE, or to be more specific, all education programmes related to degrees within the context of Chinese society. As can be seen from the aforementioned content, the system plays an important role in the enrolment stage of HE for it influences the process of screening applicants by, organising entrance examinations while at the same time managing the identification information of participants through the provisions of the academic register. However, the system’s influence on HE is not limited to the beginning of the educational programme, but also extends to the end, namely graduation. During the process of graduation, the system, especially the credentials verification system, would demonstrate a strong presence.

At the same time, degrees are not awarded until they are recorded in the credentials verification system. To be more specific, similar to the registration HE participants need to process before they start the programmes, students’ graduation information also needs to be provided by the educational institutions before graduation, such as grades and proof of learning experience, as a basis for registration and verification in the credentials verification system.

‘In principle, ordinary institutions of higher education approved by the Ministry of Education should apply to the provincial degree committee for the authorization of bachelor’s degree awarding units in the year when the first batch of undergraduates is enrolled’.

(Chapter Two, Article 8, from CN2.2, ‘Notice of the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council on the Issuance of the Administrative Measures for the Authorization and Award of Bachelor’s Degrees’)

The document quoted here is the governing document for undergraduate-level

education, but in fact, there are corresponding documents for all levels of degree education, so in order to save space I did not list them all. In other words, while educational institutions are responsible for the teaching and assessment processes, the credentials verification system plays a crucial role in the final awarding of qualifications. This system is unique to the Chinese education context and has significant implications for potential participants' decision-making, particularly for those who value formal academic credentials. The system determines whether a person's academic information can be officially recorded, thus affecting the perceived value and recognition of educational programmes. The specific impacts of this system on participation decisions in HE will be elaborated upon in subsequent sections of this study.

'In principle, ordinary institutions of higher education approved by the Ministry of Education should apply to the provincial degree committee for the authorization of bachelor's degree awarding units in the year when the first batch of undergraduates is enrolled'.

(Chapter Two, Article 8, from CN2.2, 'Notice of the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council on the Issuance of the Administrative Measures for the Authorization and Award of Bachelor's Degrees')

'The Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council is responsible for the macro policies, development guidance, quality supervision and information management of bachelor's degrees, improving the information system of degree conferment, timely and accurately releasing the information on degree conferment, and providing convenience for the society and students to inquire Provincial Academic Degrees Committees are responsible for the management, supervision and information of bachelor's degrees in their own regions and systems.'

(Chapter Four, Article 18 and 19, from CN2.2, ‘Notice of the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council on the Issuance of the Administrative Measures for the Authorization and Award of Bachelor’s Degrees’)

In the Chinese social context, a qualification or type of HE programme’s fate can therefore be highly influenced by the system, sometimes even decisively, as in the case of the Second Bachelor’s Degree (SBD) programme. In [Section 5.1](#) discussing HE-related policies during the pandemic, I address one significant change in the Chinese HE sectors amidst the pandemic. The section involves the resumption of the Second Bachelor’s Degree programmes, which were previously halted by the education system before the pandemic but were reinstated during the pandemic as independent HE levels and programmes. This specific example vividly illustrates the role of China’s education system in the HE industry. However, the lack of recognition of SBD programmes by the education system implies a loss of value for SBD as part of HE, as typified by the institutionalized cultural capital represented by certificates, as mentioned in [Section 2.6.2](#). This loss of value further impacts individuals’ judgment regarding SBD programmes or programmes similar to SBD in the decision-making process for educational participation.

To be more specific, because of the existence of the academic registry record system and the credential verification system (especially their roles in qualification auditing and management), the decision of the educational system directly influences the institution’s ability to confer degrees. Although for HE institutions there is still the freedom to offer a diverse range of educational programmes at the executive level, and they can still offer, if they want, educational programmes whose contents are very close to the SBD programme after the system officially stop the programme, they no longer have the ability and right to provide the participants an SBD that is accredited by the system. A concrete example can be the Applied English programme at the College of Arts

and Sciences, Beijing Normal University⁸. Beijing Normal University offers an Applied English project termed a ‘micro-major,’ which is similar in content structure to a second bachelor’s degree. This project provides undergraduate education in Applied English. However, they do not confer official degrees on their graduates. The reason is clear from the above discussion: the system stopped certifying the enrolment of SBDs after 2019, which means that, aside from those who were already enrolled, no new participants would receive degree certification. On the other hand, an educational programme without a qualification simply means that it no longer falls under the category of academic education, and it can still be considered as a training that participants can list on their resumes as educational experiences. However, the lack of recognition by the education system implies a loss of value for SBD as part of HE, as typified by the institutionalized cultural capital represented by certificates, as mentioned in [Section 2.6.2](#). This loss of value further impacts individuals’ judgment regarding SBD programmes or programmes similar to SBD in the decision-making process for educational participation.

3.2.3 The measures China’s education system response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, China’s education system implemented a comprehensive set of measures to mitigate its impact on teaching and learning activities. Based on a comprehensive review of publicly available information, including official government announcements, educational institution websites, and reputable news sources, these measures can be generally categorized into three main strategies. The following analysis draws from a diverse range of online resources, including but not limited to official statements from the Ministry of Education, provincial and municipal education departments, and individual

⁸ See CN2.15.

educational institutions' public notices.

3.2.3.1 The postponement of the academic term and changes in instructional delivery.

The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in China commenced during the Chinese New Year holiday period in 2020 (mid-to-late January). According to the academic calendar of the education system, the Chinese New Year holiday represents the traditional winter break, after which educational institutions at all levels are expected to commence the second half of the academic year. However, due to the outbreak, the Ministry of Education issued notices mandating the postponement of school openings and suspension of classes for all levels of school education, including universities and colleges across the country. The specific reopening dates varied by province, with cities like Beijing and Shanghai resuming primary and secondary education in early March, while most universities initiated online instruction in April. The remote teaching mode persisted throughout the latter half of 2020. However, considering the ongoing pandemic situation, in order to prevent mass movement of people, particularly HE participants, and to avoid sudden population congregations associated with the resumption of offline schooling, the resumption of offline teaching varied across provinces and was staggered based on the epidemic situation in different areas.

It is important to note that policies cancelling offline services and restricting offline activities were not exclusive to the education sector. All activities involving offline contact and population gatherings were subject to similar restrictions.

3.2.3.2 Delayed entrance examination and altered the form of examination.

Higher education entrance exams were also affected. As mentioned earlier, competition among HE participants in China is determined by national standardized exams. Although the format and content of exams may vary, such as

written exams for undergraduates (Gaokao, which is the National College Entrance Examination/NCEE of Mainland China, Zhang, 2016) and master's entrance exams, and interviews usually required for master's and doctoral entrance exams, before the pandemic, these assessments were conducted offline. During the pandemic, the timing and format of these exams were delayed. Furthermore, in line with the policy of remote work and learning for all, interviews were mostly shifted to contactless online channels.

Introducing the policies implemented during the pandemic is essential, as these policies directly impact individuals' behaviours and choices in HE decision-making. Policies such as online education and online entrance examinations enable educational participants to study and take exams from home, while the postponement of school openings and exam dates affects potential participants' academic planning and scheduling. The implementation of these policies has altered the educational environment and participants' learning modalities, potentially influencing their attitudes, expectations, and decisions regarding HE. Therefore, understanding how these policies influence the factors shaping individuals' participation in HE decision-making is crucial for better comprehending and interpreting individual behaviours and choices. Moreover, as part of the social context in which my target group operates during the pandemic, those measures of how the Chinese educational system reflected to COVID-19 pandemic and their influence were also corroborated by insights shared by respondents during Stage B semi-structured interviews and Stage C focus groups.

3.3 Adult education participation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the final subsection of this chapter, I aim to provide a concise review of recent empirical studies that focus on the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on higher education participation among young adults in China. The pandemic introduced unprecedented disruptions to traditional educational pathways, prompting significant shifts in decision-making processes. This section

highlights recent key studies that shed light on the individual, situational, and institutional factors influencing young adults' engagement with HE during this period, offering valuable insights into the process of this thesis.

As discussed in [Section 3.2.3](#), the shift to online education was one of the most immediate and transformative responses to the pandemic. Bao (2020), in a case study of Peking University, illustrates how the rapid adoption of online teaching offered flexibility but also underscored disparities in engagement and satisfaction. While some students adapted well, others reported declining motivation and concerns about the perceived quality of their education, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of remote learning as a primary mode of instruction. This tension between opportunity and limitation reflects a broader uncertainty that shaped young adults' decisions to continue or re-enter HE during the pandemic.

Alongside the logistical challenges of online education, the psychological toll of the pandemic weighed heavily on many students. Research by Wang and Zhao (2020) reveals a marked increase in anxiety levels among Chinese university students, with women and humanities students reporting higher levels of distress. This aligns with Li *et al.* (2020), who conducted a longitudinal study indicating that although initial pandemic-related stress subsided over time, symptoms of depression and anxiety persisted, particularly among final-year students facing imminent graduation. The intersection of mental health and academic performance suggests that psychological resilience became a decisive factor in shaping students' engagement with HE.

However, the pandemic's influence extended beyond individual mental health, as socio-economic factors emerged as significant determinants of educational participation. Demuyakor (2020), in his examination of Ghanaian international students in China, highlights economic burdens such as rising living costs and limited access to stable internet services, which could parallel the experiences of

many domestic Chinese students, particularly those from rural or lower-income backgrounds. The financial strain of the pandemic not only affected students' ability to participate in higher education but also amplified existing inequalities, reinforcing the divide between urban and rural learners.

In addition to socio-economic pressures, the pandemic also reshaped career aspirations, prompting potential students to reconsider their educational pathways. He and Wei (2021) argue that the widespread adoption of online education catalysed a shift toward more pragmatic, career-oriented academic choices. Faced with an uncertain job market, students gravitated toward degrees perceived as offering greater job security and higher earning potential, reflecting a broader trend in which education is increasingly viewed as a strategic tool for economic stability. This recalibration of educational priorities underscores the pandemic's role in accelerating existing trends toward credentialism and skills-based learning in China's higher education landscape.

While much of the existing literature has illuminated the psychological, logistical, and financial challenges faced by HE students during the pandemic, there remains a notable gap in understanding how these factors converge to shape the educational decisions of young adult learners specifically. Although research on HE participants in a broader sense provides valuable insights, less attention has been paid to the nuanced experiences of potential young adult learners navigating HE within the diversified challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter Four Research design and methodology.

4.1 Research overview.

The research focuses on young adults' full-time participation in higher education (HE) under the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in China (Mainland). The central aim of this project is to explore to what extent the pandemic influenced young adults' full-time HE participation as far as possible.

As reviewed in Chapter One, while HE demographics as well as the idea of life-long learning continue to diversify, a research gap persists in examining the decision-making processes and influencing factors behind young adults who opt to interrupt their workforce participation and transition into full-time HE after entering employment. This study seeks to address this understudied phenomenon by generating insights into the experiences surrounding such a reverse transition from the labour market back into HE as a full-time student, especially the influencing factors as motivations or barriers in their decision-making process. Such insights can inform policies, support services, and career counselling practices catered to this unique demographic, facilitating interventions to foster academic and professional development, and supporting the research for lifelong learning.

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic influenced many aspects of people's lives worldwide as a large social event. This pandemic can be characterized as a 'Black Swan Event', a concept introduced by Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2010) to describe occurrences that are rare, have extreme impact, and are often rationalized in hindsight. The COVID-19 pandemic fits this definition as it was largely unexpected, had a profound global impact, and has been subject to extensive post-event analysis and rationalization. However, though Black Swan Events are rare to happen, they are not unique in recent development history, nor will this be the last. Besides the COVID-19 pandemic, another historical example

of Black Swan Events is the 2008 global financial crisis. The unpredictability and far-reaching consequences of Black Swan Events underscore the need for robust systems and adaptive strategies in various sectors, including adult education. Studying the operation and transformation of society during the Black Swan Events is profoundly significant. Such research can assist social institutions and individuals in better preparing for and responding to future unexpected crises, thereby enabling the formulation of more effective crisis management strategies and policies (Comfort *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, Black Swan Events often reveal underlying issues and inequalities within social systems that are difficult to detect during normal times. Investigating these issues helps identify and address long-standing structural problems in society (Matthewman & Huppatz, 2020).

Based on these considerations, this study seeks to investigate the factors influencing young adults' HE participation within this specific social context, examining whether theories applicable before the epidemic remain relevant during a special social background and identifying emerging circumstances. Under this core research question, I employed a framework based on the summary of previous literature discussed in [Section 2.7](#). This framework guided the exploration of factors influencing the decision-making process of young adults engaging in full-time HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, I investigated these factors across three levels: the individual level, the situational level, and the institutional level.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented an unprecedented upheaval to HE, forcing institutions and students to rapidly adapt to remote and online learning modalities. This crisis has likely had a significant impact on the educational decision-making and experiences of young adult learners pursuing full-time HE degrees. However, the existing literature has not adequately addressed how this specific demographic within the adult learner population, especially young adults, has navigated the challenges and uncertainties introduced by the pandemic. By focusing on this young adult learner cohort in full-time HE, this study addressed

this research gap. Therefore, my research population consists of young adults (20-40 years old) in China (Mainland) who enrolled in full-time HE programmes at any level after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020, April - 2022, June, n=20). Further details for the sampling strategy are provided in [Section 4.4.3.1](#). The in-depth exploration of how this group has responded to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 crisis can provide valuable insights into the factors influencing their educational choices and trajectories during times of major societal upheaval. This nuanced understanding can inform policy, practice, and support mechanisms tailored to the unique needs of young adult learners in full-time HE programmes.

4.2 Research aims and anticipated outcomes.

The information gathered, analysed, and discussed in this project potentially contribute to:

1) Filling the research gap in the area of young adult learning participation. As introduced in Chapter One ([Section 1.2.2](#)) and [Chapter Two](#), there is a significant research gap in understanding the full-time HE participation of young adults, particularly in the context of major societal disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the population of young full-time adult learners is worth investigating for it exhibits characteristics distinct from both typical traditional learners and non-traditional learners due to their stage of developmental age. The research design implemented in my thesis directly responds to the call for more nuanced investigations into the population of young adults and HE participation issues during times of crisis. This focus is reflected in two key aspects of my research. Firstly, my research targets young adults engaged in full-time HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, the qualitative research strategy I have chosen allows my target group to freely share their experiences and perspectives. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the circumstances and emotional journeys of these individuals during this period. Consequently, my research contributed more empirical evidence and data to the study of this area.

2) Understanding the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, especially full-time HE. Although, as discussed in [Chapter Two](#), there is already a substantial body of research and theoretical frameworks related to HE participation and adult education engagement, the COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique context. As noted in [Chapter One](#) and [Section 4.1](#), the pandemic's abrupt onset and prolonged societal impact created a research environment distinct from normal societal conditions. To further investigate the factors influencing full-time HE participation during this extraordinary period, my study focuses on individuals who made decisions regarding their education during the pandemic. Analysing the challenges posed by the epidemic, such as health risks and lifestyle changes, sheds light on how these factors influence decision-making regarding full-time HE. This insight informs the development of strategies and policies to address future unconventional social events. To explore the factors affecting full-time HE participation during the pandemic, I employed a multi-stage research approach. In Stage A, I conducted policy analyses to reconstruct the structural environment faced by participants. Stage B involved semi-structured interviews to capture a comprehensive view of the decision-making process, including the emergence of initial thoughts, subsequent changes, and the pandemic's impact on these decisions. Finally, Stage C facilitated group discussions among different participants, providing deeper insights through the exchange of perspectives. Those approaches aim to provide a thorough understanding of the unique influences on HE participation during the COVID-19 pandemic (more information can be found in [Section 4.4](#)).

3) Advancing full-time HE policy and practice. Advancing full-time HE policy and practice is crucial, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As discussed in [Chapter Two](#), policy can manifest institutional factors related to education participation. My thesis' focus on the factors shaping HE decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic, analysed in Stage A and discussed in Stage B, directly addresses this concern. By investigating the unique challenges faced by young adults entering full-time HE during this period, this research provides

valuable insights for policymakers and educational institutions. By examining the role and function of relevant policies during the COVID-19 pandemic, my thesis contributed to policy-making, offering empirical research and better support for context-specific educational strategies in times of social disruption.

4) Enhancing equity and inclusivity in full-time HE. As highlighted in my literature review ([Chapter Two](#)), the pursuit of equity and inclusivity in HE remains a critical challenge, particularly during times of societal disruption (which was discussed in [Section 2.4.1](#)). My thesis's investigation of how motivations and barriers affect full-time HE decision-making among diverse groups of young adults directly addresses this issue, aligning with my research objectives outlined in [Chapter One](#). By employing the theoretical framework related to educational participation, discussed in [Chapter Two](#), my research provided a lens through which to identify and address potential inequalities in full-time HE access and participation. In order to achieve this goal, the mixed-methods design of my thesis allows for a comprehensive exploration of both individual and systemic factors influencing HE decisions from the standpoint of individuals. This perspective, supported by qualitative research strategy, helps uncover the complex interplay between personal motivations and structural barriers. Furthermore, the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forms the backdrop of my study as explained in [Chapter One](#), offers an unprecedented opportunity to investigate issues in HE that may be overlooked under normal circumstances. By leveraging this unconventional social context, my research gained deeper insights into the dynamics of full-time HE participation. These findings have the potential to inform policies and practices that foster greater fairness and inclusivity in education, thereby enhancing societal development.

5) Encouraging academic exchange. As discussed in [Chapter One](#), this study is uniquely positioned to contribute to the growing body of research on HE policies in times of global crisis. By focusing on the specific situation in China (Mainland) during the COVID-19 pandemic, my research provided a specific empirical study

for future cross-national and cross-cultural HE policy learning, policy borrowing, and policy referencing. In order to achieve this implication, my thesis conducted a mixed-method design to provide a comprehensive view of the Chinese HE landscapes during the pandemic. This multifaceted approach allows for a nuanced understanding of policy responses, institutional adaptations, and student experiences, addressing the complex nature of HE systems during crises. Moreover, by examining the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the pandemic in the Chinese context, my thesis can contribute to the broader discourse on crisis management in HE.

The rationale for targeting and prioritizing these five key areas of research implication stems from a comprehensive analysis of current literature, identified research gaps, and emerging challenges in the field of HE, as discussed throughout this thesis. These priorities were carefully selected to address critical needs in both academic understanding and practical application. To be more specific, filling the research gap in young adult learning participation directly responds to the lack of in-depth studies on this demographic group, as highlighted in [Section 2.1](#). This focus is crucial given the unique developmental stage of young adults and their increasing importance in shaping future educational landscapes. Moreover, understanding the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on full-time HE was prioritized due to the unprecedented nature of this global crisis and its profound impact on educational systems, as discussed in [Chapter One](#). This area of focus can contribute to the emerging body of knowledge on crisis response in education. At the same time, advancing full-time HE policy and practice was also crucial because of the urgent need for evidence-based decision-making in rapidly changing educational environments, a theme that emerged consistently in [Chapter Two](#). Enhancing equity and inclusivity in full-time HE aligns with the growing global emphasis on social justice in education. This priority addresses persistent challenges in educational access and opportunity, which have been exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic. Finally, encouraging academic exchange was prioritized to foster cross-cultural learning and policy transfer, responding to the

increasingly interconnected nature of global HE systems, as discussed in [Chapter One](#).

These five implications are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding and improving full-time HE participation among young adults in the context of global disruptions. By focusing on these priorities, this study contributed meaningfully to both theoretical discourse and practical applications in the field of HE, adult education, and the development of lifelong learning.

4.3 Research questions.

This project is aimed to provide more diversified and in-depth information on the topic of ‘motivations and barriers of young adults’ full-time HE participation during the COVID-19 pandemic’. Therefore, the core research question of this project is:

How does COVID-19 influence the decision-making process of young adults in China (Mainland) regarding their participation in full-time higher education?

Based on the framework I constituted in [Section 2.7](#) and considering that this project is processed particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study presents research questions based on three levels.

1) On the individual level:

-How do personal characteristics, such as self-efficacy and past educational experiences, influence young adults’ decisions to engage in full-time educational activities during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- To what extent do fundamental psychological needs, including autonomy and

competence, contribute to adults' motivation and willingness to overcome barriers in pursuing further education during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- To what extent do individual factors, such as attitudes and perception on HE and past educational experience, prevent individuals from participating in HE during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2) On the situational level:

- As discussed in the previous chapter, factors related to an individual's work environment—such as income, job competition, and professional skills—can significantly influence their decisions regarding participation in HE. How do occupational demands and workplace dynamics affect full-time HE participation during the COVID-19 pandemic? To what extent do these factors pose barriers to participation?

- What roles do family responsibilities and social support networks play in shaping young adults' decisions regarding educational pursuits during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how do these factors influence individuals' ability to overcome barriers to participation?

- How do social interactions and community attitudes towards young adults' education influence individuals' engagement and persistence in learning endeavours during the COVID-19 pandemic?

3) On the institutional level:

- Policy, as the tangible manifestation of an individual's political environment, reflects the broader structural context of the society in which the individual resides. It embodies the political dimensions of this environment and its influence on various aspects of life. Therefore, how do government policies and financial

incentives, such as subsidies and funding allocations, influence the accessibility and uptake of young adults' full-time education programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic? Do these policies pose barriers to participation?

- Given the nature of COVID-19 as a highly contagious virus, the pandemic necessitated significant changes in the organization of educational programmes, including full-time HE, which traditionally relied on in-person instruction. This widespread shift to alternative teaching methods, such as online learning, represents a distinctive institutional factor during the pandemic. Such a fundamental change in instructional delivery could influence the decision-making behaviours of potential participants, altering their perceptions and engagement towards (full-time) HE. How do institutional factors, including programme diversity and teaching modes, impact young adults' decision-making regarding participation in educational activities during the COVID-19 pandemic? To what extent do these factors serve as barriers to participation?

- As another pervasive institutional factor, influences represented by cultural and social atmospheres can exert broad and coercive effects on individuals within those contexts. These cultural norms and societal expectations may shape attitudes and behaviours in powerful ways. Therefore, in what ways do cultural norms and societal values influence the availability and perceived value of full-time HE initiatives when facing the COVID-19 pandemic? Do cultural and social factors pose barriers to participation?

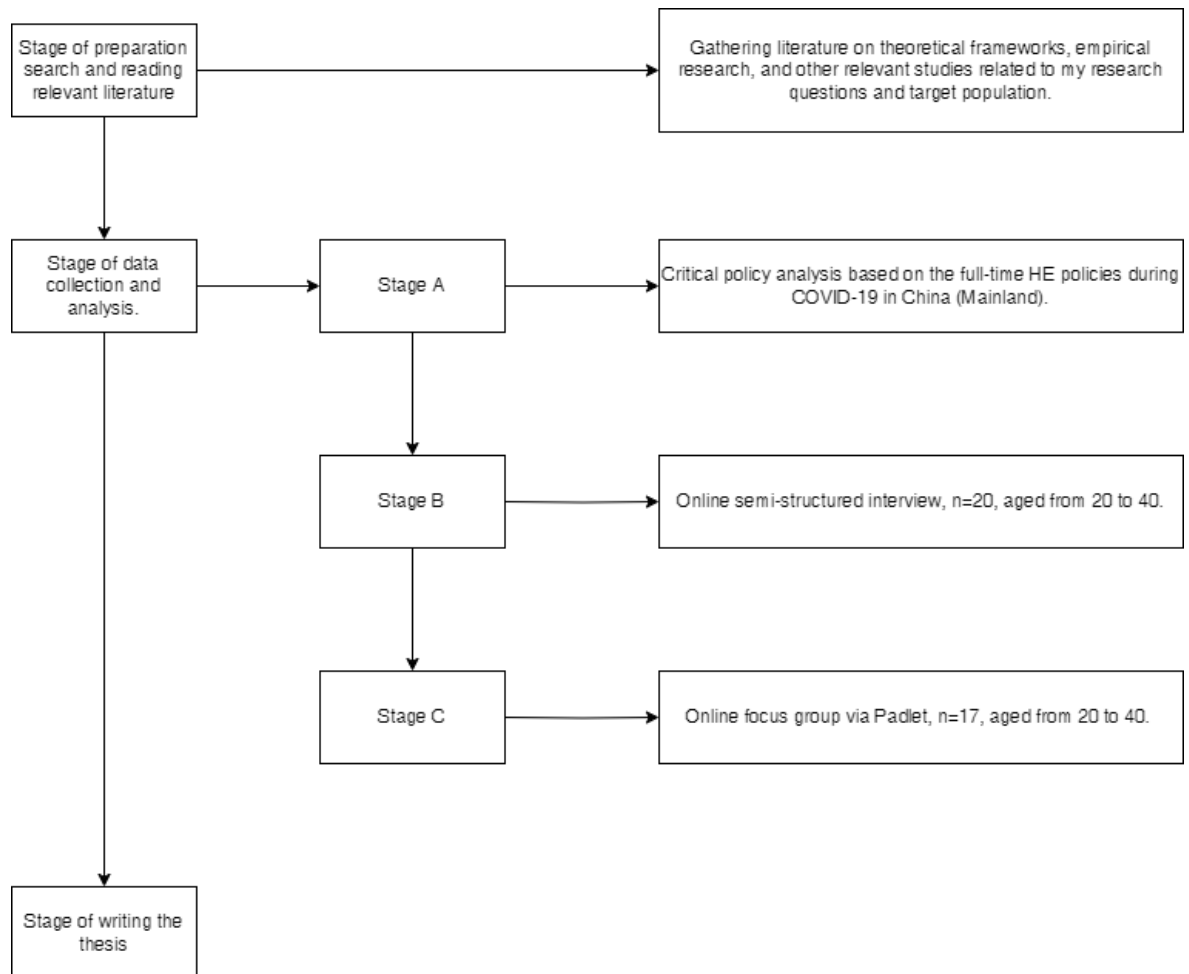
4.4 Research design and methodology.

4.4.1 Overview of the research design: Multi-staged qualitative research.

This thesis explored influencing factors related to young adults' full-time HE participation during the COVID-19 pandemic in China (Mainland), using a multi-methodology of staged data collection of critical policy analysis, triangulated to

address research questions above. Generally, this project falls within the realm of qualitative educational research. [Figure 4a](#) provides an overview of the entire project process.

Figure 4a Overview of the project stages.



Qualitative research is chosen as the core strategy for this project due to its emphasis on subjective and personal viewpoints, recognizing that individuals may interpret the same topic in varied ways (Bryman, 2012; Cohen *et al.*, 2018). Within a constructivist ontological framework, society and its meanings are understood as being constructed through individual interpretations and interactions (Bryman, 2012). This approach is especially suited for this research, for it aligns with the project's focus on exploring the influence of COVID-19 on HE participation, particularly how young adults make sense of their educational choices during the

pandemic from their own perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Although qualitative research faces challenges in ensuring reliability and validity as traditionally defined within a quantitative research framework, I have reviewed evaluation criteria specifically suited to qualitative research, as proposed by LeCompte and Goetz (1982) and Lincoln and Guba (1985). Additionally, the multi-staged research design within the qualitative strategy was employed to cross-verify data and ensure research credibility (Bryman, 2012; Cohen *et al.*, 2018). Although generalizability is limited, thick and rich descriptions of the research context are provided to allow other studies to assess the transferability of findings to other settings.

To comprehensively explore this topic, the research is guided by a series of research questions that probe potential influencing factors across three levels: individual, situational, and institutional, as discussed in the previous [Section 4.3](#). To address these questions, a multi-staged qualitative research strategy was employed, comprising three distinct phases of data collection and analysis: Stage A involved a critical policy analysis; Stage B utilized semi-structured interviews; and Stage C engaged participants in online focus groups facilitated through Padlet. Notably, these stages are not directly mapped to the three levels of analysis but instead serve complementary functions that collectively contribute to addressing the overarching research questions.

The rationale behind this research design is to first develop an objective understanding of the social context in which potential young adult participants in full-time HE are situated, by examining relevant policies during the pandemic (Stage A, discussed in [Section 4.4.2](#)). This initial stage provided an objective understanding of the educational system and broader social environment faced by the target population of young adult learners. However, policy analysis alone is insufficient to grasp the full impact of institutional factors. Therefore, it is

supplemented by the subsequent stages, where participants' personal experiences, perceptions, and interpretations related to the institutional factors are explored.

Stage B, the semi-structured interviews conducted online, allows for in-depth exploration of influencing factors at the individual, situational, and institutional levels. The online format was chosen to overcome geographical limitations and enhance participant convenience, while also preserving anonymity, which is expected to increase participation rates. This stage is critical for understanding the decision-making processes of individuals regarding full-time AHE during the pandemic and more information will be discussed in [Section 4.4.3](#).

Finally, Stage C, the online focus groups conducted via Padlet, builds on the insights gained from Stage B. This stage is designed to facilitate interaction among participants, generating deeper insights into topics identified during the interviews. While the choice of Padlet as the medium for these focus groups is strategic and offers distinct advantages, this chapter will focus solely on the research design and methodological aspects of the Padlet-based focus groups, as discussed in [Section 4.4.4](#). For an in-depth analysis of the discussion topics, their origins, and their significance, please refer to [Section 5.3](#).

Besides, the primary analysis approach applied in this thesis is Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was chosen for its flexibility and effectiveness in identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. Given the exploratory nature of this research, which seeks to uncover the complex factors influencing young adults' decisions to participate in full-time HE during the COVID-19 pandemic, Thematic Analysis provides a robust framework for making sense of the data collected across multiple stages.

The primary data analysis method employed in this study is Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was chosen for its flexibility and effectiveness in identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within

qualitative data. Given the exploratory nature of this research, which seeks to uncover the complex factors influencing young adults' decisions to participate in full-time HE during the COVID-19 pandemic, Thematic Analysis provided a robust framework for making sense of the data collected across multiple stages. Thematic Analysis was applied to the data obtained from all three stages in my thesis. The analysis process followed the six-phase guide proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), including familiarisation of the original data and information, generating codes, finding themes, reviewing themes, classifying and identifying themes, and finally reporting the results. The specific analytical procedures applied at each stage will be thoroughly detailed in the subsequent sections dedicated to each stage of the research design. Therefore, they will not be reiterated here.

Generally, the multi-staged research design was purposefully structured to first establish an objective understanding of the institutional landscape, then delve into the personal experiences and perspectives of the target participants, and ultimately facilitate group-level dialogues to corroborate and expand upon the emerging insights. This sequential approach allowed the study to comprehensively address the research questions from multiple angles, generating a nuanced understanding of the factors shaping the educational participation decisions of young adult learners amidst the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.4.2 Critical policy analysis: Stage A.

This study employs a systematic approach to policy analysis as Stage A. This study employs a systematic approach to policy analysis as Stage A. Secondary or desk-based policy research is a method of analysing existing data, documents, and literature to gain insights into policy issues without conducting primary data collection (Buse *et al.*, 2005). This approach allows researchers to examine a wide range of policy-related information, including government documents, academic literature, and reports from various organizations (*ibid*). In academic practice,

this approach has been applied in various studies related to adult education participation (Milana, 2012; Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013; Kilpi-Jakonen *et al.*, 2015).

In my research, the primary purpose of employing critical policy analysis in Stage A is to align with my research objectives and provide a comprehensive understanding of my research question on the institutional level, unpacked in [Section 4.3](#). The COVID-19 pandemic represents a unique social event that provided a distinct backdrop for HE policy formulation and implementation, resulting in policies that differ from those of normal circumstances. This analysis mainly supports the investigation of institutional-level factors, addressing research questions such as the influence of government policies, financial incentives, programme diversity, and teaching modes on young adults' participation in full-time education programmes during COVID-19. While policy analysis is integral to exploring these institutional-level influencing factors, it alone cannot provide a complete picture. Drawing from Cross's COR Model and the barriers (1981) to the participation concept discussed in [Section 2.3](#), it's evident that the impact of a factor on decision-making is inherently individual. As a result, a policy may act as a catalyst for some while being inconsequential or even obstructive for others. Therefore, analysing pandemic-era policies in Stage A is crucial for understanding the sociocultural context of participants before engaging in in-depth interviews and group discussions. The policy information gathered in Stage A, when combined with insights from Stages B and C, enables a more nuanced response to research questions concerning institutional-level influences. By conducting secondary research on relevant policies before exploring participants' personal experiences, this approach ensures a comprehensive exploration of the research questions, enhances the validity and reliability of the study's findings and contributes to more accurate and professionally robust results.

Generally, Stage A was structured into several key steps. The following steps outline the methodology utilized:

- 1) Selection of databases. The initial step involved the selection of databases serving as repositories for policy documents. These databases serve as the primary source of information for the analysis.
- 2) Keyword filtering. Relevant policy documents were identified through keyword filtering. This process involved the systematic use of specific keywords to narrow down the selection and ensure relevance to the research focus.
- 3) Content-based classification and coding. Subsequently, the selected documents undergo content-based classification and coding. This step involved organizing the documents into thematic categories based on their content. Each document was assigned relevant codes to facilitate systematic analysis.
- 4) Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of documents. The final stage entails conducting the Thematic analysis of the coded documents. This process involved identifying recurring themes, patterns, and insights within the policy documents. Through this analysis, the study aims to uncover underlying trends and implications inherent in the policies under scrutiny.

By adhering to this structured research design, the study seeks to systematically analyse policy documents, thereby providing valuable insights into the subject matter at hand. Next, I would explain the operation process of each step in detail.

4.4.2.1 Choosing databases.

Obtaining information and data from Chinese government portals and databases for secondary research is a common practice in relevant studies and such approaches have been utilized in various empirical studies, including but not limited to the studies from Fu and Ren (2010), Xu and Mei (2018), Li and Wei (2023), Tie *et al.* (2023). To ensure the comprehensiveness of Stage A in collecting relevant policy information and to minimize any potential omissions, I utilized not only

official information portals and databases from entities such as the State Council of China and the Ministry of Education but also supplemented my research with data from non-governmental databases. The specific design process is outlined as follows:

To identify appropriate databases, I initiated a search using keywords and their combinations. I employed Google, the primary English search engine, and Baidu, the major Chinese search engine. The keywords utilized encompassed ‘academic databases/CN 学术数据库’, ‘social science databases/CN 社会科学数据库’, ‘China/CN 中国’, ‘policy/CN 政策’, ‘education/CN 教育’, ‘archives/CN 文档’, and ‘public notices/CN 公告’.

Subsequently, I went through a series of screening criteria to ensure that the database used in this stage would meet the needs of this project. The criteria applied in selecting databases were:

1) Governmental Organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations.

Selecting databases from both governmental and non-governmental organizations is a wise approach to ensure comprehensive coverage of policy documents and minimize the risk of overlooking important information. State Council Policies Archive Database, National Laws and Regulations Database, and Government Information Disclosure Network are governmental databases, while the Bailu intelligence database is a non-governmental database. This diversified approach enhances the robustness of your research by accessing a wider range of sources and viewpoints.

2) Regular updates.

To ensure that the research reflects the latest policy environment, I set the

criterion that the selected database needs to be kept regularly updated. Considering that there may be quarterly releases of policy information due to its specificity, I set the screening criterion as whether there are policy information updates within a quarter (three months). The four databases used in this study all meet this standard.

3) Recommendations from other researchers

Before selecting databases, I reviewed recommendations and reviews from other Chinese PGRs as well as other PGRs who also conducted research in the Chinese context. This approach aligns with the strategies I discussed earlier for enhancing reliability and validity in qualitative research. Specifically, this process served as a form of peer review and triangulation, helping me to understand the reliability and applicability of the databases from multiple perspectives.

Ultimately, five databases were selected as outlets for policy-related information, aiding in the filtration of data on HE in China. Among these databases, three are under governmental management, while the remaining two are operated by private entities. To ensure comprehensive coverage of policy papers, I employ one database as the primary source and the remaining four as supplementary resources in this section. The specific information on the databases and the reason for their selection are found in [Table 4a](#) below. The table delineates the information of each of the five databases applied in this stage, offering details on the access link, the nature of the operator (government or private organization), and a brief overview. The overview encompasses the features of these databases, delineating their role in this research project and presenting an analysis of their strengths and limitations relative to other databases.

Table 4a Summarisation of databases used in Stage A policy analysis.

Database	State Council Policies Archive Database (the core database used in this section)	National Laws and Regulations Database	Government Information Disclosure Network	Bailu intelligence database	Bimujiang database
Access link	http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengcewenjianku/index.htm	https://flk.npc.gov.cn/	http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/xgkzl.htm	http://www.bailuzhiku.com/	https://www.51bmj.cn/
Operator	CN government	CN government	CN government	Private company	Private company
Overview	This data is from the official government archive recording of policy documents, covering all policy documents issued from the central government to local governments, and is the core database applied in this section.	This database is an official public information portal for national laws and regulations. Although it is also officially run, it only covers law-related policy information and is therefore only used as an adjunct to the core database.	The website is officially run by the government. Its limitation is that it only contains policy documents handled by the General Office of the State Council. However, it provides more detailed search entries than the core database, including the type of document, date of drafting, and date of publication. Therefore, it is chosen as a supplement to the core database in my research.	The database is dedicated to the collection and collation of Chinese government documents, with a relatively comprehensive sectoral coverage. It is one of the common private databases for academic research on policy.	Compared with Bailu database, Bimujiang database has a preference towards the field of business and technology ⁹ . Therefore, it serves as a supplement to the Bailu database in my research project.

⁹ For example, the other major function of the database is the retrieval of information on Chinese registered companies.

4.4.2.2 Keywords and time horizon of collection

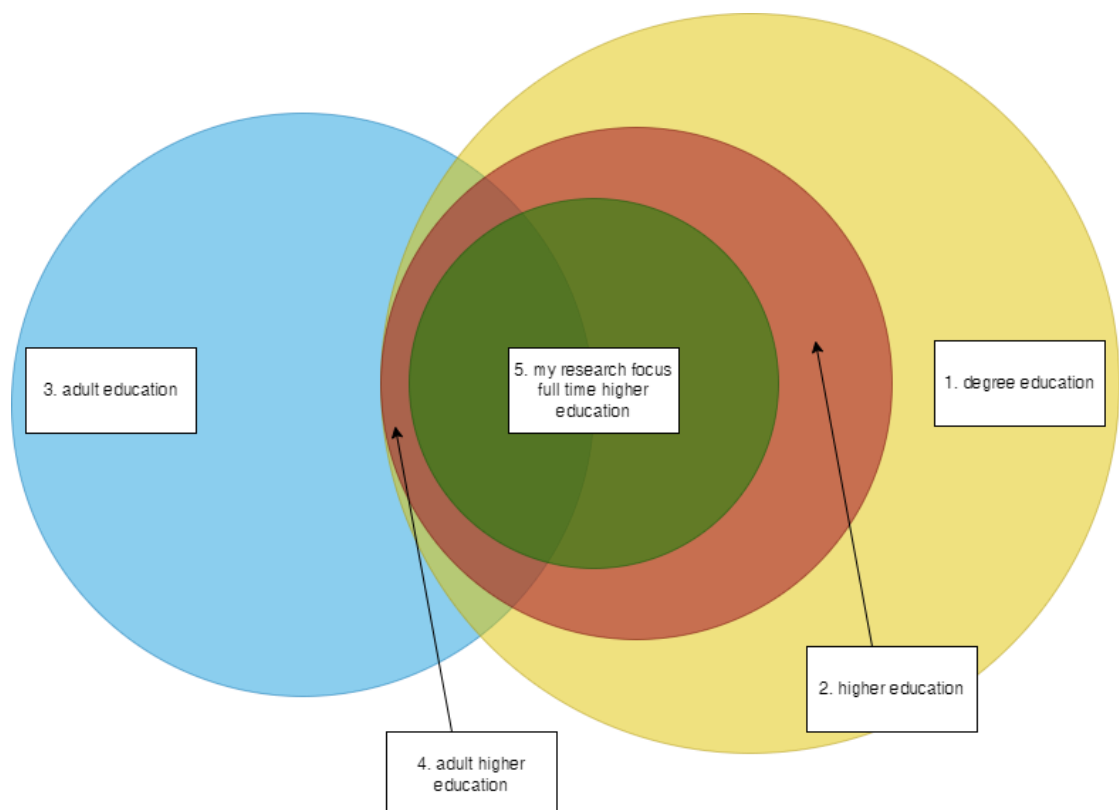
Considering the focus of this project, the time horizon for policy analysis is set as from 1st January 2020 to 31st May 2022, and the criteria are determined as the draft date of the policy document or the publication date if the information is missing. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in Chinese society and the advancement of this research project were the key factors in the selection of this time frame. To be more precise, the start date stems from the fact that although the COVID-19 pandemic initially surfaced in China in late 2019, Chinese society's response to it, including that of governmental agencies and civil organisations, started in early 2020. Therefore, the beginning of the month, *i.e.* 1 January 2020, was chosen as the start date.

The deadline for the first phase of policy information collection is set for May 31st, 2022. This is because, for my study participants, who are adult individuals involved in HE programmes invited before June 2022, subsequent policy documents are not likely to impact their decision-making behaviours.

In the following, I present the rationale of keyword search in the form of a Venn Figure (see [Figure 4b](#) on the next page). The criteria for this selection framework are based on the HE management structure in China, as introduced in earlier sections of this thesis. As illustrated in the Figure, the three principal categories in the Chinese education system that are closely related to HE are degree education (Collection 1 in yellow), higher education (Collection 2 in red), and adult education (Collection 3 in blue). It is important to note that these three relatively foundational categories collectively constitute an overlapping area, representing adult higher education (Collection 4 shaped in Vesica Piscis). While this area is more precise than the other three, adult higher education can be retrieved using the keyword 'higher education' in Chinese expression. Also, because adult higher education is a subset of the other three relatively foundational keywords, to prevent documents with broader targeting from being

overlooked due to wording issues, the keyword design of my research does not directly use the term ‘adult higher education’ as one of the keywords to collection policy information. Based on these three principal categories, the content relevant to my research objective, which is the collection of full-time higher education programmes is shown as Collection 5 in green. This collection includes both the general content of higher education and some aspects of adult (higher) education. The policy documents covered in this area are the final content I need to select. These irrelevant contents and keywords will be eliminated as key criteria for filtering out irrelevant documents related to my core research, such as primary and secondary education in educational qualifications, associate education in higher education, and part-time and non-higher education in adult education (e.g., evening-class programmes and literacy).

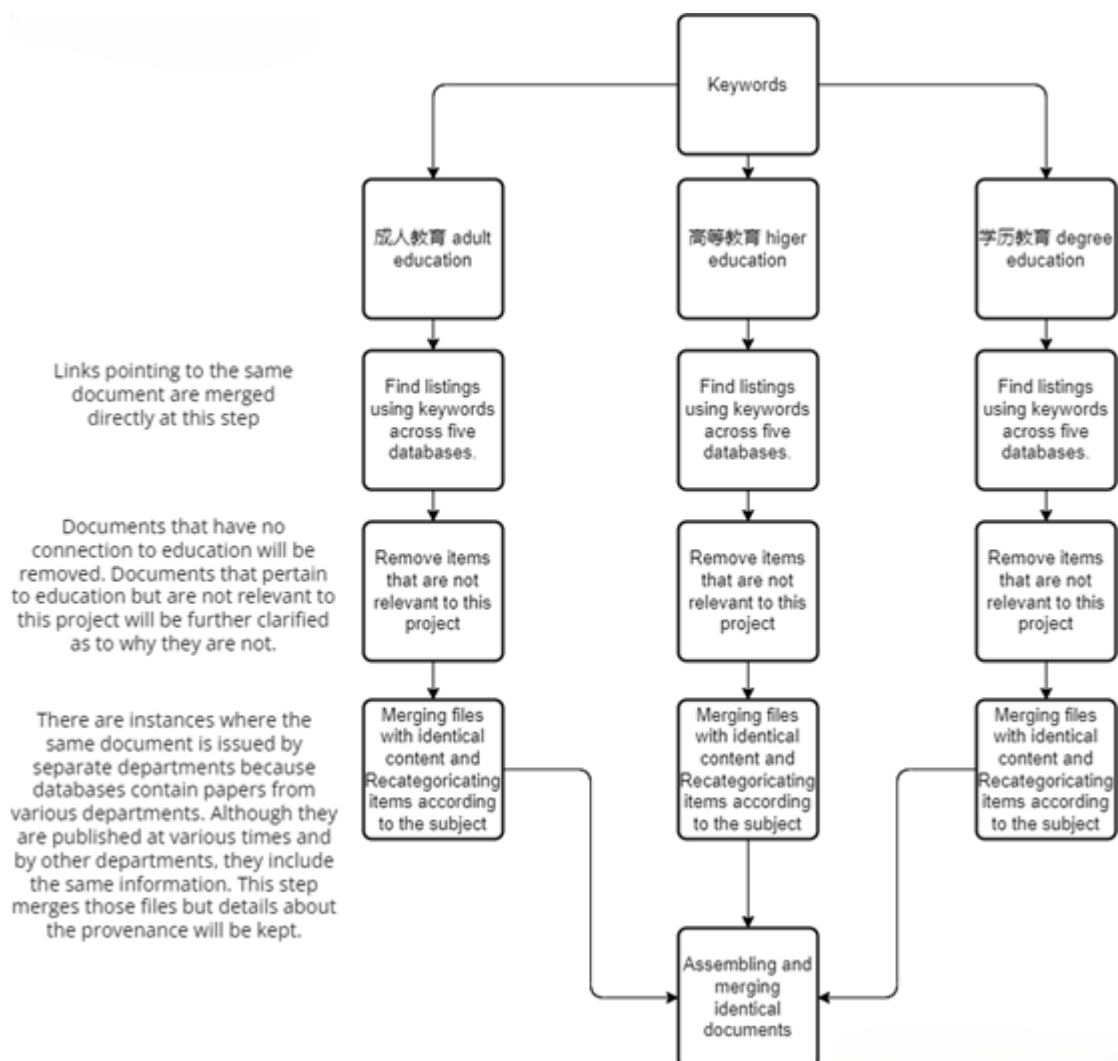
Figure 4b Rationale for keyword selection in the stage of policy analysis.



4.4.2.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria for policy documents.

The screening procedure I designed for policy documents is depicted in the figure below (see [Figure 4c](#)). As illustrated from the top of the figure to the bottom, the flow of this section follows the sequence of determining the keyword - searching the keyword - excluding irrelevant or less relevant documents - adding together the same documents under other keyword categories.

Figure 4c Screening procedure applied in the section of policy analysis.



After successfully collecting the information through the outlined process, the research would turn to the crucial phase of information analysis. Following the

information collection and analysis in Stage A, the research proceeded to Stage B interviews. The design of Stage B is sequential to the Stage A analysis as it is helpful for the researcher to comprehend the social context of potential HE participants in China. Analysing China's HE-related policies during the COVID-19 pandemic before conducting the interviews can provide a foundation for better understanding and interpretation of the experiences and perspectives shared by the participants in subsequent interviews and focus groups (Stage C). The subsequent discussion (Chapter Five) would further explore these findings in the context of the research questions, offering a comprehensive understanding of the study's implications.

4.4.2.4 Analysis of Stage A.

Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), an analysis approach commonly applied in qualitative research, was employed in this project to analyse the rich textual data gathered from Stages A, B, and C. (as well as Stage C). Thematic Analysis is a well-established approach that enables the systematic identification, analysis, and reporting of salient themes and patterns within a rich textual dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was particularly well-suited for the present study, as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' perspectives, experiences, and decision-making processes related to educational participation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen for this study over other common qualitative approaches such as grounded theory, ethnography, or phenomenology due to its suitability in exploring the factors influencing young adults' decisions to participate in full-time HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike grounded theory, which aims to develop a new theory from the data (Charmaz, 2007), this study sought to explore and describe the factors influencing educational participation decisions rather than generate a comprehensive theoretical model. Thematic Analysis allowed me to conduct a more focused

examination of these factors, especially how those factors work during certain situations, without the constraints of theory development. Ethnography, with its emphasis on long-term immersion in a cultural group (Creswell & Poth, 2018), was not feasible given the time constraints and the geographically dispersed nature of the participants in this study. Moreover, the research questions were not primarily concerned with the cultural aspects of the participants' experiences. While phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences of individuals (van Manen, 2023), this study aimed to go beyond individual experiences, as well as certain factors, to identify patterns and themes across participants under a specific social context. Furthermore, Thematic Analysis is well-suited for analysing large qualitative datasets (Nowell *et al.*, 2017), making it appropriate for handling the extensive data generated from multiple interviews and focus groups in this study.

To enhance the rigour and reliability of the analysis and address the inherent limitations of Thematic Analysis, this study employed a strategy of methodological triangulation, as recommended by Nowell *et al.* (2017). Specifically, in alignment with the data collection methods employed, the Thematic Analysis was conducted in a multi-staged approach. This approach not only ensures methodological consistency across the various stages of my research but also facilitates cross-comparison of thematic findings between stages through triangulation, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the research results. Furthermore, the data analysis process combined manual transcription and coding with the use of NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software. By integrating both manual and computer-assisted techniques, the study aims to ensure the thoroughness, accuracy, and reliability of the thematic analysis, while minimizing potential researcher bias, particularly given the large and complex dataset resulting from the multi-staged qualitative research design. Furthermore, in alignment with the data collection methods employed, the thematic analysis was conducted in a multi-staged manner. This approach not only ensures methodological consistency across the various stages of the research but also facilitates cross-comparison of thematic findings between stages through triangulation, thereby enhancing the

authenticity and validity of the research results.

The analysis process for Stage A followed a structured sequence of steps. First, as previously outlined, all policy documents that met the research criteria were saved and archived. Details of the policy information collected can be found in [Section 5.1.1](#). During the aggregation of these policy documents, I conducted three rounds of checks to ensure no relevant documents were overlooked. After archiving, I carefully reviewed the contents of these policies. Following this familiarization, I manually highlighted and coded key information before using NVivo 12 for automated coding to verify that no critical details were missed. Upon confirming the coding, I categorized the key content into themes, which were further classified. Finally, these classifications were summarized and discussed according to the different themes identified. For a detailed analysis and discussion of the results, please refer to [Section 5.1](#).

4.4.3 Semi-structured interview: Stage B.

Semi-structured interviews were employed in Stage B of this study to gather rich, in-depth data on the multifaceted factors influencing young adults' decisions regarding full-time HE participation during the COVID-19 pandemic in China (Mainland, n=20). This method was chosen for its flexibility in allowing participants to express their experiences freely while ensuring that the discussion remained focused on the research objectives (Kallio *et al.*, 2016).

The interview protocol was developed based on the theoretical framework outlined in [Section 2.7](#) and the research question framework detailed in [Section 4.3](#). The details of the interview protocol can be found in [Appendix E](#). It was structured to explore influencing factors across three levels: individual, situational, and institutional. This approach allowed for a comprehensive examination of how participants perceived and responded to various influences, revealing complex interactions between these levels that might not have been

apparent through other methods.

For instance, when discussing their decision-making processes, similar situations happened in my research very frequently when participants wove together personal aspirations (individual level) with family expectations (situational level) and policy changes (institutional level). In this context, semi-structured interviews, with their greater flexibility compared to structured interviews, facilitated the rapid adjustment of questioning strategies and allowed for targeted probing, thereby enabling the acquisition of more comprehensive information (Bryman, 2012; Cohen, 2018).

While semi-structured interviews offered numerous advantages, they also presented challenges. Establishing rapport with participants to ensure open and honest communication was crucial (Oltmann, 2016). To address this issue, I implemented a strategy of providing participants with sufficiently detailed information about my research and adhering strictly to ethical guidelines. A more detailed discussion of these ethical considerations will be provided in the ethics section at the end of this chapter ([Section 4.5](#)).

In my research, semi-structured interviews as Stage B offered an approach for in-depth investigation of respondents' experience during the pandemic. For example, I can listen to participants share their past educational experiences, attitudes, and perceptions towards full-time HE, which are individual-level influencing factors. Additionally, I can gain insights into the impacts they perceive in their work or social environments, reflecting situational-level factors. Combined with the policy analysis conducted in Stage A, I can further understand how institutional factors, including policies and cultural context, influence individuals within these settings. More importantly, by asking about factors across all three levels during in-depth semi-structured interviews, I can identify the interactions between different levels of influence and how their combination affects the participants.

4.4.3.1 Sampling strategy and informed consent of Stage B.

This research adopted a snowball sampling method to invite potential participants. Finally, 20 respondents in Mainland China who had decided to enrol in HE programmes during the epidemic were invited to participate in the Stage B information collection (n=20, aged from 20 to 40). To ensure a focus on reverse transition, all participants had a non-consecutive educational path, with a significant gap between their previous full-time student status and their current decision to re-enrol. During this gap, all participants had acquired full-time work experience. The types of HE programmes were unrestricted, but all participants were required to be enrolling in full-time studies. This selection criterion allowed for an exploration of the unique challenges and motivations faced by adults returning to education after a period in the workforce, particularly in the context of the pandemic.

Snowball sampling refers to a non-random sampling approach in which the researcher first establishes contact with a small group of participants and then reaches out to a larger group of participants through their network (Bryman, 2012). One of the most obvious advantages of this approach is processing a targeted selection of potential participants who meet the requirements of the research topic. Snowball sampling may not be an appropriate approach for quantitative research, as the intervention of the researcher may reduce the representativeness of the sample, thus making it difficult to generalise findings to groups (Bryman, 2012). However, for this project, which is based on qualitative research, the aim of the study is not to develop findings that apply to groups but to describe and explore the diversity of changes in HE participation in the unexpected social context of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the participants in this project need to have specific identity characteristics: adults, participants in HE, enrolled after the onset of the epidemic (2020-2022). Therefore, snowball sampling as a typical purposive sampling strategy can help the researcher to artificially screen the sample group and thus quickly target potential participants

who meet the project requirements. Also, snowball sampling allows the researcher to preferential invite participants with different characteristics, for example from different fields of study or work. This will enrich the diversity of information collected.

Snowball sampling offers advantages, especially when studying groups that are challenging to access (Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Bryman, 2012; Bray *et al.*, 2014). It facilitates the researcher's reach into such groups by leveraging established connections within social networks. While the target group for this study may not be hard to access, the precision required in the target population necessitates identifying potential respondents efficiently, a task facilitated by snowball sampling through the social circles of initial participants. Furthermore, snowball sampling is cost-effective in comparison to other complex sampling methods (Bryman, 2012). Its cost-effectiveness lies in the organic transmission of participants through social networks, reducing the resources needed for sample identification and invitation, which can be particularly advantageous when working with a limited research budget. Additionally, snowball sampling provides the researcher with preliminary information about potential participants through the social connections of the initial participants. This information, such as the industry or major, allows for a conscious effort to diversify the sample when extending invitations. Leveraging these advantages, this project adopted snowball sampling as its primary sampling strategy.

While snowball sampling presents its advantages, it also shows challenges. One of the drawbacks is the potential for sample bias (Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Bryman, 2012; Bray *et al.*, 2014). As samples form organically through participants' social connections, certain groups or individuals may be over-represented, leading to a distortion of the overall characteristics of the study population. While the attributes and universality of participant groups are not central to my research, as the focus is primarily on investigating the epidemic's impact on HE decision-making participation, rather than seeking broad conclusions about participant

characteristics during the epidemic. However, the snowball sampling method's inherent characteristics may inadvertently lead to a high degree of overlap in respondents' personal backgrounds. An example was noted where multiple respondents from the same school and major due to the fact that they were introduced by the same initial participant. To mitigate this limitation, efforts were made to prioritize inviting participants from different industries they worked in before they participated in full-time HE during COVID-19, enhancing the diversity of information sources.

Once potential respondents were identified, the researcher forwarded them the project's introduction and invitation message. Upon receiving positive responses, I provided them with a plain language introduction to the project and the informed consent form (see [Section 4.5](#)). Adequate time was offered for potential participants to review the project details and decide on their willingness to participate. Upon receiving the affirmative response and the signing of the informed consent form, a schedule was coordinated for the respondent's interview. For the potential respondents who expressly declined or remained unresponsive within the four-week timeframe and were not pursued further by the researcher, I would no longer extend invitations for their participation in the study. This decision was made to ensure the smooth progression of the research and to obtain a sufficient sample size in a timely manner.

While it is common to present participant demographics in the methodology section, I have chosen to include this information later, in [Table 5e](#) in [Section 5.2.1](#). This decision aligns with the structure of my research, where the sections here focus on the design and theoretical underpinnings of the study. The demographics of the sampled population are presented in the subsequent chapters to contextualize the analysis and findings together to provide a more fluid reading experience on my analysis. By structuring the paper this way, I aim to clearly separate the discussion of research methodology from the actual results of the study.

4.4.3.2 Data collection procedure of Stage B.

Due to the geographical separation between the researcher and the respondents of this project, interviews for this project were conducted online via Tencent Meeting¹⁰. Tencent Meeting is an online conferencing software service provided by the parent company of WeChat and is widely used in Mainland China, with a market position similar to that of Zoom in the UK. However, Zoom was not utilized for this study because it cannot provide stable services in Mainland China. To ensure the confidentiality of respondents' information, each interview involved only the researcher and the respondent. At the beginning of each interview, I provided a brief project overview and reconfirmed the respondent's consent to participate. Following this, I inquired about the respondent's preference for recording the conversation, either through audio or notes. Once all preparations were completed, the one-on-one interview commenced via Tencent, with each session lasting approximately 30-60 minutes. During Stage B, most participants completed their interviews in approximately 40 minutes. The shortest interview lasted 21 minutes (Participant #09), while the longest extended to one hour and 50 minutes (Participant #03).

Before the formal data collection, I conducted a pilot interview with Participant #01 to assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of the interview protocol. This individual, who fit the target demographic criteria, provided valuable feedback on the clarity of the questions, the flow of the discussion, and the overall relevance of the topics covered. While the pilot participant expressed general satisfaction with the research procedures and discussion themes, they also offered a few minor suggestions for slight wording changes to enhance the comprehension of certain questions. I carefully considered these suggestions and made minor adjustments to the interview guide accordingly, to optimize the instrument before commencing the full study. For example, when discussing social relationships, I

¹⁰ <https://meeting.tencent.com/>

initially used the broad and colloquial term ‘people around you’ in Chinese language. However, the pilot participant asked for clarification, seeking a more precise definition. As a result, in subsequent interviews, I refined the wording to specify distinct categories such as colleagues, friends, and family members, to ensure greater accuracy in the questions. Aside from those minor wording adjustments, the overall direction of my research questions remained unchanged, given the positive feedback received from the pilot study.

The formal semi-structured interview protocol I used in Stage B can be found in [Appendix E](#). While the researcher took on the responsibility of posing questions during the interviews, the design of this project encouraged the respondents to take the lead. The questions presented during the interviews were framed around a general direction, serving as a starting point for the discussions. Additional follow-up questions and exploration of specific topics were then dynamically determined based on the details shared by each respondent.

For example, the first question during the interview was ‘First, would you like to share your current role in terms of HE? Like what educational programme are you participating in or what are you researching?’ After receiving the response, I asked further questions, such as ‘How long has this been going on?’, ‘Would you like to share about your past educational experience?’, ‘When did you first have the idea of participating HE programme?’, ‘Why did you have this idea in the very beginning?’

Upon completion of individual one-on-one interviews with each participant, comprehensive documentation including notes and audio recordings was meticulously organized. Subsequently, the analysis of Stage B commenced. Concurrently, all participants from Stage B were extended invitations to participate in Stage C. Moreover, I also disseminated introductory materials and informed consent documents for Stage C, affording respondents ample time for contemplation.

4.4.3.3 Analysis of Stage B.

As in Stage A (as well as Stage C which will be discussed in the later [Section 4.4.4](#)), I employed a Thematic Analysis approach in Stage B to conduct a comprehensive analysis. This consistent analytical method across stages allowed for a cohesive interpretation of data and facilitated the comparison and integration of findings from the three stages of my research. Generally, I conducted the Thematic Analysis method to systematically organize and review the information shared by my respondents during the semi-structured interviews. As mentioned earlier, my participants shared an extensive amount of information throughout this process, with the total length of recorded interviews exceeding ten hours. Given that these insights stem from diverse individual perspectives, I believe that Thematic Analysis is the suitable method for my research design. A detailed discussion on why Thematic Analysis was chosen as the primary analytical method for this research has been provided in the previous [Section 4.4.2.4](#) and will not be repeated here.

The thematic analysis of Stage B involved several key steps: transcribing the interviews, familiarizing with the transcript content, coding, and theme development. Firstly, all audio recordings were manually transcribed into electronic transcripts using both interview recordings and notes. Participants were informed about and provided consent for both the recording and written documentation processes. Next, a meticulous verification process was undertaken whereby each transcript was cross-checked against its corresponding audio recording and notes. Multiple readings were conducted to ensure thorough familiarity with the content of the transcripts. Subsequently, manual coding of the content of each electronic document was performed. Concurrently, NVivo 12 was utilized to extract keywords from the electronic documents, which were then compared with the manually extracted keywords to confirm completeness. Following this, the coded content was categorized, and thematic structures were developed. With the completion of these steps, the thematic analysis of Stage B was essentially concluded. For detailed analysis and discussion of the findings,

please refer to [Section 5.2](#). Additionally, based on the emerging themes identified in Stage B, topics for discussion in Stage C focus groups were formulated.

4.4.4 Online focus group via Padlet: Stage C.

Stage C of this study comprised an online focus group session via Padlet¹¹ (n=17). I will first discuss the rationale for incorporating a focus group in the third stage of my research. Following this, I will explain the reasoning behind selecting Padlet as a research tool, which is a distinctive aspect of my research design.

First, it is essential to delineate the relationship between Stage C and Stage B in order to contextualize the research process effectively. In my research, the implementation of focus group discussions in Stage C plays a vital role in achieving the research objectives and providing a further perspective on all three levels of influencing factors. The topics discussed in Stage C were derived from the content obtained during the semi-structured interviews in Stage B. During the implementation of semi-structured interviews, content deviation emerged as a notable challenge, common in qualitative research due to respondents' active participation (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). In my study, although all participants focused their discussions on their decision-making processes regarding full-time HE during the COVID-19 pandemic, the specific content they covered, particularly the types of influencing factors, did not completely overlap. This led to situations where later respondents introduced topics that earlier ones had not addressed. Despite efforts to address these gaps by incorporating relevant questions in subsequent interviews, the earlier sessions lacked certain information and perspectives. A concrete example in my research can be the concept of 'sunk costs' (further insights on this can be found in [Topic Five of Section 5.3.2](#)) in HE participation was not mentioned until the seventh interview. Although addressed in subsequent sessions, understanding respondents' consideration of sunk costs before the

¹¹ <https://padlet.com>.

seventh interview remains elusive. Hence, Stage C is imperative for a comprehensive exploration of emerging topics from Stage B. For detailed information on the specific topics discussed, their origins, the purpose and significance of these discussions, and the insights gained, please refer to [Section 5.3](#).

At the same time, the focus group allowed for targeted exploration of specific areas where the individual interviews had yielded insufficient or ambiguous data. By introducing these topics to the group, I was able to elicit more diverse perspectives and deeper insights (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 2019). For instance, the focus groups delved into the influence of COVID-19 on the changes of social trends and its relation to educational participation, a theme that emerged as significant but underexplored in the individual interviews (will be discussed in [Topic One of Section 5.3.2](#)).

Moreover, the focus groups facilitated a dynamic interaction among participants, enabling them to build upon each other's responses and collectively construct meaning around shared experiences (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013; Barbour, 2018). This collaborative aspect was particularly valuable in understanding the complex decision-making processes of young adult learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, when discussing the influence of peer pressure (which will be discussed in [Topic Four of Section 5.3.2](#)), participants who held different perceptions engaged in a nuanced debate, revealing layers of complexity that might not have surfaced in individual interviews.

The online format of the focus groups, necessitated by pandemic restrictions, offered unexpected benefits. It allowed for greater geographical diversity among participants and provided a level of anonymity that seemed to encourage more candid responses on sensitive topics (Woodyatt *et al.*, 2016). This was evident in my research, for example, in the discussion about the psychological state of decision-making in the pandemic. Due to Padlet's feature of allowing fully

anonymous online interactions (which will be discussed shortly), some participants introduced perspectives on avoidance behaviour that were not mentioned in the one-on-one interviews. This aspect will be analysed in detail in [Topic Two of Section 5.3.2](#).

Therefore, by conducting online focus groups as the final stage of my data collection, this study achieved a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing educational participation decisions among young adult learners in China during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Stage C of this investigation comprised a Padlet-based focus group. This represents a distinctive and unconventional decision, diverging from traditional focus group methodologies. The idea initially emerged during my master's studies when I was first introduced to Padlet, which led me to consider using it in my doctoral research project. Unfortunately, due to Padlet's common association with teaching rather than research, I was unable to find examples of its application as a focus group tool in Google or other databases. After utilizing Padlet for data collection in my study, I found it to be a highly valuable research method. I hope my experience with this tool will contribute to the creative application of such tools in academic research across various fields in the future.

Generally, Padlet provides a cloud-based software-as-a-service, hosting a real-time collaborative web platform in which users can upload, organize, and share content to virtual bulletin boards. [Figures 4d](#) and [4e](#) on the next page are the sample pages of the application of Padlet in Stage C.

Figure 4d Sample page of Padlet, PC & English version (screenshot).

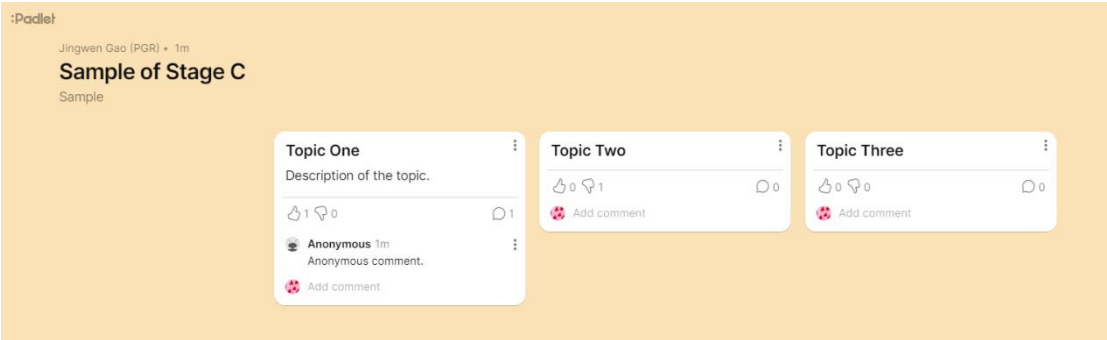
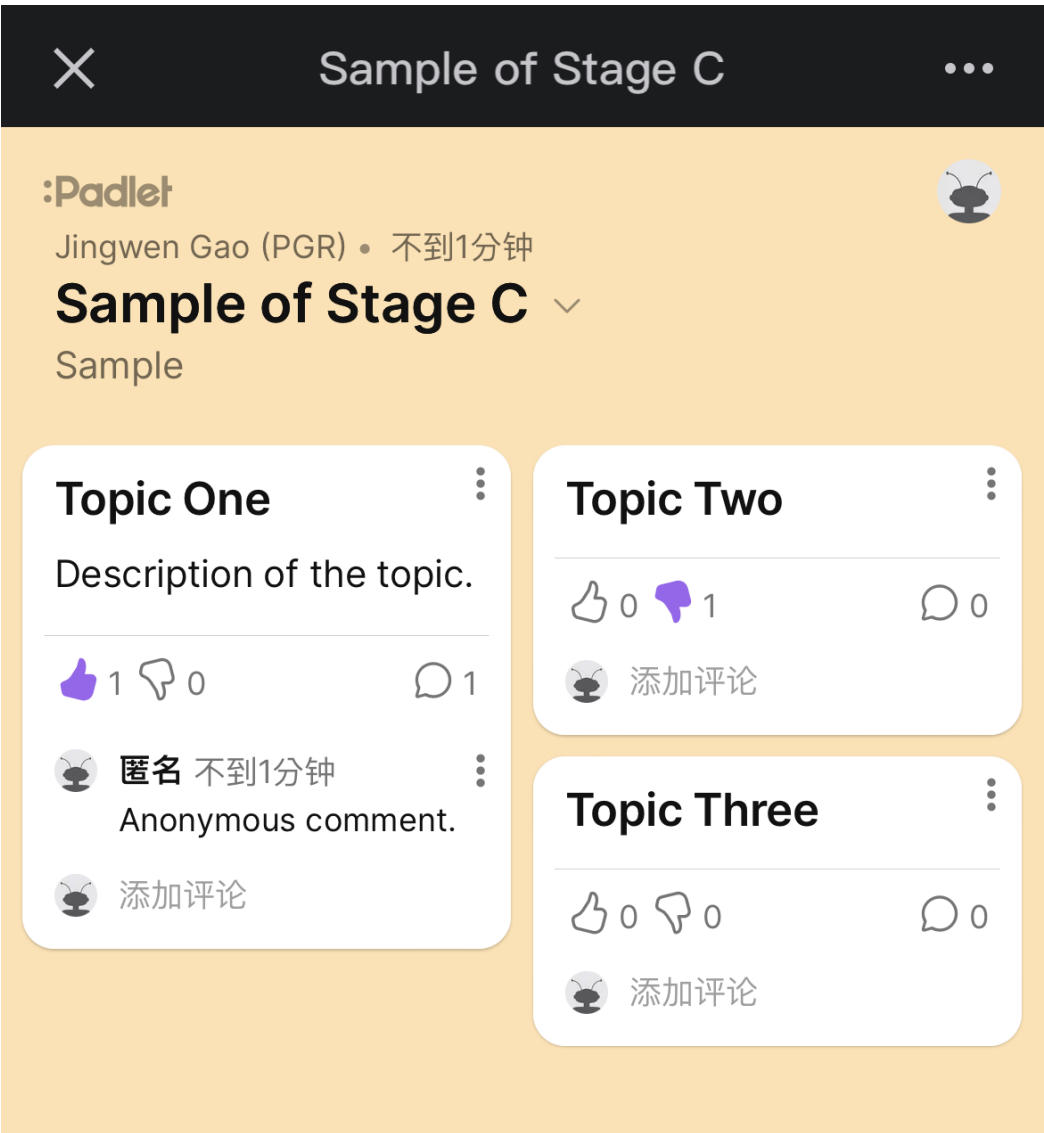


Figure 4e Sample page of Padlet, mobile device & Chinese version (screenshot).



Firstly, Padlet provides the function to achieve the functionalities of a focus group when utilized for information exchange and collection. It facilitates instant communication akin to an online chat room, allows researchers and participants to post discussion topics and questions, and enables free responses to each bulletin without limitations on content or number of participants. Despite deviations from traditional focus group formats, online data collection via Padlet can be viewed as an innovative adaptation of this method for Stage C in this project.

Based on my experience with Padlet prior to the research, extensive testing, and practical use during Stage C, I identified several advantages to using Padlet for conducting online focus groups.

- 1) Given the travel restrictions imposed by the epidemic and the social context in which the epidemic was still ongoing when I was conducting data collection, I want the data collection for this project to be carried out in a non-contact method. An online tool thus can not only greatly improve efficiency but also minimise the risk to participants.
- 2) After conducting pilot research with volunteers living in China (Mainland), I verified that this website provides service and can be used fluently in China, including Chinese language settings, as shown in [Figure 4e](#). This is very important to the success of Stage C because all my respondents are Chinese users from China (Mainland).
- 3) The website can provide an environment for anonymous discussion. Participants simply need to be given the link to access the discussion forum without registering or leaving their identity without registering. At the same time, unlike other online collaborative documentation tools, Padlet's message board nature protects participants' statements while remaining anonymous, more specifically, participants are not able to edit what others have posted, but they can still reply to others' views to show their attitudes. As shown in [Figures 4d](#) and [4e](#), neither I nor other respondents can identify the anonymous

participants.

- 4) As opposed to a focus group in the traditional sense of a 'meeting', discussions on Padlet do not request all participants in the project to attend the activity at the same time. In other words, participants in the study can access the site and post ideas multiple times at any time during Stage C. On the other hand, as the host of the project, I can control the Stage C schedule by managing when discussion pages are open and closed.
- 5) Discussions with multiple people may result in some participants being inactive or even ignored in the discussion. This may be due to the introverted nature of the participants themselves, or because they may feel uncomfortable talking directly to multiple strangers. Therefore, the researcher believes that typing can be used to distance the participants and alleviate the stress of direct communication, thus providing a more comfortable and safer environment for participants to communicate.

However, at the same time, as the focus group via Padlet in data collection for qualitative research is an innovative method in empirical studies, it is still an approach that remains to be explored and improved. The method has the following limitations.

- 1) Due to the complete anonymity of the website, the researcher cannot identify the participants and whether any non-participants entered the website because the participants shared the access URL personally. To reduce this risk, I reminded participants triple times not to share the link during the informed consent, at the end of the interview in Stage B, and before sending the access URL of Stage C.
- 2) Although it is mentioned earlier that the researcher tried to create as much of a less stressful environment for the participants as possible through the online typing exchange on Padlet, as a form of the focus group, there is still the possibility of inactive participants. The varying levels of participation among focus group members is a recognized challenge in this method of data

collection (Krueger & Casey, 2000). While some participants may dominate discussions, others might remain reticent. As Liamputtong (2016) notes, this dynamic can potentially skew the data collected. However, it is crucial to respect participants' autonomy and not coerce reluctant members into sharing their views, as this would be both unethical and potentially detrimental to the validity and reliability of the study (Morgan, 2019). In terms of encouraging active participation in Stage C of my research, participants were reminded to engage in discussions at three intervals: at the onset of Stage C, one week after Stage C commenced, and on the day preceding the conclusion of Stage C.

- 3) Lastly, owing to the complete anonymity ensured by Padlet, even in the role of a host, I cannot ascertain the origin of the viewpoints. This situation might lead to the inability to discern whether multiple similar views originated from different respondents or if they were multiple statements from the same respondent. Such repetition could potentially influence the analysis of the frequency of a particular topic or perception, thus influencing the generalization of findings. However, this limitation does not significantly impact the qualitative nature of my study. Rather than focusing on frequency, my research prioritizes exploring the depth and diversity of viewpoints on specific themes. Therefore, while the research design of Stage C may influence the frequency of specific viewpoints, it does not undermine the overall quality and depth of the study's findings.

In summary, my research required a focus group as the concluding stage of multi-staged data collection. Based on the information gathered, I consider the use of Padlet in my project to be a bold yet relatively successful endeavour.

4.4.4.1 Sampling strategy and informed consent of Stage C

The group of respondents in Stage C remains the same as in Stage B. After the respondents completed their interviews, I extended an invitation to them to participate in Stage C. Following a positive response to the invitation, the

researcher provided the respondent with a plain language introduction and an informed consent form for Stage C. Participation in Stage C is entirely voluntary, and if the respondent chose not to continue, the researcher did not issue further invitations. Potential Stage C participants were given sufficient time to familiarize themselves with the project and confirm their willingness to be part of the study.

The high level of participant engagement across the multi-staged research design was a key strength of this study. Out of the original 20 respondents, 17 individuals (85%) opted to continue their involvement in the more intensive Stage C focus groups. This exceptionally high retention rate throughout the extended research timeframe underscores the salience of the research topic for the target population of young adult learners in full-time HE. The willingness of the majority of participants to dedicate additional time and effort to the latter stages of the study speaks to the relevance and importance of exploring the educational experiences and decision-making of this demographic group, particularly in the context of major societal disruptions.

4.4.4.2 Data collection procedure of Stages C.

Upon confirming respondent participation and the designated timeframe for the focus group, information collection for Stage C commences. The researcher posted questions for discussion on the webpage, providing the link and access password to all respondents. Respondents had a 14-day window to engage with the platform. The researcher retains the ability to introduce new topics based on the evolving discourse. Discussions are conducted anonymously, permitting respondents to edit their comments without affecting others' contributions. Reminders were issued on the first, fifth, and tenth days to encourage continued participation.

The discussion topics for Stage C were derived from a thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews conducted in Stage B. Six questions across five topics were ultimately explored, and selected based on two primary reasons. First, these

topics emerged as recurring themes across multiple interviews in Stage B, indicating their significance to the respondents. Second, due to the sequential nature of the one-on-one interviews in Stage B, some topics were raised by later interviewees, precluding the opportunity to gather perspectives from earlier participants. Stage C provided a platform to address this limitation and ensure a more comprehensive exploration of these emerging themes. Ultimately, six questions across five topics were explored. The topics are: 1) the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on social trends; 2) the influence of the epidemic on the mentality of individuals; 3) the diploma devaluation and the COVID-19 pandemic; 4) peer pressure and the COVID-19 pandemic; and 5) the role of 'sunk cost'.

As mentioned above, a further discussion on the sources of those topics is discussed in [Section 5.3.2](#). At the conclusion of the discussion period, the researcher closed access, archived the webpage, and initiated the analysis of Stage C data.

4.4.4.3 Analysis of Stage C.

As in Stages A and B, I employed a Thematic Analysis approach in Stage C to conduct a comprehensive analysis. This consistent analytical method across stages allowed for a cohesive interpretation of data and facilitated the comparison and integration of findings from the three stages of my research. To be more specific, this analytical method aimed to systematically organize the data collected in the focus groups and investigate the central ideas emerging from the participants' discussions, thereby enhancing the depth of understanding regarding the research questions. A detailed discussion on why Thematic Analysis was chosen as the primary analytical method for this research has been provided in the previous [Section 4.4.2.4](#) and will not be repeated here. The processing of the focus group data involved the following three steps.

Initially, transcripts of discussions on all themes were archived and organized.

Given that this stage was conducted through Padlet, the entire discussion could be directly archived as a PDF document. This preliminary collation formed the basis for the subsequent thematic analysis. Subsequently, an initial coding of themes was carried out to categorize the questions discussed by the focus groups into themes based on content. This step aimed to establish an initial coding system, providing a thematic framework for further analysis. The final step involved a more profound exploration of the information and discussion processes presented by the respondents under each theme. This process focused on synthesizing the perspectives, identifying the core ideas underlying the viewpoints, understanding the cognitive logic exhibited by the respondents during the discussion, and learning the intersections of viewpoints among the respondents. For more in-depth details and discussion, please refer to [Section 5.3](#).

4.5 Research ethics.

Ethical considerations have been paramount throughout this study. While ethical discourse in research has a long history, recent years have witnessed an unprecedented focus on research ethics, particularly in social sciences (Israel, 2015). This heightened attention to ethics, however, varies across different research topics and methodologies (Iphofen & Tolich, 2018). As Hammersley and Traianou (2012) argue, the acceptability and application of ethical principles can differ significantly depending on the nature and context of the research being conducted. This project takes a universalist stance, which posits that ethical principles should be applied universally across all research contexts (Bryman, 2012). This approach is appropriate for the investigation as this project does not involve highly private personal information, nor does it require deception or concealment to ensure validity. Universalism in research ethics emphasizes the importance of maintaining consistent ethical standards regardless of the specific research setting or cultural context. As a result, it means that all participants will be treated with the same level of respect, confidentiality, and ethical consideration, regardless of their individual backgrounds or the specific details of

their experiences. In my research, this means that participants were informed of all information about the project, including the identity of the researcher, the research questions and objectives to be discussed, the data collection and analysis methods, etc. This applied across all facets of the entire research endeavour, particularly in Stages B and C, as both stages entailed direct contact with the participants in my research project.

The initial point to address is that the University of Glasgow had officially authorized the ethical application of this project in June 2022. All procedures, particularly those related to data collection and analysis, strictly adhere to the protocols outlined in the ethics application. The commencement of data and information collection for both phases of the study only occurred subsequent to obtaining formal approval.

Stage A the policy analysis, occupies a unique position within my multi-stage research design, as its focus is solely on relevant policy documents during the pandemic and does not involve any participant groups. To ensure the legitimacy of my research, all the policy documents analysed are authentic and sourced from legally accessible platforms. In Appendices A and B, I have provided the URLs where these policy documents can still be accessed before the thesis submission. The subsequent ethical discussions will primarily concentrate on Stages B and C, as these stages involve participant groups.

Diener and Crandall (1978) grouped the ethics of social science research into four main perspectives, which are 1) whether there is harm to participants, 2) whether there is a lack of informed consent, 3) whether there is an invasion of privacy, and 4) whether deception is involved. Firstly, the data collection for this project (especially Stages B & C, hereafter the same) was conducted entirely online to minimise the possible physical harm and privacy exploration. Also, I fully respected the participants' schedules for conducting the interviews in case the project got in the way of the participants' own lives. As for Stage C, which required

the collective participation of all respondents, I employed Padlet, as discussed earlier, to maximize the coordination of different participants' schedules.

Secondly, as mentioned above, the study adhered to strict ethical principles to confirm informed consent from the participants, and due to the topic of this project, the researcher did not intend to involve any deception. Given the potential differences in participant involvement between the two stages (indeed, 3 Stage B respondents did not participate in Stage C), I sought informed consent separately for each stage. Consequently, I believe that the greatest ethical challenge of this study centres on the collection of private information and whether there is a risk of harm to the participants' psychological well-being from the collection.

From the aspect of the source of the information, the project strictly complied with ethical regulations and avoided, as far as possible, the collection of private and, in particular, highly sensitive information from the participants. Throughout Stage B, participants possess complete control over the information they disclose. Should a participant wish to retract or omit information shared with the researcher, they have the right to do so. This option was explicitly communicated to participants in both the project description and the informed consent form to ensure their awareness and consent. From the perspective of the source, the study avoided any intentional information collection that is unnecessary or less relevant to the research questions of this project, especially sensitive information such as religion, gender and sexual orientation, home address family information, etc.

However, as the topic of this project is the factors related to the decision-making of participation in HE during the COVID-19 pandemic, participants intentionally or unconsciously disclosed sensitive information about themselves, such as marital status, educational status, income, and job, during the interview process. Similarly, the researcher's follow-up questions for details also involved sensitive information that was not part of the research design. This unconscious disclosure

and crossing of boundaries might cause negative emotions such as stress to be felt by the participant and thus there is a risk of harming the participant (Bryman, 2012). In order to minimise the influence on participants, the researcher re-emphasised the use and storage of data for this project prior to the start of the interview and did not intentionally ask for relevant information during the interview. If a participant initially raised a sensitive topic that necessitated a follow-up question, the researcher would remind them. Should any discomfort arise during this exchange, participants retained the right to request skipping the topic, to request the researcher not to document that portion of the discussion, or to withdraw from the project entirely at any stage.

Fortunately, during my interview stage (and the subsequent focus group stage), there were no instances where participants felt uncomfortable with the topics discussed. However, there were cases where respondents requested the withdrawal of certain shared information. For instance, during one interview, a respondent shared a negative past work experience and described how this experience influenced his decision to participate in full-time HE. The participant was very relaxed during the conversation and provided detailed descriptions to illustrate the situation. However, afterwards, he requested that these specific details be excluded from the record due to concerns about the potential identification of his past workplace and city, given the small size of the local industry.

To address this, I omitted the requested details during the transcription process and used markers to remind myself of the redacted information. These details were also excluded from this thesis. However, those situations did not impact my research, as my focus is on the interaction between different levels of influencing factors and participants' decision-making behaviours (in this case, how a negative work experience, as a situational level factor, influenced the participant's decision), rather than the specific processes through which these influencing factors were formed (how the negative work experience came to be).

In Stage C, no participants requested the withdrawal of any information. This can be attributed to my choice of Padlet as a research tool, which allows participants to freely delete their own contributions. As discussed earlier, this is not reiterated here.

From the aspect of the destination of the information, the project strictly controls the storage and analysis of the information. All information is stored and processed in strict accordance with the contents of the ethical application approved by the University of Glasgow. Firstly, all information, including the personal information of participants, and information shared by participants in the interview, was stored electronically in the University of Glasgow's drive in accordance with the relevant regulations. Secondly, during the analysis and discussion process, all the participants were coded and referred to in pseudonyms during the analysis and writing of the project, so as to ensure that no one other than the researcher could identify the participants. Finally, all data and information collected for this project were only used for this project.

Chapter Five Findings and discussion.

This chapter presents the key findings of my study, offering a comprehensive analysis of the data collected on young adults' (20-40 years old) decision-making process related to full-time HE against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter is structured to address each stage of my research systematically to provide a holistic understanding of the phenomena under investigation from Stage A policy analysis ([Section 5.1](#)), Stage B semi-structured interviews ([Section 5.2](#)), to Stage C focus group ([Section 5.3](#)).

Generally, this chapter begins by presenting the results of Stage A policy analysis. This is followed by an in-depth exploration of the insights gained from Stage B semi-structured interviews, which serve to elucidate and contextualize the findings under the political background shown via Stage A. Finally, the discussion of findings represents the result of the Stage C focus group via Padlet. The findings in this stage highlight the exchange of perspectives among participants on the same topic. This interaction provides a deeper understanding of how different individuals perceive and respond to the challenges and opportunities associated with full-time HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is also [Section 5.4](#) to summarise the findings of all three stages in order to provide a more systematic picture of Chapter Five.

5.1 Stage A: policy analysis.

As I mentioned in [Section 4.3](#), one of my research questions is to investigate how institutional factors influence the decision-making process of potential young adult participants in full-time HE in China (Mainland) during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, before delving deeper into exploring the decision-making experiences of the respondents (Stages B & C), it is essential to first understand the social environment they are situated in. This understanding better support me to comprehend their circumstances, feelings, and behaviours during our

interactions.

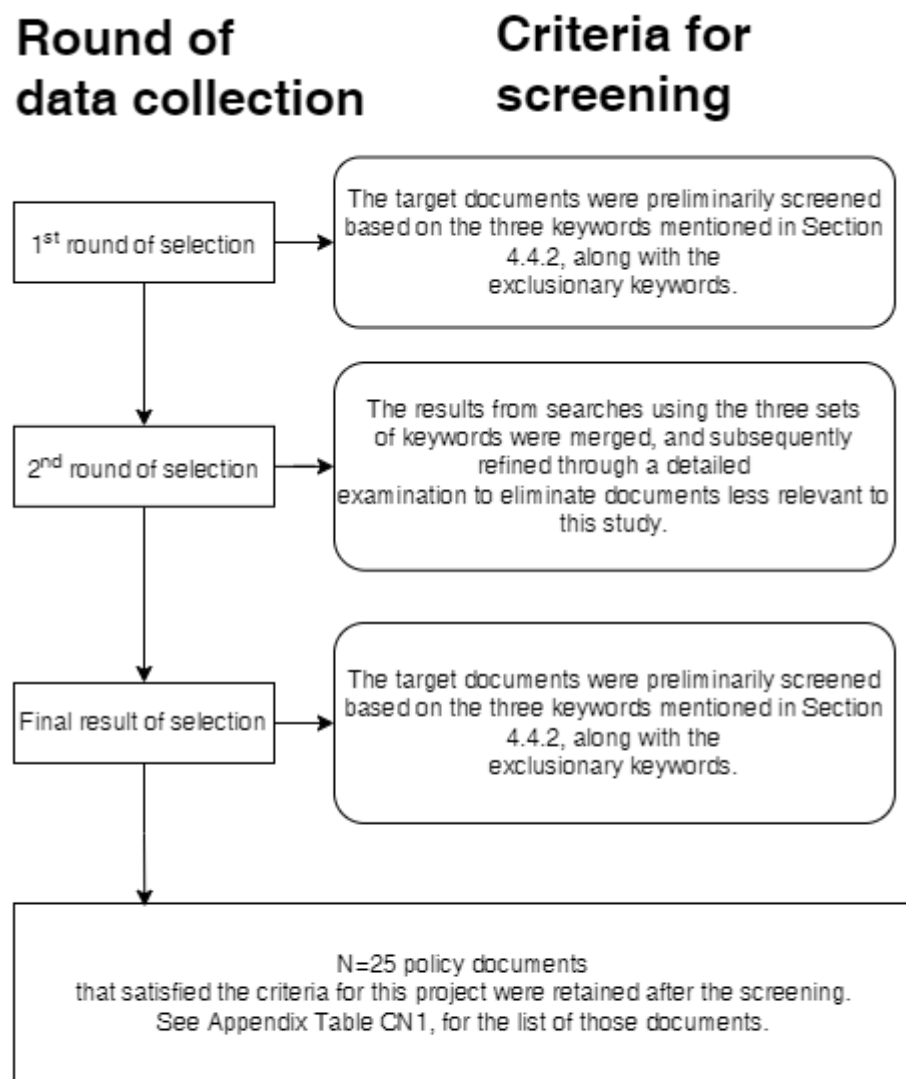
Compared to other representative institutional factors - such as culture and social atmosphere, which are more abstract and subjective - the institutional factors manifested through policy regulations are more concrete. Different individuals within the same area might perceive culture and social atmosphere differently, but the policies enacted are consistent and can be clearly searched by me. This provided a clearer understanding of the government's stance and actions regarding HE during the pandemic. Consequently, this approach enhanced my efficiency in understanding the information shared by respondents in Stages B and C, allowing me to allocate more time and effort towards exploring other relatively subjective institutional factors such as cultural and social atmosphere, as well as individual and situational factors.

Based on the considerations outlined above, I designed a critical policy analysis as Stage A of my thesis. The results of this analysis are summarized in this subsection. [Section 5.1](#) focuses on the data collection results and thematic analysis of Stage A. Generally, three subsections are included in [Section 5.1](#). To begin with, I introduce the result of policy collection following the research design ([Section 4.4.2](#)) in [Section 5.1.1](#). Based on the results, a thematic analysis is shown in [Section 5.1.2](#) to conduct an investigation of the political background faced by my target population during the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, [Section 5.1.3](#) is a summarisation of Stage A analysis.

5.1.1 The result of policy documents collection.

Based on the research design of Stage A in this project (see [Section 4.4.2](#)), [Table 5a](#) on the following page is an overview of the result of Stage A.

Table 5a Overview of the data collection of Stage A.



Final results of Stage A data collection

The initial round of data collection was conducted based on the five databases mentioned in [Section 4.4.2](#), concurrently employing the keyword selection procedure outlined therein. [Table 5b](#) presents a summary of the keyword screening process. For a detailed explanation of the selection process for both the inclusion and exclusion keywords used in this study, please refer to [Section 4.4.2](#), where the research design for Stage A is thoroughly discussed.

Table 5b Summary of Stage A data collection.

Keyword	成人教育 Adult education	高等教育 Higher education	学历教育 Degree education
Total document count from keyword search based on the 1 st round of selection.	16	122	60
Excluded document count based on the 2 nd round of selection.	9	50	43
Retained document count in the final analysis of Stage A.	7	72	17

Finally, 25 policy documents that satisfied the criteria for this project were retained after the screening. See [Appendix A Table CN1](#), for the list of those documents.

5.1.2 Thematic analysis of policies related to HE of China (Mainland) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this section, I will conduct a thorough analysis of the data collected during the policy analysis stage. This analysis is focused on understanding the content and implications of relevant policies, as well as their potential impact on the decision-making processes of potential HE participants. To be more specific, I embark on a thematic analysis of policy documents related to HE of China during the COVID-19 pandemic based on the files listed in [Appendix A](#). This stage is integral to my research, which investigates the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on decision-making behaviours in HE participation. The reason for examining policy documents from the pandemic period is rooted in Stage B&C, during which I conducted interviews and focus groups with HE participants. Therefore, it is imperative to analyse these policy documents beforehand to understand the social environment in which the respondents are situated. This analysis directly addresses my research question by illuminating one aspect of institutional factors, represented by policy context, that influence young adults' decision-making processes regarding

participating in full-time HE programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, failing to analyse these policy documents in advance may result in a limited comprehension of their decision-making processes, as I may overlook the influence of policy changes. Moreover, the policy documents reflect the national responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of the HE industry, which constitutes a significant aspect of the pandemic's influence. By examining these policy documents, I can better understand how individual, situational, and institutional factors interact to shape the decision-making processes of potential young adult participants during the pandemic. This analysis is particularly valuable in supporting me in comprehending the personal experiences and perspectives shared by my respondent group in the subsequent Stages B&C. Consequently, this approach enables me to provide more comprehensive answers to my research questions and enrich the application of my theoretical framework.

Generally, there are two themes extracted from the documents. [Theme One](#) pertained to a new option available for HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. As an emerging alternative to full-time HE participation during the pandemic, the second bachelor's degree warrants dedicated discussion due to the substantial volume of policy documents pertaining to it. Consequently, it is addressed as an independent theme in this section. Other policy measures with relatively fewer relevant documents are collectively examined under the section as [Theme Two](#), which included governmental support for the healthcare industry and employment support for HE graduates.

As mentioned in [Section 3.2](#), a comprehensive list of coded educational policies related to the pandemic can be found in [Appendix A - Table CN1](#), and those related to pre-pandemic policies are listed in [Appendix B - Table CN2](#). Those two kinds of policies were listed in separate appendixes to provide a clearer comparison between pre-pandemic and pandemic-related educational policies. As I indicated when quoting Chinese policy documents in the previous [Section 3.2](#), I will annotate the corresponding policy document code rather than using APA format citations,

allowing readers to quickly locate the referenced policies. Additionally, due to the unique nature of policy document presentation (as shown in [Appendix D](#)), the citations for policy documents in this thesis do not include page numbers.

Theme One: SBD as a new alternative to HE during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When analysing policy documents and their influence on all agents involved in HE, it is first necessary to clarify who is the subject exerting the influence. Policy documents are formulated by government departments or institutions to address certain issues or achieve certain goals. Therefore, the subject that exerts influence on all agents involved in HE via policy documents is in fact a collection of government agencies that achieve their decisions by enacting policies. As can be seen from the analysis in the later part of this text, policies related to HE are not only concentrated in a single department such as the Ministry of Education. Therefore, I think it is unreasonable to use the name of a specific department to refer to the decision-making body of the policy document. At the same time, the subject that exerts influence on all parties involved through policy documents is sometimes not only the decision-making department but also a management system consisting of multiple subjects, such as the academic record system which will be discussed later. Combining the above ideas, in order to more accurately refer to this collection of subjects that exert influence through policy documents and to make the reading more concise, I use 'the system' to refer to this large collection in the description below.

The changes in the variety of HE programmes endorsed by the educational system are important to investigate when exploring the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on decision-making factors related to HE participation. Understanding how the pandemic has influenced the expansion or reduction of educational program types is crucial for several reasons. The fluctuations in available HE programmes directly influence individuals' decision-making processes regarding HE participation. On one hand, potential HE participants may seek programmes

that align with their career objectives, interests, or the constraints imposed by the pandemic. The expansion or reduction of programme types may imply more or fewer options that cater to the needs of potential participants. On the other hand, by investigating the changes in the variety of educational offerings during the pandemic, I can gain a better understanding of the background factors influencing HE decision-making. This, in turn, supports in comprehension of the choices faced by my respondents during the pandemic in subsequent interviews and focus groups.

In general, the changes in China's system regarding the recognition of programme types/levels related to HE during the pandemic have primarily focused on the addition of the Second Bachelor's Degree as an independent educational programme and a HE level. Other programmes have not exhibited significant changes in terms of types and classification. (For further discussion on other HE programmes in China, please refer to Section 3.2). To be more precise, the Second Bachelor's Degree (SBD) is not a completely new-added educational programme and level, but rather a reinstatement of a discontinued (in 2019) HE programme in China. To support a comprehensive discussion on this topic, I first explored how SBD programmes changed through time in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus on SBD programmes is particularly significant as they transformed non-existence to existence in the system during the pandemic. In contrast, other full-time HE programmes primarily experienced operational adjustments rather than structural changes. Discussions regarding these other programmes are addressed separately in [Theme Two](#) of this section. Then, I analysed what influence these changes could have on the various groups linked with the relaunch of the SBD programme (in 2020) and how these effects could influence the motivation/barriers to participate in HE programmes.

i. The function and development of SBD before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The SBD project was first implemented as small-scale experiments in a few of China's HE institutions in 1984, and it was legally included in the educational system in its entirety in 1987¹². First, it is crucial to briefly present the SBD as a degree level that does not fall under the purview of conventional HE. In contrast to the more well-known degrees such as Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, or Doctoral degree, the SBD is not a degree level that has been produced on a big scale globally. Therefore, I have chosen three HE programmes from the Chinese HE system that, due to their names or positions in the hierarchy, are confusingly similar to SBD programmes. See [Table 5c](#) next page for a general distinction. Note that the SBD programme summarized here is based on the pre-epidemic model, while it changed considerably since the outbreak, the table for comparing old and new SBD models is included and further discussed in the second part of this section.

¹² See CN2.1

Table 5c A brief distinction between four concepts in the context of Chinese society¹³.

	Master's degree	SBD (before 2020)	Bachelor's degree	'Double degree' ¹⁴
Contents of courses	Postgraduate level education in related fields.	Undergraduate-level education in related fields, but participants are not required to take the undergraduate foundation courses they have already completed.	Undergraduate level education in related fields.	The double degree gives students the opportunity to take additional courses in different fields on top of the general undergraduate education. The graduates will only be granted ONE undergraduate degree.
Enrolment	The application is open to those who are honoured with a bachelor's degree and fresh undergraduates.	The application process is open to those who have already obtained a bachelor's degree.	The application is open to those who graduate from high school, and all the applicants will compete together, regardless of whether this is their first bachelor's degree.	Similar to bachelor's degree programmes. However, highly able learners are often selected through an additional selection process organized by institutions.
Duration of participation (full-time in general)	Two or three years	Two years (Less time than an undergraduate degree due to being exempted from already studied basic courses.)	Four years (up to five years for specific majors, such as healthcare)	Four years (up to five years for specific majors, such as healthcare)
Levels in system	Master's degree level		Bachelor's degree level	

¹³ See CN2.1, 2.4, 2.5; Please note that, as discussed above, the Ministry of Education's credentials verification system is responsible for centrally managing the awarding of degrees for all academic higher education in the Chinese social context. As a result, the examples given here are based on their pertinent legislation in the education management policy and not for particular universities in China.

¹⁴ In the credentials verification system, double degree is not a formally recognized concept but only been regarded as a special form of bachelor's degree programmes provided by certain higher education institutions to highly able students. For instance, due to a student's qualities, his school offers him the chance to enrol in a double degree programme in both sociology and economics. This means he will spend four years (same as other general undergraduates) studying both majors. He will eventually receive only ONE bachelor's degree, but his certificate and file will indicate that he majored in sociology and economics.

Since double degrees are special university-led HE programmes and are not regarded as a formal degree level and are considered as a form of undergraduate degree in the credentials verification system, the subsequent discussion will only focus on undergraduate degrees, master's degrees, and SBDs. As shown in the table, SBD differs from the two other degrees in three key ways: the requirements for enrolment, the contents of courses, and levels in the credentials verification system (Information regarding China's certificate verification system can be found in [Section 3.2](#)). On the one hand, according to the 'Trial Measures for the Training of SBD Students in Higher Education Institutions', which is the official policy document from the Ministry of Education announcing the launch of the SBD programme in China¹⁵, individuals in the SBD programme must be honoured with at least a bachelor's degree. As a result, the entry requirements for SBD are rather close to those for the master's degree programme in the Chinese educational system¹⁶.

'The target students of the second bachelor's degree programme are mainly working people who have graduated from universities and obtained a bachelor's degree (including graduates of universities before the implementation of the degree system. Hereinafter referred to as working people). In accordance with the special needs of the country, a small number of fresh graduates who have graduated from universities and obtained bachelor's degree (including students who have completed their studies early and obtained bachelor's degree according to the credit system) can also be enrolled. (hereinafter referred to as current students).'

(Article 5, from CN2.1, 'Trial Measures for the Training of SBD Students in Higher Education Institutions')

¹⁵ See CN2.1

¹⁶ See CN2.4, 2.5

At the same time, the SBD is distinctive in that it is taught at the same intellectual level and with the same content as an undergraduate degree, but in the credentials verification system, it is equated to a master's degree level.

‘.....if a student has completed a certain undergraduate course in one discipline, has been granted graduation and obtained a bachelor's degree, and then studies a certain undergraduate course in another discipline, completes all the requirements stipulated in the teaching plan, passes the grade and is granted graduation, the student may be granted a second bachelor's degree’.

(Article 2, from CN2.1, ‘Trial Measures for the Training of SBD Students in Higher Education Institutions’)

‘The training of second degree students, which belongs to post-undergraduate education in terms of level, is a way to train high-level specialists, just like the training of postgraduates’.

(Article 1, from CN2.1, ‘Trial Measures for the Training of SBD Students in Higher Education Institutions’)

The source of this contradictory situation still needs to be traced back to the official launch policy document of the SBD¹⁷. According to the document, the core reason for the establishment of the SBD in the Chinese education system was:

‘From the preliminary practice and social reflection, the adoption of the second bachelor's degree approach and the planned cultivation of high-level specialists in certain applied disciplines are complementary to the cultivation of postgraduates and more suitable for the actual

¹⁷ See CN2.1

needs of the construction of the four cultures’.

(Introduction, from CN2.1, ‘Trial Measures for the Training of SBD Students in Higher Education Institutions’)

The purpose of using SBD to address the developmental needs of emerging technologies and industries can be glimpsed from relevant policy documents. After the first policy document published about the SBD, this new form of degree was first mentioned in a policy document that supported the establishment of software engineering colleges nationwide in 2001¹⁸, which coincided with the explosion of information technology at the start of the twenty-first century. This illustration further demonstrates that the SBD programme was established with the primary objective of supplying particular talents that are desperately required in the modern labour market. Similar examples can be found in the case of national integrated circuits in 2003, criminal police in 2005, minority languages and traditional Chinese sports in 2006, and teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages in 2008. These policies tailored to specific sectors align with the social and technological landscape of their respective times, confirming the original intent behind the establishment of the SBD programme.

However, on the one hand, due to the interdisciplinary talents demanded by Chinese society at the time, the SBD programme was classified in the credentials verification system as an HE programme equivalent to postgraduate qualifications, as they shared the same code in the regulatory structure I discussed in [Section 3.2.1](#). On the other hand, as a supplementary programme rather than a substitute for graduate education, the teaching content of SBD remains at the undergraduate level. Despite its duration mirroring that of a typical master’s degree, this similarity appears coincidental rather than intentional. SBD programmes are designed for participants with prior undergraduate experience, allowing them to

¹⁸ See CN2.6

bypass basic courses they have already completed¹⁹. This structure explains why SBD, while undergraduate level, is typically two years shorter than general undergraduate programmes. The programme's design efficiently accommodates students' existing knowledge, focusing on advancing their education within a condensed timeframe. This contradiction between content and certification positioning has led to awkward situations for SBD holders in the labour market and has also laid the groundwork for the subsequent abolition of the SBD.

Put simply, the mismatch between skill levels and educational certification levels leads the market spontaneously hold a lowered assessment of SBD's value (Zhang, 2013; Song, 2020; Wang, 2020; Yu, 2021). This assertion can be supported by both the content of policy documents and theoretical perspectives. On the one hand, from the perspective of human capital theory and signalling model, the SBD programme's lower entry and graduation requirements compared to graduate programmes, coupled with its curriculum mirroring undergraduate education and shorter duration relative to two undergraduate programmes, may lead to scepticism in the labour market regarding the productivity of SBD graduates (Zhang, 2013). The negative assessment of the labour market may, in turn, lead potential participants of the SBD programme to question the worthiness of investing in this human capital, thus influencing their decision-making regarding participation in the SBD programme (Zhang, 2013; Wang, 2020). On the other hand, from the perspective of policy documents, the minimum wage for SBD graduates is the same as that for master's degree graduates, meaning that both should be guaranteed the same wage rate in the labour market, according to '*Trial Measures for the Training of SBD Students in Higher Education Institutions* issued in 1987. The reason for referring 1987 version (rather than the more recent version) is that this file was issued to correspond with the SBD, which had just been established at the same time. Because the SBD (before 2020) has already been recognized at the same level as a master's degree in the credentials verification system and the

¹⁹ See CN2.1, 2.4, 2.5.

minimum pay guarantee for graduates of HE is broken down by educational levels instead of programmes, the SBD programme is not particularly mentioned in other minimum wage standard papers. This means that hiring SBD graduates costs more than hiring other undergraduates, or the cost can be equal to hiring a master's degree holder. Therefore, SBD graduates' competitiveness in the job market may suffer if they do not have a distinct advantage over the typical bachelor's or master's graduate in this situation.

Since the notice of the supporting criminal science and technology SBD programme in 2004²⁰, SBD programmes received almost no mention in the pertinent policy documents, with the exception of the annual announcement and approval of applications for SBD programmes, which have been documented since 2002. Apart from the absence of specific policy documents targeting the SBD program, a sharp contrast emerged when comparing it to the vibrant growth observed in the national HE sector. Since 2013, there has been no addition of new majors in the usual approval process for SBD university courses. As a result, as the graduate education industry in China steadily expanded, the SBD, conceived as a special product amid the inadequacies of graduate education development, began to lose the attention of the market. This viewpoint is supported by numerous studies focusing on Chinese HE and SBD (Yang, 2010b; Song, 2020; Zhou *et al.*, 2020; Lu, 2022). Against the backdrop of the continuous expansion of graduate education and the gradual decline of the SBD programme, the Chinese education system officially halted the SBD programme in 2019.

ii. The relaunch of SBD after COVID-19 pandemic: a comparison between SBD before and after 2020.

The system (especially the department related to credentials verification) would no longer admit SBD students as of the document's effective date, according to

²⁰ See CN2.3

‘Notice of the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council on the Issuance of the Administrative Measures for the Authorization and Award of Bachelor’s Degrees, which was published on July 9, 2019²¹. This implied that the credential verification system no longer provided credential certification for new SBD entrants after its discontinuation. It also signified that at the institutional level of China’s education system, the SBD programme no longer received recognition from the government.

However, the SBD programme was promptly reinstated following the release of the Circular of the General Office of the Ministry of Education on the Continuation of SBD Education in General Universities on May 22, 2020²². Considering SBD follows (both before and after 2020) a system where new cohorts of students start their studies every September, this means the relaunch of SBD only one academic year apart. At the same time, a number of adjustments were made to the SBD programme following the pandemic, and these changes also had a significant influence on the related population to which the SBD programme is linked. In the following, for ease of differentiation, I will use ‘previous SBD’ to refer to SBD programmes that were stopped by the education department in 2019 and ‘new SBD’ to refer to SBD programmes that were restarted by the education department in 2020 after the outbreak.

While retaining the nomenclature of the ‘Second Bachelor’s Degree’, significant distinctions exist between the old and new iterations of the programme. Foremost among these is the modification of the SBD’s functionalities. In the new SBD framework, the description of serving as a supplement to master’s education and providing interdisciplinary talents has been omitted. Instead, explicit references to addressing societal impacts stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic have been

²¹ See CN2.2

²² See CN1.1

incorporated into relevant policy documents²³.

‘In order to implement the spirit of ‘Implementation Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Strengthening Measures to Stabilize Employment in Response to the Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic’ ([2020] No. 6), further optimize the talent training structure, create more re-learning opportunities for college graduates and enhance students’ employability and entrepreneurship, it was decided to continue the second bachelor’s degree education in general colleges and universities’.

(Introduction, from CN1.1, ‘Circular of the General Office of the Ministry of Education on the Continuation of SBD Education in General Universities’)

In this context, the expression of ‘the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on Chinese society’ represents a somewhat ambiguous concept. Upon closer examination of policy documents after the outbreak, it becomes evident that the focus of this impact centres around the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Chinese job market. This observation can be substantiated through the lens of social facts (Durkheim, 1897/1970) and human capital theory (Becker, 1976; Bourdieu, 1986), as well as by examining relevant policy documents.

Firstly, from a social and cultural standpoint, the outbreak coincided with the Chinese New Year (after February 2020). As a result, this period represents a significant shift in the Chinese labour market for those who are previously employed, and fresh graduates are also beginning to enter the workforce at this time through internships or pre-recruitment (Liu & Lu, 2011; Wang, 2018; Zhao, 2018). However, in response to the virus’s contagious nature, most provinces in

²³ See CN1.1, 1.2

China implemented distance learning and remote work policies after the New Year holidays to minimize human contact²⁴. Despite efforts to adapt to these measures, the epidemic inevitably decreased operational efficiency and profits, particularly in sectors heavily reliant on offline work. This economic downturn significantly impacted the labour market, especially for HE graduates (Zhou *et al.*, 2020; Lu, 2022). Zhou *et al.* (2020) and Lu (2022) both conducted comprehensive analyses based on official data from China's Ministry of Education and enrolment and graduation figures across various HE programmes, aimed to conduct analysis and prediction on the restart of the SBD programme after the outbreak. Their studies both concluded that the unprecedented employment pressure due to the outbreak.

Therefore, this timing aligns with Cross's Chain-of-response model (1981), highlighting how external conditions can trigger educational participation decisions. The implementation of distance learning and remote work policies in response to the virus's contagious nature inadvertently created barriers to education and employment, as described in Cross's classification of barriers (1981). Especially when facing a rather negative labour market, individuals may re-evaluate the costs and outcomes of education participation. This situation can be analysed through the prism of human capital theory (Becker, 1976), where individuals' educational investments are closely tied to labour market outcomes. The unprecedented employment pressure faced by graduates in 2020 potentially influenced their motivation to pursue further education, a phenomenon that can be understood using Houle's Typology (1961) of learning motivations and the AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992).

Secondly, subsequent policy documents further validate this timing. The paper to resume conducting the SBD programme explicitly states that the relaunch is in accordance with the 'Implementation Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Strengthening Measures to Stabilize Employment in Response to the

²⁴ See CN1.19

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic’²⁵. In addition to being explicitly mentioned in this paper, the relationship between this decision and the stabilisation of the job market is also heavily reflected in the succeeding measures, specifically in terms of regarding the relaunch of SBD as a method to release the employment pressure caused by COVID-19 pandemic²⁶. The policy response to this situation, particularly the relaunch of the SBD programme, reflects an attempt to address these challenges. This can be interpreted through Sen’s capability approach (1987; 1999/2001), as the policy aims to expand individuals’ capabilities and opportunities in a constrained job market. The explicit connection between the SBD programme’s resumption and employment stabilization measures in policy documents underscores the government’s recognition of education as a tool for economic recovery and individual empowerment.

At the same time, the appropriate authorities’ stance toward the SBD programme seems to change from their prior, often ‘lukewarm’ approach. In addition to routine regulatory documents and circulars on the operation of the SBD programme²⁷, the encouragement and support of the SBD programme are frequently mentioned in other policy documents²⁸ after the announcement of the programme’s relaunch in 2020 with even more enthusiasm than when it first began in 1987, not to mention the years prior to the programme’s termination in 2019. The shift in authorities’ stance towards the SBD programme, from a ‘lukewarm’ approach to enthusiastic support, can be analysed using Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of cultural capital. The increased emphasis on the SBD programme in policy documents suggests a recognition of its potential to enhance individuals’ cultural and human capital, thereby improving their employability and social mobility.

Based on the preceding analysis, it is evident that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, addressed through the introduction of the new SBD programme,

²⁵ See CN1.24

²⁶ See CN1.1, 1.2, 1.10, 1.12, 1.16, 1.25

²⁷ See CN1.1, 1.16, 1.25

²⁸ See CN1.2, 1.10, 1.12

primarily revolves around the strain it imposes on the job market²⁹. While educational adjustments typically align with the development of the education industry or learning needs, this analysis suggests that educational management has, to a significant extent, assumed the role of addressing social challenges brought about by the pandemic. This function is less closely related to learning itself and more akin to a relief channel for the sudden increase in social and market pressures due to the pandemic. This underscores a pivotal aspect for subsequent discussion and research: merely examining the pandemic's effects on learning and teaching is insufficient. HE policies hold significance beyond the educational realm, as their graduates directly shape the labour market landscape. Many policy documents concerning HE during the pandemic advocate for supporting graduates' employment or entrepreneurship endeavours, which will also be discussed in the next topic. Therefore, employment dynamics will also feature prominently in the forthcoming discussion on China's other HE policies during the pandemic, as well as in my interviews and focus group stages.

iii. The possible influence of the change of SBD during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The differences between the preview and new SBD programmes extend beyond their functional establishment to include various operational aspects. [Table 5d](#) below summarises the key distinctions between the two kinds of SBD programmes based on the pertinent policy documents. Studying these variances is crucial for my subsequent data collection stages because these specific operational details, compared to the programme's functions at the governmental level, have a closer bearing on individuals. For instance, changes outlined in the table regarding admission requirements and professional restrictions may impact prospective participants' assessment of the difficulty of engaging in the SBD programme. Additionally, the evaluation of SBD by the credentials verification system could

²⁹ See CN1.4, CN1.9, CN1.11, CN1.12, CN1.13, CN1.24.

influence prospective participants' perception of the programme's benefits.

Table 5d Differences between SBD before and after 2020³⁰.

	SBD before 2020	SBD after 2020
Enrolment	The application process is open to those who obtained a bachelor's degree.	The application process is only open to individuals who are new graduates or bachelors within three years of graduation.
Restrictions on major	Applicants are only allowed to apply to disciplines that differ significantly from their undergraduate major, namely, the target major and the original major must belong to different categories in the Ministry of Education's list of majors.	The restrictions are loosened so that applicants can apply for majors under the same categories but different sub-categories.
Levels in the credentials verification system	In the education system, SBD is considered equivalent to a master's degree.	The education system adds a new HE level for SBD, which is positioned between a master's and a bachelor's degree.

These changes reflect two directions of modification in the SBD programme, both corresponding to modifications in its functional aspects at the policy level. On one hand, there is a reduction in the requirements for participants to weaken the emphasis on interdisciplinary talent. On the other hand, improvements made to address shortcomings in the previous SBD programme aim to attract more potential participants to become full-time students (rather than entering the labour market competition), thus alleviating the enormous pressure on the job market brought about by the epidemic.

To be more specific, the new SBD project updates admissions requirements, excluding non-final-year undergraduates from the SBD applications, and relaxes

³⁰ See CN2.1, 1.1, 1.2.

the original interdisciplinary requirement (compared to the previous SBD)³¹. These two changes not only support the new SBD's policy goal of reducing employment pressures during the epidemic, but they also, in some ways, undermine the goal of cultivating interdisciplinary labour. Firstly, it removes current undergraduates from the potential pool of participants in the new SBD programme. By eliminating this group from the competition for admission to the new SBD programme, more opportunities are available to individuals who have already obtained a bachelor's degree and are already in the labour market, and thus the system achieves its aim to alleviate the pressure on the job market by this modification.

At the same time, the new SBD programme relaxes the restrictions on the choice of discipline. As mentioned earlier, the core purpose of the previous SBD programme was to create interdisciplinary labour in response to the rapid growth of technology and society. As a result, the previous SBD programme had a strict restriction on the disciplines in which graduates could not enrol in other disciplines under the same catalogue as their first bachelor's degree, for example, graduates in Chinese literature could not enrol in the SBD programme in the English language because they belonged to the same 'Literature' catalogue. However, this restriction is further relaxed in the new SBD programme, that applicants can apply to participate in disciplines under different sub-categories of the same catalogue, i.e. Chinese literature graduates can apply to the SBD programme in the English language, as the former belongs to the Chinese Language and Literature sub-category while the latter belongs to the Foreign Language and Literature sub-category. This modification directly relaxes the restrictions on enrolment in terms of discipline, giving potential individuals more options and thus attracting more individuals to participate, while also weakening its aim of developing interdisciplinary labour. To better illustrate the impact of these systematic changes, I will once again use Alex as an example. Imagine Alex, a student interested in further studies. Previously, under SBD regulations, if Alex graduated in literature

³¹ See CN2.1, 1.1, 1.2.

(Code 05, according to the HE major coding system published by the Ministry of Education in China), Alex could not enrol in another major within the same code category. However, the new SBD rules have relaxed this, allowing Alex to pursue a different major within literature, as long as it does not share the first four digits of the original major's code. For instance, Alex can now switch from Chinese literature (0501) to English language (0502) but not to Chinese International Education (050103), which remains within the same detailed category.

At the same time, the system's creation of entirely new levels and codes in the academic accreditation system for the new SBD is an improvement over the contradictory points that arose in the previous SBD if the aforementioned changes were put forth by the system in response to the needs during the epidemic. Generally, the system concentrated on improving critical elements that resulted in to stop of the previous SBD programme. The new SBD is given a new intermediate level between a bachelor's and a master's degree in the credential verification system, instead of being classified with any traditional degree. This level further clarifies the SBD level and helps to reconcile the original SBD's contradictory standing of 'file as a bachelor in the credential verification system but considered as a master in the minimum wage system.'

It is too early for the market to discuss the added value of the productivity provided by the new SBD. The first graduates of the new SBD programme will only be entering the labour market at the time of my analysis of this policy, and there is a dearth of matching data. However, I would look for opportunities to investigate this more later in the interview stage (Respondent #03 of my project is a young adult SBD participant during the COVID-19 pandemic, see more information in Stage B). At the same time, I also believe that discussing the productivity gains provided by the new SBD is not central to the analysis of the new SBD program at this time, for the reason that the core purpose of the new SBD programme is already different from the previous SBD programme. While the degree of labour market recognition of the SBD projects and the production value

they might generate remain important considerations, these aspects extend beyond the primary aim of my research, which seeks to analyse the social context shaped by policy during the pandemic. In the case of the new SBD programmes, my interest lies more in their role and effectiveness as an alternative means of addressing employment pressures exacerbated by COVID-19. Although there is much to discuss regarding the future development of these programmes and their actual capacity to alleviate labour market strain, my current research focuses on the impact of the reintroduction of SBD as a novel, full-time HE option on the decision-making processes of potential young adult participants. Specifically, I am interested in how this new educational pathway influences the motivations and decisions of individuals considering full-time HE amid the uncertainties brought about by the pandemic.

The addition of a government-approved educational programme is closely related to the study of factors influencing decision-making in HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, government initiatives to introduce new educational programmes typically respond to societal demands or institutional reforms (Mok, 2016; Zhang *et al.*, 2024), in this case, coinciding with changes brought about by the pandemic. Consequently, the introduction of new educational programmes by the government may directly impact the decision-making of participants in HE during the pandemic, particularly among groups heavily affected by the crisis. Secondly, irrespective of the presence of a pandemic, the emergence of a new educational programme may alter the competitive landscape of the education market, affecting the attractiveness and competitiveness of other educational institutions and programmes, thereby indirectly influencing decision-making in HE. Especially when supported by the government's credentials verification system, the introduction of such new educational programmes may have greater influence and emerge more swiftly compared to programmes that naturally evolve through market dynamics or competition within the education industry. Therefore, changes in the types of government-approved educational programmes during the pandemic, notably represented by the reinstatement of SBD programme, hold

significant implications for understanding the factors influencing decision-making in HE.

Theme Two: Industry-specific incentives and long-term employment measures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Compared with the previous section, other policy documents related to my research content are not so large. Therefore, I discuss the remaining two small topics in this section. This section serves as a comprehensive examination of various policies implemented during the pandemic period that have implications for my research focus. The policies under review encompass targeted industry incentives and long-term strategies (launched during the COVID-19 pandemic) aimed at facilitating the employment prospects of HE graduates. While these policies may appear disparate, they collectively contribute to shaping the socio-economic landscape for my target population - individuals aged 20 to 40 who have transitioned from the workforce to full-time HE learners. Through a detailed exploration of these policies, this chapter seeks to elucidate their impact on the decision-making considerations of individuals re-entering HE amidst the pandemic context. Specifically, I delve into the following policy areas: industry-specific incentives aimed at bolstering particular industries, and the implementation of long-term employment measures for HE graduates. Through this analysis, I aim to provide insights into how these policy interventions may influence the educational aspirations and career trajectories of my research participants.

i. Industry-specific incentives during COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic, the educational system of China implemented various measures to improve the development of the healthcare industry, as the key industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through this analysis, I aim to elucidate the impact of these policies on both the educational landscape and employment opportunities within the

healthcare sector during the pandemic.

During the pandemic, the Ministry of Education has implemented various management measures aimed at bolstering the healthcare industry and addressing critical workforce shortages. These measures encompass a range of strategies, including arranging the enrolment and improving talent development to meet the needs and improve the structure of the industry.

The pertinent policies have expanded the enrolment quotas for industries and positions in high demand. On one hand, higher-level medical education programmes, represented by master's and above levels, have been mandated to increase their enrolment during the pandemic³². This measure aims to elevate the educational attainment of relevant practitioners and enhance the capacity of educational institutions in the healthcare sector to support workforce development. On the other hand, there has been a significant increase in enrolment quotas for branches of the healthcare industry experiencing expanding demand during the pandemic, such as nursing, public health, paediatrics, infectious diseases, and critical care.

'In 2020, all institutions authorized to confer doctoral degrees in clinical medicine are required to establish disciplines in anaesthesia, infectious diseases, critical care, and paediatrics, significantly expanding the enrolment quotas for graduate students in these fields. We aim to optimize the disciplinary structure, and by 2021, complete the adjustment of the second-level directory of medical disciplines. This adjustment will incorporate anaesthesia, infectious diseases, and critical care disciplines into the guiding directory of clinical medicine disciplines and intensify efforts in their development. We will coordinate the establishment of primary disciplines related to medical

³² See CN 1.5, 1.6.

research’.

(Article 5, from CN1.5, ‘Guiding Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Accelerating the Innovative Development of Medical Education’)

In addition to various policies aimed at expanding enrolment, relevant policy documents also aim to improve the overall quality of medical education by reducing underperforming medical-related educational programmes and decreasing their enrolment, especially at lower levels of HE³³. This ensures that resources are allocated to support the aforementioned expansions while enhancing the overall standards of medical education.

‘schools that still fail to meet standards after rectification will have their enrolment qualifications for relevant specialties revoked. Use the pass rates of physician qualification and nursing practice qualification examinations as important indicators for evaluating the quality of medical talent training. Universities with a pass rate of less than 50% in qualification examinations for three consecutive years will have their enrolment reduced. Promote post-graduation medical education base accreditation and continuing medical education credit certification. Use indicators such as the pass rate of residency completion assessments and annual competency level test results as core indicators for assessing the quality of residency training bases. Professional bases ranked in the bottom 5% nationwide in terms of pass rates for residency completion theory examinations for two consecutive years will have their enrolment reduced’.

(Article 14, from CN1.5, ‘Guiding Opinions of the General Office of

³³ See CN1.5.

the State Council on Accelerating the Innovative Development of Medical Education')

In addition to the policies related to adjusting enrolment scales, the education system during the pandemic has also expanded support for targeted medical workforce training and increased the quota for free medical HE, particularly targeting remote areas in China lacking healthcare industry labour.

From the perspective of human capital theory (Becker, 1976; Bourdieu, 1986), these policy changes represent a strategic investment in sector-specific human capital. By increasing enrolment quotas and sources for higher-level medical education programmes and high-demand healthcare branches, the government is actively shaping the labour market to meet urgent societal needs. These policy changes also interact with individual motivations for learning. Using Houle's Typology (1961) and the AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992), those changes in policy suggested a possible increase in goal-oriented and extrinsically motivated learners responding to these new opportunities and societal pressures.

The implications of these management measures for my research are significant. The expansion of enrolment quotas in higher-level medical education programmes, particularly at the graduate level, aims to address the growing demand for healthcare professionals with advanced training. This increase in opportunities for pursuing advanced medical education may incentivize individuals who are considering re-entering full-time HE to pursue medical-related fields, especially those in high-demand specialities. Moreover, the emphasis on targeted medical workforce training and the provision of additional free slots for medical education, particularly in underserved remote areas, may attract individuals from these regions who aspire to pursue careers in healthcare. These policy changes not only expand access to medical education but also align educational opportunities with the evolving needs of the healthcare sector. As a result, potential HE participants may be more inclined to consider medical education (for example, Respondents

#17&18) as a viable pathway for career advancement and fulfilment, thereby influencing their decisions regarding educational participation during the pandemic.

ii. Long-term employment measures targeted at HE graduates during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The policies aimed at promoting employment among HE graduates during the pandemic hold significant relevance to the research, particularly in exploring factors influencing individuals' decision-making in HE participation during the pandemic. These policies, encompassing initiatives such as employment promotion, vocational training, internship opportunities, and entrepreneurial support, play a crucial role in shaping individuals' attitudes, expectations, and decisions regarding HE participation (Mok *et al.*, 2021). This perspective is also reflected in the experiences shared by some of my respondents, who reported that these policies influenced their educational decisions significantly. However, it's important to note that the impact of these policies on individual decision-making among my respondents is complex and varied. The diversity in how my respondents perceived the influence of these policies on their choices will be discussed in more detail in the next section, which presents the results of Stage B. The examination of these policies provides insights into the contextual background and circumstances influencing individuals' decision-making processes during the pandemic. Understanding the impact of these policies on individuals' HE decision-making is essential for developing a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play during this unique period. Considering that my research focuses on the demographic of young adults aged 20-40 (refer to [Section 4.4.3.2](#)), it is crucial to note that they have previously completed their respective educational milestones and transitioned into the workforce. However, during the pandemic, they have decided to return to full-time HE. Employment policies implemented during the pandemic are likely to impact the employment status and career prospects of this demographic, thereby influencing their decision-making

process regarding re-engagement in HE.

It is worth noting that employment-related policies, while potentially influencing participants' evaluations of education benefits, may have limited impact on individuals who commence their full-time studies during periods covered by specific policies. For instance, policies targeting labour market fluctuations following the pandemic, such as those enacted in 2020 but focused only from 2020 to 2021, may have minimal relevance for learners who embarked on their studies in the same year and typically require at least two years of full-time study to graduate. Therefore, to comprehensively assess potential policy impacts while minimizing the contents with little influence, this section exclusively examines long-term policies issued during the pandemic period that are relevant to HE graduates' employment prospects.

The Ministry of Education established an Employment and Entrepreneurship Guidance Committee dedicated to assisting graduates in smoothly transitioning into the labour market during the COVID-19 pandemic³⁴. The committee's first plan is slated to run from 2021 to 2025. Comprising members recruited by the Ministry of Education, the committee includes staff from government departments, HE institutions, industry associations, and corporate representatives. Its primary responsibilities include providing policy consultations on entrepreneurship and employment for graduates, organizing specialized job fairs for HE graduates, designing and delivering career education courses, offering training and promotional services for graduate entrepreneurship, and assisting relevant institutions in conducting research to gather feedback on the employment outcomes of graduates.

Simultaneously, the ministry also spearheaded the establishment of the '24365 Campus Online Recruitment Service/24365 Smart Employment Platform' online

³⁴ See CN 1.10,1.11,1.12.

platform to meet the job-seeking needs of HE graduates during the pandemic³⁵. Launched in 2021 for long-term use, this website not only caters to the demand for remote services during the pandemic but also aims to facilitate cross-regional sharing of employment information to enhance the success rate of job searches for HE graduates.

‘Promoting the construction of the online recruitment market. The Ministry of Education has upgraded and developed the ‘24365 Campus Online Recruitment Service’ platform, introducing high-quality human resource service agencies, industry associations, and others, to implement the ‘Position Selection Plan’ extensively, and to advance the connectivity and sharing of employment information. Local governments and universities are required to organize employment staff, graduation counsellors, and job-seeking graduates to register and use the ‘24365 Smart Employment Platform,’ strengthening online service linkage. Vigorous efforts will be made to promote the construction of the campus online recruitment market, maintaining local and university-based employer demand databases, graduate job-seeking intention databases, and timely releasing professional settings and student source information. Active online recruitment services will be conducted, encouraging employers to conduct campus recruitment through online presentations, remote interviews, and online signing, promoting the combination of online and offline recruitment, and enhancing the success rate of recruitment’.

(Article 1-2, from CN1.12, ‘Notice of the Ministry of Education on the Employment and Entrepreneurship Work of the 2022 Class of National Graduates from General Universities’)

³⁵ The two names refer to different services provided by the same website, with the former targeting the labour market (employers) and the latter targeting higher education participants (job seekers). See CN1.12.

Through the lens of human capital theory (Becker, 1976) and Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital concept, these initiatives can be interpreted as attempts to maximize the value of graduates' educational investments. The career education courses, and entrepreneurship training offered by the committee aim to enhance graduates' human and cultural capital, potentially improving their employability and social mobility. At the same time, measures such as the establishment of public online information and recruitment platforms underscore the importance of addressing communication barriers, as highlighted in theoretical frameworks like Cross's COR Model (1981), potentially triggering positive responses in the chain of events leading to successful job placement or further education decisions. Moreover, similar to the situation discussed in [Chapter Two](#), these initiatives interact with individual motivations for learning and career development. Using Houle's Typology (1961) and the AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992), these initiatives demonstrate the potential educational benefits to prospective participants, particularly the possibility of increased returns from education, which may influence changes in goal-oriented and extrinsically motivated participation.

As discussed in the human capital theory framework outlined in [Section 2.6](#), the participation of education, as a form of human capital investment, is closely related to the return of education. The policies related to employment and entrepreneurship may be considered by potential participants as influencing factors when making decisions. Those policies directly target participants in HE, providing them with support and guidance in employment and entrepreneurship. By offering services to HE graduates, the committee's form serves a crucial role in individuals' educational participation decisions by facilitating a more accurate assessment of the benefits of educational programmes, potentially increasing individuals' willingness and motivations to engage in HE.

5.1.3 The summary of Stage A analysis.

In conclusion, this section has provided a comprehensive examination of various

policies implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, shedding light on their implications for my research focus. Firstly, the pandemic period has witnessed the relaunch of SBD, a HE programme previously abandoned by the government education system. Amidst the policies implemented during this time, SBD stands out as a focal point, symbolizing both a system's response to the negative impacts of the pandemic and an additional full-time HE option for my target population. This relaunch expands the educational choices for potential participants and may attract individuals to engage in full-time HE programmes during the pandemic. Furthermore, other policies supporting HE in the health and medical sectors, as well as long-term employment assistance for graduates, may serve as additional incentives for potential participants. Together, these policy measures have the potential to influence the decision-making processes of prospective participants, highlighting the significance of policy considerations in shaping educational choices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Having comprehensively reviewed the policy strategies proposed by the Chinese education system during the pandemic, particularly those targeting full-time HE and related domains, my research transitioned into Stage B. As emphasized in [Section 4.4.2](#), my Stage A policy analysis does not independently or directly answer my research questions, although it is closely related to my third group of research questions, which explores institutional factors. The function of Stage A, understanding these policy backgrounds, is integral to grasping the social context in which my respondents live. It facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences they share during one-on-one interviews (Stage B) and focus group discussions (Stage C). This contextual understanding not only enriches the qualitative data collected but also enhances the validity and depth of the research findings.

5.2 Stage B: semi-structured interviews.

This section focuses on the data collection results and thematic analysis of Stage B and contains three parts. Firstly, [Section 5.2.1](#) provides a summary of the information collected in Stage B. [Section 5.2.2](#), the core part of this subsection,

primarily entails the thematic analysis of the Stage B information. Finally, [Section 5.2.3](#) summarizes the thematic analysis of Stage B. It is important to note that my research involves three stages of data collection and thematic analysis, each analysed separately in their respective sections. This approach is aimed at presenting the information analysis process more clearly and facilitating a better understanding of the findings for readers. In [Chapter Six](#), I conduct a triangulation discussion on the information obtained from the entire study, including literature, information, and data.

5.2.1 The result of semi-structured interviews.

Data collection for this study entered Stage B after learning about China's HE programme policies during the COVID-19 pandemic. As I mentioned in [Section 4.4.3.1](#), I invited 20 Chinese respondents who had made the decision to take part in HE programmes during the pandemic and conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews via the online meeting platform. The interviews primarily focused on understanding the participants' decision-making process for enrolling in full-time HE programmes and how these motivations, as well as any barriers, evolved due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. As discussed in [Section 4.3](#), these factors have been conceptualized across three levels, including the individual level, which examines personal motivations and challenges; the situational level, which considers the broader context and circumstances influencing decisions; and the institutional level, which looks at how policies and institutional structures shape participation. This multi-level approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of the various factors affecting young adults' decisions to pursue full-time HE during the pandemic, directly linking back to the research aims and questions. All information was provided with the informed consent of the respondents to share it with this research project, and all respondents would be referred to in the text using coded pronouns to safeguard their privacy (more information can be found in [Section 4.5](#)). For easy retrieval, the following is a general introduction of the respondents in Stage B, as displayed in [Table 5e](#) (at

the end of [Section 5.2.1](#)). The table also provides a general overview of the basic information about the participants involved in this project.

It is important to note that, while I set an interview protocol in advance to align with my research questions, as shown in [Appendix E](#), I did not strictly adhere to the sequence of questions during the actual interviews. Instead, I adjusted the content based on the information provided by the participants. For instance, during the interview with #03, the protocol initially directed me to discuss individual-level factors, such as his previous educational experiences and attitudes towards education. However, #03 naturally shifted the conversation to his work experiences. To avoid disrupting the participant's train of thought, I followed this direction and explored how his work experiences influenced his decisions regarding HE participation during the pandemic. Only after he fully shared his work-related experiences did I return to the individual-level factors that had not yet been discussed, such as his expectations for education or his evaluation of the value of the educational programmes.

When I initially explored the data provided by the respondents, I discovered that the diversity of people made it difficult to fully integrate the data. Although it is good that such a wealth of information is available for this research project, the intricacy of the situation made it challenging to organise and synthesise all the data. As shown in [Appendix I](#), each element on the first line refers to a crucial entry that I discovered during my interviews and may be directly tied to motivations for HE programme participation during the pandemic. Each of these factors can be discussed as a key variable including. These factors are:

- 1) The time point when the idea of participating HE programme first came about in relation to the time the epidemic occurred.
- 2) The objective development and employment situation of the industry in which they studied and were employed.

- 3) The academic level of the programme they participated during pandemic and the difficulty of graduation.
- 4) The extent to which the target industry might be affected by the epidemic because of the nature of the industry.
- 5) The influence of past learning and working experience on decision-making.
- 6) The different employment situations and pressures of the social climate that respondents of different genders may face.

This study does not primarily focus on the demographic and sociological characteristics of participants. Consequently, the reasons for recording these factors during data collection are not elaborated upon in detail within the main text, as they bear limited relevance to the central research questions. Additionally, omitting an extensive discussion of these factors allows for a more concise and cohesive reading experience. Nevertheless, this information has been systematically compiled in [Appendix I](#) for readers who may be interested in exploring it further.

It's also important to note that in [Table 5e](#) below, entries marked with a '-' indicate missing information for various reasons. Specifically, the '-' in the 'Starting date of HE programmes' indicates that the respondents had no clear recollection of when they first considered participating or vaguely mentioned having had the idea for a long time. The '-' in the 'Past fields of study' denotes that the respondent's current participation during the COVID-19 pandemic marks their first experience with HE.

Table 5e Overview of the information of the 20 participants in Stage B.

#	HE programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic	Starting date of HE programmes	First time raising the idea of participation	Past fields of study	Fields of study during COVID-19 pandemic	Age range	Gender
01	PhD	2021	2020	Navigation Engineering	Navigation Engineering	30-40	Male
02	Postgraduate/PhD	2020	2018	Quantity Survey	Mechanics	30-40	Female
03	SBD	2020	2018	Electrical Engineering	Computer Science	30-40	Male
04	Postgraduate	2021	-	Law	International business law	20-30	Female
05	Postgraduate	2020	-	Computer Science	Educational studies	20-30	Male
06	Postgraduate	2022	-	Accounting and Business Management	Finance and Management	20-30	Female
07	PhD	2021	2019	Information Security/Educational studies	Educational studies	30-40	Female
08	PhD	2021	2019	Italian Language & Literature/Comparative literature	Comparative literature	20-30	Female
09	Postgraduate	2021	2019	Mechanical Engineering	Mechatronic Engineering	30-40	Male
10	Postgraduate	2021	2020	Mechatronic Engineering	Mechatronic Engineering	20-30	Male
11	Postgraduate	2021	2018	Mechatronic Engineering	Mechatronic Engineering	20-30	Male
12	Postgraduate	2020	2019	Mechatronic Engineering	Mechatronic Engineering	20-30	Male
13	Postgraduate	2022		Chinese Language & Literature	Sociology	30-40	Female
14	Postgraduate	2022	-	Chinese Painting	Chinese Painting	30-40	Female
15	Undergraduate	2020	-	-	Animation	20-30	Female
16	Undergraduate	2020	-	-	Archaeology	20-30	Female
17	Undergraduate	2020	-	-	Occupational Therapy	20-30	Female
18	Undergraduate	2020		-	Basic Medical Sciences	20-30	Female
19	Postgraduate	2020	2020	Educational studies	Educational assessment	20-30	Female
20	PhD	2020	2018	Pharmaceutical English/ Educational studies	Educational studies	30-40	Female

5.2.2 Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with young adult participants of full-time HE during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This section presents the analysis of the data collected during the semi-structured interviews. The primary focus here is to categorize and interpret the information shared by the respondents, shedding light on their personal experiences, attitudes, and decisions regarding full-time HE participation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Occasionally, connections will be made to the insights derived from the policy analysis phase, particularly where policy contexts intersect with individual experiences. Nonetheless, similarly to my explanation in the beginning of the analysis of Stage A ([Section 5.1.2](#)) the analysis in this section remains grounded in the interview data itself, refraining from integrating theoretical frameworks or extensive literature comparisons. The main purpose of this section is to faithfully reflect the voices of the interviewees. This more comprehensive discussion will be reserved for [Chapter Six](#) at the end of this thesis, which will integrate my research design, data collection and findings, as well as the broader literature to answer research questions.

As mentioned in [Section 4.4.3.3](#), the data of Stage B is conducted by thematic analysis. Generally, there are three themes categorised from the information shared by the respondents. These three themes correspond to addressing the three research questions of the project. And align with the theoretical framework's multi-level approach to understanding decision-making in HE. Specifically, these themes reflect factors at the individual, situational, and institutional levels that influence young adults' decisions to participate in full-time HE during the pandemic. Due to the numerous topics and subtopics involved, the following [Table 5f](#) outlines the general structure of the analysis of Stage B, along with the sources of information from which each section is derived.

Table 5f Summarization of the analysis of Stage B.

Title of theme/subtheme.	Introduction of the theme/subtheme.	Codes of sources.
Theme one: Factors on the individual level.		
Subtheme 1.1 Career planning and work experience as factors influencing the decision on the individual level.	Career planning and work experience from respondents themselves as motivation. Without influence from the COVID-19 pandemic.	#01/02/03/06/07/09/12/14/19/20
	Career planning and work experience from respondents themselves as motivation. With influence from the COVID-19 pandemic.	#01/14
	Career planning and work experience from respondents' social circles as motivation. Without influence from the COVID-19 pandemic.	#07
	Career planning and work experience from respondents' social circles as motivation. With influence from the COVID-19 pandemic.	#06/15
Subtheme 1.2 Knowledge and skills as factors influencing the decision on the individual level.	Knowledge and skills from respondents themselves as motivation. Without influence from the COVID-19 pandemic.	#02/03/04/05/07/08/10/11/14/15/16
Subtheme 1.3 Health risks as the factor influencing the decision on the individual level.	Health risks from respondents as barriers.	#04/06/07/08/13
	Clearly indicating that health risks are not an influencing factor.	#04/07/09/20
Theme two: Factors on the situational level.		
Subtheme 2.1 Industry requirements as the factor influencing the decision on the situational level.	Industry-specific requirements as the motivation.	#04/08/13/16/17/18
	Position-specific requirements as the motivation.	#01/02/04/07/08/13/20
	Industry and position have fewer requirements for academic levels.	#02/15
	'Diploma devaluation' as the motivation. With influence from the COVID-19 pandemic.	#19/20
	'Diploma devaluation' as the motivation. Without influence from the COVID-19 pandemic.	#01/02/03/04/06/07/12/13/16/19
Subtheme 2.2 Social relationship as the factor influencing the decision on the situational level.	Short-term influence. Completely dominated by others.	#02/19
	Short-term influence. Integrating others' viewpoints with respondents' own.	#01/07/08/11/18
	Short-term influence. Completely unaffected by others.	#01/05/11/13/17/19/20
	Short-term influence. Completely dominated by respondents themselves.	#06/09/12/14/16/20
	Long-term influence.	#04/05/13
Theme Three: Factors on the institutional level.		
Subtheme 3.1 Policies during the COVID-19 pandemic as the factor influencing the decision on the institutional level.	Respondents were aware of policy information related to HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents felt the influence.	#03/14
	Respondents were aware of policy information related to HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents did not feel the influence.	#05/09/10/11/16/17
	Respondents were aware of policy information related to HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents did not feel the influence due to the comparison with other policies.	#01/04/12/15/16/18/19
	Respondents were not aware of policy information related to HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents did not feel the influence.	#02/16/13/20
Subtheme 3.2 'Peer pressure' culture as the factor influencing the decision on the institutional level.	Directly causing motivation	#11/13/18
	Directly causing barriers	#20
	Indirectly causing motivation	#11/12
	Indirectly causing barriers	#12

Since the RQs for this project were constructed based on the classification of the individual/situational/institutional level (see [Chapter Four](#) for details), the discussion in Stage B is also constructed based on the three dimensions of questioning. As mentioned in the preceding section, while respondents have provided a wealth of information and this is supportive of my research, the diverse emphases in the information provided by different individuals pose challenges for its organization and analysis. Therefore, after thoroughly integrating the interview materials, I decided to approach thematic analysis from two perspectives: 1) What are the influencing factors? 2) Where do these influencing factors originate?

Such an analytical approach aids in providing a clearer framework for processing information during thematic analysis. For instance, as illustrated in [Table 5f](#), factors stemming from social relationships have been divided into two subthemes within my analysis: one categorized as [Subtheme 2.2](#) and the other as [Subtheme 3.2](#). While both represent influencing factors within social relationships, the former is based on respondents' own living situations, emphasizing factors a closer influence on the respondents and exhibiting a stronger subjective agency. The latter, however, focuses more on external environmental factors. Although both can be described as 'because of friends/family,' their sources differ, leading the former to be categorized under the situational level factor analysis and the latter under the institutional level analysis. Building upon the aforementioned framework, I would proceed to conduct a comprehensive analysis and discussion of the data I have gathered in Stage B.

Theme One: Factors on the individual level.

Firstly, the needs and feelings of the respondents themselves, as the subjects in which the decision-making takes place, are important factors influencing decision-making behaviour at the individual level. Building upon the aforementioned framework, I will proceed to conduct a comprehensive analysis and discussion of the data I have gathered.

The findings under this theme focus on four main aspects. In [Subtheme 1.1](#), respondents' career plans and work experiences exert a highly intricate and diverse influence on individuals in the decision-making process regarding HE participation. These influences can function as both motivators and barriers depending on the individual's circumstances. In addition to the influence exerted on respondents due to their own vocational and occupational needs, the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the situations within this classification, particularly when the epidemic directly alters an individual's work experiences or situations.

At the same time, the findings of this project underscore the role of knowledge and skills as significant factors shaping individuals' decisions regarding participation in HE programmes, which constitutes [Subtheme 1.2](#). It is noteworthy that, the unanimous perception among the group of respondents represented in [Subtheme 1.2](#), wherein all respondents believed that their experiences in this regard were unrelated to the occurrence of the pandemic.

Moreover, respondents in this project demonstrated a unanimous stance on security risks, and in this research project, the safety risk is centred on health safety during the epidemic as [Subtheme 1.3](#). Unlike other influences, these health risks emerged uniformly as obstacles rather than motivators for participation in HE programmes. Additionally, health risks serve as influences not only directly influencing the individual decision-maker but also indirectly shaping decision-making by influencing the attitudes of others within the individual's social circle. It is also important to note that in addition to the specific cases reported to be affected, there are cases in this project where health risks were not regarded as an influencing factor in decision-making.

Subtheme 1.1 Career planning and work experience as factors influencing the decision on the individual level.

First, the participation decision is influenced based on respondents' understanding of the industry, their work experiences, and career planning purposes. This group of respondents (#01/02/09/10/12/14/15/19/20) frequently expressed dissatisfaction with their employment status, which in turn motivated HE participation. According to the information they provided, the causes of this dissatisfaction included, but were not limited to, the disconnect between reality and ideals, the industry's general decline, and the possibility of poor pay or high unemployment as a result of the epidemic's economic blow. This group of respondents aspired to change their level of job market competition by taking part in HE programmes in order to obtain the job status they desired.

Here I would use a very special case #01. According to the information he shared, several shifts in attitude during his decision-making process encompass all of the situations mentioned above. According to the timeline of his experience, he originally studied Navigation Engineering. During his postgraduate studies, he decided to change his career to the Internet industry which was doing better at that time. However, when it was close to his graduation, he had the idea that he wanted to re-educate himself and return to his original industry by participating in HE programmes because he believed that the internet industry was experiencing a period of stagnation,

(All quotes in the text that are bracketed and marked with an * indicate completions of sentences based on the context of the dialogue to enhance clarity. Brackets without an * represent the questions asked by the researcher.)

#01

*'...at that time we (*my postgraduate mates and I) thought...internet industry is*

*so popular, they (*my postgraduate mates) suggested maybe we can switch our careers to the internet. Well, about the internet industry, then we found that, we felt like, it was very popular when we just started our postgraduate programme, but when we were close to our graduation, we had the feeling that It is not much of an upside anymore, It is just gone into stagnation, and was even trending downward. So at that time, I just didn't have a good (*work) choice, I thought I might want to further my education (*in my original field).'*

However, at this point, his idea was still in the consideration stage, and after successfully finding a job in the Internet industry he still chose to join and work for a while. The negative feelings he had from this work experience reinforced the idea of participating in HE programmes.

#01

*'...One (*reason) is a psychological gap (*with what I expected), and another (reason) is what my master's degree programme is about, uh, it can be contributed to the country. Anyway, it is because the projects that the supervisor worked on were related to them (*the government), and the things (*I learned in postgraduate) were also more on the application of knowledge, involving hardware and software, It is like ... to building a whole stuff. The sense of achievement I get from doing something like this is much more and it is more interesting than changing and moving data around on those tables.'*

At the same time, due to his understanding of the employment situation in different industries during the epidemic, combined with his relatively negative work experience, he completely changed his career plan during the epidemic. He redirected his career plan back to his original career in Navigation Engineering. At the same time, he had a plan to work in a university or a research institute in the future, which has very high academic requirements. As a result, he ultimately decided to enrol in a PhD programme during the epidemic.

Other respondents in this group reported situations that, while not as complex as #01, were also based on career planning considerations. For example, respondent #10, during the interview, clearly mentioned that his initial motivation for participating was not for the knowledge and skills themselves, but simply because he did not think that the knowledge and skills he had at that time were sufficient to make a living.

#10

‘Many of us (my peers and I) then went to work, and I did too, but I didn’t really gain much from it. So, I thought about improving myself further, and considered continuing my studies. At that time, it was just this idea—I felt my abilities weren’t enough, and it was mainly about pursuing more knowledge or skills, primarily it was about improving my abilities.’

Similarly, #12 and #19 indicated that they wanted to upgrade their qualifications by participating in HE programmes because they thought that their past educational experience was not good enough for them to find a satisfying job. Respondent #09 had tried to participate in HE programmes but gave up the idea as he found the application and assessment process exhausting. However, after working for a while, he realized that he was not satisfied with his job situation and resumed his intention to participate in HE programmes for better career development. There was also #14 who had also given up the idea, but she shared that the reason was because she had adapted well to her work, so she put the idea of participating on hold for the time being. However, she always knew that the current work situation was not what she expected, so in the end, she decided to participate in HE programmes, driven by the need to achieve her career goals.

In addition, some respondents (#02/15) indicated that there were cases in their social circles during the epidemic where they changed their willingness to participate in HE programmes based on employment considerations. It is

important to note that the reason why this category of cases is classified here rather than [Subtheme 2.2](#) (influence of social relationships) is because the nature of the influencing factors reported by respondents remains work-related. However, these influences are conveyed through social relationships as a medium. In this scenario, the influence experienced by respondents is more focused on work-related needs and self-assessment, rather than the transmission of social values and perception through social relationships.

For example, when talking about the topic with friends in #02, many of them said that it was because of the recession and the poor job market caused by the epidemic that they might as well take the opportunity to continue their studies if they could not find a good job during the epidemic. A similar situation was reported by respondent 15, whose family's attitudes changed significantly after the epidemic due to concerns about employment.

#15

*'At that time (*before the COVID-19 pandemic), everyone just like, maybe cause I am still young? Then everyone just thought like, I still have time to carefully consider. Then instead, the last two years (during the COVID-19 pandemic), especially last year (2022), the country was more seriously affected by the epidemic. The market was affected regardless of the industry and the economy just went downward, so my parents started to say, well maybe try to get a master's degree?... They think that the market is terrible, so I have to raise my competitiveness, something like that.'*

In this case, rather than the epidemic changing respondents' intention to participate in HE programmes, the epidemic changed respondents' career plans, which indirectly contributed to their intention to participate in HE programmes. However, it is important to note that in this last case, in addition to respondents' own reports of being influenced for the sake of their career planning, there was

also an intention to participate in HE, resulting from industry and market requirements for academic qualifications. This is discussed further later in [Theme Two](#).

The viewpoints that are categorised here are more complex than some of the sub-themes that will be discussed later, represented by [Subthemes 1.2](#) and [1.3](#), which respondents in this project reported rather more focused viewpoints. The findings categorized here reveal a complex interplay of motivations for HE participation, primarily driven by career-related considerations and work experiences. This complexity can be analysed through multiple theoretical lenses, alongside the policy strategies highlighted in the previous Stage A, to provide a deeper understanding of the participants' decision-making processes.

First of all, every influence included under this [Subtheme 1.1](#) serves as a motivation to participate in HE programmes. No respondents in this research project mentioned any barriers to this situation. This means the absence of reported barriers in this subtheme aligns with Sen's Capability Approach (1987; 1999/2001). The respondents' focus on motivations suggests that they perceive HE as an opportunity to expand their capabilities and achieve valuable functionings in their careers. This presents a relatively positive signal—indicating that, at least within the scope of my research project, the issue of participants' lack of awareness of their own right and capability to engage in education, as highlighted in studies related to the Capability Approach (Sen, 1987; 1999/2001), such as in research from Broek *et al.* (2023), did not emerge.

The two scenarios reported by respondents, motivation stemming from unsatisfactory job status and motivation due to a gap between current education/skill level and career aspirations, can be interpreted through Houle's Typology (1961) of learning motivations. These scenarios primarily reflect goal-oriented motivations, where individuals seek education to achieve specific career objectives. The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on these motivations,

particularly in the first scenario, can also be understood through Cross's Chain-of-response model (1981). The pandemic-induced changes in job conditions and personal treatment acted as external triggers, initiating the chain of responses leading to educational participation decisions. At the same time, this aligns with the results of the Stage A policy analysis that revealed strategic efforts to enhance educational participation by focusing on graduate employment outcomes. However, it is important to note that while the shared experiences of individuals appear consistent with these policy strategies, further, more precise analysis is needed to determine the exact role and impact of these policies in shaping educational participation. This shows a complex interplay between personal career aspirations, educational decisions, and governmental strategies, as will be discussed in [Topic Three of Section 5.3.2](#).

While this may appear to slightly overlap with [Subthemes 2.1](#) and [2.2](#), they are actually distinct. For Subtheme 1.1 here, these vocational needs are intrinsic, manifesting predominantly in forms that bear resemblance to the concept of self-actualization, as described in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, providing a useful parallel for understanding the nature of these intrinsic motivations. In contrast, the two subsequent subthemes I would address, while also relating to vocation, depict an extrinsic need perceived by respondents, placing them in a passive state of reception. The intrinsic nature of the vocational needs described here aligns closely with Maslow's (1943) concept of self-actualization. This distinction aligns with the debates presented in Deci & Ryan's SDT (1985) and Vallerand *et al.*'s AMS (1992), reflecting a differentiation that originates from different sources but targets the same specific category of needs.

Subtheme 1.2 Knowledge and skills as factors influencing the decision.

In addition to career-based considerations, another group of respondents indicated that their participation in HE programmes was motivated by the pursuit of knowledge and skills, with #04/08/17/11 falling into this category. For example,

#07 indicated that one of the reasons she decided to continue her participation in HE programmes was because her undergraduate/postgraduate experience made her feel that the professional knowledge she had acquired was ‘too general’ and she was looking for further professional competence.

#07

*‘When I was taking my postgraduate programme...I found the stuff I learned during my postgraduate was not that much. It just feels like, you know, there are lots of stuff (*in my field), and I couldn’t learn them all in a postgraduate programme. Coincidentally, my final assessment is about social class, and I found I am interested in this topic...then I thought like, well, it might be a nice topic to learn further, so I decided to participate in a PhD programme.’*

At the same time, #08 came up with the idea of participating in HE programmes based on a similar idea, namely, wanting to continue learning about the same research topic that she focused on during graduate school. The other respondents in this group, while not reporting in as much detail as these two, also indicated that the idea of participation in HE programmes was based on their own academic pursuits.

In addition to the four respondents mentioned above who developed the idea of participating in HE programmes based on the pursuit of knowledge and skills in their original majors, Respondent #05 indicated that he developed the idea of participating based on an interest in knowledge that was not in his or her original field. Specifically, he originally majored in Computer Science, but because of his cross-industry career in education, he became interested in the knowledge and skills in the field of education and wanted to participate in HE programmes based on this idea.

#05

'In the past, well, I graduated from university and worked in a bank, for half a year, I guess? Then I felt uncomfortable... I am not really good at selling. Then I got a chance to work in my senior high school. Well, generally responsible for course of career planning. Em, then about half a year later, I started to interest in education. But my bachelor's degree is more related to statistics stuff. Then I felt like, if possible, I may take a master's degree and figure out what is education, especially modern education.'

Respondent #13 reported a similar situation, stating that the motivation for her to continue to participate in HE programmes and change her original area of specialisation was that she wanted to learn about different industries.

In addition, a more unusual situation arose in the case of participation decisions driven by academic pursuits. Unlike the other groups of respondents who mostly experienced repeated changes in their ideas during the decision-making process, in the case of academic pursuit-driven, no respondents reported that their needs for knowledge and capability had changed, even after the outbreak. It is important to emphasize that the perspectives of the respondents here have not changed solely in relation to the influencing factors stemming from their needs for knowledge and skills. That is to say, the respondents reporting this Subtheme 1.2 did not report any changes in their decisions driven by the pandemic affecting their needs for knowledge and skills. The reality is that the decision-making processes of the respondents are not driven or hindered by a single factor. Take #14 as an example; she demonstrated multiple attitude changes throughout the decision-making process. Her attitude towards participating in HE fluctuated between wanting to participate and not wanting to participate several times. However, what influenced these attitude changes was not a change in her need for professional skills but rather other factors. She consistently regarded the enhancement of professional skills as the driving force behind her decision-making process.

The analysis of knowledge and skills as influencing factors in HE participation decisions has revealed several interesting patterns that can be interpreted through various theoretical lenses, even though the related policy strategies from Stage A under this theme did not exhibit a clear connection. The absence of reported pandemic influence on the role of knowledge and skills in decision-making processes is noteworthy. This stability in motivation despite external changes can be understood through Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital. Respondents may perceive the accumulation of knowledge and skills (institutionalized cultural capital) as inherently valuable, regardless of the contextual changes brought about by the pandemic.

Applying Houle's Typology (1961) of learning motivations, the focus on knowledge and skills appears to align primarily with learning-oriented motivations. Participants seem to be driven by a desire for knowledge acquisition and skill development for their intrinsic value, rather than solely for goal-oriented (career advancement) or activity-oriented (social interaction) reasons. Similarly, the consistency in responses regarding knowledge and skills can be further analysed using Vallerand *et al.*'s (1992) AMS. The motivation to acquire knowledge and skills may represent a form of intrinsic motivation, specifically, the motivation to know and to accomplish. This intrinsic drive appears to remain stable despite the external pressures of the pandemic. This also somewhat challenges Becker's (1976) perspective on evaluating educational investment primarily through economic returns. However, after completing the entire study, I found that the rebuttal to Becker's view is not limited to this aspect; a more pronounced conflict emerges in Stage C's discussion on emotions. Since there was no significant evidence related to this issue in Stage B, to ensure the coherence and completeness of the discussion, this part will be further explored in the subsequent [Topic Two of Section 5.3.2](#).

Finally, compared to the results of other subthemes in Stage B, only a subset of respondents in Stage B indicated being influenced by knowledge and skills factors.

This could be interpreted through Cross's COR Model (1981), suggesting the decision-making of educational participation can be a complex system constituted by a variety of factors. For these individuals, the perceived importance of knowledge and skills may have been a key factor in overcoming potential barriers to participation, while for others, different factors in the chain of response may have been more salient.

In conclusion, this analysis reveals that the knowledge and skills serve as stable, intrinsic motivators for HE participation among the sample group, seemingly unaffected by the pandemic. This finding provides valuable insights into the enduring value placed on education and personal development, even in times of significant societal upheaval. Future research could explore how these motivations interact with other factors in the decision-making process and whether this stability persists over time or across different demographic groups.

Subtheme 1.3 Health risks as the factor influencing the decision.

Since the research questions of this research project are grounded in the particular social context of the COVID-19 pandemic, health risk highlights its influence on HE programme participation decision-making during the epidemic, in addition to the influences that are often seen on a daily basis. Although most of the Respondents who mentioned such factors used the Chinese word 'safe (安全)' once to describe it, the idea of safe is indeed a very broad concept. From the information they shared, the negative influence of safety hazards on decision-making behaviour in the specific social context of the epidemic, which was addressed in this interview, actually refers specifically to the physiological safety risks that may be associated with the epidemic. Therefore, even though the respondents mostly used the word 'safety' to describe it during the interviews, to make the information easier to understand, I would summarize this factor by using 'health risks' directly.

This group of respondents are #04/07/08. None of the three respondents expressed their own concerns about health risks but rather indicated that there were people in their social circle who were opposed to the idea of participation because of the health risks. The other three were also in striking agreement on two other points. First, their reported negative attitudes toward participation were independent of HE programmes themselves, namely, the respondent/respondent's social circle was not opposed to, or even positive about, participating in HE programmes, but was opposed to doing so during the epidemic. Secondly, the case of all three respondents arose when they told others that their planned destination for participation in the HE project was not local.

What is very typical in this regard is that #07 stated that she originally had the idea of participating in HE programmes before the outbreak, and many of her friends were supportive at that time. However, during the epidemic, some of them changed their attitudes to opposition because they were worried that going to an unfamiliar environment during the epidemic would be very troublesome if the respondent got sick.

#07

'I have two really good friends, both of them have the doctor degree... it was the summer of (20)19, we had a chat, and they ask me about may participate a doctoral programme? They really supported me a lot on this issue... when I told them I was thinking about go to another place (to participate HE during the COVID-19 pandemic), they were worried about the situation. They persuaded me, maybe delay the participation, then wait the pandemic to pass. They are really nice people, they just worried about my health.'

Respondent #08 reported another case of a stronger shift in attitude because of the epidemic. Similarly, she wanted to participate in HE programmes before the outbreak and was supported by her social circle. However, after the outbreak, and

especially during the same period when she changed her original target school, which was closer to her place of residence, to a school far away from home, most of the people around her in her social circle, except for her mother, were against her decision to participate in HE programmes during the outbreak due to health concerns, and this even led to the breakdown of social relationships.

Of the influences centred on health risks, there were no respondents in this research project who reported a positive influence. With the exception of the respondents mentioned above who explicitly mentioned being negatively affected during decision-making, none of the other respondents expressed a clear preference for this, either stating that they did not feel it was an issue or that they had not considered health risks at all. Another respondent with a more special working experience, Respondent #09, was the only respondent who explicitly stated a reason for not being influenced by health risks. He indicated that he had worked in Africa before the outbreak. When talking about the influence of the epidemic, particularly on his mental and physical health, he stated that he was unaffected because he was aware of malaria in Africa, and therefore thought that the COVID-19 pandemic was ‘not a serious thing’ and did not experience any emotion swiftly.

In summary, the topic of safety risks, particularly health risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, as a factor influencing educational participation is highly specific. While the exploration of this factor may have limited relevance in everyday life, as I mentioned in the research design chapter, studying the impact of various factors during the pandemic can provide valuable insights for addressing potential future large-scale societal events. This is especially significant for all stakeholders involved in the operation of HE. The convergence of opinions among respondents underscores the pervasive nature of these concerns and their potential to override other factors in the decision-making process. Especially the uniform perception of health risks as barriers rather than motivators aligns with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943). In this context, safety needs have become

more salient due to the pandemic, potentially overshadowing higher-level needs such as self-actualization through education. This shift in priorities highlights how the external environment can significantly alter the decision-making landscape for potential adult learners. It also reflects the dynamic changes in the influence of various factors within Cross's COR Model (1981), depending on the broader social context.

Theme two: Factors on the situational level.

The next part of the section would move on to Theme Two. The main influences and sources anchored in this section are external factors that are a layer higher than the individual but closely related to the situation of respondents' lives. Underlying this theme, two subthemes are reported by respondents, namely the influence of industry/work requirements and influencing factors originating from social circles.

Primarily, the requirements of the industry and market exert significant influence on individuals' decision-making processes regarding HE project participation, discussed in [Subtheme 2.1](#). This influence can act as either a motivation or an obstacle, contingent on the specific dynamics of industry and market developments. Additionally, within this context, the social trend of diploma devaluation emerged as a recurring topic among the respondents. The role of qualification devaluation holds significance in the influence of industry and market on individual participation decisions. There are indications that epidemics may influence situations where qualification devaluation is a factor. However, Stage B lacked sufficient information on this topic, necessitating further exploration in Stage C.

In [Subtheme 2.2](#), the sources of influence included the respondents themselves as well as the influence of pertinent perspectives from their social circles. For example, some of the respondents also had people in their social circles who

suggested participating in HE programmes based on career consideration, and all of the occurrences that emerged from this project were motivated. This influence can manifest in various ways, depending on factors like the duration, the origin of the effect, and the direction of influence. Moreover, the influence of social relationships on an individual's HE decision-making cannot be simplified as mere obstacles or motivation. Beyond these two fundamental situations, social relationships can also strengthen the initial views and decision-making tendencies of potential respondents through their influence. Meanwhile, instances were also identified where individuals explicitly mentioned not considering social relationships in their decision-making.

Subtheme 2.1 Industry requirements as the factor influencing the decision on the situational level.

Since most of the respondents in this study came from different industries, the results of the interviews show that the influence of the industry atmosphere on participation in HE programmes is diverse. In the case of law and medicine-related industries reported by Respondents #04/17/18, some of the industries have mandatory requirements for practitioners' education. The level of education is a mandatory requirement if one wants to get a job opportunity in the industry. Therefore, participating in HE programmes to improve their academic qualifications without switching careers is a strong influencing factor in their decision-making. Respondent #05 also indicated that her friends who are in these types of industries also have a more positive attitude towards her participation in full-time programmes when discussing the different opinions of friends around her in different industries. In these specific industries, this situation is even more like an institutional-level factor. However, my communication with the respondents and personal research, shows that this is not an explicit regulation but rather tends to reflect a consensus among stakeholders within the labour market. As illustrated by my respondents as well as what I personally observed and learned through my own experience, there is no hard requirement for the educational

qualifications of legal professionals explicitly stated in regulations in China. However, in practice, most workplaces for legal professionals, such as law firms, do not hire individuals with lower educational qualifications. This has led to a consensus among legal professionals that attaining a certain level of education is necessary to become a lawyer, for instance. Therefore, here, I still distinguish the requirements in this respect from the discussion of Theme Three and regard them as the influencing factors from the situational level.

Another similar situation is that the educational requirements are not specific to a particular industry, but to a certain position or type of work. Respondents #01/07/08/20 all indicated in their interviews that their current career plans were to enter universities or research institutes to pursue an academic career. Due to the higher educational threshold requirements of this part of the industry in the context of Chinese society, these respondents all ended up participating in doctoral programmes during the pandemic. They all mentioned that their decision to participate was made in preparation for future work in universities or research institutes. One of them, #08, is more typical. #08, as a researcher currently studying Comparative Literature, sees the subject she is studying as something ‘pure academic like philosophy or history’. The most ‘orthodox’ direction of employment for such a major would be a job in a HE institution. In her work experience, she has tried other jobs but eventually realized that she did not like them. Against such a background, the choice to improve her qualifications in order to meet the requirements of HE practitioners was unavoidable.

#08

‘Well, yeah, I think learning comparative literature...if, I mean if you don’t want to work as a, for example, a government clerk? I really think working in higher educational institutions is the most professionally aligned choice. And, if you really want to work in higher educational institutions, a doctorate is necessary... (in the past) a master’s degree helped me get a job in the media industry, but I

found my heart was not in this.'

Contrary to this situation, there are industries that do not require a high level of education and the actual demonstration of personal competence, and the accumulation of work experience are valued more (#12/15). This situation is represented by #15, as she stated that her industry, animation, is an industry that is more focused on personal competence rather than academic qualifications. As a result, neither she nor her colleagues saw the motivation to participate in HE programmes when considering only industry requirements. Even in the case of #12, he reported if just considering the general requirements of the industry, it would be a better choice to use the time participating in HE programmes to accumulate work experience. Under this situation, the industry itself does not have any positive influence on their decision-making behaviour. On the other hand, #15 also mentioned that this only makes sense if she does not change her career in the future. With what she knew about the labour market, if she wants to work in a different industry then the level of education will be very important.

When discussing the influencing factors associated with market and industry requirements, a key concept, 'the devaluation of qualifications', was mentioned by a number of respondents (#01/02/03/19/20). Further to this some respondents described the further impact on themselves as a phenomenon of 'academic discrimination'. The next section focuses on this type of topic.

First of all, as the phenomenon described by # 01 in reference to the topic in question, *'I think the education degree is devalued, and even a master's degree is not really valued in society.'* Those respondents indicated that the influence brought by the devaluation of qualifications should not be described as 'motivation', but rather a kind of force they could not fight, which pushed them to participate in HE programmes. In addition, some of the respondents indicated that this devaluation of qualifications has become a default entry code for certain industries. It should be noted in particular that from the feelings shared by the

respondents, there is a difference between the situation described here and the ‘industry default rule’ mentioned earlier. While both are ‘industries using a certain degree as a barrier to entry for employment’, the motivations are different. The industry default rule mentioned earlier refers to the fact that the difficulty of the job content in the industry requires a specific level of education or specialized skills. Mentioning this situation respondents tended to be more neutral or even positive about this situation. This is because, from the information they reported, respondents mostly agree with such requirements and believe that these requirements for their academic qualifications are reasonable. However, in the latter case, respondents who reported the devaluation of education believed that such industry requirements for qualifications were not based on the difficulty of the job, but rather on the fact that there was an excess of supply over demand in the labour market, which in turn made the industry demand more and more from its labour force. For example, #02 described this situation by saying.

#02

*‘That is, nowadays, education is the ticket to many, many jobs, but in fact, it (*the job) does not need so much knowledge and skills. For example, in fact, so much work can be well-finished by postgraduates or undergraduates, but they (*employers) are willing to see candidates compete with each other harder and harder. This led to the result that we have no other choice (*but to raise the academic degree)’*

At the same time, #02 also mentioned that constantly improving her education was not a solution to her dilemma of facing the devaluation of her education.

#02

*‘And then actually, you may find that we spend so much cost, and time, to have it (*a higher degree), the cost-effective is actually not that high. Because some*

*of them (*employers) are like, for example, recruiting a postgraduate to do the work, cause if a postgraduate can do this, they will not recruit a PhD for they don't want to pay that much,'*

However, this information is insufficient to show whether there is a correlation between the devaluation of qualifications and the epidemic. In contrast, Respondents #19/20 indicated that there had been a significant devaluation of qualifications in the education industry prior to the epidemic. The educational requirements in the education market have risen sharply in recent years and the trend has continued. Respondent #20 indicated that since she has aspired to become a teacher since high school, she is always aware of the latest recruitment situation in the sector.

#20

*'It is that when I was in high school, my biology teacher was a PhD, and so were the others, I mean, the average educational level of the biology group seemed to be the highest within the different subjects in my high school. We (*my classmates and I) all joked at the time that, it must be hard to get a job studying biology in college, cause even PhDs are coming to be high school teachers. As you can see now, It is not a surprise to hear that PhDs become high school teachers. And it's common for good high schools to require candidates to be at least postgraduate. (Was this situation you're talking about during the epidemic? Or?) No, it was like this before the epidemic. It had nothing to do with the epidemic, there were too many people (*candidates).'*

Respondent #19, who also works in the education industry, similarly stated that the education labour market requirements for qualifications rose wildly during the epidemic. However, when pressed for her perceived reasons for this situation, she gave two reasons. One was that in 2021 China's compulsory education system introduced a double-reduction policy, which aimed to reduce academic pressure

on primary and high school students and promote educational equity. The regulation under this policy included a ban on the provision of paid educational services outside of non-compulsory education by serving staff and strict control of students' school hours. Although the policy is targeted at the compulsory education group, it has a direct impact on the employment situation of relevant practitioners in the education sector. Respondents indicated that this policy reduced the number of jobs available to education practitioners and would also lower the income of some practitioners, thus squeezing the education job market, leading to increased competition and linear inflation of qualification requirements. Respondent #19 believed this was the main reason for the inflation of qualifications in her industry, which is the result of free competition in the market. In other words, she believed the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic did not take the main responsibility for this.

However, although not the main reason, she also argued that the epidemic exacerbated the devaluation of qualifications, which was her second reason. Although not from the same industry, #02/03 held similar views on this idea. Respondent #19 indicated that many companies closed down during the epidemic and therefore, a large number of labourers came back into competition in the job market, thus exacerbating the devaluation. Respondent #03 reported further on this, namely that the expression he used was 'educational discrimination'. He believed that he was discriminated against in the work process because of his qualifications. The discrimination he suffered included different wages for the same job because of different qualifications, and even unemployment due to a lesser qualification than a new applicant. As a result, changing the situation in which he was being discriminated against by improving his qualifications was a central motivation for his participation in HE.

#03

'I really thought like, it was already three months (since I was working there), it

was time for signing a formal long-term contract and paying for my insurance. But no, he (the boss) kept delaying it. At that time, I lacked experience, and also, was also a little bit inferior, I didn't resist... Then I quit, the boss even made excuses for me to work a few more days, and then recruited a woman with a higher education to take my job. When I asked around later, I found her salary was much, much higher than mine, and the boss even paid her a full set of insurance.'

From the information he shared, the 'educational discrimination' he suffered remains a further extension of the devaluation of academic qualifications. Because of the overflow of labour with HE qualifications, which leads to fierce competition for the same position, more and more highly educated labourers participate in the competition for the relatively bottom positions, thus squeezing the competition space for the rest of the labour force.

#02

'That is, nowadays, a diploma is the stepping stone of many, many jobs, but in fact, it (the job) did not need so highly educated labour. For example, in fact, so much work can be handled by labourers with a master's degree, or undergraduate, but they (employers) prefer to let the employees compete, and finally leading to the result that everyone has no other choice but to compete till death.'

In addition to the situation described above, there were also respondents who mentioned similar points. However, on the one hand, they did not explicitly define these views as a sign of devaluation of qualifications. On the other hand, they did not discuss the topic further. For example, #07 used the term 'essential ticket' to describe the role of qualifications in the current job market. At the same time, Respondent #12 believed that the role of academic qualifications in the Chinese job market was not related to the industry but a general threshold. In practice, there might be situations where more work experience is required, but for most

situations, the degree requirement is an entry requirement, and the only way to compete is to have a certain degree. Both of them argued that the Chinese job market used qualifications as a basic screening requirement and that it is not industry-specific. They did not give an explanation as to why this is the case, but they believed that it contributed to some extent to their decision to participate.

Subtheme 2.1 is also a classification with a more complex situation. The case of industry and market as influence variables exhibits both incentive and resistance, and consequently, three categories, in terms of its ultimate resulting influencing consequences. Along with these three categories, the crucial concept of ‘educational devaluation’ is also introduced. I’ll go into more detail about this crucial concept later. In the cases of three categories, there are no cases indicating that they have been impacted by the epidemic since the pressures placed on (potential) practitioners are rather ongoing and objective. On the one hand, respondents provided a more specialised picture of the situations when industry and market needs created impediments to participation in HE programmes. Due to a larger emphasis being placed on professional experience or individual skill than on academic education, the majority of the sectors in the examples created a barrier to respondents’ participation decisions. On the other hand, there were two manifestations for the situations where industry and market requirements influenced the respondents’ decision-making behaviour. One is the industries represented by law and the other is the position represented by research work, both of which have high academic standards, consequently creating a motivation for respondents wishing to work in the relevant field to participate in HE programmes.

Compared to the self-directed, career development-driven educational engagement discussed in [Subtheme 1.1](#), the driving forces reflected in Subtheme 2.1 exhibit a strong external and coercive nature. This further validates theoretical frameworks, such as Vallerand *et al.*’s AMS framework (1992), which categorizes influencing factors into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. The

coercive power of industry and market norms regarding academic qualifications on individuals is particularly evident here. Similarly, the respondents' implicit acceptance of these external pressures when discussing this factor also highlights the compulsory influence exerted by industry or market-related, in the form of a kind of social facts, on those working within them (Durkheim, 1897/1970). Additionally, it's crucial to note that these industry-specific educational requirements are not explicitly mandated by government policies according to the information shared by respondents. Based on the information analysed in Stage A, it appears that while the policy responses during the pandemic aimed to foster a more positive and dynamic job market through various soft measures, they did not specifically modify the stringent industry requirements, such as graduation criteria and professional qualifications. Therefore, they represent a form of market self-regulation that has evolved in response to changing economic conditions and industry needs during the pandemic. This self-regulation can be understood through the lens of human capital theory (Becker, 1976), where industries are seeking to maximize the value of their human resources in a challenging economic environment.

The topic of academic devaluation raised from this subtheme reveals the intricate interplay between individual perceptions, societal changes, and educational decision-making processes. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital provides a fundamental lens through which to view this phenomenon. The devaluation of academic credentials represents a shift in the value of institutionalized cultural capital. Respondents' perception of this devaluation as an ongoing, shifting social context rather than a fixed industrial requirement aligns with Bourdieu's understanding of cultural capital as a dynamic entity whose value is continually negotiated within social fields. This dynamic nature of academic devaluation also resonates with Mezirow's TLT (1991). The awareness of credential devaluation may serve as a 'disorienting dilemma,' prompting individuals to reassess their perspectives on education and its role in their personal and professional development. This reassessment process could explain why academic devaluation

was consistently viewed as a driving force in decision-making across all examples in the study.

Academic devaluation was viewed as a driving force in their decision-making in every example included in this topic. The tendency of academic devaluation was related by some respondents to the occurrence of epidemics, showing that the presence of epidemics did exacerbate academic depreciation. The opposing set of respondents disagreed, indicating that the epidemic's development had nothing to do with the trend. Apart from the explicit explanation of the connection between the epidemic and the devaluation of credentials, the two were, however, rarely discussed in light of one another. Additionally, a few respondents did not include the phrase 'academic devaluation' in their description. None of them provided any more information, although the situation they described was connected to the social setting of academic devaluation in terms of context and the characteristics of the point of view. All of this information is deficient in Stage B. Particularly, when I attempted to correlate the pandemic-era policy changes in Stage A, such as the expansion of HE programmes, increased resource support, and the potential rise in the number of HE participants and graduates, with respondents' concerns about the devaluation of academic qualifications, I found that relevant information was still lacking. Therefore, as one of the six core topics in Stage C, academic devaluation was further investigated and will be discussed in [Topic Three of Section 5.3.2](#).

Subtheme 2.2 Social relationship as the factor influencing the decision on the situational level.

The information gathered from this interview also showed a portion of respondents (#02/14/19) who received influences and sources that were agreed upon in terms of social relationships. From the information they shared, it appears that the influence of this social relationship may even cross over the specific needs discussed above and become a factor on its own that influences the respondents'

decisions. In other words, regardless of the objective presence of some needs of the respondents themselves, the respondents subjectively believed that they did not have a clear driving factor, but rather made their decisions because of the views of their social circle.

For example, #02 stated that at the very beginning, she did not have a clear plan for her future, but since her friends were going to apply for a postgraduate programme and persuaded her to join them, she took the advice and tried to apply (but failed) before the epidemic. From the later information shared by #02, she abandoned the idea of participation before the second attempt. However, her friends, who were also unsuccessful the last time, continued to persuade her to give it another try. The persuasion of friends pushed her to the final act of participation.

#02

'Before the epidemic, before all the stuff, I already didn't want to try, because at that time, that time, I just gave up, let it go whatever. But a friend of mine kept inviting me to say, well, another application to graduate school. He/she said that maybe the outstanding applicants would choose universities abroad, let's have another try, to the top universities in China. Ah. I said, 'Okay,' and then I started to prepare for it anyway.

Similarly, with #14, she stated that she originally did not have the idea of going to graduate school, while her friends around her were advising her that she should not be satisfied with her undergraduate level, so her friend's point of view played a big role in driving this decision-making process. Also, similar to #02 is that when she received the influence of her friends to start thinking about it, she did not have a clear, clear reason why she wanted to participate in HE programmes.

There was also respondent #19. For her, the matter of participating in HE

programmes was entirely a suggestion from her family, and she had no plans to do so before this. However, unlike the other two cases, the situation reported on #02/14 was not directly related to the occurrence of the outbreak, whereas the suggestion of family member #19 was made solely because of the occurrence of the outbreak.

In addition to the above cases of being highly influenced by social circles, other respondents reported cases of being influenced by social relationships. However, these respondents already had a spontaneous motivation to participate before being influenced by social relationships, so the final impact was a combination of both. For example, #01 stated when describing how he first developed the idea of participation.

#01

*‘At the time I actually had a postgraduate supervisor... that a girl in the same class as me, she had applied for a PhD after one year of postgraduate study in (*20)19. I was told by my supervisor that maybe also consider continuing my studies and applying for a PhD. So, because of the supervisor ‘s advice and my own attitude and thoughts about the employment environment, I decided to ... I thought about it (continuing higher education) as well.’*

Similarly, #07 said that since several of her closest friends had chosen to pursue a doctoral degree, she was motivated by being aware of the possible benefits of continuing to upgrade her qualifications from her daily interactions. While it is clear in conjunction with the rest of what #07 shared that the influence of these friends was not the main factor driving her decision to participate, she indicated that this point did strengthen her willingness to participate.

It is worth noting that, although affected to varying degrees of intensity, both conditions may be related to the cultural climate of ‘peer pressure’ that will be

discussed in [Subtheme 3.2](#).

Finally, the rest of the remaining respondents in this project felt that their decision-making behaviour was not influenced by their social relationships. In addition to these cases where they explicitly stated that their decisions were made without the involvement of other people's opinions, even the respondents who appeared above who reported that they had been influenced felt that most of them were in the early stages of a decision-making process when interacting with the people around them. When they had not yet implemented participatory behaviours but were at the end of a relatively strong tendency to participate, they responded that the views of those around them were no longer enough to change their minds. For example, both #01/05 indicated that although they would discuss the related topics with other people at the later stage of the decision-making process, they did not care about the attitude of the other person. There is also Respondent #11, whose opinion and emotion are briefly affected when interacting with other people, but he soon comes out of emotions and returns to his original thoughts. There were even respondents #13/19/20 who said that they did not interact with others at all during the decision-making process, and therefore, did not think they had received any influence from social relationships. For example, #13 gave an explanation for this situation when asked about this topic.

#13

*'The thing is, well it is discussed on the premise that you mention it (*HE programme), but I haven't talked to anyone about it at all, so I don't feel It is had an impact.'*

Similarly, #19 indicated during the interview.

#19

‘Well, the main thing is that at the time (when I was thinking about participation) it was the height of the epidemic, do you remember? I was working on my final assessment at the time, and yeah, everyone was so busy with their own stuff. No one wanted to listen to all your stuff, which made no sense to them.’

In addition to the cases mentioned above, there is a more specific situation also reported by Respondents #02/03/14/20, where the attitudes of the social circle are subservient to the respondents themselves. This situation all appeared in the discussion of the influence of family. This group of respondents expressed that the attitude of their family members when it comes to the discussion of whether or not they want to participate in HE programmes is not based on any of the external influences mentioned above, but rather that it is the respondent’s willingness. They support the respondent regardless of how the respondent makes the decision, therefore, when this group of respondents expressed that they had the idea of participating in HE programmes, the families were supportive. The most typical example is when Respondent #03 said that he expressed his idea of participation when he was chatting with his family. At that time, his family showed a fully supportive attitude. However, it was only when the topic came up again after the participation that the family told him the truth that they were supportive at the time solely because the respondent had expressed a desire to be involved. In other words, his family members were supportive of his idea regardless of whether the idea was to participate in the programme or not. In this group of cases, represented by #03, the respondents all indicated that such a supportive attitude reinforced the respondent’s original intention.

If the situations mentioned above are short-term influences from the social circle, some other respondents (#04/05) reported more long-term decision-making influences from the social circle. For example, #04 stated that she had the idea of participating in HE programmes because of the family atmosphere she grew up in, which led her to identify the academic level she wanted to achieve while growing up. This goal setting was not about need, but more like a consensus that

did not require a reason.

#04

*'(May I know when you first had the idea of participating HE programme?) Well, want to continue to learn, this idea, is something I always have...cause the place I grew up, I mean my family is very traditional. They think learning is something very, very, important. (*And they think) I should make a living by continuing to learn, and most of my family members are intellectual. Well then, I set a goal for myself that, I must participate HE programme, and at least get a master's degree. So I always believe I should have a master's degree since I was a kid.'*

In addition to this subtle influence of the family environment from an early age, #05 reported relatively more extreme cases where family members wanted the respondent to participate in HE programmes to improve their education, even to the point of arguing.

#05

*'Using the word 'support' (*to describe the attitude of my family)? I would say it's a euphemistic expression. They (*my family) always persuaded me to participate (*in HE programmes) in a very tough way, which even led to squabbling. Well, this may be due to the experience of my father, perhaps, for he is someone like, learning changed his life.'*

Although it was also mentioned by #05 in the discussion on other topics that he already had his own motivation behind his decision on HE programmes, he also stated that the motivation for his involvement was to address this long-standing family conflict.

In this subtheme, I focused on the situational-level influences that social

relationships may exert. Across my research, social-related factors emerge as particularly unique. Within the framework I developed to explore and analyse factors at different levels of influence (as integrated in the theoretical framework discussed in [Section 2.7](#)), social-related factors appear at both the situational (in this subtheme) and institutional levels (in [Subtheme 3.2](#) later). Building upon the unique perspectives shared by respondents, Subtheme 2.2 here reveals a nuanced interplay between social relationships and educational decision-making during the pandemic. The influence of social connections manifests in highly personalized ways, reflecting the diverse life circumstances of individuals and the varied nature of their interpersonal relationships. This intimate, context-specific impact on decision-making processes provides a rich tapestry of insights into the complex dynamics of educational participation.

As mentioned in [Theme One](#), the respondents in my research did not report social needs at the individual level. When examining their discussions on social relationships, despite being closely tied to the individual, these relationships are perceived as external influences. The impact of these factors does not stem from the respondents' intrinsic need for social activities or relationships, nor do they view social connections as a direct benefit of educational participation. From this perspective, social relationships as a decision-making influence cannot be categorized as an activity-oriented factor in Houle's Typology (1961), nor can they be considered as a need for communication as described in Boshier's EPS (1971). Instead, they more closely align with the relatively external forms of motivation outlined in the AMS framework (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992). However, this observation hints at another possibility. As discussed in the debates surrounding the AMS framework (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992), external motivation includes a spectrum of self-regulation, and the boundary between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is not always clear-cut. If the respondents who explicitly rejected or were indifferent to the influence of social relationships provide evidence of the relatively stable presence of social relationships as situational-level external factors, then for those who acknowledged being influenced by social relationships, the nature of

this influence becomes more ambiguous. Is this influence truly a situational external factor, or could it be, perhaps unbeknownst to the respondents themselves, an internalized recognition and pursuit of a social need? This question presents a potential avenue for further research.

Theme Three: Factors on the institutional level.

The next part of the section would move on to Theme Three. The main influences and sources anchored in this section are external factors that are a layer higher than the individual and social circle, such as culture and policy. These are the larger layers of the social environment in which the responder is embedded. Although the respondent does not have direct interaction in the same way that the social circle does, the respondent may be influenced by that level of influence when he or she is in it. This theme consists of two subthemes and discusses each of the two core topics learned from the interviews, namely policies during the epidemic and peer pressure culture on the decision-making behaviour of the respondents. This theme aligns with my theoretical framework's institutional level and addresses my research question concerning the contextual factors affecting young adults' full-time HE decisions during the pandemic.

In [Subtheme 3.1](#), the influence of HE-related policies during the epidemic on individuals' decision-making behaviour in HE projects appeared to be relatively limited. Most participants in this project indicated that their decision-making was not significantly influenced by HE-related policies during the epidemic. However, in the instances where participants did discuss the relevance of HE-related policies to their decision-making, the influence was described as decisive. This suggests a polarized effect of HE-related policies during the epidemic on individuals' decisions to participate in HE projects.

In [Subtheme 3.2](#), numerous instances are indicated under the subtheme of peer pressure, encompassing direct motivation, direct barriers, indirect motivation,

and indirect barriers. This diversity suggests that peer pressure exerts various effects on potential HE programme participants. However, Stage B information did not include discussions of peer pressure in relation to the social context of the COVID-19 pandemic among respondents. Consequently, exploring the connection between peer pressure and the epidemic would be another point in Stage C, filling the informational gaps in this context.

Subtheme 3.1 Policies during the COVID-19 pandemic as the factor influencing the decision on the institutional level.

In addition to the influence of industry and market demands on the participation decision, policy is another factor that may have an influence on motivation, especially in the social context of the epidemic. A number of very interesting phenomena were reported by the respondents under this topic. Their ideas can be roughly categorized into four groups.

First, some respondents (#03/09/14) explicitly stated that the policy affected their intention to participate in HE programmes. This kind of opinion is largely consistent with the conjectures made in the analysis of policy done in Stage A. Under the influence of policies related to the expansion of colleges and universities during the epidemic, some respondents clearly felt that it was less difficult to participate, and thus made more active participation decisions. For example, #09/14 had the experience of trying to apply to HE programmes before the epidemic but failed. Thus, they clearly felt that the difficulty of applying and assessing for enrolment had decreased after the release of policies related to the expansion. Another example is #03. He was involved during the epidemic in the SBD programme that was restarted during the epidemic as mentioned earlier. He also made several attempts to apply and take the entrance exam for different HE programmes before the pandemic, but all of them ended in failure. In his own words, he would not have had the opportunity to participate in HE programmes had it not been for the restart of the SBD programme.

#03

*‘(And do you think this affects you much?) Yes! Of course, I mean, cause without that stuff (*the COVID-19 pandemic and related policies), I wouldn’t have come (*to the university). I wouldn’t have the chance to study. Because if there was no epidemic, the country wouldn’t have pushed for this second bachelor’s degree, and I couldn’t have been here (* my university).’*

The second group of views, represented by #10/11/20, indicated that they were aware of the policies related to HE during the epidemic, but did not think it influenced their decision-making. This group of respondents, typified by #20, felt that the policy represented by the expansion had only changed the difficulty of participation objectively, but not their intention to participate subjectively. However, the difficulty of participation itself was not a key consideration for them.

#20

‘Well how to say...after all you know, applying to a PhD programme is not something, well, something has a certain result, right? I mean you apply for it doesn’t mean you certainly can participate. So when I considered whether I should apply for it, I knew there was a risk of failure. What I was wondering is, well, should I have a try? Yeah, the point is to decide whether I should try. So the policy just like, honestly It is good news, but it just reduced the risk but didn’t erase the risk. Right? So I don’t think the policy influenced my decision. It made no difference to me.’

A third group of respondents (#01/15/19/20) felt that policies during the epidemic did not influence their decision-making because their industries were more affected by non-epidemic related policies. The logic for this situation is similar to the situation reported by #09 in [Subtheme 1.3](#), who reported that he was not influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic because he had experience with malaria.

Similarly, the respondents belonging to this group all had felt a much greater influence from other policies. Therefore, the HE-related policies during the epidemic they perceived seem to be much less influential under such a stronger comparison.

For example, as #01 used to study in the navigation engineering industry, compared to the policies during the epidemic, it was rather the policy changes triggered by technological development in the industry and international trade frictions before the epidemic that had a greater influence on his decision-making. The same was true for Respondent #15, as she found that policies directly related to her animation industry, such as policies related to grading and vetting, had a greater impact on the industry ecology than policies related to the HE industry as a whole during the outbreak. In contrast, she felt that policies during the epidemic *'could almost be said to have had no influence'*. Finally, there was also the impact of the double-reduction policy on the education industry mentioned by #19, which has been discussed earlier and will not be repeated here.

The last group contains all the remaining respondents (including #02/04/05/06/07/08/12/13/16/17/18). They explicitly stated that they had no knowledge of the policies related to HE at all and therefore had not felt any influence from it.

The analysis of respondents' perspectives on relevant HE policies during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a complex landscape of influences and perceptions, which can be interpreted through multiple theoretical lenses. The varied responses to HE policies during the pandemic can be understood through Cross's Chain-of-response model (1981). This model helps explain how external factors, such as policy changes, interact with individual circumstances and attitudes to influence educational participation decisions. The diversity of responses suggests that policies act as one of many factors in a complex decision-making process, rather than a universal determinant.

For those respondents who reported a positive influence of policies on their decision to participate in HE, the frameworks of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and the capability approach (Sen, 1987; 1999/2001) can be applied. These policies may have enhanced individuals' sense of autonomy, competence, or relatedness, thus fostering more self-determined forms of motivation for educational engagement. The positive effects of related policies may also stem from the fact that these policies have helped potential education participants realize their own capability to engage in and complete HE.

Whether this is due to an increase in self-confidence or an awareness of educational rights, a triangulation of evidence from the policy analysis in Stage A supports this conclusion. During the COVID-19 pandemic, China's education policies, such as the expansion of HE programmes and the increase in enrolment quotas for specific industries or programmes, have made concerted efforts to lower the barriers to entry into HE and broaden the potential participant base. These measures may have rekindled the hopes of those who previously lacked confidence in their ability to compete in HE, or they may have awakened a sense of entitlement to educational participation among those who had not previously recognized it. This also aligns with the idea of TLT (Mezirow, 1991), which posits that external stimuli can trigger the potential for learning.

While my research mentioned above that most respondents already had a clear understanding of their right to participate in education - suggesting that the latter scenario of self-awareness awakening was not prevalent among them—there is strong empirical evidence from respondents who were motivated by policy changes. This is particularly true for those who have experienced prior failures or negative educational experiences. For these individuals, the policies had a significant and positive influence on their motivation to re-engage with full-time HE.

Conversely, other respondents expressly said that HE-related rules during the

outbreak had no influence on their choice of actions. To be more specific, some respondents stated that the reason for this was that other non-HE-related policies or policies that were published pre-epidemic had a greater or more direct impact on them or their industry. In light of this comparison, those respondents indicated that the effects of HE-related regulations during the outbreak could be overlooked. This observation further reinforces the perspective within composite theoretical frameworks, such as the COR Model (Cross, 1981) and the EPS (Boshier, 1971; 1977), which emphasize that the impact of various influencing factors is multiple, with no single determinant holding universal sway. In other words, for respondents who were unaffected by the various policies discussed in Stage A, this may indeed suggest a failure of those policies to reach this demographic. However, an alternative interpretation is that the content of these policies—or even the existence of policies as institutional factors - simply did not fall within the primary considerations of these respondents. From this perspective, the lack of policy impact is both natural and potentially unavoidable.

Moreover, in addition to the respondents previously mentioned who were aware of the policies relating to HE during the epidemic and described them in terms of their influence, some respondents indicated that they were completely unaware of the policies and as a result did not think they were influenced by them. This could also be interpreted as an indication that these respondents did not have related needs and thus did not seek out policy information. However, this optimistic speculation is based on the fact that my respondents ultimately decided to participate in full-time HE. For those I did not interview—those potential participants who ultimately chose not to engage—whether their non-participation was influenced by a failure in policy communication, which constituted an information barrier (Cross, 1981), remains a critical issue that practitioners must seriously reflect upon and investigate further.

Subtheme 3.2 ‘Peer pressure’ culture as the factor influencing the decision on the institutional level.

Finally, some respondents (#11/12/20) mentioned ‘peer pressure’ in sharing their decision-making process, which is a topic related to the social and cultural climate. To some extent, this is a topic that is closely linked to the influence of social circles and might be better discussed in [Theme Two](#). However, from the information shared by the respondents, it is clear that peer pressure is not a pressure or demand that arises for one specific individual, but rather a cultural climate that exists more broadly. Therefore, similar to the previously mentioned difference between career planning and industry requirements, I categorise this section as an influencer on the institutional level.

In the group of respondents who reported being affected by peer pressure, four situations emerged for shared information: directly causing motivation, directly causing barriers, indirectly causing motivation, and indirectly causing barriers.

First, #11 indicated that he felt peer pressure and in this way was more inclined to make the decision to participate, which can be summarised as ‘directly causing motivation’. To be more specific, he indicated that apart from his academic pursuits, peer pressure was one of the reasons he decided to participate in HE programmes. As most of the people in his social circle, especially his cousins in his big family, were postgraduates, such pressure from peers made him, who was not yet a postgraduate student at the time, even more, determined in his decision to participate in full-time HE programmes.

In light of this participant’s statements, I would like to clarify why the topic of peer pressure has been classified under Theme Three rather than being included in the discussion of social relationships within Theme Two. To be more specific, #11 indicated that apart from his academic pursuits, this pervasive cultural pressure was one of the reasons he decided to participate in HE programmes. He

noted that in his broader social context, especially among his extended family, there was a widespread expectation for individuals to pursue postgraduate education. The participant particularly emphasized that this is a widely held value, rather than one unique to his own family environment. He used expressions such as ‘everyone thinks this way,’ ‘this is generally how people see it,’ and ‘it’s the same in my family’ to underscore the prevalence of this perspective. This example illustrates how institutional-level factors, manifested as cultural expectations and societal norms, can significantly influence individual decision-making. Unlike the situational factors in Theme Two, which involve direct influences from family or friends, this represents a more pervasive cultural phenomenon. From this perspective, this influencing factor is cultural and thus institutional in nature, aligning with the focus of Theme Three on broader societal and institutional impacts on educational decisions. In Subtheme 3.2 here, all the respondents referenced this perspective during their interviews.

Second, Respondent #20 indicated that the peer pressure he or she feels creates a hindrance to his or her participation in decision-making, which can be summarised as ‘directly causing barriers’. In her case, this was caused by the fact that most of her peers were still in the labour market, in which case she herself would feel pressured if she wanted to leave the labour market and remain a full-time student identity.

#20

‘Almost all of my friends and cousins, they were still working. At that time, if I decided to apply for a PhD programme, that means I would be a ‘student’. It just like, well, I am different. And then when people chat with you, it might be, ah, how’s your current job going? Oh, you’re still a student. You know what I mean, that doesn’t sound or feel like something someone at my age should do.’

Third, some respondents (#11/12) reported peer pressure acting on others in their

social circle, thus indirectly contributing to their decision-making, which can be summarised as ‘indirectly causing motivation’. Except for the peer pressure felt by #11 mentioned above, he also reported that his family members were similarly influenced and therefore encouraged him to participate in HE programmes. Another case with opposite specifics but similar results was that of Respondent #12. He reported that because he was contemplating whether or not to apply to HE programmes, this made him the first of his big family to potentially earn a graduate degree. This possibility made his family’s social circle strongly advise his family that they should support his participation, which shifted the otherwise relatively negative attitudes of the respondent’s family to support his decision to participate.

Finally, indirectly from the social circle, peer pressure discouraged respondents from participating in decision-making, which can be summarised as ‘indirectly causing barriers’. It is from this that the original negative attitudes of #12’s family mentioned above originated. The reason for this is similar to that reported by #20. In the social circle of #12’s family, people of the same generation have performed well in their jobs. At this point, if the respondent decided to leave his job and became a student again, his family would feel pressure to do so. This stress caused #12’s family to originally disagree with the respondent’s idea of participation until this negativity was later dissolved by the positive emotions mentioned above.

There were many different instances documented under the heading of peer pressure, including direct motivation, direct barriers, indirect motivation, and indirect barriers. This suggests that peer pressure has a variety of effects on potential HE programme participants as well as different mechanisms through which it operates. However, according to the data from Stage B, none of the respondents discussed peer pressure while addressing their relationship with the social context of the epidemic. As a result, one of the main subjects covered in Stage C will be investigating the connection between peer pressure and the epidemic.

Generally, the influence of peer pressure on educational participation during the pandemic presents a complex dynamic that can be elucidated through multiple theoretical lenses. This phenomenon, which can act as both a motivator and a barrier, not only affects the respondents directly but also indirectly through their social circles, including family members. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital provides a foundational framework for understanding this dynamic. Peer pressure can be seen as a manifestation of social capital, where educational decisions are influenced by the norms, expectations, and behaviours within one's social network. The dual nature of this influence, as both motivator and barrier, reflects the complex ways in which social capital can shape individual choices and opportunities.

On one hand, peer pressure can either enhance or diminish an individual's sense of autonomy, competence, and belonging, thereby influencing their motivation to engage in education. When peer influence aligns with personal values and goals, it can serve as a positive motivating factor. Conversely, when it conflicts with personal aspirations, it may become a barrier. This seems to support the SDT's (Deci & Ryan, 1985) perspective on relatively internal influences. However, from another angle, specifically from the respondents' expressed feelings, respondents were more likely to perceive peer pressure as an external factor rather than a pursuit they actively embrace. From this perspective, 'peer pressure' as a specific cultural phenomenon, plays a role very likely to the social relationship discussed in Subtheme 2.2. However, unlike the influence of social relationships, peer pressure operates more as a social fact (Durkheim, 1897/1970): exerting broad influence over individuals, with a coercive power that persists regardless of individual perspectives. This mechanism bears a certain resemblance to the industry's implicit requirements discussed earlier. This also highlights that within the AMS framework (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992), even factors categorized as external can manifest differently based on their degree of internalization. It further suggests the potential fluidity between these external influences. Given this, I identified peer pressure as a topic worthy of further exploration in Stage C in [Topic](#)

[Four of Section 5.3.2](#), where I also examined how the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted the social dynamics surrounding peer pressure.

5.2.3 The summary of Stage B analysis.

Based on the project's study purpose, this section generally summarises the information in this section. Overall, the information about the 20 Chinese participants in HE programmes during the pandemic that was gleaned from the one-on-one semi-structured interviews in Stage B is analysed and discussed in Section 5.2. The following parts contain the information. After coding, recoding, and categorising, I came up with three main themes and six subthemes, with two subthemes in each theme separately. To help visualize the structure of my analysis on Stage B, I have already included a comprehensive visual representation in [Table 5f](#), [Section 5.3.2](#), which can be helpful while reviewing the summary below.

The goal of this project is to investigate influencing factors that work in the decision-making process of HE participants in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. The preceding [Table 5f](#) continues to serve as a valuable tool for organizing the analytical framework and content in the conclusion section. Following the thematic analysis of the information obtained from Stage B semi-structured interviews, and in alignment with the research design outlined in Chapter Four, I identified influencing factors that can be categorized into factors at the individual level, situational level, and institutional level.

For Theme One, individual-level influencing factors in Stage B are concentrated in three aspects: [Subtheme 1.1](#), related to career demands; [Subtheme 1.2](#), related to knowledge and capability demands; and [Subtheme 1.3](#), related to safety risks. In [Subtheme 1.1](#), I analysed the influencing factors constituted by individuals' vocational-related demands. In my project, all cases under this subtheme were reported as motivators for participation rather than barriers. Some of these influencing factors directly impacted the respondents, while others were

transmitted through the respondents' social relationships. Regardless of the scenario, variations were observed between the social environments before and during the pandemic. In [Subtheme 1.2](#), I analysed the influencing factors constituted by individual demands stemming from knowledge and skills. For respondents reporting this category, this influencing factor served as a driving force for decision-making participation, unaffected by the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, in [Subtheme 1.3](#), health risks, a topic highly associated with the pandemic, constituted one of the influencing factors for individual decision-making participation. Under this subtheme, the safety risks brought about by the pandemic were reported as barriers to participation. Additionally, instances were observed where respondents explicitly stated that these factors did not constitute influencing factors under this subtheme.

[Theme Two](#), representing situational-level influencing factors, primarily encompass two subthemes: one focusing on job-related factors at the situational level, and the other on factors related to social relationships. The former concentrates on the influence of the respondents' reported work environment/position/industry on their decision-making participation, encompassing both motivators and barriers. Depending on the content, the motivators can be further divided into those influenced by the industry and those influenced by the position. Conversely, barriers include examples from industries that place greater emphasis on work experience rather than educational background. At the same time, respondents particularly reported information related to the devaluation of diplomas, including its impact before and after the occurrence of the pandemic. [Subtheme 2.2](#) focuses on the influencing factors constituted by respondents' social relationships. Depending on the process of their influence, this subtheme encompasses various scenarios, including short-term effects and long-term effects, where influence is entirely driven by others/others' perspectives and combined with one's own perspective/existence of others' influence but self-unaffected (acknowledging the influence's presence but producing no effect)/entirely self-driven (denying the influence's presence),

constituting both motivators and barriers.

In addressing the individual level, Theme Three primarily analyses the influencing factors outlined in [Subtheme 3.1](#), constituted by policies, and [Subtheme 3.2](#), shaped by socio-cultural elements. Given the focus of my research on the COVID-19 pandemic as the background context, all policy-related information within [Subtheme 3.1](#) is based on HE policies during the pandemic period. Depending on the circumstances of the respondents, [Subtheme 3.1](#) encompasses discussions on four scenarios: respondents being aware of policy influence and being affected by it; respondents being aware of policy influence but remaining unaffected; respondents being aware of policy influence but disregarding it due to the presence of other non-HE policies for comparison; and respondents being unaware of policy influence. Lastly, peer pressure, repeatedly mentioned by multiple respondents as a social atmosphere, is discussed in [Subtheme 3.2](#). Similarly, considering the varying degrees of influence, [Subtheme 3.2](#) comprises four scenarios of how peer pressure works as an influencing factor, which are direct motivation, indirect motivation, direct barrier, and indirect barrier.

Although Stage B semi-structured interviews provided ample and diversified information to support my research, the analysis still reveals emerging issues, exemplified by the topic of diploma devaluation. In designing the semi-structured interview questions, the issue of diploma devaluation was not included in my questions design. However, in Stage B, this topic was voluntarily raised by several respondents. This prompted me to realize that there may be additional aspects worth exploring in this area. Particularly, I am interested in understanding whether other respondents who did not spontaneously mention this topic hold unique perspectives and experiences. Another example is the issue of peer pressure. On one hand, I seek to understand more about respondents' views on peer pressure. On the other hand, the information about peer pressure in Stage B lacks insights into its influence during the pandemic period. This is because almost all respondents who mentioned peer pressure did not specify whether it was related

to the pandemic. Therefore, based on these gaps in information and topics for further discussion, I designed the discussion topics for Stage C (more details about research design can be found in [Section 4.4.4](#)).

5.3 Stage C: focus group via Padlet.

This chapter focuses on the data collection results and thematic analysis of Stage C. Section 5.3 also contains three parts. Firstly, [Section 5.3.1](#) provides a summary of the information collected in Stage C. Then, in [Section 5.3.2](#), the section focuses on the thematic analysis of the Stage C information. Finally, [Section 5.3.3](#) summarizes the thematic analysis of Stage C. Stage C is the last data collection and analysis stage of my research. Following this section is the chapter on the findings and conclusion of this project.

5.3.1 The result of the focus group.

As mentioned above, the same respondents who participated in Stage B were also invited to participate in Stage C and no additional respondents were recruited for this stage. More information about the sampling and recruitment of Stage C can be found in Section 4.4.4. Finally, 17 of the 20 Stage B respondents responded to that invitation and participated in Stage C (n=17). Among them, respondents #8, #10, and #11 did not participate in the focus group of Stage C. Despite efforts to maintain contact, these participants did not respond to follow-up communications regarding the focus group stage of the study. While the specific reasons for their non-participation are unknown, such variations in participant involvement across different stages of a multi-phase study are a recognized challenge in research methodology. Due to the significant overlap between participants in Stages B and C, participant codes and information are not reiterated for brevity. [Table 5e](#) in [Section 5.2.1](#) can be referenced for this information if needed.

5.3.2 Thematic analysis of focus group with participants of HE during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this part, I will analyse the data collected from online focus group discussions. The analysis concentrates on the views, consensuses, and disagreements expressed by participants during group interactions. While I may mention some findings from previous stages for comparison, the primary goal is to present the unique dynamics and insights generated by the focus groups. This approach supports me in capturing the distinctive perspectives produced through collective discussion, unencumbered by predetermined theoretical frameworks.

Firstly, it is significant to highlight that Stage C is performed in an anonymous manner via the Padlet platform, as discussed in [Section 4.4.4](#). This is because all the respondents were gathering together in this stage and their personal information needed to be safeguarded. However, this also means that neither the researchers nor the respondents are able to pinpoint the precise origin of the divergent viewpoints. In particular, the researcher was unable to reliably identify cases in which a responder posted many thoughts on the same issue or whether multiple opinions originated from the same respondent. As a result, rather than emphasising the frequency and generalizability of opinions, Stage C of this project concentrated on the diversity of opinions, and in a similar vein, the quantity of opinions expressed at this stage is merely a declaration of findings rather than emphasising the frequency of the opinion.

The methodological approach in this study combined both deductive and inductive elements, reflecting a flexible and iterative research design. In my Stage B, the semi-structured interviews were guided by the theoretical framework derived from a comprehensive review of existing literature and empirical studies as shown in [Section 2.7](#). This deductive element provided a structured foundation for the data collection. However, the research process evolved inductively as new themes and unexplored areas emerged from these interviews in Stage B. These emergent

topics, which were not initially anticipated in the theoretical framework, formed the basis for the five core topics explored in the subsequent focus group discussions, which constituted my Stage C. This transition from semi-structured interviews to focus groups represents a shift from a primarily deductive approach to a more inductive one, allowing for the exploration of novel insights grounded in participants' experiences. The focus group discussions were then structured around these inductively derived topics, encouraging participants to engage in a deeper, collaborative exploration of these five themes. In my analysis phase, a further inductive process was employed to identify subtopics within each core topic. To provide a better reading experience, the term 'subtopic' is used specifically to refer to the categories identified in Stage C of this research, in contrast to the subtheme, which is employed in the analysis of Stage B. This deliberate distinction is made to avoid any potential confusion between the different stages of analysis and to clearly differentiate between the thematic structures developed at each stage.

As a result, this section will also be divided into five topics (the fifth and sixth questions serve a single topic that will be covered in further detail in the fifth topic). The topics of Stage C are listed in [Table 5g](#) in the next page. The specific sources and questioning techniques related to these five topics will be individually introduced in the subsequent analysis of each one. Due to space limitations, they are not elaborated here.

Table 5g A general presentation of the information gathered from Stage C.

Topic One The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on social trends	Subtopic 1.1 COVID-19 pandemic, social trends, and HE participation influencing factors.
	Subtopic 1.2 Influencing the economy as the COVID-19 pandemic's specific mechanism.
Topic Two The influence of the epidemic on the mentality of individuals	(No subtopic in this section)
Topic Three The diploma devaluation and COVID-19 pandemic.	Subtopic 3.1 The pandemic influences the trend of diploma devaluation through its effects on the economy.
	Subtopic 3.2 The pandemic influences the trend of diploma devaluation through its effects on teaching modality.
	Subtopic 3.3 China's substantial population base has an unrelated social background to the COVID-19 pandemic.
Topic Four Peer pressure and the COVID-19 pandemic.	Subtopic 4.1 The experience of peer pressure and its changes during the pandemic.
	Subtopic 4.2 The absence of perceived peer pressure
Topic Five The role of 'sunk cost'	Subtopic 5.1 Sunk cost as an influencing factor and its changes during the COVID-19 pandemic
	Subtopic 5.2 Situations unaffected by sunk cost.
	Subtopic 5.3 Situation regarding the change in attitude toward sunk cost due to the pandemic

Topic One The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on social trends

Firstly, it is necessary to explain why this topic, which has been discussed in Stage B, needed to be investigated further in Stage C. The emergence and refinement of themes in Stage C followed an iterative process, bridging insights from the semi-structured interviews in Stage B with the focused discussions in Stage C.

Topic One in Stage C emerged from notable insights shared by several participants during Stage B. #20, for instance, observed a significant shift among young adults, including herself, toward seeking relatively low-paying but stable jobs in the public sector, such as civil service positions, rather than pursuing the previously

popular high-paying but high-pressure jobs in internet companies. She remarked that this trend existed before the pandemic, but it had intensified after its onset, noting, ‘Before COVID-19, this trend was there, but it wasn’t as crazy as it is now - everyone around me seems to be preparing for a job change.’ This viewpoint led me to consider the role of the COVID-19 pandemic as a ‘magnifying glass’, a metaphor #20 used in the interview, in the decision-making process regarding full-time HE. In contrast, other participants identified new social trends triggered by the pandemic. For example, #17, who worked in the healthcare sector, noted that due to the pandemic, there was ‘unprecedented attention and explosive growth’ in her industry, creating new opportunities and challenges. Based on these insights, I hypothesized a correlation between the pandemic and social trends, which potentially influences young adults’ decisions regarding full-time HE participation. Moreover, individual perceptions of the changes in social trends during the COVID-19 pandemic reflect individuals’ perceptions of the institutional level factors. Perceiving societal trends from an individual standpoint is crucial due to the inherently collective nature of these trends. It is possible for a phenomenon to appear prominent in virtual spaces, such as social media, yet lack significant resonance or understanding among individuals in real-life scenarios.

Therefore, in Stage C, I sought to delve deeper into this observation. The discussion of Topic One began with the following question:

‘Some people view the COVID-19 pandemic as an accelerator or magnifier, hastening certain pre-existing trends such as the pressure of labour market competition and the pursuit of secure public sector jobs. On the other hand, some believe the pandemic may have created new social trends, with some industries experiencing explosive growth due to its impact. How do you perceive the relationship between the pandemic and social trends? (Examples are welcome.)’

In designing this question, I intentionally refrained from specifying particular social trends or hotspots, given that the Stage B interviews revealed that

participants' focus and perspectives were closely tied to their unique personal experiences and industry contexts. By not pre-defining any specific trend or hotspot, I aimed to encourage participants to share a broader range of unique observations.

Interestingly, although this question did not directly link to the topic of full-time HE decision-making, my respondents naturally connected their discussions of social trends to their educational decisions. This outcome can be attributed to their thorough understanding of my research project beforehand and, to some extent, the format of the focus group discussion itself. According to my personal experience, in oral discussions, topics can easily drift away from the main focus, leading to a lack of concentration or the neglect of certain issues. However, I chose to use Padlet as a tool to create a forum-like environment similar to social networks, where all opinions were expressed in written form. This written format allowed my respondents to communicate their thoughts more concisely and efficiently, leading to more focused and productive discussions.

After coding and categorizing the information discussed by the respondents under Topic One, I further divided the theme into two subthemes: its influence on individual decisions to participate in HE, as shaped by social trends, and its specific mechanisms of influence on the economy. The decision to separate economy-related content into the second subtheme was driven by the fact that discussions surrounding the economy and its relationship with the pandemic generated particularly intense interest and engagement among the respondents in Stage C. The volume and depth of responses concerning economic issues significantly exceeded those related to other individual social trends and emerging hotspots.

Subtopic 1.1 COVID-19 pandemic, social trends, and HE participation influencing factors.

Epidemics may play a reinforcing role in influencing factors involved in decision-making with HE programmes by affecting social trends. The possible specific influence of the epidemic includes accelerating the development of pre-epidemic societal trends, intensifying pre-existing societal tensions, advancing industry reforms and technological innovations, and creating new social hotspots and trends.

Firstly, the pandemic's function as a magnifying lens will strengthen preexisting factors that potentially influence decision-making regarding HE participation. This perspective was highlighted by several respondents during Stage B and Stage C. Some participants acknowledged the pandemic's potential to amplify preexisting societal conflicts, notably within the realms of the job market and labour relations.

'Anyway, I just feel like, the epidemic is more like a kind of magnifying lens. I mean, the social trends existing before the COVID-19 pandemic were magnified and put on the stage. For example, the anxiety of young people about employment. The concept of '996' (refers to the culture of working from 9 am to 9 pm, six days a week) has been existing for a long time. But against the backdrop of the epidemic, people have become more anxious.'

The perception of this respondent is that certain job market disparities in China existed prior to the pandemic but were not adequately acknowledged. With the pandemic acting as an amplifying lens, these disparities have intensified. The increased focus and discourse on these disparities can be attributed to their broader influence due to the epidemic on individuals.

At the same time, in addition to employment-related topics, a number of social challenges that had not been resolved before the epidemic have become more

difficult to resolve under the impact of the epidemic.

‘I think the epidemic is like a gas pedal that intensifies some existing problems. I am more pessimistic and think that the epidemic has a negative effect. These problems exist and have to be solved sooner or later, and it is best to solve them by intensifying them in this way, but I don’t know if they can be solved so far. For example, the downturn real estate industry, demand for jobs, low wages, etc.’

Except for the job and economic issues mentioned before, other dilemmas that have been used as examples in this subtopic include the devaluation of academic qualifications, the allocation of social resources, and the long-term effect after a period of rapid growth. Considering that the survey results from Stage B also indicate that these societal trends may influence individuals’ decisions regarding participation in HE programmes, it is conceivable that the pandemic could impact individuals’ participation decisions by amplifying the scope and intensity of these societal trends. In fact, opinions expressed during Stage C corroborate this notion. For example:

‘In the past (Before the epidemic), many of my female friends preferred to work in governmental institutions because of the high unemployment rate, and now many of my male friends also emerge similar thoughts for fear of even higher unemployment due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the very bad economic environment.’

In this case, the depressed job market triggered by the epidemic has led to more individuals feeling the pressure of employment and the risk of unemployment. As a result, these individuals may change their HE participation decisions. In other words, the epidemic may have indirectly strengthened the influence of the influencing factors on individuals’ HE programme participation decisions by strengthening the influence of these possible influencing factors.

Finally, the epidemic may create new social hot topics and trends and contribute to the emerging new motivations and barriers to the potential HE participants, such as healthcare, psychological health during lockdown, and live stream shopping.

‘The healthcare industry, particularly the vaccine industry, has grown as a result of the epidemic but has rapidly declined once the epidemic model has been lifted. Such explosive growth and decline will inevitably lead to additional economic and employment challenges.’

On one hand, this partly signifies the possibility of outbreaks leading to increased attention and growth prospects for specific industries. This assertion is corroborated by insights from Stage B participants within the healthcare sector, indicating that the outbreak and the subsequent focus on the healthcare industry influenced their HE decisions. On the other hand, similar to the instances observed in Stage B, the cases of such outbreak-induced changes in industries reported in this study were predominantly confined to healthcare-related sectors. Further research with larger and more diverse samples is needed to ascertain if this trend is replicated across other industries.

Subtopic 1.2 Influencing the economy as the COVID-19 pandemic’s specific mechanism.

One specific manner in which the pandemic influenced HE program participation is its influence on the economy. Insight from respondents indicates that the pandemic significantly disrupted or altered the regular operations of industries, thereby shifting the trajectory of social trends, such as the clash between minimalism and consumerism, pursuit from high-paying but unstable jobs to low-paying but stable positions., preference for employment in government agencies and state-owned enterprises., resistance against overtime culture. In discussions revolving around the pandemic and social trends, a recurring theme was the

profound influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on economic development.

‘The impact of the epidemic on the economy is obvious, with the real economy suffering badly and the internet economy on the other hand growing during this time. The epidemic has broken some of the economic cycles that have been in place for a long time, and it will take some time to re-establish these cycles.’

Although this finding, compared to the issues discussed in the other sections, has a weaker direct correlation to the topic of HE participation, it provides an explanation, to some extent, for the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic may be in effect. Particularly, interpreting the pandemic’s influence on the economy can indirectly affect decisions regarding HE program participation by altering specific economic facets like personal earnings, industrial advancements, job opportunities, and professional trajectory planning.

‘I believe that the epidemic has affected the economy, which further affected jobs and the employment environment, thus forcing many people to turn to schools as a ‘buffer’. This is in fact the result of the COVID-19 pandemic leading to a decline in the overall economic level of a society.’

For instance, the causal sequence outlined in this perspective concerning the pandemic’s progression - its economic repercussions, subsequent effects on employment, and the resultant increase in the number of individuals turning to full-time education as a buffer—would be expounded upon in [Topic Three](#).

Summary

There exists a robust connection between the influence of the pandemic on social trends and individual decision-making concerning HE programme participation. This association can be elucidated through various explanations. On one hand, the pandemic might amplify the development of social trends and their effects on HE

participation decisions by hastening their progression. Instances include the devaluation of academic credentials and heightened job market competition among the youth in China. This perspective is further corroborated by the triangulated evidence from Stages A and B. As discussed in the policy analysis during the pandemic, one of the primary objectives of HE policy adjustments in mainland China was to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic on the job market. This was also reflected in the experiences of many respondents in Stage B, who frequently cited the adverse effects of the pandemic on their employment status and industry development. The alignment between these policy goals and the respondents' experiences underscores the significant challenges posed by the pandemic to the labour market.

At the same time, pandemics have the potential to instigate novel social trends and industry developments, thereby fostering new HE programmes and market demands, such as the surge in medical device and vaccine technology during outbreaks. This idea is further supported by the policy analysis in Stage A, particularly the policy emphasis on high-demand industries, and is corroborated by the experiences shared by relevant respondents in Stage B. From this perspective, the disruptions caused by the pandemic to everyday life and the market, especially the emergence of new opportunities, acted as external stimuli that potentially triggered learning behaviours (Mezirow, 1991). These new external pressures prompted individuals who were previously in a state of amotivation to reconsider their life circumstances and perceptions, thereby transforming them into potential participants in education.

Moreover, outbreaks may achieve an influence on social trends through their influence on economic development, subsequently influencing individual HE participation decisions. Serving as a global crisis, the pandemic significantly affected multiple facets of the economy, triggering substantial transformations in the job market, industrial framework, and consumption behaviours. This economic influence, in turn, may prompt individuals to respond via their decision-making

process. This represents a typical case where education is viewed as a form of human capital investment, closely linked to capital returns and market reactions in the context of the pandemic (Becker, 1976; Bourdieu, 1986). The pandemic's impact on economic returns has indirectly influenced the decision-making behaviour of potential participants whose primary considerations are economic gain or career advancement. Conversely, as seen in Stage A, initiatives such as employment support for HE graduates were trying to leverage this connection, attempting to mediate educational participation and market operations during the pandemic.

Topic Two The influence of the epidemic on the mentality of individuals.

The emergence of an epidemic can potentially influence the mentality of potential participants, consequently influencing their decision-making involvement in the HE initiative. This topic also stems from the unique psychological experiences shared by respondents in Stage B. For example, #16 described her decision-making process during the pandemic in a vivid way, noting that she felt her psychological state was 'stuck in the time when the pandemic first started.' This feeling persisted, regardless of whether she was initially making the decision or had already been enrolled for some time. The impact of the pandemic on the psychological state of potential participants was particularly evident among those whose decision-making processes spanned both before and after the pandemic. For instance, #08 expressed heightened anxiety as a result of the pandemic. This anxiety, coupled with the social relationship challenges discussed in Stage B, had a noticeably negative effect on her decision-making at the time.

Based on these insights shared in Stage B regarding the psychological factors affecting my respondents, I planned to use this as the basis for Topic Two in Stage C, to further explore the connections between the pandemic, psychological factors, and full-time HE participation decisions. A deeper understanding of the individual-level experiences is crucial for my investigation. To this end, the

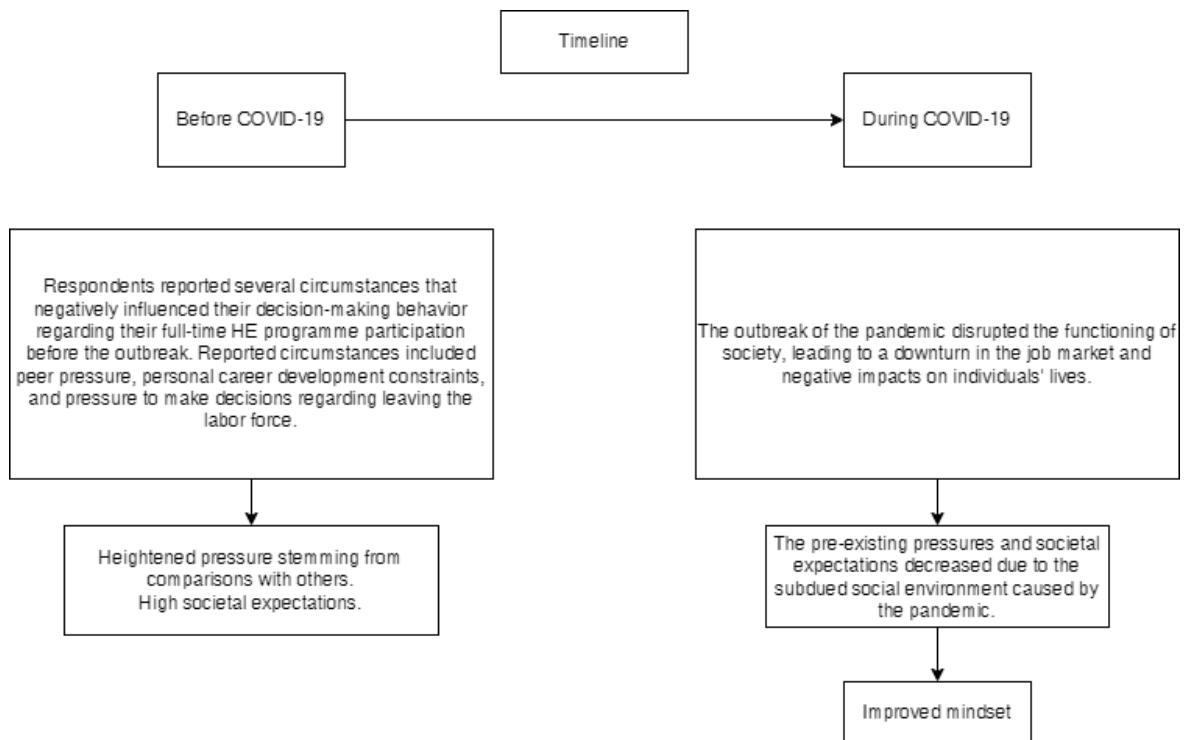
discussion of Topic Two begins with the following question:

‘Considering your decision to participate in full-time HE programmes, how do you compare your psychological state before and after the pandemic? What similarities or differences have you noticed in your feelings? (If your decision-making occurred entirely after the onset of the pandemic, please feel free to share how you think you might have experienced this process under different social circumstances.)’

This question was designed to highlight my focus on the pandemic and changes in psychological states. Additionally, for respondents whose decision-making occurred entirely during the pandemic, I included a supplementary question to ensure they remained engaged in the discussion and were not excluded due to their different decision-making timelines.

As the result shows underlying this topic, the change of psychological factors manifests diversely among individuals, and the respondents’ experiences of altered mindsets during this study can be broadly classified into two distinct groups in the discussion of Stage C. These groups represent the two primary perspectives that emerged regarding the changes in respondents’ emotions towards HE participation before and after the outbreak of COVID-19. [Figure 5a](#) on the following page summarises the two groups in terms of the changes in respondents’ mentality related to HE participation before and after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the frequency of both viewpoints appears to be balanced across the two groups, it is important to emphasize that this observation should be treated with caution. The unique anonymity of Padlet may influence participant behaviour, and thus, the equal frequency of viewpoints does not necessarily indicate a meaningful or significant trend. The anonymity could allow for freer expression, but it also limits the ability to draw definitive conclusions about the prevalence or importance of these viewpoints.

Figure 5a Changes in the psychological states of the respondents during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Initially, the outbreak potentially triggered a favourable shift in the feelings of the respondents. This was substantiated by the respondents' acknowledgement that the challenges brought about by the epidemic might have relieved them of stress, subsequently fostering a positive transformation in their mental.

Respondents expressing this viewpoint emphasized that their participation in full-time HE programmes, regardless of the emergence of the epidemic, was inherently under pressure. Noteworthy stressors cited include peer pressure, expectations for career advancement, workplace challenges, and the possible perceived burden of reverting to student status. Amid these stressors, the abrupt onset of the epidemic and its repercussions in the job market provided an opening for them to effect a transformation, thus mitigating some of the pressures and enabling those respondents to approach their decision-making concerning the HE initiative with a more optimistic mindset.

'I wanted to participate before the epidemic, anyway. And then I really participated during the epidemic. If you ask what the difference was, I think that mentally I felt less pressure to participate during the epidemic. When there was no epidemic, I would also want to, but then I might have hesitated for should I quit my job. After all, my friends are working. But during the epidemic, my feeling was basically like, 'I couldn't find a good job anyway', so I felt comfortable leaving the job market. I generally felt that way, my stress has decreased.'

Conversely, there are also respondents adopting a more pessimistic outlook throughout the outbreak, consequently shaping a less favourable stance concerning their involvement in HE programmes. The adverse effects of the epidemic on these individuals' personal and professional spheres prompted feelings of apprehension, dread, and ambiguity about what related to HE participation. Such psychological instability compelled them to approach their educational decisions with heightened prudence and a heightened unease about potential outcomes.

Within this particular group of respondents' accounts, the outbreak significantly derailed their anticipated trajectory with regard to involvement in HE programmes. The challenges highlighted in their accounts included the hurdles associated with application and completion processes, the educational efficacy of the program, and the program's prospects in the job market during and post-epidemic. Consequently, this cohort of respondents developed a negative perception toward their decision to participate in full-time HE programmes, owing to the disruptions brought about by the epidemic.

'Before the epidemic, I would pay more attention to the reputation or ranking of schools if I was considering HE participation, and I was more confident and calmer. However, during the epidemic, I was more concerned about may I participate in the programme quickly, and because of the threshold and arrival problems of

schools due to the epidemic, I became more anxious about not being able to study overseas for myself, and thus not being able to graduate and get a job. I became more impatient.'

In conclusion, the outbreak had varied effects on the respondents' decision-making mindset regarding participation in the full-time HE projects, subsequently shaping their overall attitudes and behaviours in this regard. This shift in perspective signifies, to some extent, individuals' responsiveness and flexibility in navigating uncertain circumstances, alongside the distinctive manner in which the epidemic impacted individuals across different contexts.

During my conversations with participants in Stage C, I discovered a phenomenon that was not evident in Stage B interviews. Some participants revealed that their full-time HE engagement during the pandemic was driven by a desire to escape and feelings of guilt. Generally, those respondents indicated that their participation in HE programmes, especially full-time HE programmes rather than other part-time HE programmes, was driven by a desire to escape from previous work and life experiences. The happening of COVID-19 pandemic, indeed, provides the chance for them to escape. Related to this, some respondents also indicated that the epidemic alleviated their original guilt about the decision to leave work temporarily and return to full-time study.

Several participants expressed dissatisfaction with their previous work experiences or felt overwhelmed by work and life pressures. They sought opportunities to escape their original life situations. This desire for escape, however, was difficult to justify both to themselves and to their family or friends. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly provided them with an opportunity to leave their jobs and re-enter full-time education. The societal and labour market disruptions caused by the pandemic made it more acceptable for themselves and others to step away from their previous roles and assume the identity of a full-time student.

‘Anyway, it’s anonymous. In fact, I went for a master’s degree for another reason. I really don’t want to work. Working hard every day just means feeling, wow, the days at school are really happy. But I can’t really say that at ordinary times (before the COVID-19 pandemic), because everyone works like this. Why can’t you if others can suffer? Moreover, China society does not support idle people. At my age, people should work to earn money to support their families, so it is difficult for me to say I want to go back to school. Then just when the epidemic happened, it was very smooth, so I naturally quit my job. As soon as the epidemic broke out, it seemed reasonable that I didn’t want to work. After all, the company was laying off staff, and then business performance was not good.’

Besides, similar to the desire to escape, some participants considered leaving work to re-engage in full-time education was unacceptable. They believed that doing so would be seen as shirking responsibilities and pressures, both personally and in the eyes of others. Before the pandemic, such decisions resulted in feelings of guilt, as participants felt they were increasing financial burdens on themselves and their families. This resulted in a kind of emotional barrier for young adults to become full-time HE participants again. However, the pandemic changed the situation, making such choices appear more reasonable and acceptable. The crisis allowed these individuals to rationalize their decisions and mitigate feelings of guilt, ultimately having a positive influence on their decision to participate in full-time HE during the COVID-19 pandemic.

‘I feel a little bit like you, but my situation is a little different. I had the idea of participation before the epidemic, but I never implemented it because I felt that my peers were all working, so I felt that if I went to participate, it would be very unsociable. In short, it means a little peer pressure, but it’s not the same. My family is very supportive of my decision to pursue a master’s degree. They believe that if I have the opportunity to study further, I should go for it. After all, they don’t rely on my salary. But I felt especially guilty. It seemed inappropriate to go back to studying when I should be helping to lessen the family’s burden or working

hard on my career.'

In conclusion, whether as a means of escape or a way to alleviate guilt, the pandemic provided a relatively 'acceptable' reason and opportunity for some young adults to address their emotional needs. It enabled them to temporarily escape work and life pressures while also reducing the guilt associated with full-time study. This indicates that beyond various objective factors, emotional needs and psychological states can be significant drivers and barriers to their participation in full-time HE before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. While this phenomenon could be interpreted as an expression of higher psychological needs, I argue that it is overly simplistic to categorize it solely as a high-level psychological demand within the framework of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). A more accurate interpretation aligns with the previously discussed concept of using learning as a means to alleviate negative emotions. In my study, however, it is not merely about learning itself but, more crucially, about adopting the identity of a full-time student as a way to escape the negative identity associated with being a full-time worker. From this perspective, this phenomenon warrants a deeper, perhaps psychologically oriented, exploration in its own right.

This discovery particularly underscores the significance of Stage C in my research. While earlier discussions mainly involved expanding upon the issues identified in Stage B and facilitating the exchange of opinions, the anonymity afforded by Stage C provided new insights that were not captured during the Stage B interviews. This indicates that the anonymous environment in Stage C allowed participants to share perspectives that they might have withheld in a more direct setting, thereby enriching the overall findings of my study.

Summary

Generally, the epidemic appears to have influenced the mindset of respondents, exerting a certain degree of influence on their attitudes and behaviours in the

decision-making process for HE participation. This shift in mindset signifies the individuals' apprehension and concern regarding the uncertain social situation, highlighting their readiness to confront and adapt to the evolving circumstances. Some respondents may have undergone favourable shifts in their mindset during the epidemic, manifesting as reduced stress or guilt. This positive shift could have resulted in a more optimistic outlook when making decisions about the HE project during the epidemic compared to the pre-epidemic period. Conversely, other respondents may have experienced more adverse psychological effects from the outbreak, finding themselves ensnared in decision-making predicaments due to a negative mindset, marked by hesitation and anxiety.

The findings are closely related to the decision-making behaviour regarding full-time HE during the pandemic. Firstly, respondents' concerns and anxieties about the uncertain social situation directly influenced their attitudes and behaviours towards HE programmes. Those who experienced favourable changes in mentality may be more willing to confront challenges actively and adopt a more optimistic attitude towards HE programmes, as their mentality helps alleviate the stress brought about by the pandemic. Conversely, respondents who suffered more negative psychological effects may be more prone to hesitation and anxiety, which could lead to their negative attitudes or behaviours towards HE participation decisions. Deci and Ryan's SDT (1985) offers valuable insights into the pandemic's impact on this issue. The theory's emphasis on autonomy, competence, and relatedness aligns with the challenges posed by lockdowns and social distancing measures. These circumstances may have influenced individuals' sense of self-efficacy and connectedness, crucial elements in educational motivation, as also measured by Vallerand *et al.*'s AMS (1992).

Additionally, it is crucial to pay particular attention to the unique characteristics of full-time education within my research, as well as the emotional factors associated with it. As a form of education that directly alters the social identity of participants, full-time education may be linked to the emotional aspects of

identity transition, including the desire for and apprehension about such a change. These emotions can serve as either motivational drivers or barriers in the decision-making process. Following the onset of the pandemic, the impacts on social and market operations may have influenced the difficulty of identity transformation for potential participants, thereby further affecting their participation decisions.

Furthermore, individuals' changes in mentality are also related to their personal characteristics and backgrounds, further influencing their decision-making regarding HE participation during the pandemic. Therefore, changes in individuals' mentality not only reflect their coping mechanisms in response to the pandemic but also their personal adaptability and decision preferences when facing uncertainty and challenges. On the other hand, the highly personalized experiences provided by individuals with different personalities and life backgrounds also demonstrate that even when facing the same social event or influencing factors, individual perceptions may vary significantly. This once again underscores the importance of exploratory qualitative empirical research. This perspective became particularly evident during the interviews conducted in Stage B. The one-on-one semi-structured interviews allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of each respondent's unique circumstances, directly correlating their responses to specific situations with their coping strategies, feelings, and interpretations. This level of individual correspondence is difficult to capture in the fully anonymous group discussions of Stage C. This contrast underscores the advantages of my multi-staged research design, where different methodological approaches complement each other to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research topics.

On this topic, the policy analysis in Stage A provides limited insights. This is partly due to the inherently personal and subjective nature of psychological factors, making it difficult to corroborate with policy information. Additionally, the relevant policies often lack a focus on individual psychological aspects. Through a comprehensive analysis, it becomes evident that psychological factors - whether

it be changes in mindset, increased stress during the pandemic, or the unique case of escapism - are significant determinants in the decision to pursue higher HE. The lack of policy attention to these psychological dimensions represents a critical gap that needs to be addressed.

Topic Three The diploma devaluation and COVID-19 pandemic.

In the subsequent discussion, I thoroughly analyse the interplay between the diploma devaluation and the epidemic. Prior to this discussion, it is necessary to indicate the linkage between investigating this topic and the research questions of this study. In Stage B [Subtheme 2.1](#), the research shows that the phenomenon of diploma devaluation significantly influenced the respondents' choices regarding HE participation, a pattern observable both pre- and during the epidemic. While certain respondents contended that the epidemic shaped their decision-making behaviours by contributing to the trend of diploma devaluation, not many of them specifically shared their viewpoints about possible changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, there is a pressing need to garner further insights into the dynamics of diploma devaluation before and during the epidemic. Based on the aforementioned ideas and objectives, my third topic was designed as follows:

‘The term ‘diploma devaluation’ refers to a situation where the perceived value of diplomas and degrees is diminished in the labour market. In one-on-one interviews, some respondents indicated that their decision to engage in higher education was a strategy to counteract credential inflation, while others believed that the pandemic has exacerbated this trend. How do you perceive the potential connection or relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and credential inflation?’

Underlying this topic, the whole section can be divided into three subtopics. Within this domain, the experience and perception shared by the respondents can be condensed into eight key points, which are the COVID-19 pandemic, economic

downturn, depressed job market, increase in participation in HE programmes, large population base in China, shifting to online teaching methods, job market questions the value of diploma, and accelerating the devaluation of diploma.

These eight key points, representing various aspects of consideration, have been distilled from a range of perspectives and rationales articulated by diverse individuals, ultimately converging into five coherent sequences. The five logical sequences draw upon subsets of the eight key items, representing various respondents' cognitive processes regarding decision-making in HE participation during the pandemic and the phenomenon of diploma devaluation. The interrelationship among these sequences is visually represented in the following [Figures 5b](#) to [5f](#). In these Figures, arrows denote causality (from cause to effect) as perceived by the respondents, while plus signs indicate co-occurrence (representing instances where factors are connected but without a causal relationship). Finally, by conducting a thematic analysis, the five sequences are further condensed into two subtopics.

Figure 5b COVID-19 pandemic-economic downturn - depressed job market- accelerating the devaluation of diploma.

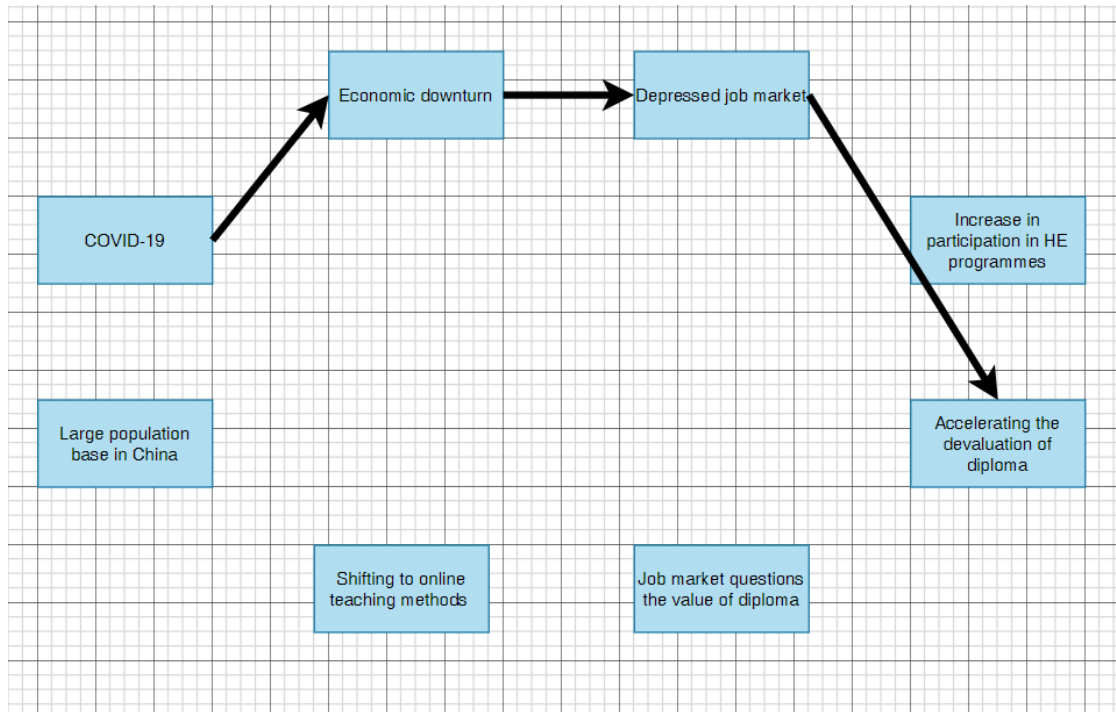


Figure 5c COVID-19 pandemic - shifting to online teaching methods - job market questions the value of diploma - accelerating the devaluation of diploma.

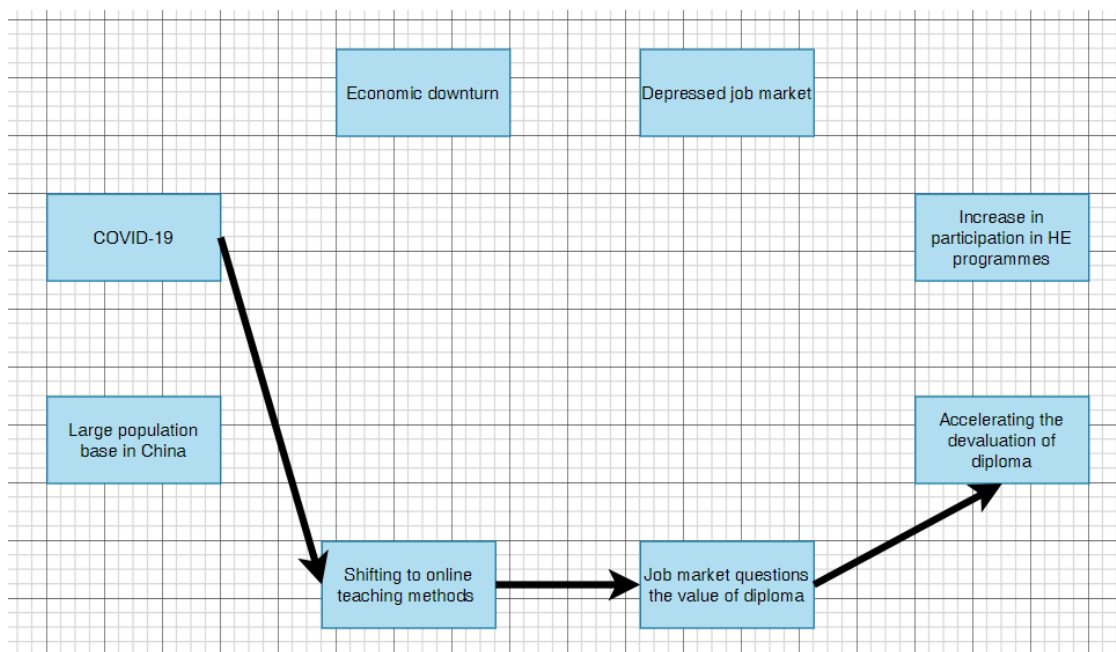


Figure 5d COVID-19 pandemic - shifting to online teaching methods/ large population base in China- job market questions the value of diploma- accelerating the devaluation of diploma.

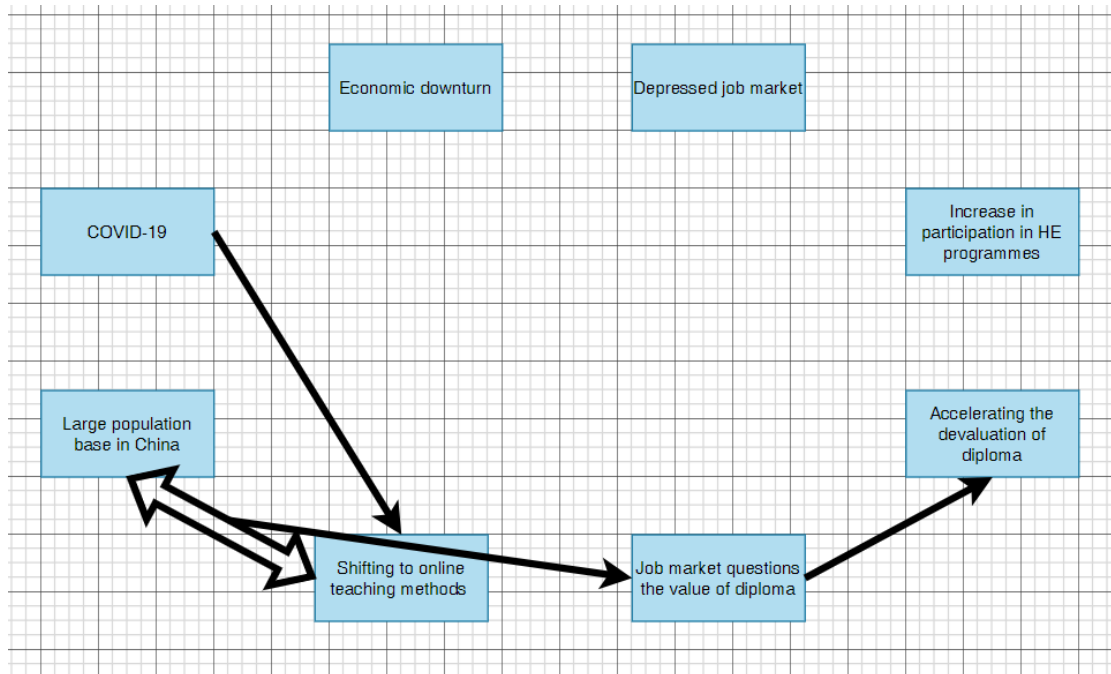


Figure 5e COVID-19 pandemic-economic downturn/ large population base in China - increase in participation in HE programmes - accelerating the devaluation of diploma.

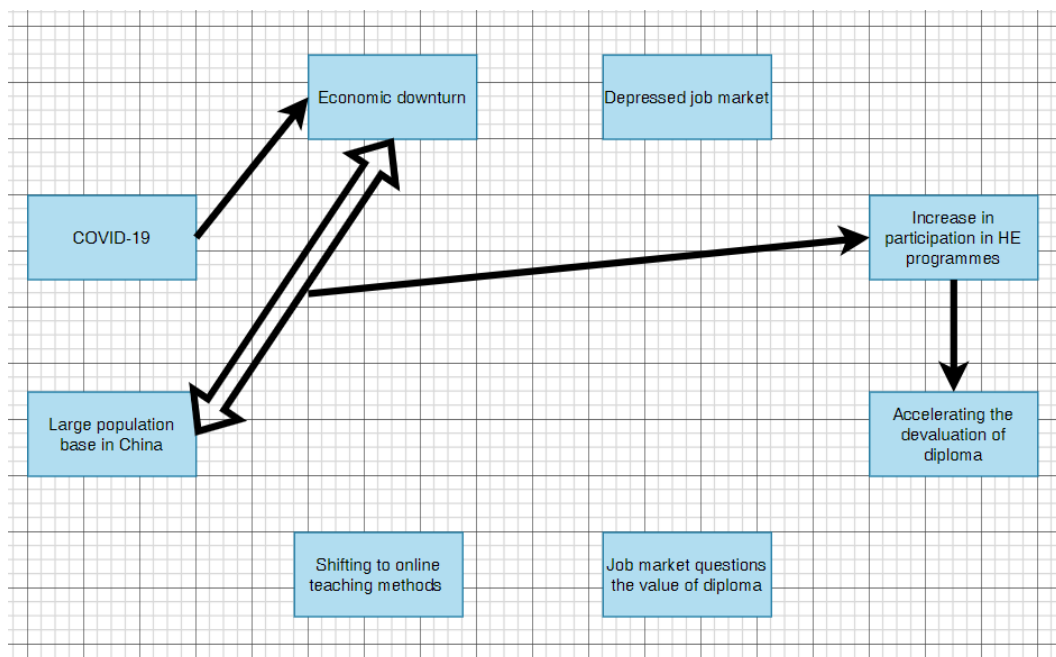
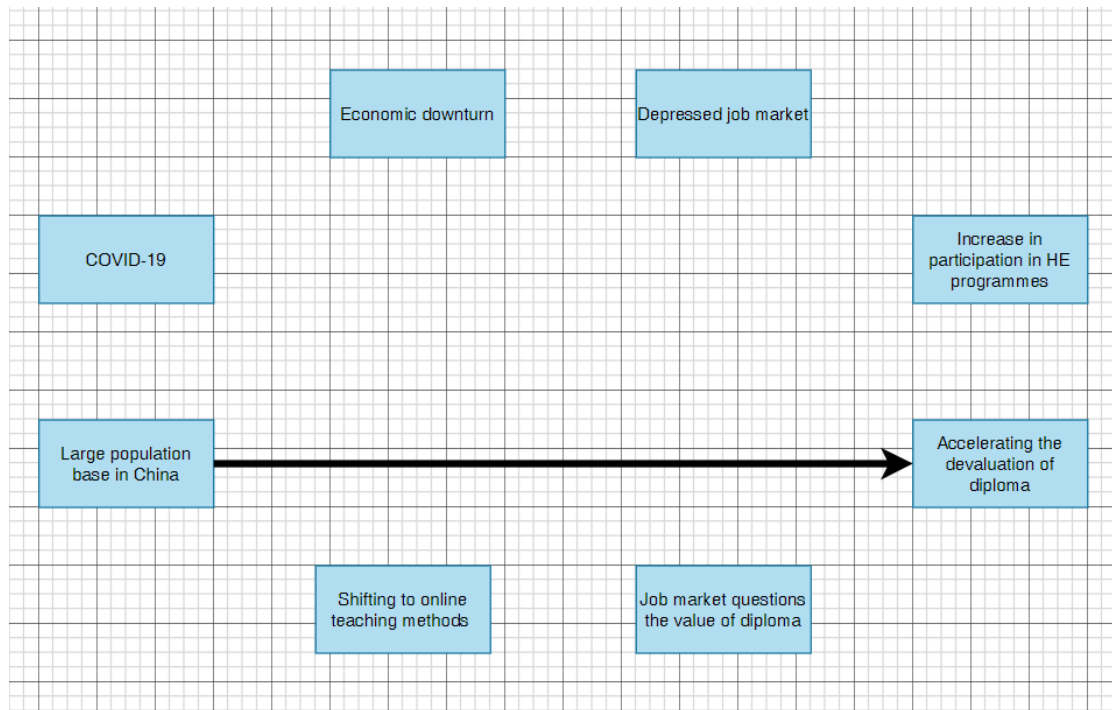


Figure 5f Large population base in China - accelerating the devaluation of diploma.



Subtopic 3.1 The pandemic influences the trend of diploma devaluation through its effects on the economy.

The epidemic could accelerate the trend of credential devaluation through its influence on the economy. Several respondents in both Stage B and Topic One of Stage C had previously reported the negative effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy and the market. This negative influence was further revisited on the topic of the devaluation of qualifications, offering an additional discussion of the link between the epidemic and the diploma devaluation. Akin to the observations in Topic One, participants once again highlighted the epidemic's role as an accelerator or a magnifying glass of social trends. Some respondents indicated that the devaluation of qualifications was an existing social trend predating the epidemic, with the epidemic serving to expedite the pace and severity of this devaluation. Furthermore, this acceleration was facilitated through the adverse effects on the economy and the market.

‘similar to the previous question, I think that the epidemic is a magnifying glass, and then the devaluation of education is also one of the amplifying social trends. The epidemic led to the economic downturn, which led to the downturn in employment, and finally, it led to the fact that the problem of devaluation of qualifications when applying for jobs became more and more serious. I think there is definitely a connection between the two. But when it comes to the phenomenon of diploma devaluation itself, I think the COVID-19 pandemic is only an amplification. The problem has been there for a long time, and it is not caused by the epidemic.’

Among the issues of which the epidemic adversely influenced the economy mentioned by respondents, two situations were identified to support this idea. Firstly, some respondents believed that the epidemic influenced the job market, resulting in a sharp rise in competitive pressures for employment during the COVID-19 pandemic, consequently amplify the trend of credential devaluation (see [Figure 5b](#)). The second situation involved its interaction with the large population base, an idea that would be unpacked in [Subtopic 3.3](#). Together, these two issues contributed to an upsurge in the number of individuals engaging in HE during the epidemic, which finally resulted in a rise in the labour with HE degrees in the job market. Ultimately, this trend contributed to an acceleration in the devaluation of qualifications (see [Figure 5e](#)).

It’s worth noting that perceptions can sometimes diverge from statistical realities though they reflect the respondents’ genuine concerns. At the same time, the extent of credential devaluation varied across industries. Even when the information shared by respondents aligns with the objective realities of their industry or community, differences across industries must still be taken into account. However, as discussed extensively in the literature review and throughout Stage B, both motivations and barriers should be understood from the respondents’ personal perspectives. While discrepancies between the information available to respondents and objective realities are certainly worth exploring,

such gaps highlight the complex interactions between personal values and perceptions, everyday environments, and broader socio-cultural conditions in shaping educational choices. This concept can be linked to Cross's COR Model (1981), which discusses the role of information. As previously discussed, while information exists objectively, it is equally important to consider what type of information potential adult learners are actually exposed to when analysing its impact on their decision-making processes.

Subtopic 3.2 The pandemic influences the trend of diploma devaluation through its effects on teaching modality.

The extensive implementation of distance education in China during the COVID-19 pandemic may expedite the devaluation of diploma. Owing to the particular mode of transmission during epidemics, the majority of the population adopted diverse measures to minimize close social interactions and offline engagements during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, and the education industry in China was no exception. In Stage B, numerous respondents, particularly those whose pursuit of HE programmes started at the early stage of the epidemic (2020), reported changes in the teaching modality. These changes encompassed the transition of all courses to online distance learning, the suspension of internships and practical field visits, and the reduction of academic-related travel. On the other hand, for respondents whose enrolment in HE programmes began in the later stages of the epidemic (2021/2022), the execution of their programmes remained relatively unaffected, with many indicating the relaxation of distance learning regulations in their respective provinces by that time. However, they did report changes in the format of the entrance examination, typically in terms of the interview stage, which was conducted remotely via the Internet during the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, neither the respondents participating in HE programmes during the initial phase of the pandemic nor those engaging in HE programmes during the later phase viewed these modifications as negatively influential in their decision-making process regarding HE program participation. Some even expressed

positivity about the shift, believing that the transition to remote application, evaluation, and course delivery significantly enhanced their lives and studies, while reducing participation costs. However, within the context of diploma devaluation, some respondents perceived the alteration in teaching modality as negatively influencing the market's appraisal of the value of qualifications.

'Due to the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the courses were taught online after the epidemic and the exams were online. It is felt that these will lead to an even greater devaluation of qualifications when it comes to employment. For example, many students studied via the Internet during the pandemic, and because of such learning experience, employers may be sceptical of the competence and expertise of the candidates at the time of looking for employees, which amplifies the tendency to devalue the qualifications.'

This kind of situation is exemplified in both [Figures 5c](#) and [5d](#). The disparity between the two opinions lies in the presence or absence of a fusion of the situation with China's large population base. Aside from this distinction, both opinions suggest that the epidemic altered the teaching and learning modality, leading to reduced costs for participants in HE programmes (e.g., online interviews and lectures reducing travel and accommodation costs), lowered participation challenges (e.g., some respondents who had undergone multiple HE programme applications found online interviews and exams less challenging than the conventional face-to-face interviews they had encountered previously), and a decline in the quality of instruction (e.g., internships were curtailed or even cancelled). Several respondents indicated that these circumstances influenced the quality of HE programmes they were engaged in, potentially leading the job market to assess graduates of HE programmes less favourably during the epidemic. Ultimately, the trend of credential devaluation during the epidemic was intensified by the job market's less favourable evaluation of the same level of credentials compared to the pre-epidemic period.

Subtopic 3.3 China's substantial population base as an unrelated social background to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The devaluation of diplomas in China may be influenced by the country's substantial population base, operating as a social context isolated from the COVID-19 pandemic. In the topic of diploma devaluation, the intrinsic social context of China's sizable population was frequently referenced by various respondents. Three sequences ([Figures 5c](#), [5d](#), and [5e](#)) reflect this kind of idea opinion. The respondents had slight differences in their views regarding the role of the pandemic. While they both acknowledged China's large population as a key factor in the devaluation, respondents represented by [Figures 5c](#) and [5d](#) believed that the pandemic played a significant role, in accelerating the devaluation process. In contrast, respondents represented by [Figure 5e](#) perceived the devaluation of diploma as an inevitable outcome of the large population base, with the pandemic having minimal impact.

'The devaluation of education is inevitable, as there are too many people, especially in the age group (like me). And when the rate of socio-economic development does not continue to rise steadily, many people will be forced to return to school. At the same time, universities are expanding their enrolment in response to this social demand. The result is that the university carries a large part of the burden of social pressure for employment, and the qualification is then devalued. Of course, maybe much higher degrees, like doctoral degrees, are still highly valued in society.'

'In the case of China, the population base has led to the inevitability of this phenomenon, and it is a situation in which Chinese people have to compete to the death. Competition has increased to the point where there are more and more people receiving higher levels of education, and the value of education has been reduced. I don't feel that the influence of the epidemic is as obvious in this regard.'

In all the logical sequences mentioned above, the respondents engaged in this study perceive China's substantial population base as an inherent social context that exists relatively independently within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some respondents perceived this context as a contributing factor to the heightened devaluation of qualifications. Meanwhile, even among those who did not explicitly establish a connection between this context and the occurrence of the epidemic, some believed that this situation could potentially operate with the social context of the epidemic, ultimately expediting the trend of diploma devaluation.

Summary

In this section, the research explored the correlation between the devaluation of qualifications and the COVID-19 pandemic. The study reveals that the economic influence of the epidemic has, to some extent, expedited the trend of diploma devaluation, aligning with Becker's (1976) human capital theory. This theory posits that individuals invest in education to enhance their economic value; however, the pandemic's disruption of labour markets has potentially altered the perceived returns on educational investments. Furthermore, Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital provides insight into how the pandemic may have differentially affected the value of qualifications across various social strata, potentially exacerbating existing inequalities. This observation suggests that external environmental factors brought by specific social backgrounds can accelerate the devaluation of qualifications. Additionally, with the epidemic's nature prompting a shift in the HE teaching modality, from traditional offline lectures to an online format, the research identifies that this alteration in the lecture format may diminish the perceived value of qualifications in the job market, consequently hastening the qualification devaluation process. In this respect, the relevant policies during the epidemic also played a certain role, not only because of the connection between compulsory lockdown and distance education but more importantly, a series of policies that resulted in the expansion of HE enrolment

during the epidemic affected the market's evaluation of HE diplomas. Lastly, the study found that China's substantial population base may act as a foundational factor contributing to the devaluation of qualifications. This implies that the devaluation of qualifications is an intricate and multifaceted social phenomenon, shaped by both distinctive social events and enduring social contexts.

Topic Four Peer pressure and COVID-19 pandemic.

The subject of the correlation between peer pressure and decision-making regarding HE project participation has been previously addressed in Stage B. However, as indicated in [Section 5.2](#), the information on peer pressure collected during Stage B lacked a specific focus on the epidemic. While there are respondents shared diverse experiences concerning peer pressure, there was minimal explicit discourse on the connection between peer pressure and the epidemic. Consequently, the themes associated with peer pressure are explicitly presented and examined in Stage C. It is worth noting that the relationship between peer pressure and decision-making regarding HE project participation has already been explored in Stage B and is not the primary focus of analysis in this stage. Therefore, I further investigated this topic here via the question:

“Peer pressure’ refers to the influence exerted by members of one’s peer group. It can prompt an individual to alter their thoughts, values, and behaviours to align with the social norms of the group. In one-on-one interviews, some respondents reported that their participation decisions were influenced by peer pressure. How do you perceive the potential connection or relationship between peer pressure and participation decisions in higher education programs during the COVID-19 pandemic?”

Within this subject area, two distinct sets of respondents’ perspectives emerged. These can be categorized as [Subtopic 4.1](#) the group of respondents who experienced peer pressure and delineated their encounters during the epidemic

based on their personal experiences, and [Subtopic 4.2](#) the group of respondents who did not experience peer pressure and elucidated the reasons behind their lack of such feelings. The insights from these two groups are encapsulated in the following two Figures.

Figure 5g Perceived peer pressure among respondents and its changes during the pandemic.

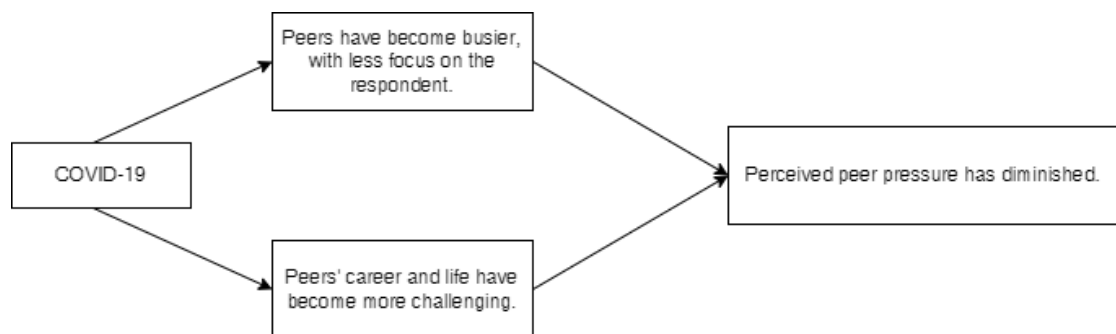
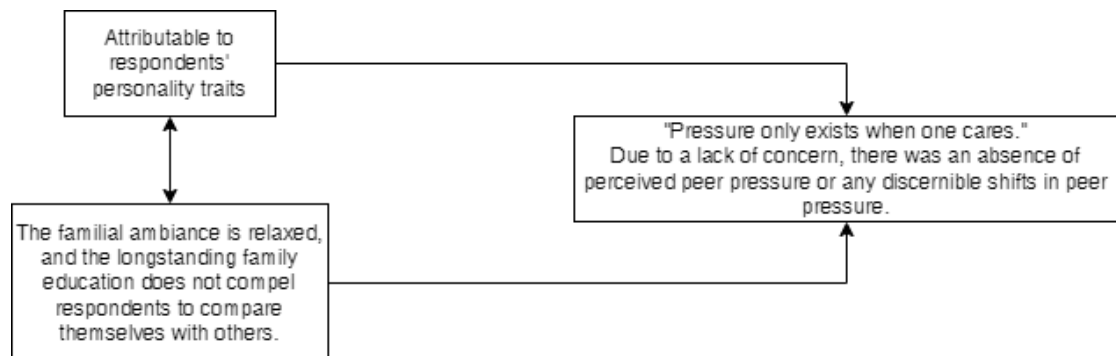


Figure 5h The absence of perceived peer pressure and potential explanations.



Based on the information gathered in this stage, I will examine the theme of peer pressure and its evolution during the epidemic, exploring it across two distinct sub-themes.

Subtopic 4.1 The experience of peer pressure and its changes during the pandemic.

The epidemic potentially diminished the level of peer pressure experienced by individuals, subsequently influencing their considerations in the decision-making process for full-time HE programmes. According to the accounts provided by the respondents, the phenomenon of peer pressure is akin to the improved mental disposition observed during the epidemic, as discussed in Topic Two, and arises due to the adverse effects of the epidemic on individuals' lives.

'I think the peer pressure during the epidemic had a much smaller effect on me. As soon as the epidemic started everyone went about their own business, it seemed like no one cared what I wanted to do, so there was a lot less annoying stuff.'

'Instead of being (more) peer-pressured by the COVID-19 pandemic, I was less pressured because many of my peers were struggling with employment.'

According to the information shared by the respondents in Stage C, some individuals experienced a relative decrease in competition from their peers, and thus, the decreasing peer pressure during the epidemic, as normal social operation was disrupted, and numerous industries and markets suffered setbacks. This decrease could stem from limited social interactions, lowered social expectations, and an increased emphasis on personal well-being and safety. Consequently, individuals may encounter reduced social anxiety and competitive stress, thereby directing their attention toward other factors in their decision-making process for HE programmes.

Subtopic 4.2 The absence of perceived peer pressure.

In this research, several respondents believed they were not influenced by peer

pressure in their decision-making process for the HE project. They explicitly indicated that their decision-making was independent of peer pressure, both prior to and during the epidemic. Simultaneously, this group of respondents posited that the lack of influence extended beyond the singular aspect of deciding on HE project participation.

‘My personal opinion is that peer pressure varies from person to person, depending on the level of family education and personal attitudes. I am not personally affected by peer pressure, because my decision to participate in the HE project, both before and during the epidemic, was my own decision. My peers only played the role of a medium for sharing and they did not have any involvement in my decision-making.’

Simultaneously, respondents who highlighted this circumstance also attributed its emergence to various factors, including heightened independent thinking, increased confidence or assertiveness, the educational background of family members and their approach to upbringing. Considering these aspects, respondents might accord lesser or no weight to peer pressure or influence during the decision-making process for HE programmes.

Summary

This section explores the complex interplay between peer pressure and COVID-19. While Stage B touched on the diverse effects of peer pressure on individuals, it lacked specific information about peer pressure in the pandemic context. Stage C discussions filled this gap, revealing new insights. [Subtopic 4.1](#) uncovers an unexpected finding: the pandemic may have alleviated some of the perceived peer pressure experienced by respondents.

When considered alongside the findings from [Topic Two](#), this reduction in perceived peer pressure could potentially foster a more positive attitude among

respondents towards HE participation decisions. To be more specific, the pandemic's influence on peer pressure operates through two main mechanisms. On the one hand, it impacts the lives of individuals within the respondents' social circles, objectively altering the sources and nature of peer pressure. On the other hand, it affects respondents' personal perceptions of peer pressure, subjectively changing how they experience and respond to it. Whether it is any of these phenomena, they can all be viewed as manifestations of peer pressure as a social fact impacting potential participants (Durkheim, 1897/1970). This was initially evident in Stage B and is further corroborated here. However, the role of the pandemic in this context is quite nuanced. According to the information shared by my respondents, the pandemic created a social environment distinct from everyday life, which, paradoxically, helped some respondents escape the coercive force of peer pressure as a social fact.

However, [Subtopic 4.2](#) reveals that some respondents remain unaffected by peer pressure in their HE decision-making, even during the pandemic. These individuals, who were minimally influenced by peer pressure before, perceive little to no change in its impact amid COVID-19. Some may even overlook its existence entirely. This finding aligns with earlier discussions on changes in respondents' mentality during the pandemic, emphasizing the importance of considering individual life backgrounds and personality traits when assessing the pandemic's influence on decision-making processes.

Topic Five The role of 'sunk cost'.

During the Stage B interviews, some respondents highlighted a concept commonly referred to in everyday language as 'sunk costs' (CN 沉没成本). While not strictly an academic term in this context, it effectively describes a phenomenon observed in respondents' decision-making processes. This concept relates to resources already invested in preparing for HE that cannot be recovered, regardless of future

decisions. Aligned with the use of ‘sunk costs’ in the context of the Chinese language, some respondents used this idea in Stage B to explain how their prior investments of time, effort, and money in preparing for HE influenced their choices, particularly when the pandemic occurred during their preparation phase. For instance, if they had already spent months studying for entrance exams or paid for application fees, these ‘sunk costs’ often made them hesitant to change their educational plans, even in light of the new circumstances brought about by COVID-19.

This observation illustrates how past commitments can constrain future choices in educational decision-making. It suggests that the impact of unforeseen events like the pandemic on HE participation is moderated by individuals’ prior investments in their educational journey. However, a more comprehensive understanding of the correlation between sunk costs, epidemics, and decisions regarding HE programme participation is presently insufficient. Hence, elucidating the dynamics and mechanisms of sunk costs in the decision-making process within the context of an epidemic, through the forthcoming discussions on this topic, holds crucial significance for this research project. Therefore, the last topic I discussed in Stage C with my respondents was:

‘In the one-on-one interviews, many respondents discussed encountering negative impacts related to the pandemic during the later stages of the decision-making process. However, they felt that, having already invested significant resources (including but not limited to time and money), it was difficult to alter their participation decisions at that point. How do you perceive the concept of sunk costs in relation to preparing for higher education during the pandemic?’

Regarding the matter of sunk costs and the decision-making process for HE participation during the epidemic, this study identified three distinct patterns among the respondents. Firstly, certain participants explicitly acknowledged the influence of sunk costs on their full-time HE decision-making and observed a

degree of modification in this influence during the epidemic. Secondly, some other respondents indicated that their full-time HE decision-making behaviour remained unaffected by sunk costs. They specifically emphasized that their decision-making, both before and during the epidemic, was primarily guided by goal-oriented strategies and long-term considerations, rather than being swayed by pre-existing costs. Thirdly, a group of interviewees experienced a shift in their perspective on sunk costs as a result of the epidemic. This change in their viewpoint was not solely tied to alterations in sunk costs during the epidemic but rather centred on their personal attitudes toward the concept. The subsequent discussion will delve into each of these three perspectives in greater detail.

Subtopic 5.1 Sunk cost as an influencing factor and its changes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on the experience shared by the respondents in this stage, the research finds that sunk costs can influence potential participants in their decision-making process regarding HE participation. Furthermore, the outbreak of an epidemic has the potential to amplify the influence of sunk costs on decision-making for HE participation. Being a global crisis, the epidemic profoundly affected various facets of society, including the educational sphere. The heightened uncertainty and risk stemming from the epidemic intensified individuals' careful examination and contemplation of their educational decisions, thus may lead result in a priority of the immediate efficiency of resource allocation and the long-term returns when considering HE participation. Particularly during the epidemic, when individuals confronted heightened uncertainty and risk in their educational pursuits, sunk costs might be further increased.

Among the information gathered in Stage C, the experience of respondents who reported this kind of viewpoint can be generally divided into two kinds, see [Figures 5i](#) and [5j](#) on the next page.

Figure 5i Sunk cost as an influencing factor with employment challenges.

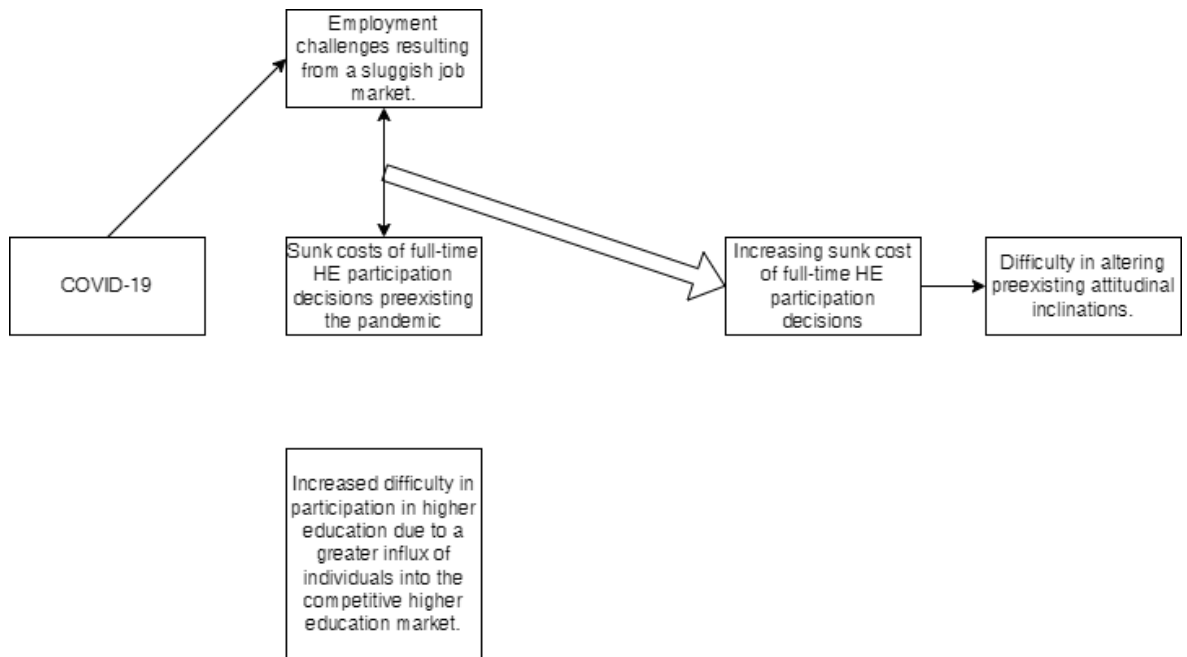
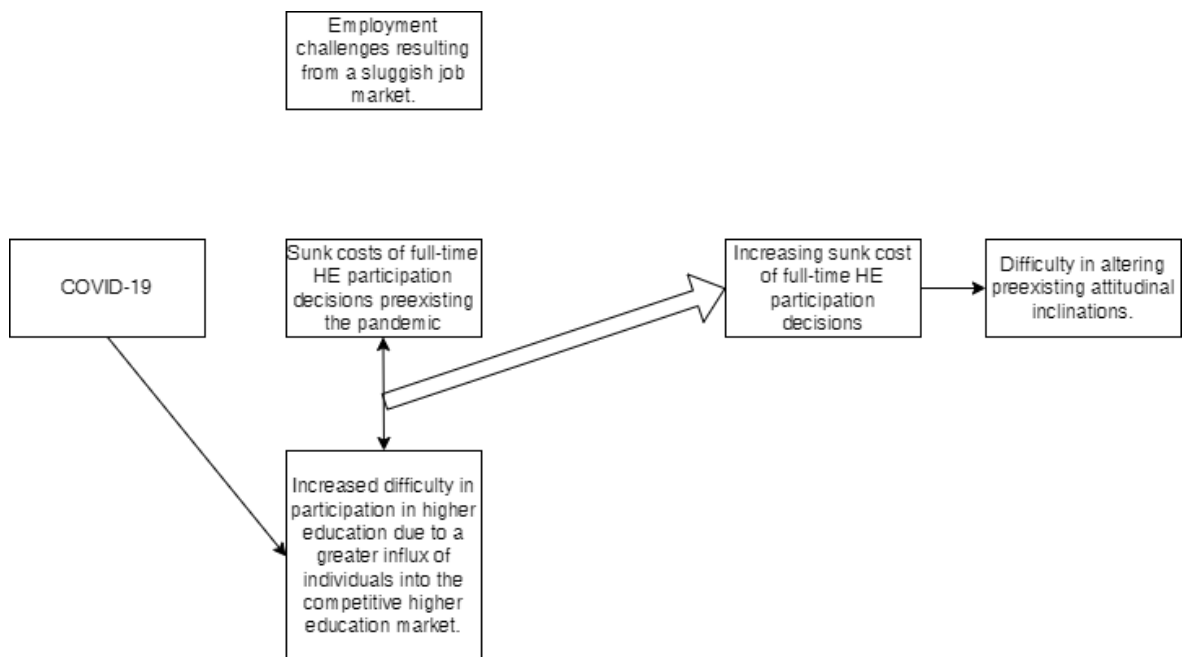


Figure 5j Sunk cost as an influencing factor with participation difficulties.



Despite their differing circumstances, respondents from both situations described partially similar circumstances. Initially, they acknowledged the existence of sunk costs in the HE participation decision-making process, even before the pandemic. Secondly, they agreed that the COVID-19 outbreak intensified the influence of

these sunk costs on their decision-making. Thirdly, they concurred that sunk costs affected their decision-making by reinforcing their initial inclinations, whether towards participation or non-participation in HE. The nuances between these three points lie in their temporal and causal relationships. In other words, these three aspects respectively represent the validity of sunk costs as a relevant factor in discussions involving the pandemic, sunk costs, and participation decisions: the validity of sunk costs as a contributing factor in educational participation decisions, and the validity of sunk costs as an element impacted by the pandemic. It's important to note that not all respondents fell into this category. Some individuals did not perceive sunk costs as a factor in their educational decisions, while others did not believe the pandemic had any impact on sunk costs. Additionally, a few respondents did not recognize the concept of sunk costs in relation to educational participation at all. Those cases constituted my discussion in the following [Subtopic 5.2](#) & [5.3](#).

'If you're talking about sunk costs, then yes, there are indeed some. Because originally, this thing (HE) wasn't something you could just join (without preparation). I really started considering participation only after the outbreak of the epidemic, and I've also sacrificed a lot of other things, like giving up opportunities for campus recruitment and such. If you must say, all of these are actually my sunk costs. At this point, I never even thought about giving up. Maybe I was influenced by this. As for the impact of the epidemic, I feel like it has intensified the sunk costs. Because it's even harder to find a job during the epidemic.'

'It's not just about finding a job; at that time (during the epidemic), I felt like I had no other choice. Before the epidemic, I could say forget about it, but during the epidemic, I would feel like if I gave up during this time, I would be wasting it.'

On the other hand, the two groups seem to attribute the heightened sunk costs to

different origins. In the case of the respondents depicted in [Figure 5i](#), the increased costs stem from the deteriorating job market. Given that the participants in this study opted for full-time HE involvement, their decision to participate also implied a temporary departure from the labour force. Engaging in HE activities during the pandemic meant that respondents had to forgo more scarce employment opportunities and salaries due to the adverse effects of the pandemic on the job market. Consequently, for this group, the sunk costs during the epidemic, and the impact of these sunk costs on their decision-making, grew more substantial.

Nevertheless, for the respondents represented in [Figure 5g](#), the increased costs are linked to the challenges associated with the competition for participation in HE programmes. Stemming from the unfavourable consequences of the epidemic on society, this particular group of respondents perceived an influx of individuals competing for HE participation during the epidemic, consequently heightening the difficulty and costs associated with joining HE programmes. To be more specific, engaging in full-time HE programmes during the epidemic entailed a more competitive application process and necessitated a greater investment in preparation, which, for this group of respondents, constituted a higher sunk cost and an intensification of the influence of sunk costs on their decision-making.

‘During the epidemic, the sunk costs involved in applying for HE programmes increased significantly due to the heightened competition pressure. Of course, this could also be attributed to the issue of limited entry, but we cannot overlook the facilitating effect of the economic downturn brought about by the epidemic.’

In conclusion, sunk costs have the ability to influence the prospective participants’ decision-making processes regarding HE involvement, especially with the added complications stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of this group of respondents, individuals are compelled to meticulously assess their ongoing educational choices in light of existing commitments and prospective gains, while

also considering potential shifts in investments and benefits due to the epidemic. The presence of these sunk costs, coupled with their heightened influence, might render it challenging for respondents to relinquish the investments they have already made, thereby compelling their participation. It is important to note that the primary focus of this research is to broadly identify and understand the factors influencing young adults' decisions to participate in full-time HE during the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than to conduct an in-depth exploration of any single factor. This approach allowed for a comprehensive overview of the decision-making landscape but necessarily limited the depth of analysis for individual factors. Future research could build upon these findings by examining specific factors in greater detail. For instance, using the topic of sunk costs as an example, subsequent studies might investigate how potential participants cognitively navigate the challenges posed by sunk costs. Additionally, exploring how situational factors, represented by social relationships, as well as societal structures and cultural values, influence individuals' responses to the presence and fluctuations of sunk costs could yield valuable insights.

Furthermore, beyond the perspectives mentioned earlier regarding the changes in sunk costs during the pandemic and their impact on individual decision-making, some participants viewed their current life and work situations as sunk costs influencing their decision to engage in full-time HE, irrespective of the pandemic's occurrence. Specifically, although these respondents acknowledged encountering difficulties in their previous career paths or experiencing relatively negative feelings in their past work or life, their substantial investments of time and effort in their work and life made it difficult for them to commit to fully disengaging from their current life trajectory to pursue full-time education. This 'unwillingness to waste previous efforts', as one respondent described it underlying this topic, reflects the impact of individual-level factors on educational benefit assessments and attitudes towards education. It also highlights the influence of career planning on individual level and situational factors such as work environment and industry development on their decision-making process.

‘... My field of work belongs to making quick money. If you can’t make more money during the peak period, once the hype dies down, no one will pay attention to this market anymore, and there might never be another good opportunity. I used to think that while I was young, I should work as hard as I could. But after working for a while, I realized that my overall state was not good; I felt like a labour robot, and suddenly, making money didn’t seem like the most important thing anymore. On the other hand, I was reluctant to leave my job, so I kept delaying (my participation). Then the pandemic hit, and our industry’s rapid growth period was almost over. At that point, I felt I couldn’t delay any longer - it had to be now.’

Subtopic 5.2 Situations unaffected by sunk cost.

In addition to investigating the situation outlined in [Subtopic 5.1](#), wherein decision-making behaviour was influenced by sunk costs, I also identified a subset of respondents who did not exhibit a definitive decision-making influence linked to the presence of sunk costs. Despite acknowledging the existence of sunk costs as well as the increase of sunk costs in the process of making decisions about HE projects during the epidemic, they chose to exclude sunk costs from their decision-making considerations.

‘Honestly speaking, there is indeed a sunk cost, that is, I searched for information for quite a long time for I had this idea (to participate), including choosing a school, choosing a major, and so on. But in my case, I’m not a person who would let these things influence my decision. I believe in stopping losses in time rather than straggling due to the wasted time and effort I have already put in. So even though I ended up participating in HE programmes, if, I mean if I didn’t want to participate in HE programmes at that time, I would have just stopped all the preparations.’

The viewpoint expressed by this respondent, along with those of others who

shared similar perspectives, indicated that their reassessment of sunk costs during the pandemic and their evolving views were not limited to their participation in HE. Instead, these shifts reflect a broader transformation in their overall outlook on life and attitudes towards their circumstances. The insights shared by respondents who held this view, alongside the differing perspectives highlighted in [Subtopics 5.1](#) & [5.2](#), have led me to recognize that sunk costs are not merely financial or temporal investments, but are deeply intertwined with broader life contexts and personal values. The impact of sunk costs, especially within the context of the pandemic, seems to extend beyond the immediate decision of whether to pursue further education. It reflects a broader reassessment of priorities and life goals. This reassessment can vary significantly based on individual perceptions of these costs and their willingness to embrace change or maintain the status quo.

Subtopic 5.3 Situation regarding the change in attitude toward sunk cost due to the pandemic.

As a significant event with far-reaching implications for social operations, the outbreak of an epidemic may potentially alter how respondents perceive sunk costs and their corresponding attitudes. Especially in light of the experience different from normal times and risks presented by the epidemic, individuals might reevaluate and recalibrate their perspectives and even values to navigate the prevailing challenges and transformations.

‘Before the epidemic, I was quite concerned about sunk costs and how I was perceived by others after my graduation. Because I had invested a lot of time and money, and I believed I deserved more after my graduation. However, after the epidemic, I have become more open-minded, because I feel like, in the current of times, the individual is insignificant. When the market economy is in the doldrums, it would be too much of a burden to overly emphasize the sunk costs, and I think It is better to regard the investment of time and money as part of my

experience.'

Based on the information gathered in this study, it is evident that this subset of interviewees' reassessment and shift in perspective regarding sunk costs during the epidemic was not solely about sunk costs but reflected a broader shift in their overall outlook and approach to life. Such changes might have been prompted by the disruption of their normal life trajectories due to the epidemic or the emotional impact of the epidemic as a significant and negative social event. However, this influence is not unidirectional. For instance, in the perspective cited here, respondents' evaluation of sunk costs evolved from a relatively more objective emphasis on material gains to a focus on fulfilling their subjective emotional needs. Conversely, there was also a shift in the opposite direction, wherein respondents who previously considered their mental needs as the primary influencing factor in their decision to participate in HE began to prioritize the assessment of the potential economic benefits of the HE project due to the effects of the epidemic on the society, particularly the market.

Summary

This section focuses on the intricate interplay between sunk costs, the COVID-19 pandemic, and decisions related to HE participation. Through the perception shared by respondents on how sunk costs may influence individuals' decision-making behaviours regarding HE participation and how epidemics may influence the possible sunk costs of HE participation, the research found that sunk costs can influence individuals' emotional dispositions and decision-making in the educational investment, especially in the background of the uncertainties and risks posed by COVID-19 pandemic ([Subtopic 5.1](#)). However, in [Subtopic 5.2](#), I also observe that certain respondents remain unaffected by sunk costs in their HE participation decision-making. Participants holding this perspective tend to distance themselves from emotional biases, opting instead to objectively evaluate the value of HE participation based on anticipated benefits. Furthermore, the

epidemic may have induced a fundamental shift in how respondents perceive sunk costs ([Subtopic 5.3](#)). In other words, the assessment of sunk costs by a subset of respondents changed as a consequence of the epidemic. This suggests that within the context of the interaction involving potential participants, the COVID-19 pandemic, and sunk costs, the epidemic didn't merely influence the alteration of sunk costs; it potentially also influenced the participants' overall stance toward sunk costs.

5.3.3 The summary of Stage C analysis.

In Stage C, the focus was on examining the nuanced effects of COVID-19 on the decision-making processes of young adults in China (Mainland) related to full-time HE participation across five core topics. At the beginning of this section, I provide an organizational framework for the findings and analysis of Stage C, as illustrated in [Table 5g](#).

Firstly, there are connections between the influence of the epidemic, the developments of social trends, and the decision-making process by the individual related to HE programmes in [Topic One](#). Economic impacts were particularly highlighted as a conduit through which COVID-19 shaped these trends, linking individual decision-making with broader societal shifts.

Underlying [Topic Two](#), my research investigated the influence of COVID-19 on the mentality of potential full-time HE participants. Its influence on the mentality can be various, depending on the individual's personal situation and experience.

Moreover, as one of the factors already identified in Stage B that may be associated with individuals' HE participation decision-making behaviours, the development of diploma devaluation may be related to COVID-19, as discussed underlying [Topic Three](#).

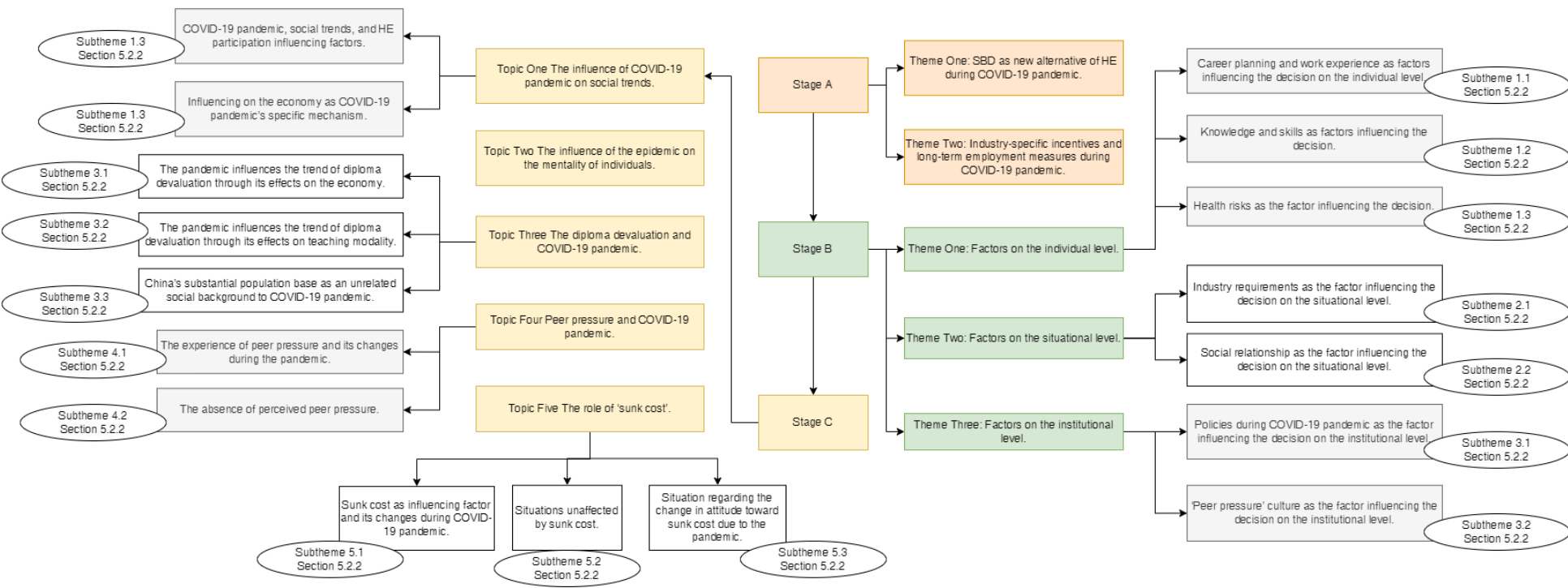
Additionally, as another factor related to social trends influencing full-time HE participation decision-making, this study investigates the link between peer pressure in different ways underlying [Topic Four](#). While some respondents noted a shift in peer pressure that positively impacted their decisions, others felt that peer influence remained irrelevant throughout the pandemic.

Ultimately in [Topic Five](#), this investigation delved into a factor that had been neglected in the Stage B interviews - sunk costs. The discussions in Stage C revealed that sunk costs were more complex and interwoven with broader personal and contextual factors. The pandemic reshaped perceptions of these costs, leading to varied impacts on decision-making.

5.4 Summary of findings.

This section synthesizes the findings from the three research stages, providing an integrated overview of the key factors influencing young adult learners' full-time HE participation during the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining the individual, situational, and institutional influences, and pandemic-specific dynamics, this section seeks to offer a cohesive narrative that underscores the complexity of decision-making among young adults in China. The analysis highlights not only the diversity of factors but also their interconnectedness, revealing broader implications for HE systems during times of crisis. To provide readers with a clearer and more intuitive understanding of the findings and the structure of the thesis, the following [Figure 5k](#) can serve as a useful reference.

Figure 5k Summary of findings across the three stages.



As discussed previously, this research was conducted following a structured sequence across three stages: Stage A (policy analysis), Stage B (semi-structured interviews), and Stage C (focus groups). These stages were designed and organized to address the research questions in a complementary and interrelated manner. Consequently, I argue that the order of these stages is integral and should neither be altered nor analysed in isolation. Therefore, in the following section, I present an organized summary of Chapter Five based on the sequential execution of these three stages and their interrelationships.

The data collection and analysis began with Stage A, which involved a critical policy analysis. This stage focused on institutional factors, particularly policies implemented during the pandemic. Among the various cultural and community influences, policies were selected for analysis because their political characteristics make them the most observable and objective institutional factors through documented evidence. By critically exploring policy documents relevant to the pandemic, this stage enabled me to develop an advanced understanding of the social environment and the educational system's background in which the participants were making decisions. This understanding allowed for a more comprehensive interpretation of respondents' experiences and perceptions in the subsequent stages. The findings from Stage A ultimately centred on two major themes, providing critical insights into the broader institutional context that informed the discussions and analyses in Stages B and C.

On the one hand, the relaunch of the SBD programme stands out as a particularly significant change. This initiative, abandoned just before the COVID-19 pandemic, was reintroduced as a response to the challenges posed by the pandemic. It served as both an immediate measure to mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19 and a strategy to expand full-time HE options for potential adult participants. Other policy interventions, such as those supporting HE in specific fields and offering employment assistance for graduates, provided additional incentives for young adults to consider further education. These policies highlight the importance of

institutional frameworks in decision-making processes, demonstrating how targeted interventions can encourage re-engagement with education during crises.

After examining the policy adjustments faced by potential young adult participants in full-time higher education during the pandemic, this study progressed to Stage B, which involved conducting semi-structured interviews. At this stage, I sought to deeply explore, from the perspective of my respondents, the influencing factors they encountered during their decision-making processes amid the pandemic, as well as their diverse interpretations of these factors.

The exploration in Stage B was guided by the layered framework constructed in [Section 2.7](#). As illustrated in [Appendix E](#), the semi-structured interviews were organized around three levels: the individual level, the situational level, and the institutional level. This framework served as the starting point for a structured and systematic inquiry into the decision-making processes of the respondents.

At the individual level, the findings from Stage B reveal a nuanced picture of motivations and barriers influencing HE participation and three primary themes emerged. For many respondents, vocational aspirations and career-oriented goals were primary motivators for HE participation. The pandemic did not diminish these aspirations but rather highlighted the importance of educational qualifications in navigating an uncertain labour market. At the same time, a desire to enhance skills and knowledge further motivated individuals to pursue HE. Unlike other factors, these aspirations appeared to remain unaffected by the pandemic context, underscoring their intrinsic nature. The situation of COVID-19 also brought something different from the normal period, which made the health risks a significant barrier to HE participation for some respondents. These risks, although widely acknowledged, had varied effects depending on individual perceptions and circumstances.

In terms of situational level, two key subthemes were identified. On the one hand,

the influence of workplace dynamics and industry demands played a dual role as motivators and barriers. Unlike individual-level career-related factors, these situational career factors are reflected in the external influence exerted by specific industries or job positions on potential participants. Moreover, respondents' social networks significantly influenced their decisions, with peer and familial expectations acting as both drivers and inhibitors. The complexity of these relationships, ranging from direct encouragement to subtle societal pressures, underscores the interconnectedness of personal and situational factors.

Finally, institutional-level influencing factors also impacted the decision-making behaviours of my respondents. In Stage A, the study initially analysed the political environment in which respondents made their decisions. However, the influence of policy changes, as revealed through the interviews, appeared polarized. On one hand, some respondents identified policy changes as decisive factors. On the other hand, aside from explicitly stating that they were unaffected by such changes, a larger number of respondents either lacked awareness or had not received information regarding policy adjustments during the pandemic. Consequently, they did not regard policy changes as a significant institutional influence. Additionally, many respondents reported experiencing the influence of community cultural dynamics, particularly peer pressure, as an impactful factor in their decision-making.

However, I identified several topics that warranted further exploration during interviews, which became the focus and significance of the Stage C focus groups. After analysing the various issues emerging from the findings in Stage B, five topics were selected for discussion in Stage C: the impact of the pandemic on social trends, the influence of the pandemic on the psychological state of potential participants, diploma devaluation, peer pressure during the pandemic, and sunk costs in decision-making during the pandemic. These five topics significantly broadened the scope of the study's findings from specific perspectives. Notably, the exchange of opinions among respondents in Stage C revealed their views on

pandemic-specific topics or the interactions between influencing factors. Moreover, their thought processes during the decision-making process provided deeper insights into the research findings.

Still, it is important to note that although the findings summarised above were more prominent compared to other perspectives and experiences in this research project, my respondents reported highly diverse circumstances during the interviews. Particularly, when faced with similar influencing factors, different respondents exhibited highly individualized interpretations. This underscores the complexity of the motivations and barriers to full-time HE participation among young adult learners within the unique context of the pandemic.

Chapter Six Conclusion.

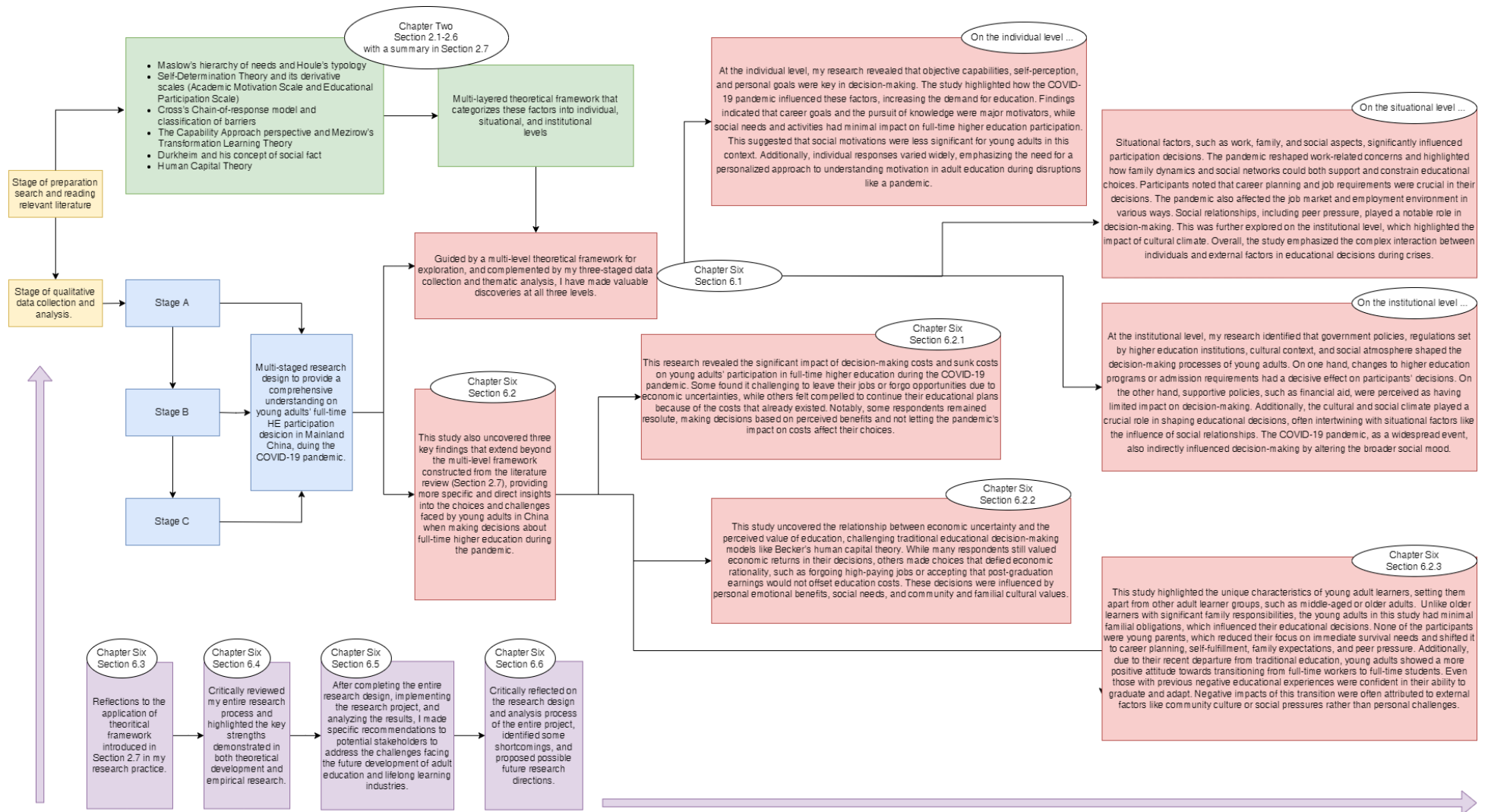
This chapter will address the core research aim of investigating factors influencing the decision-making of young adults (aged 20-40) to participate in full-time HE in China (Mainland), during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the outset of the research, I developed a theoretical framework to guide my investigation, based on a review of relevant theoretical constructs and empirical studies (see [Section 2.7](#)).

Building upon this framework, the chapter begins with [Section 6.1](#), which revisits the research questions and addresses them at three levels: individual, situational, and institutional, providing a comprehensive overview of how the findings intersect across these dimensions. [Section 6.2](#) delves into the key discoveries made throughout the study, challenging and extending the initial theoretical model proposed in [Section 2.7](#). This section is further divided into three subsections: [6.2.1](#) examines the impact of accumulating costs on decision-making; [6.2.2](#) explores the significance of non-economic benefits in influencing participation decisions; and [6.2.3](#) discusses the varying responses among different groups of young adults.

After discussing the research findings, [Section 6.3](#) focuses on the interaction between the theoretical framework and the research process, reflecting on the strengths and limitations of the three-level framework introduced in [Section 2.7](#) to support this study. Following this, [Section 6.4](#) outlines the strengths of this research, highlighting its contributions to the field and the robustness of its methodological design. [Section 6.5](#) then considers the implications of the findings for stakeholders in HE, offering practical recommendations based on the study's outcomes. The chapter continues with [Section 6.6](#), which critically reflects on the limitations of the research and suggests avenues for future studies, acknowledging areas where further exploration is needed. Finally, [Section 6.7](#) provides a concise conclusion, summarizing the overall contributions of the thesis and reaffirming its significance in the broader academic discourse.

As I did at the beginning of this dissertation in [Section 1.5](#) of Chapter One, I have also provided a flowchart at the conclusion of this work to illustrate my overall research findings, as shown in [Figure 6a](#) on the next page. This flowchart begins in alignment with the previous one ([Figure 1b](#), [Section 1.5](#)), with the yellow section representing the initiation of the research. The green section follows, detailing the literature review process, where relevant theories and previous studies were critically examined. The blue section signifies the subsequent stages of data collection and analysis, where the core empirical work of the study was conducted. After analysing all the gathered information, the red section encapsulates the findings and conclusions. This segment primarily addresses the core research questions, showcasing the key insights drawn from the study. Following the completion of the main research, the purple section on the bottom of the flowchart represents a critical reflection on the entire process. It includes the theoretical and practical contributions of the research, strategic recommendations for stakeholders, and an evaluation of the study's limitations, along with suggestions for potential future research directions. This flowchart provides a comprehensive overview of the research journey, from inception to reflection.

Figure 6a Flowchart of my research outcomes.



6.1 Addressing the research questions at Individual, Situational and Institutional levels

This research explored the factors influencing full-time higher education (HE) participation decisions among young adults in mainland China during the COVID-19 pandemic, employing a multi-layered theoretical framework that categorizes these factors into individual, situational, and institutional levels. By a triangulation analysis from three stages of research, critical policy analysis (Stage A), semi-structured interviews (Stage B), and online focus groups via Padlet (Stage C), this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how these factors interact to shape HE participation decisions during a period of global disruption.

At the individual level, my research reveals that objective capabilities, self-perception, and individual-level conversions all played crucial roles in the decision-making processes of these young people. The research highlights an intricate interaction between lower-level survival needs and higher-level self-actualization needs, as suggested in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), particularly in the unique social context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents' experiences confirm support that external stimuli, such as the pandemic, can trigger a heightened demand for educational participation. This finding aligns with some related studies during the pandemic that I reviewed in [Section 3.3](#), such as He and Wei's work (2021) and Guan and Blair's work (2021). The findings at the individual level also reveal a nuanced categorization of individual needs; including, career aspirations, and the pursuit of knowledge and skills, which are both validated as significant motivating factors in this study. This aligned with the framework of AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992), especially in terms of extrinsic motivators, as well as the idea of TLT (Mezirow, 1991) that provides a possible explanation of the happening of adult learning behaviours.

Notably, my study finds minimal evidence supporting the influence of social

needs on full-time HE participation during the pandemic. Although the discussion in [Chapter Two](#) explored various theoretical frameworks - ranging from Houle's (1961) activity-oriented learner typology and the intrinsic motivation to stimulation in the AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992), to Bourdieu's (1986) idea of social capital - all of which suggest that potential education participants might be motivated by social needs, such as maintaining relationships, seeking social activities, or deriving emotional value from these interactions, my respondents exhibited minimal evidence of such motivations. This suggests that the motivation driven by social interactions may not be a primary factor among young adults in this particular context, or perhaps warranting wider investigation or conceptualisations of social activities. For example, since my research is focused on full-time HE, which typically involves traditional and formal teaching methods, young adults who participate in education based on social needs might be more inclined toward newer, more flexible educational activities. These could include community events that emphasize collaboration and social interaction, more flexible open courses or online learning, and non-academic courses driven by personal interests. The observed differences in participation motivations across various types of educational programmes can be understood through the lens of Boshier's EPS model (1971; 1977) and Cross's (1981) COR Model. These theoretical frameworks help elucidate the distinct factors that attract potential participants to formal versus non-formal education. Boshier's model (1971; 1977), for instance, emphasizes the role of social and environmental factors in shaping participation decisions, which may vary significantly between formal and non-formal settings. Similarly, Cross's model highlights the interaction between internal psychological factors and external barriers, offering insight into why individuals might be drawn to one type of educational programme over another.

Similarly, the emergence of this phenomenon may be closely tied to the broader social context of the pandemic. Compared with various nonformal or informal educational activities, full-time higher education prior to the pandemic was more heavily reliant on traditional face-to-face instructional models. As research on

higher education's transition to online delivery during the pandemic has indicated (Bao, 2020; Demuyakor, 2020; Wang and Zhao, 2020; He and Wei, 2021), this shift posed significant challenges and uncertainties for both providers and learners. Consequently, potential participants whose primary interests lay in participating in activities or seeking social interaction may have opted for other programmes - already well-experienced in remote or online operations - rather than full-time HE, which was suddenly compelled to adopt an unfamiliar instructional mode.

Beyond the differences caused by the various types of educational programmes, importantly, the respondents' perceptions of influencing factors based on 'needs' exhibit a high degree of individuality, challenging the notion of uniformity in how personal needs affect educational participation decisions. On one hand, this finding resonates with Knowles' (1980) theory of andragogy, which emphasizes the importance of individual experience and self-concept in adult learning. These highly individualized factors lead to different responses from individuals when confronted with the same types of influencing factors. However, the observed high degree of individuality challenges the notion of uniformity in how personal needs affect educational participation decisions, as sometimes implied in broader categorizations like those proposed by Houle (1961). While these classic studies provide valuable frameworks for understanding adult learner motivations, the findings suggest a more nuanced, individualized approach may be necessary, particularly in response to external disruptions, such as times of crises. In fact, although this diversification is more obvious among the individual factors, it is reflected in situational and institutional factors discussed later. The prominence of individualized decision-making echoes findings by Guan and Ploner (2018), revealing that social pressures and personal aspirations intersect in unique ways for each learner. Combined with the influence of the pandemic, studies such as Wang and Zhao (2020) show that the pandemic heightened anxiety among Chinese students, disrupting predictable learning patterns and amplifying individualized responses to educational participation.

Situational factors, including work-related, family-related, and social-related aspects, were found to be equally significant in influencing participation decisions. Each of these factors demonstrated a notable impact on individuals' choices to participate. Respondents often faced unemployment, salary reductions, or career stagnation, prompting reassessments of job market prospects and personal competencies. This aligns with Boshier's (1971; 1977) EPS model, which highlights career-related motivators, and Becker's (1976) view of education as a strategic investment in human capital. He and Wei (2021) similarly observed that Chinese students increasingly pursued practical, career-focused degrees during the pandemic, reflecting broader patterns of crisis-driven educational engagement. Family and social networks also played a dual role, either encouraging or deterring participation. When families perceived education as a pathway to career advancement, respondents were more inclined to engage, reinforcing Guan and Ploner's (2018) viewpoint that mianzi (face) and familial expectations heavily shape educational decisions in China. Conversely, scepticism from family or peers regarding the benefits of education often dampened motivation. This reflects Wang and Zhao's (2020) findings that psychological stress and negative social feedback can hinder academic engagement. From this point of view, the influence of the social circle on the situational level interacts with the psychological state on the individual level, which also reflects the limitations that the three-level theoretical framework may bring while helping my research. I will discuss this point in more detail in the next [Section 6.3](#).

While this research uncovered significant influences of social relationships on young adult learners' decision-making processes, a deeper analysis revealed these influences often manifested as peer pressure - a pervasive cultural phenomenon. This finding suggests that what initially appeared as situational factors may, in fact, be rooted in broader institutional-level cultural climates, a concept that will be explored further in the subsequent discussion on institutional factors.

But there is one layer further to consider. **In terms of the institutional level, this research identified that government policies, regulations set by HE institutions, cultural context, and social atmosphere all play a significant role in shaping the decision-making processes of young adults.** This finding aligns with Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice, which emphasizes the importance of social, economic, and policy contexts in educational decisions. Similarly, it supports Tinto's (2012) perspective in terms of the role of institutional action, which highlights the role of institutional factors in student persistence. My research goes beyond these established theoretical frameworks, offering more detailed and nuanced empirical conclusions. Analysis of policy documents related to full-time HE in mainland China during the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with insights from semi-structured interviews and focus groups, revealed a polarized impact of pandemic-related educational policies. On one hand, policies that altered HE programmes or admission requirements were found to have a decisive effect on potential participants' decisions. For instance, as I emphasized in Stage A, the well-known SBD programme's relaunch policy, primarily aimed at alleviating the employment pressure brought about by the pandemic, significantly influenced the decisions of young learners, particularly those potential participants who believed that the full-time HE programmes offered by educational institutions before the pandemic did not meet their needs.

Conversely, supportive policies, such as those offering financial aid, while potentially influential, were often perceived as having a limited impact on decision-making. Based on the perspectives shared by my respondents, they generally view such supportive policies as more of a supplementary benefit rather than a primary driver for educational participation. This suggests that, in their assessment, engagement in education primarily relies on their own resource accumulation rather than external support. Considering both the supportive policies and the personal experiences of the respondents, this phenomenon may be attributed to two main situations. On the one hand, the supportive policies during the pandemic mostly provided partial assistance, which made the

participation process easier but did not allow potential participants to fully rely on these resources. On the other hand, even if resources such as comprehensive tuition reimbursement or stable living stipends were available, these policies were not targeted at the respondent group in my study but rather at other populations facing more severe difficulties or highly skilled learners with special abilities. Consequently, the impact of these policies was less evident among my respondents. This outcome is consistent with findings in educational policy research, which highlight that the effectiveness of policy interventions often depends on their alignment with the specific needs and contexts of the target population (Verger *et al.*, 2012; OECD, 2020).

Additionally, the cultural and social climate were also crucial in shaping the educational decisions of young adult learners. This idea is widely reflected in various theoretical frameworks I have reviewed, including Maslow's (1943) discussion on the need for belongings, SDT's (Deci & Ryan, 1985) exploration of relatedness, the theory within AMS (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992) concerning the regulatory influence of external factors, Durkheim's (1897/1970) discussion of social facts, and Bourdieu's (1986) discourse on social capital, which all empathised the crucial role of external values and atmosphere in decision-making process. This could best be seen when young adults become aware that they are immersed in a particular social atmosphere or under cultural influence - such as when they distinctly perceive themselves as being affected by peer pressure - or when their views conflict with mainstream opinions, such as not agreeing with the notion that individuals need to prove themselves by gaining an edge in competition with their peers. This expands the literature framework on the influence of cultural and social contexts on educational participation by suggesting the consideration of scenarios where individual agency transcends group culture. At the same time, my findings corroborate, from a different perspective, the multi-factor decision-making models represented by the COR Model (Cross, 1981) and EPS (Boshier, 1971; 1977). They validate the notion that multiple influencing factors collectively impact individuals' decisions and that the effects of these

influences exhibit individual specificity.

6.2 Key discoveries: Pushing boundaries of the initial model in Section 2.7.

This section will delve into these three novel findings that emerged during my investigation of the decision-making processes of young adults in China surrounding full-time HE during the COVID-19 pandemic, including [Section 6.2.1](#) a discussion on accumulating costs (also known as ‘sunk costs’), [Section 6.2.2](#) a defence on the role of non-economic benefits on full-time HE participation, and [Section 6.2.3](#) a focus on young adult learners. These insights, while not directly fitting into my predetermined multi-level framework in [Section 2.7](#), provide valuable contributions to the field and offer new avenues for future research. By exploring these emergent themes, I want to highlight the nuanced complexities of my research topic and demonstrate the potential for expanding existing theoretical constructs I discussed in [Chapter Two](#).

6.2.1 The impact of accumulating costs on decision-making.

First, this research reveals the significant impact of decision-making costs and the costs of changing decisions - often referred to as ‘sunk costs’ - on young adults’ participation in full-time HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. The role of sunk costs in decision-making is a frequently discussed topic, particularly in the context of long-term investments and goal-oriented events with extended decision-making processes (SAMUELSON & ZECKHAUSER, 1988; Arkes & Hutzel, 2000; Roth, 2015; Redish *et al.*, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, studies such as Guo (2020) and Imbriano *et al.* (2021) explored educational participation through the lens of sunk costs, highlighting how the disruption heightened the perceived risks associated with altering pre-established academic or career pathways.

In the context of China Mainland, committing to higher education requires extensive preparation, often spanning six months or more, leading to a

considerable accumulation of sunk costs. This reflects findings from Bao (2020), who identified that students who had already invested significant time and resources in preparation for standardized entrance exams were less likely to reconsider their educational trajectories, despite uncertainties introduced by the pandemic. These patterns are consistent with the review of the Chinese HE system presented in [Section 3.2](#) and the critical analysis of relevant policies in Stage A.

The findings from Stages B and C reveal that the pandemic exacerbated existing pressures on potential participants in full-time HE. The pandemic-induced economic downturn has created a higher-risk decision-making environment, making it more difficult to leave jobs or forgo emerging opportunities, thus increasing the perceived weight of sunk costs (Imbriano *et al.*, 2021). For some individuals, the intensified economic uncertainties during the pandemic heightened their sensitivity to sunk costs in educational investments, aligning with the conclusions drawn by He and Wei (2021). The pandemic-induced economic downturn created a high-risk decision-making environment, making it more difficult to leave jobs or forgo emerging opportunities, thereby increasing the perceived weight of sunk costs. This reflects a broader global trend identified by Demuyakor (2020), who observed that international students faced similar dilemmas, balancing sunk costs of education with immediate financial constraints.

Conversely, others feel compelled to proceed with their educational plans due to the sunk costs of their preparatory efforts, despite the increased challenges and potential risks of diminished outcomes. Notably, a subset of respondents demonstrates a strong resolve to remain unaffected by sunk costs. These individuals exhibit decisiveness in their commitment to full-time HE, basing their decisions on specific perceived benefits, and refuse to allow the pandemic's impact on costs to influence their choices (Guo, 2020).

However, the role of policy in mitigating the negative effects of sunk costs remains limited. While government initiatives during the pandemic aimed to expand online

learning and reduce financial burdens through tuition support programmes according to the findings of Stage A, these policies primarily targeted current students, often neglecting those in the preparatory stages. Studies by Wang and Zhao (2020) and Bao (2020) emphasize that while remote learning policies reduced barriers to entry, they failed to address the psychological and economic inertia stemming from sunk costs, leaving many prospective students without sufficient institutional support. This policy gap suggests a need for more proactive interventions aimed at reducing the risk associated with sunk costs, such as flexible enrolment policies, rolling admissions, or financial relief for exam preparation expenses.

6.2.2 The role of non-economic benefits in participation decisions.

In addition, this study uncovers the relationship between economic uncertainty and the perceived value of education, challenging traditional educational decision-making models such as Becker's human capital theory (1976), as well as more recent studies that explore the impact of economic conditions on educational investments (Na, 2012; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013; Smith, 2013). This traditional value system is commonly observed in policy-making behaviours, as seen in some of the policies discussed in Stage A during the pandemic, often aimed to encourage educational participation by increasing investment or enhancing the economic returns for HE graduates.

However, contrary to the trends where economic outcomes positively correlated with educational investment, the present research reveals a paradoxical effect: the economic instability induced by the pandemic led some individuals to pursue full-time HE as a risk mitigation strategy. While many respondents in my project still considered economic returns a significant factor in their decision to engage, others exhibited behaviours and perceptions that defied economic rationality. These factors included forgoing high-paying jobs or acknowledging that post-graduation earnings would not offset the costs of education. Reasons for such

decisions varied, encompassing personal emotional benefits, social relationship needs, and influences from community and familial cultural values. This stands in contrast to the logic underpinning Becker's human capital theory (1976), which defines individuals as rational actors who view educational investment primarily as an economic decision. To be more specific, the emergence of this phenomenon suggests that individuals may deliberately make educational investments that do not necessarily maximize economic returns, challenging the notion of purely rational decision-making in the context of education. This finding challenges the traditional view of educational participation as solely or largely an economic investment (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Perna, 2006), highlighting the multifaceted motivations behind such decisions, more in line with the idea of Bourdieu's (1986) multi-concept human capital forms, or the idea of Houle (1961) who classified learners with different orientations.

Combined with the analysis of Stage A, this finding also provides unique insights at the policy level. While policies linking full-time HE to economic recovery during the pandemic aimed to support the labour market, their overemphasis on aligning education with economic returns demands overlooks the broader social and developmental roles of education. Studies such as Wenjun *et al.* (2020) highlight that emotional stability and mental health influenced educational decisions as much as job prospects, challenging the narrow economic focus of existing policies. Similarly, Yang (2020a) critiques the undervaluation of education's transformative potential, aligning with Bourdieu's (1986) view that cultural and social capital are integral to educational pathways.

6.2.3 Group-specific responses among young adults.

Finally, this study highlighted the unique characteristics of young adult learners, distinguishing them from other more commonly studied adult learner groups, such as middle-aged or older adults. Unlike prior research with adult and older adult learners, which highlights significant influences of family and caretaking

responsibilities (Stuart *et al.*, 2018), the young adults in my study report rather minimal familial obligations, which influenced their educational decisions. This might be due to the fact that no participants in my research identified themselves as young parents. The lack of family burden may have shaped their focus on factors like career planning, self-fulfilment, family expectations, or peer pressure, rather than on immediate life or survival needs. This implied that young adults may be less constrained by basic needs compared to potential adult learners who bear heavier family or survival responsibilities (Maslow, 1943) and were also less likely to be restricted by family obligations, like the family togetherness scale in EPS (Boshier, 1971; 1977). Instead, they tended to focus more on self-awareness (Maslow, 1943; Vallerand *et al.*, 1992), which drives them to seek educational experiences associated with stimulation, sensation, and achievement, such as the pursuit of pure knowledge and skill acquisition (Houle, 1961; Boshier, 1971; Vallerand *et al.*, 1992).

Additionally, due to their relatively recent departure from traditional educational systems compared with other age groups, young adults - defined in this study as individuals aged 20 to 40 - appeared to exhibit a more positive attitude toward the transition from full-time workers to full-time students. Past research shows that older adults, especially senior learners, often experience negative emotions when faced with the transition back to a learner identity or when participating in adult education (*e.g.*, Narushima *et al.*, 2018). Even those who reported previously negative educational experiences expressed confidence in their ability to graduate and adapt to their new roles. Any negative impacts of this transition were often attributed to external factors, such as community culture or social pressures, rather than to personal challenges. Therefore, future models/ research should incorporate more attention to the detailed social demographic characteristics of the research object group.

6.3 Evaluating the theoretical framework: Strengths, limitations, and reflections.

The theoretical framework presented in [Section 2.7](#) underpinning this study - categorizing influencing factors into individual, situational, and institutional levels - proved essential in dissecting the multifaceted nature of educational participation decisions among young adults. This layered approach enabled a structured analysis of how personal motivations, external pressures, and institutional dynamics intersect, offering valuable insights into the drivers behind higher education engagement. By applying this model to guide the data collection and analysis, the study effectively illuminated the diverse pathways learners navigate, particularly in the face of external disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

A significant strength of this framework lies in its ability to capture the interplay between distinct yet interdependent factors. By segmenting influences into individual, situational, and institutional levels, the model facilitated granular analysis, unveiling patterns that might otherwise remain obscured. This structured differentiation not only clarified how elements such as career aspirations, psychological well-being, and economic constraints operate at various tiers but also reinforced the value of a comprehensive approach in examining adult learning behaviours.

More importantly, the structured nature of the framework provided a clear and organized pathway for navigating the often complex and multi-perspective landscape of influencing factors. In doing so, it enabled the research to remain focused and methodical, ensuring that no single dimension was overlooked. This approach enriched the study, offering a more holistic and layered understanding of the research topic. By maintaining conceptual clarity amidst diverse and overlapping influences, the framework contributed to a more nuanced and multidimensional interpretation of the factors shaping educational participation.

However, the study also revealed notable limitations within the framework, particularly regarding the fluid and overlapping nature of social influences. While family pressures consistently emerged as a dominant situational factor, the influence of peers appeared less distinct, often blending with individual drivers like self-concept and personal ambition. This observation echoes Guan and Ploner's (2018) findings, which highlight how *mianzi* (face) and social capital in Chinese cultural contexts blur the boundaries between familial expectations and peer interactions. The rigidity of the framework occasionally struggled to account for such nuances, suggesting that a more flexible or hybrid model might better capture the complexity of relational influences.

This subtle relationship not only exists within the situational level factors. For example, when some of my respondents talk about their own needs, such as their love and pursuit of knowledge and skills, they subconsciously mentioned the influence of family. After further questioning, some insisted that this demand came from their own will rather than the outside world, but more respondents hesitated or admitted that family relationships had influence on their establishment of values. From this perspective, one key takeaway from applying this framework in practice was that the boundaries between influencing factors at the three levels proved far more fluid than initially anticipated. This aligns with the ongoing debate in previous chapters regarding the distinction between internal and external factors. Beyond the cross-level interactions mentioned above, this blurring is driven by the degree to which the effectiveness of certain factors depends on individual perception and interpretation. In other words, individuality manifests not only in how factors exert influence but also in how these factors are categorized and activated. A clear example is the role of work-related influences that career concerns should be classified as personal needs or as reflections of broader industry trends at the situational level. The distinction often rests on how learners perceive and contextualize these influences, underscoring the need for more adaptable frameworks capable of capturing this variability.

6.4 Strengths of this research and academic contributions.

This study on the factors influencing young adults' full-time HE participation decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic, constituted by a multi-staged research design (Stage A policy analysis, Stage B semi-structured interview, and Stage C focus group via Padlet) demonstrates several key strengths that contribute to its significance within the field of educational research and decision-making theory.

Firstly, this research's primary strength lies in its innovative integration of multiple theoretical frameworks, which provides a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complex decision-making processes in times of crisis. By synthesizing elements of decision theory, social-ecological models, and crisis response frameworks (as summarised in [Section 2.7](#)), this study offers a unique theoretical lens through which to examine educational choices. This interdisciplinary theoretical approach allows for a more holistic understanding of how individual, situational, and institutional factors interact in shaping young adults' educational trajectories during unprecedented circumstances. The integration of these theories not only enriches the analytical framework but also contributes to the development of a more robust theoretical model for understanding decision-making in dynamic and uncertain environments.

At the same time, this study's theoretical strength is further enhanced by its ability to bridge macro-level policy analysis with micro-level individual experiences via the application of a multi-staged approach. Cooperating with the synthesized theoretical framework, the multi-staged research approach enables a deeper and more comprehensive exploration of how factors on different levels during the pandemic cascade down to influence personal decision-making processes. Moreover, this methodological choice not only allows for the triangulation and refinement of existing theories but also facilitates the emergence of new theoretical insights grounded in empirical data.

While my research is set against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings extend beyond this specific context and hold significant relevance for future empirical studies. Although global pandemics or similarly large-scale social disruptions may seem rare, the insights gained from this study offer valuable perspectives for addressing other future scenarios, such as global economic crises or major societal upheavals with similar characteristics. This is supported by research that highlights the importance of learning from crisis contexts to better prepare for and manage critical junctures (e.g., Boin, 2005).

Although global pandemics or similarly large-scale social disruptions may seem rare, the insights gained from this study offer valuable perspectives for addressing other future scenarios, such as global economic crises or major societal upheavals with similar characteristics.

Another key strength of this research lies in its examination of the forced shift to remote work and the resulting dominance of remote education during the pandemic. Before COVID-19, technologies and teaching methods like online learning were primarily used as supplementary tools for traditional, in-person classes. The pandemic, however, compelled these methods to take centre stage, offering a unique opportunity to assess and understand how such a sudden shift in educational delivery impacts both the industry and potential participants' perceptions. This situation provided an unprecedented glimpse into the rapid evolution of the education sector under duress, which would be difficult to replicate in normal social conditions.

Furthermore, although this study does not explicitly engage in cross-cultural or comparative analysis, as an empirical investigation focused on full-time HE among young adults in mainland China, it provides valuable insights and foundational data that can support future comparative and cross-cultural education studies. The integrated research framework and methodological design I employed are sufficiently adaptable, enabling future researchers to adjust and test them across

different cultural contexts, demographic groups, and types of education. This adaptability enhances the potential for developing and testing more universally applicable theories of educational decision-making.

It is also worth noting that I innovatively employed Padlet as a research tool. I have extensively discussed the specific use of Padlet in [Section 4.4.4](#), along with its advantages and disadvantages. Reflecting on my overall research and the role Padlet played, I believe it successfully met all the objectives I had set out for it within my research design, proving itself to be a highly effective tool for research assistance. Particularly in group research settings, Padlet provided a platform similar to a closed network forum, and its features - such as anonymity - aligned well with the diverse requirements of social science research. From another perspective, Padlet's successful application in my study, despite not being originally designed as a research tool, demonstrates that research methodology does not need to be confined to traditional forms and tools. The key is to identify and boldly experiment with tools that align with one's research design and objectives.

Finally, from an academic perspective, this research contributes to the growing body of literature exploring the multifaceted factors influencing young adult learners' participation in full-time HE, particularly during times of social and economic disruption. While prior studies have extensively examined adult learners' decisions through the lens of familial obligations, career transitions, and institutional barriers (Stuart *et al.*, 2018; Narushima *et al.*, 2018), this study highlights the unique experiences of young adults, distinguishing them from older or mid-career learners. The findings align with research by Wenjun *et al.* (2020), which emphasizes the role of career uncertainty, self-fulfilment, and psychological well-being in shaping educational pathways during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, this research complements insights from Guan and Ploner (2018) on

mianzi (face) and social capital, extending their application to the context of young adult learners, where peer networks exert a subtler but equally influential force. Unlike the rigid categorizations of learner motivation seen in Houle's (1961) or Boshier's (1977) models, the findings reveal fluid, overlapping drivers that challenge traditional frameworks, reinforcing the importance of adaptive, context-sensitive approaches. Additionally, the study echoes critiques by Yang (2020a) and Bao (2020), which highlight the limitations of pandemic-era policies that narrowly align education with labour market recovery, neglecting the psychological and social dimensions crucial to sustained educational engagement.

By integrating situational, individual, and institutional factors, this research not only bridges theoretical gaps in existing adult learning models but also underscores the need for policy frameworks that address the diverse, evolving motivations of young adult learners. In doing so, it contributes to a more holistic understanding of the intersection between education, economic uncertainty, and personal development in contemporary higher education landscapes.

6.5 Implications for HE stakeholders.

In this section, I build upon the key findings discussed in the previous [Sections 6.1](#) and [6.2](#) to offer strategic insights for HE stakeholders, particularly policymakers and educational institutions. Each finding is analysed in depth to suggest potential pathways for enhancing the inclusivity and effectiveness of the HE system. Toward the end of this section, I provide a table summarizing concrete measures that stakeholders can consider for future development and implementation.

This study's findings at the individual level provide critical insights for policymakers and educational institutions, particularly in the context of adult education during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The research illustrates the intricate balance between survival needs and self-actualization, a concept well-supported by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). This also demonstrates the

diversified manifestation of various influencing factors at the individual level, corroborating the distinction between different types of learners as represented by Houle's Typology (1961). Furthermore, it aligns with the discussions on different types of scales in Cross's COR Model (1981) and the EPS (Boshier, 1971). This delicate balance underscores the necessity for a more adaptive approach to adult education. For instance, institutions should consider implementing personalized learning pathways and adaptive support services, tailored to accommodate the diverse motivations and life circumstances of adult learners. At the same time, this study suggests that in future pandemic scenarios, policymakers should prioritize safeguarding measures for educational processes, such as examinations and organizational activities. These measures are crucial in ensuring that potential participants can pursue HE without concerns about their basic survival needs. Such strategies can significantly enhance the accessibility and relevance of educational opportunities, even in times of widespread uncertainty, thereby contributing to the development of a more resilient and inclusive educational system.

The study also sheds light on the complex interplay between situational-level factors in educational decision-making during crises. This emphasized the importance of more flexible educational services to meet the different needs of potential learners (Boshier, 1971; Cross, 1981; Vallerand *et al.*, 1992). These findings suggest that educational institutions should provide targeted support services, such as virtual counselling and flexible scheduling, to accommodate the diverse needs of learners facing varying living and working situations. By addressing these situational factors with specific, evidence-based interventions, educational institutions and policymakers can create a more resilient and adaptable educational environment. This approach not only supports young adults in navigating their educational journeys during times of crisis but also promotes long-term educational attainment and personal development, even in the face of ongoing uncertainty.

Additionally, the interaction between institutional-level factors and potential

learners must be carefully considered when designing initiatives aimed at promoting lifelong learning. On the one hand, the varied responses of individuals to similar life circumstances, as noted by Perna (2006) on the structural barriers to educational attainment, highlight the need for policies that are both flexible and context-sensitive. While structural modifications, such as changing programme entry requirements, can have a significant impact, the effectiveness of financial aid and other support measures often depends on how well they align with the diverse needs of learners. By integrating these considerations, stakeholders can create educational environments that are more responsive to the needs of adult learners, particularly during periods of societal disruption. This multi-level approach could be incorporated into policy-making discussions, potentially through the development of toolkits that map these interconnections and inform curricular changes.

The study's exploration of how sunk costs and decision-making pressures influence educational choices during a crisis adds a crucial layer to existing decision-making theories. This is consistent with the work of Guo (2020), who investigated the role of sunk costs in decisions to study overseas during the pandemic. Although my research topic differs from this study, a similar finding emerged regarding the decision-making issue of sunk costs. Our respondents, while exhibiting diverse reactions, affirmed the significant role that sunk costs play in the educational decision-making process. The findings emphasize the need for educational institutions and policymakers to consider these psychological and economic factors when designing support systems and advising prospective participants, particularly in times of uncertainty. Educational institutions, in collaboration with government agencies, should focus on helping potential participants understand and manage the accumulating costs and pressures they may encounter during the decision-making process. By addressing these challenges, support systems can better facilitate not only the intention to participate in education but also the successful realization of that participation.

The finding of this research also challenges the traditional view of educational participation as solely or largely an economic investment (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Perna, 2006), highlighting the multifaceted motivations behind such decisions, more in line with the idea of Bourdieu's (1986) multi-concept human capital forms, or the idea of Houle (1961) who classified learners with different orientations. This finding emphasizes the need for educational institutions and policymakers to adopt a more holistic approach, considering not only economic factors, in supporting prospective participants, particularly in times of economic uncertainty. By recognizing and addressing these diverse motivations, support systems can more effectively facilitate educational participation and help individuals navigate the complex decision-making landscape.

Moreover, it is imperative that future research and policy development pay closer attention to the specific social demographic characteristics of young adult learners. In line with Cross's (1981) perspectives on adult learners, it's important to recognize that they are not a monolithic group, and their diverse backgrounds require nuanced approaches. Policymakers and practitioners should consider the unique needs and characteristics of young adults, rather than generalizing them as part of the broader adult population. Young adults often differ significantly from older adult learners, particularly in their motivations, life circumstances, and educational needs (Arnett, 2000). Tailoring educational participation strategies to reflect these unique traits will likely lead to more effective engagement and better educational outcomes. This targeted approach not only enhances the educational experience for young adults but also contributes to the development of a more inclusive and adaptive HE system.

Finally, based on the discussions outlined above, [Table 6a](#) on the next page presents specific actionable measures that can be implemented to enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of China's HE system, particularly for young adult learners. These recommendations are directly informed by the analysis and insights previously discussed, offering a pathway for policymakers and institutions

to leverage the findings of this study in tangible and impactful ways.

Table 6a Possible recommendations for stakeholders.

For policymakers	For educational programmes providers
Provide systematic explanations and public outreach regarding the full participation process in HE, especially for procedures involving government departments, such as entrance exams and degree conferrals.	Prioritize the improvement of counselling services for potential participants, enabling them to access information more promptly and conveniently.
Offer public service continuing education counselling, particularly for individuals in unconventional life circumstances (e.g., unemployed, low-income families, those with special living needs), with an emphasis on psychological support.	Provide clear and detailed guidance for the entire education process, from preparation and application to participation and graduation, ensuring potential participants have a comprehensive understanding of the process, including the possible experiences and costs involved.
Consider implementing more flexible enrolment management methods, such as splitting the current annual national HE entrance exams into two sessions per year, providing more flexible options for individuals from different industries and family backgrounds.	Update educational programme offerings and content promptly in response to societal and market needs during large-scale social events like pandemics.
Intensify the dissemination of key policies, such as eligibility for enrolment and degree conferral, to ensure potential participants are well-informed and do not miss opportunities due to a lack of information.	Actively promote the characteristics and suitable audiences of educational programmes instead of waiting for potential participants to seek counselling. For example, recommend programmes to individuals with backgrounds in specific industries, those with specific needs, or those interested in particular learning formats.
Provide more targeted promotion of related policies, such as financial aid and industry-specific needs, ensuring that information reaches those who are most sensitive to these topics (this can be coordinated with counselling services).	Offer more comprehensive and professional advice based on the needs and circumstances of potential participants, rather than only addressing their immediate inquiries. For instance, if an individual seeks information about full-time HE but may be better suited for another type of programme, ensure they are fully informed of all options.
Strengthen positive social guidance, creating a more open and inclusive public opinion atmosphere that encourages individuals to explore their potential and consider further education.	Strengthen engagement with graduates, leveraging the fact that young adults have recently left the school system and are more adaptable to returning to student status, helping potential participants stay informed about further education opportunities.
Include young adult learners in the promotion of adult education and lifelong learning, whether in images or text, to avoid reinforcing stereotypes that adult education is primarily for middle-aged or older adults.	

6.6 Limitations and future research.

This study delves into the factors influencing young adults' full-time higher education participation decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the research provides valuable insights into this complex phenomenon, it is crucial to acknowledge its limitations and consider avenues for future research. This section reflects on the research process, discusses the study's limitations, and proposes directions for future investigations.

First is the reflection on the methodology. The decision to employ a three-staged mixed-methods approach, including critical policy analysis (Stage A), semi-structured interviews (Stage B), and online focus groups (Stage C), was driven by the need to capture diversified factors on the individual level, situational level, and institutional level. Moreover, the three-staged data collection and analysis was also designed to triangulate the findings for a comprehensive exploration of the research question, providing rich, multi-layered data. One of the key limitations of this study, as discussed in [Chapter Four](#), stems from the inherent nature of the qualitative research design I employed. This design choice, particularly in Stages B and C, relied heavily on self-reported data from participants. While self-reported data can provide deep insights into participants' personal experiences, perspectives, and motivations - making it a strength of my research - it also introduces certain vulnerabilities, as I discussed in [Chapter Four](#) research design. Specifically, the data is subject to biases such as social desirability bias, recall bias, and individual interpretation, which can potentially distort the authenticity of the responses. Participants may consciously or unconsciously present themselves in a certain light or omit details that they consider unimportant or uncomfortable. This risk is particularly evident in the interviews conducted during Stage B. Additionally, because the data is context-dependent and shaped by individual perceptions, it may not be easily generalizable to broader populations. While these limitations do not negate the value of the findings, they do suggest the need for cautious interpretation and an

understanding that the conclusions drawn are intimately tied to the specific contexts and individuals studied.

Moreover, as a multi-staged qualitative study with limited resources and scope, the sample size of my research is not particularly large. Additionally, the participants I selected were all individuals who ultimately succeeded in engaging with full-time HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. This selection criterion, however, inherently excludes the experiences and perspectives of those who either attempted but failed to participate or were not willing to participate at all. This limitation in sampling can potentially lead to selection bias, as noted in methodological research on participation-based studies (Bryman, 2012; Patton, 2015; Cohen *et al.*, 2018). Consequently, my study does not capture the potentially valuable insights from those who faced barriers to participation, which could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges in this context.

Based on the limitations discussed, future research directions could address these gaps by incorporating several key approaches. First, from a methodological standpoint, it would be beneficial to include the analysis of relevant municipal and educational data, such as the number of full-time HE enrolments, application rates (as indicated by the number of candidates registering for entrance exams), and actual admission rates during the pandemic years. This approach, which I considered during the initial design phase of my study, was not feasible at the time due to the unavailability of updated data, as my research was conducted while the pandemic was still ongoing. Integrating these quantitative and objective data sources in future studies could provide a broader and more comprehensive perspective on the trends and impacts of the pandemic on HE.

Additionally, future research could focus on exploring the experiences of other populations during the pandemic, particularly those who were not included in my study, such as individuals who attempted but ultimately did not succeed in

participating in full-time HE. Investigating their perspectives would offer valuable insights into the barriers and challenges they faced, enriching the understanding of the complexities involved in educational participation during such a global crisis. Moreover, future research could consider incorporating control groups.

Furthermore, it could be advantageous to extend this research to include longitudinal studies that track changes over time, providing a more dynamic view of how the pandemic's effects on educational decisions evolve. Although I also inquired about and recorded the timeline of my respondents' decision-making process from initial thoughts to decisions made during the pandemic in Stage B, this was a retrospective exploration based on their memories. While the COVID-19 pandemic has passed, the exploration of adult education participation and lifelong learning does not end here. A possible longitudinal study in terms of educational decisions could involve examining how shifts in policy, economic conditions, and social factors continue to influence HE engagement in the post-pandemic period. Additionally, comparative studies across different regions or countries could highlight how varying pandemic responses and educational systems impacted participation, offering a more global perspective on the issue.

6.7 Conclusion.

In closing, this study has not only illuminated the distinctive characteristics and decision-making processes of young adults in HE during the COVID-19 pandemic but also provided a robust foundation for further exploration in diverse contexts. The findings of this study highlight the complex interplay of economic, social, and personal factors affecting young adults' HE participation decisions. These results reveal a nuanced perspective that challenges traditional assumptions of homogeneity within this demographic group. Specifically, [Chapters Five](#) and [Six](#) detail how these diverse factors interact to influence decision-making processes. This research calls for a broader, global examination of young adults, emphasizing the need to consider their diverse experiences rather than treating them as a

monolithic group. The insights gained from this study, though limited in literature and scope, underscore the precarious and marginalized positions many young adults face in various crises. There is a pressing need for more extensive research that can adapt and test this model in different fields, such as health and economics, to address the multifaceted challenges encountered by young adults.

The development of this model offers a valuable framework for understanding and supporting young adults through turbulent times. It represents a call for researchers, policymakers, and educators to engage in global work that acknowledges and addresses the heterogeneity of young adult experiences. By doing so, further research can better support this critical demographic in navigating their educational and life choices amid ongoing and future crises, as well as the development of lifelong learning.

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Appendix A Table. CN1 List of policy documents in China during COVID-19 pandemic.

Item number	Original title and access link (When there are multiple links, they all point to the same document published by different departments.)	Title in English
CN1.1	教育部办公厅关于在普通高校继续开展第二学士学位教育的通知 http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A08/moe_1034/s3883/202005/t20200529_460339.html	Circular of the General Office of the Ministry of Education on the Continuation of SBD Education in General Universities.
CN1.2	教育部办公厅关于进一步做好第二学士学位教育有关工作的通知 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2021-03/12/content_5592575.htm	Circular of the General Office of the Ministry of Education on Further Improving the Work Related to the Second Bachelor's Degree Education.
CN1.3	教育部 国家卫生健康委 国家中医药管理局关于深化医教协同进一步推动中医药教育改革与高质量发展的实施意见 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-12/24/content_5572954.htm	Ministry of Education, National Health and Wellness Commission, National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine on Deepening the Synergy between Medicine and Education to Further Promote the Reform and High-Quality Development of Chinese Medicine Education.
CN1.4	教育部办公厅关于做好 2021 届教育类研究生和公费师范生免试认定中小学教师资格改革工作的通知 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2021-02/06/content_5585451.htm	Notice of the General Office of the Ministry of Education on the Reform of the Qualification of Teachers in Primary and Secondary Schools for the Class of 2021 Education Postgraduates and Publicly-funded Teacher Training Students Exempted from the Examination.
CN1.5	国务院办公厅关于加快医学教育创新发展的指导意见 http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2020/content_5549881.htm http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-09/23/content_5546373.htm	Guiding Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Accelerating the Innovative Development of Medical Education.
CN1.6	教育部办公厅等四部门关于开展高水平公共卫生学院建设的通知 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2022-01/06/content_5666676.htm	The General Office of the Ministry of Education and other four departments on the construction of high-level public health colleges.
CN1.7	国家中医药管理局 推进“一带一路”建设工作领导小组办公室关于印发《推进中医药高质量	Notice of the Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the

	融入共建“一带一路”发展规划（2021—2025 年）》的通知 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2022-01/15/content_5668349.htm	Construction of "The Belt and Road Initiative" issued by the State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine on the "Development Plan for Promoting High Quality Integration of Traditional Chinese Medicine into the Construction of "The Belt and Road Initiative" (2021-2025).
CN1.8	政府工作报告——2020 年 5 月 22 日在第十三届全国人民代表大会第三次会议上 http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2020/content_5517495.htm	Report on the Work of the Government - 22 May 2020 at the Third Session of the 13th National People's Congress.
CN1.9	教育部关于印发《教育类研究生和公费师范生免试认定中小学教师资格改革实施方案》的通知 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-09/08/content_5541467.htm	Notice of the Ministry of Education on the Implementation Plan for the Reform of the Exemption of Education Postgraduates and Publicly-funded Teacher Training Students from the Certification of Primary and Secondary School Teachers' Qualifications.
CN1.10	教育部关于做好 2021 届全国普通高校毕业生就业创业工作的通知 http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A15/s3265/202012/t20201201_502736.html	Notice of the Ministry of Education on the Employment and Entrepreneurship Work of the 2021 Class of National Graduates from General Universities.
CN1.11	教育部办公厅关于印发全国普通高校毕业生就业创业指导委员会章程的通知 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2021-11/04/content_5648774.htm	Notice of the General Office of the Ministry of Education on the Issuance of the Statute of the National Steering Committee for Employment and Entrepreneurship of Graduates from General Universities.
CN1.12	教育部关于做好 2022 届全国普通高校毕业生就业创业工作的通知 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2021-11/21/content_5652326.htm	Notice of the Ministry of Education on the Employment and Entrepreneurship Work of the 2022 Class of National Graduates from General Universities.
CN1.13	国务院关于印发“十四五”就业促进规划的通知 http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2021/content_5637947.htm http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2021-08/27/content_5633714.htm	Notice of the State Council on the issuance of the 14th Five-Year Plan for Employment Promotion.
CN1.14	国务院办公厅关于进一步做好高校毕业生等青年就业创业工作的通知	Circular of the General Office of the State Council on Further Improving

	http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2022/content_5692853.htm http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2022-05/13/content_5690111.htm	the Employment and Entrepreneurship Work of College Graduates and Other Youth.
CN1.15	教育部办公厅等六部门关于做好 2020 年高职扩招专项工作的通知 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-07/12/content_5526121.htm	The General Office of the Ministry of Education and other six departments' notice on the special work for the expansion of higher education in 2020.
CN1.16	教育部关于印发《2021 年全国硕士研究生招生工作管理规定》的通知 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-09/04/content_5540694.htm	Notice of the Ministry of Education on the Issuance of the Regulations on the Administration of the National Master's Degree Enrolment in 2021.
CN1.17	教育部关于印发《2022 年全国硕士研究生招生工作管理规定》的通知 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2021-09/04/content_5635387.htm	Notice of the Ministry of Education on the Issuance of the Regulations on the Administration of National Master's Degree Enrolment in 2022.
CN1.18	教育部关于做好 2022 年普通高校招生工作的通知 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2022-01/30/content_5671320.htm	The Ministry of Education's Notice on the Good Recruitment of Students to General Colleges and Universities in 2022.
CN1.19	教育部应对新型冠状病毒感染肺炎疫情工作领导小组办公室关于在疫情防控期间做好普通高等学校在线教学组织与管理工作的指导意见 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-02/05/content_5474733.htm http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-02/14/content_5478554.htm	Guidance on the organization and management of online teaching in general higher education institutions during the outbreak prevention and control period from the Office of the Leading Group for the Response to the COVID-19 pandemic Outbreak, Ministry of Education.
CN1.20	教育部办公厅关于加强高等学历继续教育专业设置与管理有关工作的通知 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2021-12/23/content_5664113.htm	Circular of the General Office of the Ministry of Education on Strengthening the Setting and Management of Higher Education Continuing Education Programmes.
CN1.21	教育部关于印发《职业教育专业目录（2021 年）》的通知 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2021-03/22/content_5594778.htm	Notice of the Ministry of Education on the Issuance of the Catalogue of Vocational Education Majors (2021).
CN1.22	教育部办公厅 国家邮政局办公室关于进一步做好 2020 年高校录取通知书寄递工作的通知 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-08/03/content_5532137.htm	General Office of the Ministry of Education Office of the State Post Bureau on Further Improving the Delivery of College Offer Letters in 2020.

CN1.23	<p>教育部 中央网信办 工业和信息化部 公安部市场监管总局关于加强普通高等学校在线开放课程教学管理的若干意见</p> <p>http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2022/content_5692861.htm</p> <p>http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2022-04/01/content_5682923.htm</p>	<p>Ministry of Education, Central Internet Information Office, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, Ministry of Public Security, General Administration of Market Supervision, Opinions on Strengthening the Teaching Management of Online Open Courses in General Higher Education Institutions.</p>
CN1.24	<p>国务院办公厅关于应对新冠肺炎疫情影响强化稳就业举措的实施意见</p> <p>http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2020-03/20/content_5493574.htm</p>	<p>Implementation Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Strengthening Measures to Stabilize Employment in Response to the Impact of COVID-19 pandemic.</p>
CN1.25	<p>教育部办公厅关于公布 2020 年普通高等学校第二学士学位专业备案结果的通知</p> <p>http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A08/moe_1034/s3883/202007/t20200710_471303.html</p>	<p>Notice of the General Office of the Ministry of Education on the Announcement of the Results of the Record of SBD Programmes in General Higher Education Institutions in 2020.</p>

Appendix B Table. CN2 List of policy documents in China and official website/news sources used in this thesis.

Item number	Original title and access link (When there are multiple links, they all point to the same document published by different departments.)	Title in English
CN2.1	高等学校培养第二学士学位生的试行办法 http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A02/s5911/moe_621/198706/t19870606_81944.html	Trial Measures for the Training of SBD Students in Higher Education Institutions.
CN2.2	国务院学位委员会关于印发《学士学位授权与授予管理办法》的通知 http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A22/yjss_xwgl/moe_818/201907/t20190726_392378.html	Notice of the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council on the Issuance of the Administrative Measures for the Authorization and Award of Bachelor's Degrees.
CN2.3	关于中国刑事警察学院招收第二学士学位生及授予学位有关问题的批复 http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A08/s7056/200411/t20041123_124704.html	Approval on Issues Relating to the Admission of SBD Students and the Awarding of Degrees by the China Criminal Police College.
CN2.4	中华人民共和国学位条例暂行实施办法 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2020-12/25/content_5574063.htm	Provisional Measures for the Implementation of the Degree Regulations of the People's Republic of China.
CN2.5	普通高等学校学生管理规定 http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2005/content_108168.htm	Regulations on the management of students in general higher education institutions.
CN2.6	教育部关于试办示范性软件学院的通知 http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A08/s7056/200107/t20010725_109642.html	Notice from the Ministry of Education on the Pilot Establishment of Demonstrative Software Colleges.
CN2.7	教育部关于印发《2017 年全国硕士研究生招生工作管理规定》的通知 http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A15/moe_778/s3261/201609/t20160905_277755.html	Notice of the Ministry of Education on the Issuance of the Regulations on the Administration of National Master's Degree Admissions in 2017.
CN2.8	教育部关于印发《2018 年全国硕士研究生招生工作管理规定》的通知 http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A15/moe_778/s3261/201708/t20170831_312801.html	Notice of the Ministry of Education on the Issuance of the Regulations on the Administration of National Master's Degree Admissions in 2018.

CN2.9	教育部关于印发《2019 年全国硕士研究生招生工作管理规定》的通知 http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A15/moe_778/s3113/201808/t20180821_345717.html	Notice of the Ministry of Education on the Issuance of the Regulations on the Administration of National Master's Degree Admissions in 2019.
CN2.10	教育部关于印发《2020 年全国硕士研究生招生工作管理规定》的通知 http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A15/moe_778/s3113/201908/t20190819_395052.html	Notice of the Ministry of Education on the Issuance of the Regulations on the Administration of National Master's Degree Admissions in 2020.
CN2.11	教育部关于印发《2021 年全国硕士研究生招生工作管理规定》的通知 http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A15/moe_778/s3113/202009/t20200903_484958.html	Notice of the Ministry of Education on the Issuance of the Regulations on the Administration of National Master's Degree Admissions in 2021.
CN2.12	教育部关于印发《2022 年全国硕士研究生招生工作管理规定》的通知 http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A15/moe_778/s3261/202109/t20210903_558663.html	Notice of the Ministry of Education on the Issuance of the Regulations on the Administration of National Master's Degree Admissions in 2022.
CN2.13	教育部关于印发《高等教育学历证书电子注册管理暂行规定》的通知 https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2002/content_61903.htm	Notice of the Ministry of Education on Issuing the Interim Provisions for the Electronic Registration and Management of Higher Education Qualification Certificates.
CN2.14	普通高等学校学生管理规定 http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A02/s5911/moe_621/201702/t20170216_296385.html	Regulations for the Management of Students in Regular Higher Education Institutions
CN2.15	微专业招生(五) 北京师范大学文理学院应用英语微专业 https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/m-YP0NyScelgSjElx5omfQ	Micro-major Enrolment (5): Welcome to Apply for the Applied English Micro-Major at Beijing Normal University College of Arts and Sciences.
CN2.16	教育部办公厅关于做好 2023 年全国成人高校招生工作的通知 https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/202309/content_6901427.htm	Notice from the General Office of the Ministry of Education on Effectively Conducting the 2023 National Adult Higher Education Admissions Work.

Appendix C Notes of Stage A policy analysis (example).

A类政策文件			
CN1.13	2021-8-23 十四五规划相关。		
CN1.14	2022-5-5 和CN1.12对比, 是后续实践。		
CN1.15	高教打招 2020/7/30.3. 来源是 2020年政府工作报告, 发布于2020/5/22. 涉及的内容是专升本打招. CN1.8 没有太多内容. 但CN1.15里有相当于扩大入学的内容和内容		
CN1.16	2020年8月24日发布的有关2021 ^届 年研究生招生工作的部署. (多一条关于国际生的内容, 但我认为可以忽略不计)		
CN1.17	涉及SBD的内容, 即在现阶段承认了法学SBD的有效性. (是相对性的) 2021/8/30.		
CN1.18	A类管理, 但提到疫情. → 是普通教育的		
CN1.19	关于疫情期间的教学指导. → 防控类的.		
CN1.20	关于高等学历继续教育专业的申报和审批. 渠道文件, 是日常维护		
CN2.15	是规范过云管院. 来源是2016年12月3日的高等学历继续教育		
CN1.21	高等职业教育的本科转科录, 也是规范管院. 专业设置管院办法		
CN2.16	是对过去文件的修订. → 2017/12/13. CN2.16.		
CN1.22	关于录取通知 → 疫情相关. 和CN1.19是一类.		
CN1.23	↑ 网络课程相关.		
CN1.24	疫情对就业的影响.		
CN1.25	SBD的申报.		
# 整理 A类文件 #			
	2020 2021 2022		
普通招生	✓	✓	✓
研究生招生	✓	✓	✓

Appendix D Coding of Stage A policy analysis, with the screenshot of the original policy document as the comparison (example of CN1.1).

教育部办公厅关于在普通高校继续开展第二学士学位教育的通知

教高厅函〔2020〕9号

date

各省、自治区、直辖市教育厅（教委），新疆生产建设兵团教育局，有关部门（单位）教育司（局），部属各高等学校、部省合建各高等学校：

high-demand labour

第二学士学位教育作为大学本科后教育，是培养复合型人才的重要渠道。为贯彻落实《国务院办公厅关于应对新冠肺炎疫情影响强化稳就业举措的实施意见》（国办发〔2020〕6号）精神，进一步优化人才培养结构，为高校毕业生创造更多再学习机会，增强学生就业创业能力，经研究，决定在普通高校继续开展第二学士学位教育。现将有关事项通知如下。

employment / job market

一、已通过教育部普通高等学校本科教学评估五年及以上的高校，可申请开展第二学士学位教育。

二、高校可在已设置的第二学士学位专业招生，也可依托现具有学士学位授予资格的本科专业申请增设第二学士学位专业，报教育部集中备案后进行招生，已撤销的第二学士学位专业需重新申请备案。备案工作与每年新增本科专业设置工作同时进行。

new full-time HE

三、鼓励高校开展第二学士学位教育，2020年增加一次第二学士学位专业集中备案（方式见附件）。重点支持高校在国家急需的公共卫生与预防医学、应急技术与管理、电子信息、大数据、网络空间安全、集成电路、能源动力、生物与医药、养老护理、家政服务等相关领域以及高校有能力、有需要举办的专业增设第二学士学位专业；支持高校依托“双一流”建设学科专业增设第二学士学位专业。

四、第二学士学位招生计划将作为增量纳入国家普通本科总规模内单列下达。各地各高校要严格执行教育部核定的第二学士学位招生计划，任何高校均不得未经批准擅自招生和授予学历学位。

五、第二学士学位主要招收当年普通高校本科毕业并获得学士学位的应届毕业生，以及近三年普通高校本科毕业并获得学士学位、目前未就业的往届生。其他人员原则上不得报考。具体招生范围由高校自主确定。

system's management

六、第二学士学位招生考试办法由招生高校根据相关专业人才培养要求和学校实际研究制定，并报属地省级教育行政部门备案。招生高校应参照国家教育考试有关工作要求，加强招生考试管理，规范工作程序，严格录取标准，确保公平公正。

七、学生可报考与原本科专业分属不同学科门类的第二学士学位专业；或与原本科专业属于同一学科门类、但不属于同一本科专业类的第二学士学位专业。具体专业所属的学科门类、本科专业类可登录教育部网站（www.moe.gov.cn），搜索“普通高等学校本科专业目录（2020版）”进行查询。

Appendix E Semi-structured interview protocol - the CN version used in Stage B and the translation version in EN.

半结构化访谈计划

感谢你同意参加这次访谈。我们采访你是为了更好地从您的视角探索您在 Covid-19（新冠肺炎）的全职高等教育参与经历，尤其是参与的决策是如何进行的。参与这项研究是自愿的。采访时间大约为 30-45 分钟，取决于你愿意分享多少信息。在征得你的同意后，我想以笔记以及录音的形式记录采访内容，因为我不想错过你的任何意见。所有的回答都将被保密。这意味着你的去识别化的访谈回答将只与研究小组成员分享，我们将确保我们的报告中包含的任何信息都不会识别你是受访者。您可以在任何时候、以任何理由拒绝回答任何问题或停止访谈。

- 对采访有什么问题吗？

- 我可以对我们的讨论进行记录吗？

访谈问题（仅仅是草稿，最终还是要由具体的访谈内容决定）

整个访谈预计按照以下的四个步骤进行

1) 确定参与者在疫情前后的状态和产生的变化

a) 确定身份和身份变化

- 首先，你能告诉我你目前在高等教育中的角色吗？[你在参加什么教育项目？研究或学习什么？这已经有多长时间了？]

- 在参与高等教育项目前你的生活状态是怎么样的？[你是其他教育项目的学生？短期/长期工作中？]

b) 再确定观点和观点的变化

- 你大概是从什么时候开始考虑参与全职高等教育项目的？[这里开始可能会产生疫情前/后两种可能性，不同的可能性将会影响到后续的访谈话题]

（疫情前）

- 你决定参与全职高等教育的主要原因是什么？

- 在这个考虑的过程中有哪些因素促进了您的参与？

- 在这个考虑的过程中有哪些因素阻碍了您的参与？

（疫情后）

- 你决定参与全职高等教育的主要原因是什么？

- 在这个考虑的过程中有哪些因素促进了您的参与？

- 在这个考虑的过程中有哪些因素阻碍了您的参与？

2) 确定疫情在这个过程中的影响

- 你目前的情况的全职高等教育参与情况与您原本预想的生涯规划有什么差异？

- 疫情的爆发对您的参与决定产生了什么影响？

- 疫情的爆发对您的参与决定产生了那些促进的影响？

- 疫情的爆发对您的参与决定产生了那些阻碍的影响？

3) 根据原本设计的研究问题的维度补问前面没有涉及到的内容

- 你身边的人（例如家人朋友）在您的参与过程中起到了什么样的作用？

- 在疫情发生之后他们的态度或者观点有什么变化？

- 你感觉你所在的地区或者行业的对待成年人参与全职高等教育这件事的态度如何？这种态度在疫情后发生了什么变化？

- 这些社会/行业的态度/变化对你的参与产生了什么影响？

- 你感觉你所在的地区或者教育机构在成年人参与高等教育的政策在疫情后发生了什么变化？- 这些变化对你的参与产生了什么影响？

4) 最后一步是总结部分

- 除了全职高等教育的参与之外，你认为疫情还对你生活产生了哪些影响？你对此有何感受？

- 疫情已经持续了很长时间了，从疫情的开始到现在，你对疫情，或者说对疫情带来的变化的态度发生了什么改变？

- 我想这就是我所要讲的一切。你还有什么要告诉我的，或者你想跟进的最后想法吗？

谢谢你的参与！

如果你对采访有任何进一步的问题，请告诉我们。

-Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. We are interviewing you to explore your experiences with full-time higher education participation during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly how your decision-making process was influenced. Participation in this study is voluntary. The interview will last approximately 30–45 minutes, depending on how much you wish to share. With your consent, I would like to take notes and record our conversation, as I do not want to miss any of your valuable insights. All your responses will be kept confidential, meaning your de-identified interview responses will only be shared with members of the research team, and we will ensure that no information included in our reports can identify you as a respondent. You may refuse to answer any question or stop the interview at any time for any reason.

- Do you have any questions about the interview?

- May I record our discussion?

-Interview Questions (Draft, to be guided by the actual interview content)

The interview is expected to follow these four steps:

1) Identifying the Participant's Pre- and Post-Pandemic Status and Changes

a) Identifying Roles and Changes in Roles

- First, can you tell me about your current role in higher education? [What education programme are you participating in? What are you studying or researching? How long have you been in this programme?]

- What was your life situation like before joining the higher education programme? [Were you a student in another programme? Employed in a short-term or long-term job?]

b) Identifying Perspectives and Changes in Perspectives

- When did you first start considering participation in a full-time higher education programme? [This may lead to two possible scenarios—pre- and post-pandemic—that will guide the subsequent interview questions.]

(If Pre-Pandemic)

- What were the primary reasons for your decision to participate in full-time higher education?

- What factors facilitated your participation during this consideration process?

- What factors hindered your participation during this consideration process?

(If Post-Pandemic)

- What were the primary reasons for your decision to participate in full-time higher education?

- What factors facilitated your participation during this consideration process?

- What factors hindered your participation during this consideration process?

2) Determining the Impact of the Pandemic on This Process

- How does your current full-time higher education participation compare with what you originally planned for your career?

- What impact did the outbreak of the pandemic have on your decision to participate?

- What facilitating influences did the outbreak of the pandemic have on your decision to participate?

- What hindering influences did the outbreak of the pandemic have on your decision to participate?

3) Additional Questions Based on the Research Questions' Dimensions

- What role did the people around you (e.g., family, friends) play in your decision-making process?

- How did their attitudes or perspectives change after the pandemic began?

- How do you feel the attitude towards adult participation in higher education in your region or industry is? How did this attitude change after the pandemic?

- What influence did these societal/industry attitudes/changes have on your participation?

- How do you feel policies in your region or educational institution regarding adult participation in higher education have changed since the pandemic? How did these changes affect your participation?

4) Final Summary Step

- Beyond participating in full-time higher education, what other impacts do you think the pandemic has had on your life? How do you feel about these impacts?

- The pandemic has been ongoing for a long time. Since it began, how has your attitude towards the pandemic, or towards the changes it has brought, evolved?

- I think that covers everything I wanted to discuss. Is there anything else you would like to share or any final thoughts you have?

Thank you for your participation!

If you have any further questions about the interview, please feel free to let us know.

Appendix F Semi-structured interview transcript of Stage B (example from part of the interview with Respondent #01, the original Chinese version and the translation version in EN, hiding the privacy part).

...

哦，好的，那你大概是什么时候开始就是说考虑参与，就是你现在的这个博士项目的？大概在（20）20 年吧，就是那会疫情刚开始，就是（20）20 年初的那半个月，呃，半年。然后（我）就考虑跟老师说过，然后因为个人一些原因，然后从左右两个就是跟老师说暂时放弃。但是临毕业之前（我）还是跟老师说，觉得还是可能想参与一下这个后续的读博的一个计划。然后去，所以上班一会儿之后去，后来也回来读博了，也是也这样子计划来的时候。

诶，那有没有就是那么能深入说一下为什么当时就是想放弃这个想法，就是先是怎么有的这个想法，然后又...先聊聊怎么有的这个想法吧？

可能这个想法，一个是周围人的呃，一个周围人的氛围吧。（我）这周围整个同学都转行了，再一个我觉得当时因为我们这个专业吧出去找工作，到时候我们就朝着，互联网比较热嘛，他（周围同学）说互联网去。那是互联网那个的话，后来就觉得当我们到，就是我们刚入学硕士的时候，它挺火热的。然后等我们快硕士毕业的时候，其实那时候已经有感觉这个它的上升空间已经不大了，就已经进入停滞期，然后甚至还有往下走的趋势，所以那会儿就是没有太好的选择，就觉得可能要深造一下也可以，然后当时其实老师也跟我，就跟我同一届一个女生，(hidden privacy)，然后当时老师也跟我说了，希望我接着就是也能转博的。所以因为老师提的这个，然后加上我自己对这些一些啊什么就是就业环境的一些看法，想法，所以就决定当时也想过，然后跟老师当时后来又放弃了一个原因，是因为个人还有一些家庭原因，觉得吧可能是暂时就去找工作比较好，但其实从我个人上来讲，我还是喜欢在，老实说喜欢在学校里待着吧，因为觉得对，我们说因为上学现在我觉得是学历贬值的话，就硕士其实真的出去毕业之后其实也并不是那么在社会上被看重吧。

哎，我可以先问一下，就是你的研究生的那个专业和互联网算是对口的吗？还是说你是当时考虑是想转，就是说工作是为了换一个行业？

工作是为了换个行业，（我们）就是一边科研，然后一边学这些额外的东西嘛。所以说互联网学习的成本他就是说，说起来高，其实难度也其实对我们来说也不是特别难，我同学也有，就是花了三四个月学习，然后也找了挺好的工作，都是一样的，难度不是太高。

...

Oh, okay, so when did you probably start, that is, consider getting involved in this PhD project that you're in now?

It was about (20)20, that's when the epidemic first started, that's (20)20 early half, er, six months. Then (I) considered talking to my supervisor about it, and then for some personal reasons, I told him/her¹ that I would give up (applying PhD) for the time being. But before I graduated (I) still told my teacher that I thought I might want to participate in this follow-up to the PhD program. Then I went ... so I went to work for a while, and later came back to read the PhD.

Eh? So can you go a little deeper into why you just wanted to give up on the idea at the time, and how the idea first came to you and then... Shall we start by talking about how you got the idea (to participant the PhD programme) in the first place?

Maybe this idea, one (of the reasons) is the surrounding people's uh, a surrounding people's atmosphere. People around (me), the entire class (of my major) have changed careers, and then ah, I think at that time because, our major, (if I) going out to find a job, I would go towards ... at that time the Internet (industry) is popular when we enrolled (in postgraduate/2018). Then when we were about to graduate with a master's degree (2020), I actually had the feeling that the development of the Internet industry was not positive anymore, that is to say, it had entered a period of stagnation, and there was even a downward trend, so at that time there was no good (job) choice for me, so I thought it might be possible to further the education (in my own profession). At the time I actually had a postgraduate supervisor... that a girl in the same class as me, (*hidden privacy*). I was told by my supervisor that maybe also considering continuing my studies and applying for a PhD. So, because of the supervisor 's advice and my own attitude and thoughts about the employment environment, I decided to ... I thought about it (continuing higher education) as well. The reason I gave up later was because I had some personal and family reasons, and I thought it might be better to go and find a job for the time being. But personally, I still like, frankly speaking, I like to stay in college, because I think the value of education is devalued, and even a master's degree is not really valued in society.

Hey, can I ask first, is that your postgraduate major and the Internet kind of a match? Or were you thinking about it at the time, that is, working for a change of field?

Is to change the industry, (me and people of my major were) just doing our research while learning another additional knowledge. The cost of studying the Internet-related knowledge (for my profession) is high, but it's not extremely difficult. My classmates have also spent three or four months studying (the Internet industry) and then got good jobs. They are all similar, it's not too difficult.

¹ In Chinese, the third person pronouns for the different attributes are identical in pronunciation, so the gender of the respondent's supervisor is not known here. As this is not very relevant to the study, it was not asked further.

Appendix G Coding of Stage B semi-structured interview. (example of page 1/5, Respondent #01, a translation version in English).

Generating the idea for participating	Generating the idea for participating after COVID-19 pandemic
Changing the idea for participating	Considering the idea of dropping participation
	Not completely abandon the idea of participation.
Influence from peers	Peers have a positive influence on the idea of participation.
Influence from the market	Market has a positive influence on the idea of participation.
Influence from the institutions and the staff	Institutions and the staff have a positive influence on the idea of participation.
Personal subjective preference	Having a personal subjective preference to participate.
The value of academic qualifications	Depreciation of academic qualifications
Participating AHE as life experience	Participating AHE as life experience is the key motivation.
Professional knowledge	Professional knowledge is not the key motivation.
Capability	Capability is the key motivation.
Personality and mental state	Cultivating personality and mental state are the key motivation.
Engagement with society	Being out of touch with society
Work experience	Gap between actual and anticipated work
	Negative attitude about the content of the work
Salary	Salary does not have a negative influence
Career planning	Confused about future career planning
Competitiveness and degree of choice in the market	Increasing the competitiveness and degree of choice in the market
Labour market during COVID-19 pandemic	Civil service jobs offer more security
Sense of security	Lack of sense of security
The role of degree	Upgrading the academic degree is a mandatory requirement for specific industries and positions
The information gap in employment	The large information gap in employment
Social circle resources	Participating brings social circle resources
Participating competition during COVID-19 pandemic	COVID-19 pandemic increases the competition for participation in the AHE project.

Appendix H Online focus group via Padlet transcript and notes of Stage C (example from the original Chinese version, hiding the privacy part).

Stage C focus group

第三阶段小组讨论在线匿名留言板

JINGWEN GAO (PGR) SEP 10, 2023 10:16PM UTC

JINGWEN GAO (PGR) SEP 10, 2023 10:27PM UTC

新冠疫情与社会趋势 1

一些人认为，新冠疫情的出现是一种加速器，或者说放大镜，它加快了某些疫情前就存在的趋势，如劳动力市场竞争的压力和对体制内就业的追求。另一方面，也有一些人认为疫情的发生可能创造了新的社会趋势，例如某些行业因为疫情的发生迎来了爆发式的发展。你如何看待疫情与社会趋势之间的关系？（欢迎举例说明）

不知道你指的是哪种社会趋势？反正我感觉疫情应该是属于放大镜那类，都是原本的趋势被放大摆到台面上来了。比如说年轻人就业焦虑什么的，其实996这个概念早就有了，但是在疫情这个背景下大家更焦虑了而已。 — ANONYMOUS

哦我突然想起来，确实好像有一个，我感觉消费主义和极简主义的对抗好像也是疫情期间繁盛起来的。但是你要说扼制消费主义是疫情创造的新趋势，我觉得疫情前其实也有，但我切实感受到这种对抗趋势的出现的确是在疫情期间。不过这个好像跟高等教育没什么关系... — ANONYMOUS

我觉得新冠疫情是类似于加速器，激化了一些已经存在的问题，我比较悲观，认为是一些负面影响，但是这些问题本身就存在，迟早要解决，就这样激化能解决最好，但是目前不知道能否被解决。比如：房地产行业，工作岗位需求，工资低等。 — ANONYMOUS

我觉得新冠疫情是加速器。以前身边很多女性朋友喜欢体制内的工作，因为失业率一直很高，现在很多男性朋友也更加倾向于找体制内的工作，怕由于新冠导致的失业率更高和中国国内经济环境很不好等等的问题。 — ANONYMOUS

我个人非常认可这种说法，同时我认为国家由于疫情推出的相关政策也很重要，它直接影响了社会发展的走向 — ANONYMOUS

疫情加速了一些社会管控手段的布局，如天网、全实名，虽然说有利于将危害社会的人群限制并找出来，但如果不加限制的使用这项权利会造成很大的负面影响，疫情期间有些事件给我们很大的警示作用。另外疫情对经济的影响是显而易见的，实体经济严重受损，而互联网经济在这段时间反而有一定的发展。疫情阻断了长久以来的一些经济循环链条，摧毁再重建这些循环确实需要一些时间。 — ANONYMOUS

<https://padlet.com/padlets/gehtli7awllv47j/exports/print.html?print=1>

Appendix I The rationale of demographic characteristics of participants in Stage B&C.

This appendix provides a detailed explanation of the rationale for documenting the demographic characteristics of the participants, as summarized in **Table 5f** in the main text. The descriptions included here aim to clarify the underlying principles and considerations for recording these characteristics.

- 1) The time point when the idea of participating HE programme first came about in relation to the time the epidemic occurred. This largely reflects the respondent's attitude towards returning to full-time HE before the pandemic. For example, #02 in the table mentioned that he first had this idea in 2018, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. This means that when interpreting his decision-making process during the pandemic, it is important to consider whether he already had a positive attitude towards further education and to what extent the pandemic influenced this decision.
- 2) The objective development and employment situation of the industry in which they studied and were employed. A very typical example can be the public health and pharmacy industries that acquired political support during the pandemic, discussed in the previous section on Stage A.
- 3) The academic level of the programme they participated during pandemic and the difficulty of graduation. Interestingly, although the participants in my study were involved in a variety of programmes, including undergraduate, SBD, master's, and doctoral programmes, each with varying levels of entry and graduation difficulty, there was no significant difference in the reported difficulty of completing these programmes. Instead, my respondents' concerns about the challenges of graduation seemed to be focused on other factors, which are:
- 4) The extent to which the target industry might be affected by the epidemic because of the nature of the industry. A typical contrast can be seen between #20, who pursued a doctoral programme in education during the pandemic, and #16, who enrolled in an undergraduate archaeology programme during the same period. Neither participant expressed significant concern or anxiety about the difficulty of graduating from their respective programmes during the pandemic, whether at the doctoral or undergraduate level. Instead, the archaeology participant reported that the pandemic's impact on fieldwork and outdoor activities posed challenges to her educational participation. In contrast, the doctoral participant, whose education studies did not require irreplaceable outdoor activities, explicitly stated that the pandemic did not affect her expectations regarding the difficulty of graduating.
- 5) The influence of past learning and working experience on decision-making. This situation is highly complex and cannot be easily summarized, which is why it is not reflected in this table. More detailed information regarding this aspect will be thoroughly discussed in the following analysis.
- 6) The different employment situations and pressures of the social climate that respondents of different genders may face. During this study and extensive literature review, I found gender emerged as a significant aspect worthy of dedicated exploration in adult HE participation. However, this study does not focus primarily on gender, and the sample size and characteristics of my respondents do not provide a sufficiently robust basis for meaningful gender-based comparisons. I believe drawing rigorous conclusions about gender differences would require interviewing individuals of different genders engaged in similar industries and educational programmes, which is beyond the scope of my research. Nonetheless, with participants' informed consent (detailed in Section 4.4.3.2), gender information is included in the demographic data. This inclusion aims to maintain transparency in reporting participant characteristics and potentially contributes to the broader field by providing gender-related data that may inform future studies specifically designed to explore gender dimensions in adult HE participation.