

Ambition And the Excellence Premium: How Student Ambition Moderates Threshold Returns to Perceived Pedagogical Quality: Evidence from China

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Abstract

Using three-wave data from 1,973 Chinese university students and complementary qualitative staff interviews, we estimate the relationship between perceived pedagogical quality and skill development beliefs, testing for heterogeneity by student ambition. We identify convex returns concentrated at the upper tail of the quality distribution: students perceiving “Very High” quality report 23–30 percentage point higher skill beliefs than lower-tier peers. Critically, ambition moderates these relationships asymmetrically: ambitious students receive amplified returns from Very High teaching quality but compensate for Low assessment quality through motivated reasoning while compensation collapses at Very Low quality. Findings imply pedagogical excellence generates heterogeneous, threshold-based returns.

Keywords: Student ambition; Skill development beliefs; Teaching and assessment quality; Human capital formation; Cognitive and affective skills; Chinese university