

Analysis of the Mechanisms and Challenges Underlying Graduation Delays Among Undergraduate Sports Students

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Abstract: As a significant segment of higher education students, sports students possess distinct identity attributes. Compared to "academic students," "arts and sports students" face more severe graduation delays. Through case interviews with sports students at a Double First-Class university in Southwest China, this study reveals that characteristics such as training experiences, mindset, and learning motivation, coupled with the absence of effective academic supervision mechanisms, peer support, and parental backing in universities, render sports students more susceptible to becoming habitual truant students and academically struggling individuals. This leads to their gradual marginalisation in both interpersonal and academic spheres, ultimately resulting in delayed graduation. The path to redemption for delayed graduation among sports students requires reconstructing their value systems, refining academic guidance frameworks, enhancing psychological resilience, and rebuilding social support functions. Such measures may mitigate delayed graduation rates and foster holistic student development.

Keywords: Sports students, academic difficulties, delayed graduation, self-redemption

Academic research on this phenomenon remains limited. A search of the CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) database for the keyword "delayed graduation" yields only 105 academic journal articles. Among these, the overwhelming majority focus on postgraduate cohorts, particularly doctoral students, with scant attention devoted to undergraduate delayed graduation. [1] As a distinct group within the undergraduate cohort, sports students constitute a significant proportion of delayed graduates. Academic research on this specific population is notably scarce. Consequently, investigating the causes of delayed graduation among undergraduate sports students and implementing targeted prevention, guidance, support, and assistance measures to mitigate this phenomenon holds considerable practical significance.

1 Conceptual Definitions

This paper primarily addresses two core concepts: sports undergraduates and delayed graduation. Our research subjects are sports undergraduates, who possess unique admission and study pathways. These are primarily manifested in the entry requirements for university admission: Sports-specific admissions (for students holding a Level 2 athlete certificate or higher, exempting them from the national college entrance examination); High-level athletes (athletes with outstanding sporting achievements and excellent academic performance, eligible to apply for non-sports majors); and Direct admission for outstanding athletes (exceptionally talented athletes who have achieved success in national or other major competitions, granted direct admission without examination). It is evident that the admission of undergraduate sports students places greater emphasis on competitive performance, with academic results requiring only a minimum pass mark.

Secondly, deferred graduation constitutes a significant measure within university academic registration and teaching management, offering students an additional opportunity for choice and "self-redemption". Graduation deferrals can be categorised as voluntary or involuntary. Voluntary deferrals occur when students choose to retain their enrolment status for reasons such as civil service examinations, postgraduate entrance examinations, military enlistment, or other factors. Such decisions are typically linked to personal development or career planning. Involuntary deferrals arise from objective circumstances including

insufficient credits, illness preventing academic completion, or family emergencies. In these cases, students often have no choice but to accept the deferral passively. [2]

2 Research Design

This study employs qualitative research methodology, utilising purposive sampling to conduct long-term follow-up investigations with students experiencing varying durations of academic deferral. Six deferred students from the Physical Education programme were selected for interviews: three deferred for half a semester, two deferred for one year, and one deferred for two years. The tracking period ran from September 2023 to March 2025. Corresponding interviews and exchanges were also conducted with their academic advisors, primarily through one-on-one face-to-face discussions supplemented by telephone interviews. Each student and their advisor was allocated a minimum of 120 minutes for conversation.

Table 1: Student Respondent Information

ID	Gender	Age	University Admission Method	Field of Study	Reason for Deferred Graduation	Duration of delay
Student A	Male	22	Direct admission for outstanding athletes	Sports Training	Insufficient credits to graduate	0.5 academic year
Student B interviewed	Male	22	National Physical Education Examination	Physical Education	Insufficient credits to graduate	0.5 academic year
Student C	Male	23	Sports Unified Examination	Sports Rehabilitation	Insufficient credits to graduate	0.5 academic year

Student D	Female	22	National Physical Education Examination	Recreational Sports	Psychological factors, insufficient credits	Year 1
Student E	Male	23	Sports Special Admission	Physical Education	Insufficient credits to graduate	Year 1
Student F interviewed	Male	22	Sports Special Recruitment	Sports Training	Insufficient credits to graduate	1 academic year

Table 2: Respondents (Teachers)

ID	Gender	Status	Years of Service
Teacher A	Female	Counsellor	3
Teacher B	Male	Counsellor	2
Teacher C	Female	Specialist Coach	10
Teacher D	Female	Counsellor	2

3 High Start, Low Finish: A Rollercoaster Life Journey

The article opens by discussing the four pathways for sports students to enter university, focusing on the two most common and highest-admission methods: the national sports unified examination and the special sports recruitment scheme. In 2024, approximately 360,000 candidates registered for the national sports unified examination across China's 31 provinces,

autonomous regions, and municipalities, with around 135,000 ultimately admitted to undergraduate programmes – an admission rate of 37.5%. In 2024, 63,725 applicants registered for the national sports-specific admissions programme, with 19,672 ultimately admitted. The undergraduate admission rate stood at 30.87%, with rates for Double First-Class universities, 211 Project universities, and 985 Project universities being 5.4%, 4.1%, and 1.1% respectively. [3] Thus, for sports students to gain admission to Double First-Class institutions represents a remarkable breakthrough. What appears to be a promising start to life has only just begun. For those who graduate late, their university experience resembles a rollercoaster ride: climbing from the lowest point to the highest peak, only to plummet abruptly into the darkest depths. The suffocating pressure this creates leaves students gasping for breath. This article explores the reasons behind delayed graduation among sports students from four perspectives: mindset, academics, psychological state, and family dynamics.

3.1 Rigid Mindset: Prioritising Training Over Academics

Due to their unique identity, athletic students—regardless of their admission pathway—rely fundamentally on physical prowess and sporting skills. Once committed to the athletic path, training becomes the dominant theme of their daily lives. Only through gruelling practice can they achieve competitive results that serve as the gateway to university admission. Take the students interviewed in Table 1 as an example: "Our daily routine is rigidly structured. We begin training immediately after waking—three hours in the morning, three hours in the afternoon, and sometimes additional evening sessions. When preparing for upcoming competitions, intensive training sessions can extend to 8-10 hours daily. As professional athletes, our existence revolves around training and competitions. Academic studies are confined to subjects directly relevant to our sport, leaving little room for broader knowledge. This routine has been my reality since the age of ten." (Student A, 22, Sports Training) The vast majority of professional athletes are selected for training at sports academies during childhood. While these academies offer some academic courses, they focus on foundational, general knowledge and fall far short of the academic standards for non-sports students. "Since choosing the sports university entrance route, my original study pattern has been disrupted. Having only started sports training in Year 10, my foundation is weaker than others'. Now I must dedicate 2-3 hours daily to training. If my sports score doesn't meet the threshold, no matter how high my academic score is, it won't matter – I won't gain university admission." (Student B, 22, Sports Education)

Research indicates that for students entering university via the unified sports examination, the cultural requirement in most regions is a mere 350 points (out of 750 total), representing just 70% of the local undergraduate cultural admission threshold. For the sports-specific recruitment route, the cultural examination covers only four subjects—Chinese, Mathematics, English, and Politics—significantly fewer than the six subjects required for the general Gaokao. Athletes admitted through recommendation are exempt from cultural examinations altogether. This indicates that undergraduate sports students enter university with weaker academic foundations than their peers. However, once enrolled in undergraduate programmes, their public courses are identical to those of academically admitted students. English, ideological and political theory courses, and computer studies are all compulsory public subjects. However, in specialised courses, they require both arts and sciences, with science-oriented subjects like sports anatomy, sports physiology, and sports psychology being major failure areas for sports students. Taking first-year students at a certain sports university as an example, Sports Anatomy, as a foundational subject, is required upon university entry, with a failure rate as high as 26% and a retake rate of 10%. Within the training programme for sports students, alongside public compulsory courses and specialised theoretical modules, practical courses constitute over half of the curriculum. Compulsory practical courses cover disciplines such as basketball, football, volleyball, athletics, swimming, and gymnastics, supplemented by elective practical courses including table tennis, tennis, and badminton. This demands that every student excels both in theoretical academic subjects and in their specialised skills, achieving mastery in both areas. However, the prevailing mindset among most sports students is that honing technical skills and enhancing physical fitness are the primary objectives, with academic theory deemed less significant. "We have several practical sessions each week, and the training intensity is quite demanding. For sports we hadn't encountered in secondary school, learning them is quite challenging. It's not enough to just pay attention in class and train hard; afterwards, we need to find time to consolidate and improve our skills. For courses like gymnastics and swimming, we have to spend double the time practising independently just to meet the teacher's requirements. For those subjects where I can read the words but find the content mentally taxing, I'd rather sweat on the training ground than sit in a classroom poring over 'obscure' texts" (Student E, 23, Sports Training). This entrenched mindset leads most sports students to prioritise physical training over theoretical learning. Over time, this imbalance results in high failure rates, graduation difficulties, and frequent delays in completing degrees.

3.2 Academic Momentum: From Self-Indulgence to Falling Behind

During secondary school, teachers often repeated the phrase "university will be a breeze", a mantra that became etched into every student's consciousness. For sports students in particular, high school entailed a far more gruelling existence than their peers. They endured intense training regimes while simultaneously meeting academic demands – a dual ordeal testing both body and mind – all with the singular goal of securing university admission. Thus, the promise of "university being a breeze" became an unquestioned creed for countless young athletes. Consequently, "ease, enjoyment, and freedom from constraints" became their initial perception of university life. Upon successfully entering university, nearly every freshman undergoes a transition period—a phase of role adaptation—shifting from the high school environment where daily study and training were rigorously enforced to one of self-management. Everything becomes free and open. Vast swathes of spare time are yours to command and arrange, and even attending lectures carries none of the former compulsion. "At first, I found it a bit jarring after starting university. No more rising at six for early training sessions, and far more free time. Hobbies forbidden in secondary school could now be pursued openly without question. Initially, I still managed to attend the 8am lectures, but upon realising that sleeping in or skipping classes came with little consequence, I grew increasingly fond of that unrestrained, carefree existence. Naturally, this led to a waning interest in studies, and my training became perfunctory whenever possible. I'm not chasing scholarships or personal accolades anyway. My mindset is simply to graduate if I can, taking things one step at a time. Besides, I haven't seen the top students fare much better than me." (Student C, 23, Sports Rehabilitation) Once the habit of self-indulgence and slackness takes root, achieving self-redemption and transformation later becomes nearly impossible. From a lack of ambition regarding academics and honours, students gradually develop an indifferent attitude towards failing exams, retakes, and academic warnings, slowly embarking on the path to delayed graduation. [4]

3.3 Mentality Degeneration: My Present Self Is Merely Mediocre

A prevailing trend in contemporary society promotes a 'Buddhist-like' or 'lying flat' mentality, suggesting people should avoid excessive 'competition', adopt a level-headed attitude, and refrain from placing undue pressure on themselves. However, within the

university setting, this ethos gradually morphs into a complete absence of competitive spirit, drive, or ambition. Students confront life with a decadent, passive attitude, succumbing to self-destructive resignation and deliberate decline, a mindset that influences many peers. Every sports student admitted to the institutions surveyed was a top performer in their local high schools, some even achieving top marks in regional athletic examinations. Yet upon reaching university—a higher platform—some experience a shift in mindset. They discover that their former excellence now places them merely at an average level, creating a psychological gap. Had they embraced reality and utilised their new platform for rigorous training, they could have achieved greater heights. Instead, their mindset shifted: unable to accept their new position, they neglected themselves and became marginalised. Self-reproach, regret, irritability, and confusion now surround them daily, as inner turmoil and resistance clash with an unalterable reality. [5] "With my high school achievements placing me among the top three locally, I arrived at university brimming with confidence. After a year or two, I realised that while I once secured top-three finishes at provincial youth games, I now struggle to achieve respectable results even in the professional category at university sports days. Academically, I've plummeted too. As an athlete, I can't even compete with others in sports, let alone academics. Defeats in competitions have eroded my confidence in studies. With so many more talented peers around, I gradually stopped training and studying altogether." (Student F, 22, Sports Training) Rigid thinking, academic marginalisation, and psychological marginalisation intertwine, becoming key factors triggering delayed graduation.

3.4 Family Disappointment: From Parental Support to Unbearable Pressure

From the moment they gain university admission, sports students become their family's pride. During their academic studies, their poor grades led parents to believe a bachelor's degree was out of reach. Yet pursuing sports offered these academically struggling students a second chance. "When my university entrance exam results came through, my parents were overjoyed. Though my academic score was only just over 400 points, combined with my prior sports test results, I had a strong chance of getting into a good university. They even threw me a celebration banquet and shared the news far and wide. At that moment, I felt the whole family was proud of me. Since learning I'd be deferring graduation, I've lacked the courage to tell my parents. I fear they couldn't bear this reality—the fall from their initial pride to my current predicament fills me with guilt, though it's too late now." (Student D, 22, Leisure Sports) Regarding students facing potential deferral, parents are typically informed

beforehand of the risk. According to university regulations, departments issue academic warnings to students with excessive failed courses and notify parents, keeping them abreast of their child's academic standing. Upon hearing this news, parents are usually stunned, incredulous, and fall into deep contemplation. "Whenever we inform parents during graduation season that their child will be delayed, they usually struggle to accept this reality. They immediately ask us what to do and whether there are any remedies. In these conversations, one can sense their anger, helplessness, and anxiety. We generally advise parents not to blame their children, but they can only silently accept and process this fact after the conversation ends." (Teacher A, counsellor) The postponement of graduation deals another heavy blow to parents' emotions, shifting them from hope to despair.

4 Path to Redemption: Preventive Strategies for Academic Delay

Based on the unique characteristics of sports students and practical circumstances, four preventive measures have been identified from the mechanisms underlying delayed graduation. These focus on: reconstructing perceptions; improving academic guidance, early warning, and evaluation systems; enhancing psychological resilience; and fostering home-school collaboration.

4.1 Paradigm Shift: Strive Academically for One's Own Sake

The realm of meaning constitutes an essential dimension of human existence, expressing aspirations for life experiences and ideal living while providing rationale for practical endeavours. [6] Students facing delayed graduation must rediscover themselves post-examination, confront reality, and navigate both the farewells as peers depart for employment and the solitude of remaining behind. Regarding extended graduation, two paths exist: striving to complete coursework and graduate successfully, or regrettably withdrawing if dual certificates cannot be obtained within the maximum study period. Weighing the pros and cons, successful graduation remains the most cost-effective option for 90% of deferred students. Most can complete their credits within the extended timeframe, exchanging their completion certificate for a degree and academic qualification. "Upon learning my graduation was postponed, I discussed it with my family. I'd initially resigned myself to it, but they all urged me to give it one more go – to fully let go of the past and start afresh." (Student B, Physical Education Unified Examination) Extended study offers students who had previously given up on themselves a second chance

at redemption. Yet this opportunity brings immense pressure. Students must genuinely re-examine their identity, confront current pressures and circumstances, bid farewell to their former selves, and subjectively recognise the meaning and value of restarting their studies—learning and living for themselves. For deferred students, this shift in mindset is paramount. In every conversation with graduating students, we prioritise this mental adjustment. They must understand the consequences of deferral and the benefits of graduating on schedule. They need to confront their past, learning both to let go of the past and embrace the present. Yet this transformation can occur in an instant for some, while for others it demands considerable time. When students grasp the implications of deferral and choose to recommit, the wounds of deferral begin to heal. (Interviewed Teacher B, Counsellor) From another perspective, delayed graduation does not signify failure in higher education. Rather, it represents a positive outcome of interaction between the educational institution and the individual. It affords students an additional opportunity for self-renewal and self-redemption, granting them time and space to re-examine themselves and reconsider their path.

4.2 Refining Academic Guidance and Early Warning Systems

Unlike the academic model in secondary education, Chinese universities predominantly operate on a credit system. This requires students to accumulate the minimum total credits for graduation within the prescribed academic years. Students select and undertake courses through a combination of self-direction and guidance, which to some extent grants them autonomy and diversity in knowledge acquisition. Ultimately, delayed graduation stems from insufficient credits, necessitating improvements and supplements to academic guidance. Typically, upon entering university, students receive a programme of study for their discipline. This document functions as a manual, outlining required courses and credit requirements. Some institutions also offer introductory courses where distinguished professors provide an overview of the field, giving students a preliminary understanding of university learning. The reality, however, is that students often struggle to comprehend these programmes. They find them unclear, incomprehensible, or overly complex, leaving many unaware of their exact credit requirements. "After enrolment, lecturers explained the programme to us, constantly stressing its importance. I only grasped that our courses were categorised into several types and noted the total credit requirement. The rest felt rather vague, and I remained uncertain about what I could actually do." Subsequently, I paid little attention to the programme until my final-year graduation review, when I discovered I was short of elective credits. These electives are further subdivided into categories like general education electives and major-

specific electives. I had assumed graduation was assured, only to find this oversight forced me to defer graduation by six months. (Student A, 22 years old, admitted as an outstanding athlete) Therefore, enhancing students' interpretation and comprehension of relevant policy documents—ensuring they fully grasp the policies and documents, particularly the detailed content of the training programme—will further alleviate graduation delays caused by information gaps.

Academic warnings are issued when students accumulate excessive failed credits within a specific period, signalling an academic crisis. The college will formally notify students of this risk through written documentation detailing the failed credits and subjects. This warning serves as a wake-up call; should academic difficulties persist, students face the risk of demotion or even expulsion. The academic warning system functions as an early warning beacon, alerting students to potential academic risks before they accumulate to the point of preventing graduation. In this era of artificial intelligence, we must fully leverage digital and intelligent technologies to implement academic warnings for students. Concurrently, we must refine the academic warning mechanism and streamline communication channels between home and school. Although university students are adults, they still require parental supervision and reminders in certain areas. When issuing academic warnings, current institutional regulations stipulate that adult students need only be personally informed, with the warning notice requiring their signature. However, in practice, such students often face academic crises precisely due to poor self-discipline, strong inertia, and weak motivation. The warning notice may serve as a short-term reminder or deterrent, but over time, students tend to disregard it. Therefore, in our daily work, we notify each student's parents individually about academic warnings, ensuring they are aware of their child's situation at school. This prevents students from exploiting loopholes between home and school environments. Based on current observations, direct parental intervention in academic matters yields far greater results than school-teacher involvement alone. (Interviewed Teacher D, Counsellor)

4.3 Enhancing Self-Efficacy and Cultivating Resilience

Though university students have reached adulthood in age, their psychological maturity often lags behind. They require support in developing resilience and rebuilding psychological functions. University demands self-management, self-awareness, and self-improvement. It offers not only growth in knowledge, skills, and character, but crucially, it is a stage for cultivating psychological capabilities—particularly stress tolerance and adversity resilience.

For these sports students who overcame immense obstacles to enter university through the Gaokao, they must learn to accept defeat on the field as well as academic setbacks. Among sports students, a single loss, injury, or moment of wavering resolve can lead them to abandon their athletic path: "Coach, I'll stick to academics. I simply can't endure the hardship of sports." This is a common refrain among sports students, whose psychological vulnerability far exceeds that of their peers due to repeated setbacks and blows. Hence, we organise diverse psychological activities to enhance their mental resilience, alleviate stress and tension from academics and training, and cultivate psychological fortitude to match their physical strength. Moreover, due to generally insufficient depth in cultural education, the psychological maturity of sports students falls far below that of the average person. Though they possess muscular physiques, most remain "big children" at heart, with behaviour and thought patterns that appear somewhat immature. We must guide them through proper value orientation and career planning, conveying mainstream ideologies and societal values. Adhering to a long-term perspective that prioritises end goals, we help them harness their subjective efficacy when adversity seems insurmountable, thereby tempering character and reshaping selfhood. [7]

"Upon learning of my delayed graduation, I underwent extensive psychological preparation. Though I'd long anticipated it, the moment I was formally notified felt like the sky had fallen. This stands as the most significant setback in my life thus far. During the summer break, I consulted a psychologist and sought advice from numerous friends. My parents offered unwavering support rather than reproach, which greatly eased my burden. I resolved to rally my spirits." (Student F, 22, Sports Special Admission)

4.4 Multi-faceted collaboration to support students

The occurrence of delayed graduation hinges primarily on the student themselves, though it is inevitably linked to the prevailing era, social environment, and family support. The complexities of contemporary society and the fast pace of the digital age subject university students to varying degrees of influence and pressure. We require a sound social ethos and guidance. The state must foster diverse employment opportunities, dismantling the dogmas of civil service positions, institutional prestige, and elitism. Greater understanding and tolerance are needed for so-called "academic setbacks." In reality, delayed graduation is prevalent in China's higher education system. Relevant statistics indicate a doctoral delay rate of 60%, a master's delay rate of 20%, while undergraduate extension rates hover around 5%, rising to 10% in certain disciplines due to greater course difficulty. We must shift society's

stereotypical perceptions of extended study periods. Our society requires both exceptional individuals and ordinary people. Increasingly, public discourse suggests that "without diligent study, one cannot secure a good job or achieve a comfortable life." While this holds truth, the definitions of a good job and a comfortable life vary greatly from person to person, with no universal consensus. For sports students, becoming a physical education teacher remains a viable option. Yet China's rapidly expanding sports industry has created numerous new opportunities and roles. Recent trends like live sports broadcasting, sports cultural industries, and phenomena such as "Village BA" and "Super League" have opened employment avenues for sports graduates, offering alternative pathways particularly for those who extend their studies.

Moreover, family influence is paramount, particularly when students face pivotal life decisions or setbacks. Parents' role becomes especially crucial at such junctures. Students facing delayed graduation are often less emotionally mature and may have not experienced significant failure. Confronted with this reality, they risk becoming despondent, potentially abandoning their studies and pursuing alternative paths. Conversely, if families provide sufficient support and reassurance, using this opportunity to teach their children how to confront setbacks appropriately and how to rise from adversity, they deliver an invaluable lesson in personal growth. This approach will undoubtedly have a profound and lasting impact on the child's future. [8] The reality is that when the university informs both the student and their parents of the deferral, the student remains unperturbed, having anticipated this day. Parents, however, typically react with shock, anger, and resignation. They cannot believe their pride and joy has become an academic failure, leading them to berate and blame the child, leaving the already defeated student without forgiveness. "During university years, parents dread receiving calls from the institution. Unlike secondary school, university tutors seldom contact parents without cause; such calls invariably portend trouble. Whenever we inform parents their child faces deferral, most struggle to accept reality, berating their offspring for immaturity and pleading for solutions from teaching staff." (Interviewed Tutor D, Student Counsellor)

Once home-school communication channels are established, teachers should inform parents about the deferral status, its causes and implications, and proposed solutions. Gaining parental understanding and support, and opening their hearts to the reality of deferral, will significantly aid students in completing their studies. This shifts students from "going it

alone" academically to a collaborative effort where multiple parties work together towards a common goal.

5 Conclusion

The occurrence of academic deferrals is directly linked to societal, institutional, personal, and familial factors, though its root cause lies with the student. Weak psychological resilience, insufficient motivation, and poor self-management efficacy make undergraduates susceptible to this path. Each student represents a family's hope, particularly for sports students who gain university admission through an alternative pathway, thereby securing greater future opportunities. Delayed graduation offers such students a relatively low-cost lesson from their mistakes. Though initially passive, they can still rectify the situation through personal effort; otherwise, they risk descending into another "abyss": withdrawal, signifying complete academic failure. By examining the mechanisms behind delayed graduation among undergraduate sports students and reflecting on this phenomenon, it is hoped that this article may offer some insight and benefit to sports students, serving as a warning to themselves and encouraging them to contribute their own efforts to building China into a sporting powerhouse.

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Author's contribution

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