

# The Overqualification Paradox: Why Highly Educated Graduates Experience Lower Early Career Satisfaction

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## Article Info

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## Abstract

The rapid expansion of higher education has led to a growing number of highly qualified graduates entering increasingly competitive labor markets. Although higher educational attainment is traditionally associated with improved employment prospects and career success, emerging research suggests a paradoxical outcome in which highly educated individuals report lower levels of satisfaction during the early stages of their careers. This phenomenon, referred to as the Overqualification Paradox, raises important questions about the relationship between educational attainment, career expectations, and early career experiences.

Drawing on human capital theory (Becker, 1964), person–job fit theory (Edwards, 1991), and expectation–disconfirmation theory (Porter & Lawler, 1968), this conceptual paper examines how higher education may create expectation gaps that negatively influence early career satisfaction. Highly educated graduates often enter the workforce with elevated expectations regarding meaningful work, career advancement, compensation, and skill utilization. However, early career positions frequently involve routine responsibilities, limited autonomy, and gradual career progression, creating a mismatch between graduates' expectations and their actual work experiences.

This study develops a conceptual framework explaining how perceived overqualification, expectation–reality gaps, and skill underutilization contribute to lower job satisfaction among highly educated graduates during the early stages of their careers. The framework also identifies potential moderating factors, including organizational support, job design, and career development opportunities, that may mitigate the negative effects of perceived overqualification.

By integrating insights from organizational behavior, human capital theory, and career development literature, this study contributes to the growing research on overqualification by highlighting the paradoxical consequences of educational attainment for early career satisfaction. The findings offer theoretical insights and practical implications for organizations, educational institutions, and policymakers seeking to better align graduate expectations with labor market realities in an era of expanding higher education.

## Introduction

Over the past few decades, higher education has expanded rapidly across the world, with an increasing number of individuals pursuing advanced degrees in the hope of securing better career opportunities, higher earnings, and improved job satisfaction. Governments, educational institutions, and policymakers have consistently promoted higher education as a pathway to economic mobility and professional success. According to **human capital theory**, investments in education enhance individuals' knowledge, skills, and productivity, thereby increasing their value in the labor market and improving employment outcomes (Becker, 1964). As a result, obtaining higher levels of education is widely perceived as a rational strategy for achieving long-term career advancement and personal fulfillment.

However, recent trends in labor markets suggest a paradoxical outcome. Despite possessing higher levels of education and qualifications, many graduates report **lower levels of job satisfaction during the early stages of their careers**. In many cases, highly educated individuals enter positions that do not fully utilize their skills, involve routine tasks, or offer limited opportunities for immediate advancement. This mismatch between educational attainment and job requirements often leads to a condition known as **perceived overqualification**, in which employees believe their education, skills, or abilities exceed the demands of their job roles (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006). While higher education theoretically increases employability and career prospects, the experience of overqualification may undermine early career satisfaction and professional engagement.

This phenomenon can be described as the **Overqualification Paradox**—a situation in which higher educational attainment, rather than enhancing early career satisfaction, may contribute to dissatisfaction due to unmet expectations and skill underutilization. Highly educated graduates frequently enter the workforce with strong expectations regarding meaningful work, career progression, compensation, and opportunities to apply their knowledge. However, early career positions often involve entry-level responsibilities that prioritize organizational learning and experience accumulation rather than immediate responsibility or autonomy. When these expectations are not met, graduates may experience an **expectation–reality gap**, which can negatively influence job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Porter & Lawler, 1968).

Theoretical perspectives from organizational behavior provide useful insights into this paradox. **Person–job fit theory** suggests that employees experience higher levels of satisfaction when their skills, abilities, and qualifications align with the requirements of their job roles (Edwards, 1991). When individuals perceive that their qualifications exceed job demands, this mismatch may lead to feelings of frustration, boredom, or reduced motivation. Similarly, research on perceived overqualification indicates that employees who believe their capabilities are underutilized may experience lower job satisfaction, decreased organizational commitment, and increased turnover intentions (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009).

Despite the growing body of literature on overqualification, much of the existing research focuses on the **outcomes of overqualification within organizational contexts**, such as job attitudes, performance, and turnover behavior. Comparatively less attention has been given to the broader structural and psychological mechanisms through which higher education itself may contribute to expectation gaps during the transition from education to employment. As higher education systems continue to expand globally, understanding how educational attainment shapes graduates' early career expectations and experiences has become increasingly important.

This study addresses this gap by examining the **Overqualification Paradox** through a conceptual lens that integrates insights from human capital theory, person–job fit theory, and expectation–disconfirmation theory. The paper develops a conceptual framework explaining how higher education may generate elevated career expectations, how early career job structures may fail to meet these expectations, and how this mismatch may lead to lower levels of early career satisfaction among highly educated graduates.

By exploring the mechanisms linking educational attainment, expectation gaps, and perceived overqualification, this research contributes to the literature on career development and organizational behavior in several ways. First, it highlights the paradoxical relationship between higher education and early career satisfaction. Second, it proposes a theoretical framework explaining how expectation–reality gaps influence job satisfaction among highly educated graduates. Third, it offers insights for organizations, educational institutions, and policymakers seeking to better align graduate expectations with labor market realities.

Understanding the Overqualification Paradox is particularly important in contemporary labor markets characterized by **mass higher education and increasing competition for high-skill jobs**. As the number of highly educated graduates continues to rise, organizations and educational systems must consider how to better manage the transition from education to employment in order to ensure that higher education fulfills its promise of long-term career satisfaction and professional development.

## Literature Review

### Overqualification and Early Career Outcomes

The concept of **overqualification** has gained increasing attention in organizational behavior and labor market research as higher education participation has expanded globally. Overqualification refers to a situation in which an individual possesses more education, skills, or experience than is required for their current job role (Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006). Scholars often distinguish between **objective overqualification**, which occurs when formal education exceeds job requirements, and **perceived overqualification**, which reflects an employee's subjective belief that their abilities and qualifications are underutilized within their job (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009).

Research has shown that perceived overqualification is particularly important because it directly influences employees' psychological reactions to their work environment. Employees who believe their qualifications exceed job requirements may experience feelings of boredom, frustration, and underutilization of skills, which can negatively affect job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Maynard et al., 2006). Several studies have also found that perceived overqualification is associated with higher turnover intentions, reduced engagement, and lower organizational attachment (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009).

In the context of early career employment, the likelihood of overqualification may be especially high. Many graduates enter entry-level positions that emphasize learning and experience rather than full utilization of advanced knowledge or specialized skills. As a result, highly educated individuals may perceive a mismatch between their qualifications and job responsibilities during the initial stages of their careers. This mismatch may contribute to lower levels of job satisfaction despite higher educational attainment, thereby giving rise to the **Overqualification Paradox**.

### Human Capital Theory and Educational Investment

One of the foundational theories explaining the relationship between education and labor market outcomes is **human capital theory**. According to Becker (1964), investments in education enhance individuals' knowledge, skills, and productivity, thereby increasing their economic value in the labor market. Human capital theory predicts that individuals who obtain higher levels of education should experience improved employment opportunities, higher wages, and greater career success.

Educational institutions and policymakers have long relied on this framework to justify the expansion of higher education systems. The underlying assumption is that greater educational attainment leads to better alignment between individuals' skills and the demands of the labor market. However, the rapid expansion of higher education in many countries has resulted in an increasing number of graduates competing for a limited number of high-skill jobs. This imbalance may lead to situations in which individuals accept positions that do not fully utilize their qualifications.

When the supply of highly educated workers exceeds the availability of suitable job opportunities, the labor market may produce conditions in which graduates are employed in roles that require lower levels of education than they possess. In such cases, the expected returns to educational investment may not immediately materialize, particularly during the early stages of a career. This discrepancy between educational attainment and job requirements provides an important foundation for understanding the emergence of perceived overqualification among highly educated graduates.

### Person–Job Fit and Skill Utilization

Another theoretical perspective that helps explain the consequences of overqualification is **person–job fit theory**. Person–job fit refers to the degree to which an individual's abilities, skills, and qualifications align with the requirements of a particular job role (Edwards, 1991). When employees experience a strong match between their capabilities and job demands, they are more likely to report higher job satisfaction, engagement, and performance.

Conversely, when a mismatch occurs between employees' qualifications and job requirements, negative work attitudes may emerge. Overqualification represents a specific type of person–job misfit in which employees possess capabilities that exceed the demands of their role. In such situations, employees may perceive that their skills are underutilized, leading to feelings of dissatisfaction or reduced motivation.

Research suggests that skill underutilization can negatively affect employees' perceptions of meaningful work and professional development opportunities. When highly educated employees are unable to apply their knowledge or skills in their daily tasks, they may question the value of their educational investment or feel that their career progress is slower than expected. These perceptions can significantly influence early career satisfaction among graduates entering the workforce.

### Expectation–Disconfirmation and Career Expectations

The relationship between educational attainment and early career satisfaction can also be explained through **expectation–disconfirmation theory**. This theory proposes that satisfaction is determined by the gap between individuals' expectations and their actual experiences (Porter & Lawler, 1968). When outcomes meet or exceed expectations, individuals experience satisfaction; when outcomes fall short of expectations, dissatisfaction is likely to occur.

Higher education often shapes graduates' expectations regarding career outcomes, including meaningful work, rapid career progression, financial rewards, and opportunities to apply specialized knowledge. Educational institutions, career advisors, and societal narratives frequently reinforce the belief that higher education guarantees access to fulfilling and prestigious careers. As a result, graduates may enter the labor market with elevated expectations about their early career experiences.

However, early career positions often involve entry-level responsibilities, structured learning environments, and gradual advancement rather than immediate access to complex or highly autonomous roles. When graduates encounter jobs that differ from their expectations, an **expectation–reality gap** may emerge. This gap can lead to dissatisfaction even when the job itself provides valuable experience or long-term career benefits.

## Integrating Overqualification and Early Career Satisfaction

The literature on overqualification, human capital theory, person–job fit, and expectation–disconfirmation provides important insights into the relationship between education and early career experiences. However, these perspectives have rarely been integrated to explain why highly educated individuals sometimes report lower levels of early career satisfaction.

The concept of the **Overqualification Paradox** emerges from the intersection of these theoretical perspectives. While human capital theory predicts that higher education should enhance career outcomes, person–job fit theory suggests that mismatches between qualifications and job demands can lead to dissatisfaction. At the same time, expectation–disconfirmation theory highlights how elevated expectations formed during higher education may contribute to dissatisfaction when early career experiences do not meet those expectations.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this study provides a conceptual framework for understanding how educational attainment may simultaneously increase employability while also creating conditions that contribute to lower early career satisfaction among highly educated graduates.

## Research Gap

Although the literature on overqualification has expanded significantly in recent years, several important gaps remain in understanding the relationship between higher educational attainment and early career satisfaction. Existing research has primarily focused on the **outcomes of perceived overqualification within organizational settings**, such as job attitudes, work engagement, performance, and turnover intentions (Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006; Erdogan & Bauer, 2009). While these studies provide valuable insights into how employees respond to perceived skill underutilization, they often examine overqualification as an **organizational-level phenomenon** rather than as a broader structural consequence of expanding higher education systems.

First, much of the existing literature examines overqualification **after individuals have already entered organizations**, focusing on how employees react to job roles that do not fully utilize their skills. However, relatively little attention has been given to the **transition period between higher education and the labor market**, during which graduates form expectations about their careers and begin evaluating their early work experiences. Understanding this transition is critical because early career experiences often shape long-term career attitudes, professional identity, and organizational commitment.

Second, while human capital theory predicts that higher levels of education should lead to improved employment outcomes (Becker, 1964), empirical evidence increasingly suggests that higher educational attainment does not always translate into immediate career satisfaction. The expansion of higher education has produced labor markets in which the supply of highly educated workers may exceed the availability of high-skill positions. As a result, graduates may enter roles that require lower levels of education than they possess, creating conditions for **perceived overqualification**. Despite this growing structural mismatch, relatively few studies have examined how the expansion of higher education contributes to expectation gaps that influence early career satisfaction.

Third, existing research has rarely integrated multiple theoretical perspectives to explain the **psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between education and early career dissatisfaction**. Although studies on person–job fit highlight the importance of aligning employees' qualifications with job demands (Edwards, 1991), and expectation–disconfirmation theory explains how unmet expectations influence satisfaction (Porter & Lawler, 1968), these theories have rarely been combined with overqualification research to explain the paradoxical outcomes associated with higher education.

Finally, the literature lacks a **comprehensive conceptual framework** that explains how higher educational attainment may simultaneously enhance employability while also creating conditions that contribute to lower early career satisfaction. Most studies examine overqualification as an isolated variable rather than exploring how educational expectations, job structures, and skill utilization interact during the early stages of a career.

To address these gaps, the present study introduces the concept of the **Overqualification Paradox**, which describes a situation in which higher educational attainment may lead to lower early career satisfaction due to expectation–reality gaps and perceived skill underutilization. By integrating insights from human capital theory, person–job fit theory, and expectation–disconfirmation theory, this research develops a conceptual framework that explains how educational attainment shapes career expectations, how early career job structures may fail to meet these expectations, and how this mismatch contributes to perceived overqualification and reduced job satisfaction among highly educated graduates.

Through this theoretical integration, the study seeks to advance the literature by providing a more comprehensive understanding of how expanding higher education systems influence graduates' early career experiences and satisfaction levels.

## Research Questions and Research Propositions

Building upon the identified research gap, this study seeks to examine the paradoxical relationship between higher educational attainment and early career satisfaction. While traditional perspectives such as human capital theory emphasize the benefits of education for employment outcomes, emerging evidence suggests that higher education may also create expectation gaps that influence graduates' early career

experiences. The concept of the **Overqualification Paradox** provides a framework for understanding how higher education may simultaneously enhance employability while also contributing to dissatisfaction during the early stages of a career.

To explore this phenomenon, the present study is guided by the following research questions:

1. **Research Question 1 (RQ1):** How does higher educational attainment influence graduates' expectations regarding early career outcomes?
2. **Research Question 2 (RQ2):** How do expectation–reality gaps affect graduates' perceptions of overqualification in early career positions?
3. **Research Question 3 (RQ3):** How does perceived overqualification influence early career job satisfaction among highly educated graduates?
4. **Research Question 4 (RQ4):** What organizational or contextual factors may moderate the relationship between perceived overqualification and early career satisfaction?

### Research Propositions

Based on insights from human capital theory (Becker, 1964), person–job fit theory (Edwards, 1991), and expectation–disconfirmation theory (Porter & Lawler, 1968), the following propositions are developed to explain the mechanisms underlying the **Overqualification Paradox**.

1. **Proposition 1 (P1):** Higher levels of educational attainment are positively associated with elevated expectations regarding early career outcomes.
2. **Proposition 2 (P2):** Elevated career expectations increase the likelihood of expectation–reality gaps during the early stages of employment.
3. **Proposition 3 (P3):** Expectation–reality gaps increase the likelihood that graduates will perceive themselves as overqualified for their job roles.
4. **Proposition 4 (P4):** Perceived overqualification is negatively associated with early career job satisfaction.
5. **Proposition 5 (P5):** Skill underutilization mediates the relationship between perceived overqualification and reduced job satisfaction.
6. **Proposition 6 (P6):** Organizational support and career development opportunities moderate the negative relationship between perceived overqualification and job satisfaction.

Together, these research questions and propositions provide the theoretical foundation for understanding the **Overqualification Paradox**. The proposed framework suggests that higher education influences career expectations, which may create expectation–reality gaps when graduates enter entry-level positions. These gaps can lead to perceptions of overqualification and reduced job satisfaction during the early stages of employment.

By articulating these relationships, the study offers a structured conceptual model that integrates multiple theoretical perspectives to explain why higher educational attainment may not always translate into higher levels of early career satisfaction.

### Conceptual Framework

To explain the mechanisms underlying the **Overqualification Paradox**, this study proposes a conceptual framework that integrates insights from **human capital theory** (Becker, 1964), **person–job fit theory** (Edwards, 1991), and **expectation–disconfirmation theory** (Porter & Lawler, 1968). The framework illustrates how higher educational attainment may indirectly influence early career satisfaction through the formation of elevated career expectations, the emergence of expectation–reality gaps, and the perception of overqualification in early career positions.

At the beginning of the framework, **higher educational attainment** acts as a foundational factor shaping graduates' career expectations. According to human capital theory, individuals invest in education with the expectation that it will generate improved employment opportunities, higher income, and meaningful work experiences (Becker, 1964). As individuals pursue advanced degrees and accumulate specialized knowledge, they often develop strong expectations regarding job complexity, career advancement opportunities, autonomy, and compensation.

However, the transition from education to employment often exposes graduates to **entry-level job structures** that prioritize learning, training, and gradual career development. These positions may involve routine responsibilities, limited autonomy, and restricted decision-

making authority. As a result, a discrepancy may emerge between graduates' expectations and their actual work experiences. This discrepancy can be described as an **expectation–reality gap**, a concept rooted in expectation–disconfirmation theory, which suggests that satisfaction is strongly influenced by the difference between anticipated and actual outcomes (Porter & Lawler, 1968).

When the expectation–reality gap becomes significant, graduates may begin to perceive that their education, skills, and abilities exceed the requirements of their job roles. This perception leads to **perceived overqualification**, defined as the belief that one's qualifications are greater than those required for the job (Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006; Erdogan & Bauer, 2009). From the perspective of person–job fit theory, this condition represents a mismatch between employees' capabilities and the demands of their job roles (Edwards, 1991).

Perceived overqualification can subsequently influence **early career job satisfaction**. When individuals believe that their skills and knowledge are underutilized, they may experience feelings of frustration, boredom, or reduced motivation. Over time, this perception can negatively affect their evaluation of their career progress and overall job satisfaction.

The framework also incorporates **moderating factors** that may influence the strength of these relationships. Organizational support, job design, and career development opportunities may reduce the negative effects of perceived overqualification by providing employees with opportunities to utilize their skills, develop professionally, and progress within the organization. For example, organizations that offer structured mentorship programs, challenging assignments, or opportunities for skill utilization may help mitigate dissatisfaction among highly educated graduates.

Overall, the proposed conceptual framework suggests that higher educational attainment does not directly reduce job satisfaction; rather, it creates conditions that may increase the likelihood of dissatisfaction through expectation gaps and perceived overqualification. By integrating multiple theoretical perspectives, the framework provides a comprehensive explanation for the **Overqualification Paradox** and highlights the mechanisms through which education, expectations, and job characteristics interact to shape early career experiences.

### Conceptual Model of the Overqualification Paradox

Higher Educational Attainment  
 ↓  
 Elevated Career Expectations  
 ↓  
 Expectation–Reality Gap  
 ↓  
 Perceived Overqualification  
 ↓  
 Skill Underutilization  
 ↓  
 Lower Early Career Job Satisfaction

Moderating Factors:

- Organizational Support
- Job Design
- Career Development Opportunities

### Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several important contributions to the literature on overqualification, career development, and organizational behavior by introducing the concept of the **Overqualification Paradox**. While existing research has primarily examined the consequences of perceived overqualification within organizations, relatively little attention has been given to the broader structural and psychological mechanisms through which higher educational attainment may influence early career satisfaction. By integrating insights from human capital theory, person–job fit theory, and expectation–disconfirmation theory, this study advances a more comprehensive theoretical understanding of how educational attainment, career expectations, and early employment experiences interact.

**First**, this study contributes to the **overqualification literature** by shifting the focus from purely organizational outcomes to the **educational origins of perceived overqualification**. Prior research has largely examined how perceived overqualification affects employee attitudes and behaviors such as job satisfaction, performance, and turnover intentions (Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006; Erdogan & Bauer, 2009). While these studies provide valuable insights into the consequences of overqualification, they often treat overqualification as a condition that emerges within the workplace. In contrast, the present study emphasizes how overqualification may originate earlier in the **transition from education to employment**, where elevated expectations formed during higher education interact with the realities of early career job structures. By highlighting this transition phase, the study expands the theoretical scope of overqualification research.

**Second**, this research contributes to the **human capital theory literature** by highlighting the paradoxical outcomes that may arise from educational investments. Human capital theory suggests that individuals invest in education to increase their productivity and improve their labor market outcomes (Becker, 1964). However, the expansion of higher education systems has created labor markets in which the supply of highly educated workers may exceed the availability of high-skill positions. Under such conditions, graduates may enter roles that do not fully utilize their qualifications. By introducing the concept of the **Overqualification Paradox**, this study demonstrates that higher education may simultaneously increase employability while also generating expectation gaps that influence early career satisfaction.

**Third**, this study contributes to the literature on **person–job fit** by providing a deeper understanding of how educational attainment influences perceived mismatches between employees' qualifications and job requirements. Person–job fit theory emphasizes that employees experience higher satisfaction and performance when their skills and abilities align with the demands of their job roles (Edwards, 1991). However, the present study highlights a specific form of misfit—**overqualification-driven misfit**—that may occur when individuals possess capabilities that exceed job demands. By linking this mismatch to graduates' expectations formed during higher education, the study extends person–job fit theory to better explain early career dissatisfaction among highly educated individuals.

**Fourth**, the study contributes to **expectation–disconfirmation theory** by applying it to the context of early career experiences. Expectation–disconfirmation theory suggests that satisfaction depends on the degree to which actual outcomes meet or deviate from prior expectations (Porter & Lawler, 1968). While this theory has been widely applied in fields such as consumer behavior and organizational psychology, its application to the transition from education to employment remains relatively limited. This research demonstrates how elevated expectations formed during higher education may lead to expectation–reality gaps when graduates enter entry-level positions, thereby influencing their perceptions of overqualification and job satisfaction.

**Fifth**, the study contributes by developing a **conceptual framework that integrates multiple theoretical perspectives** to explain the Overqualification Paradox. By linking educational attainment, career expectations, expectation–reality gaps, perceived overqualification, and early career satisfaction, the framework provides a structured theoretical model that can guide future empirical research. This integrative approach helps bridge previously fragmented streams of research across education, labor market dynamics, and organizational behavior.

Finally, this study opens new avenues for future research on the relationship between higher education and early career outcomes. Future studies may empirically test the proposed framework across different industries, countries, and educational systems to examine how variations in labor market conditions influence the likelihood of experiencing the Overqualification Paradox. Additionally, researchers may explore organizational practices that help mitigate the negative effects of perceived overqualification, such as job redesign, mentorship programs, and early career development initiatives.

Overall, by conceptualizing the **Overqualification Paradox**, this study provides a novel theoretical perspective that advances scholarly understanding of how expanding higher education systems influence graduates' early career experiences and satisfaction. The findings highlight the importance of examining not only the economic returns of education but also the psychological and organizational consequences that shape graduates' transition from education to employment.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the paradoxical relationship between higher educational attainment and early career satisfaction through the concept of the **Overqualification Paradox**. While higher education is traditionally viewed as a pathway to improved career outcomes and professional success, this research suggests that increased educational attainment may also create conditions that lead to dissatisfaction during the early stages of employment. By integrating insights from human capital theory, person–job fit theory, and expectation–disconfirmation theory, the study provides a conceptual explanation for how educational investments can simultaneously enhance employability while generating expectation gaps that influence graduates' perceptions of their early career experiences.

One of the central insights of this study is that **higher education plays a significant role in shaping graduates' career expectations**. Educational institutions often promote the idea that advanced education leads to meaningful work, rapid career progression, and opportunities to apply specialized knowledge. Consistent with human capital theory, individuals invest in education with the expectation that it will increase their economic and professional opportunities (Becker, 1964). However, the transition from education to employment often exposes graduates to entry-level positions that emphasize learning and gradual skill development rather than immediate responsibility or autonomy. When these experiences do not align with prior expectations, graduates may experience an **expectation–reality gap** that negatively affects their perceptions of their work.

The study also highlights the role of **perceived overqualification** as a key mechanism linking educational attainment and early career dissatisfaction. When highly educated graduates perceive that their knowledge and skills exceed the requirements of their job roles, they may experience feelings of underutilization and reduced motivation. Research on overqualification suggests that such perceptions can lead to lower job satisfaction, reduced engagement, and higher turnover intentions (Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006; Erdogan & Bauer, 2009). In the context of early careers, these perceptions may be particularly salient because graduates are transitioning from an educational environment that emphasized achievement and capability into workplace roles that may initially limit the application of those capabilities.

From the perspective of **person–job fit theory**, perceived overqualification represents a form of misalignment between employees' capabilities and the demands of their job roles (Edwards, 1991). When individuals believe that their skills are not fully utilized, they may

question the value of their educational investments or perceive that their career progression is slower than anticipated. Over time, this misalignment may contribute to dissatisfaction even when the job provides valuable experience or long-term career opportunities.

The findings of this study also highlight the broader **structural implications of expanding higher education systems**. As higher education participation increases globally, the supply of highly educated workers may grow faster than the availability of high-skill positions. This imbalance can create labor markets in which graduates accept roles that require lower levels of education than they possess. While such positions may serve as stepping stones in long-term career development, they may also increase the likelihood of perceived overqualification during the early stages of employment.

Importantly, the discussion suggests that the **Overqualification Paradox does not imply that higher education is inherently problematic**. Instead, it highlights the complex interaction between educational expectations, labor market conditions, and organizational job structures. Higher education continues to provide important long-term benefits, including career mobility, higher lifetime earnings, and opportunities for professional development. However, the short-term experiences of graduates entering the workforce may not always align with the expectations formed during their educational journey.

The study also points to the importance of **organizational practices and career development opportunities** in shaping graduates' early career experiences. Organizations that provide challenging assignments, mentorship programs, and opportunities for skill utilization may help reduce the negative effects of perceived overqualification. Similarly, career development initiatives that clearly communicate progression pathways can help align graduates' expectations with realistic career trajectories.

Overall, the discussion underscores the importance of understanding the **psychological and structural mechanisms underlying the Overqualification Paradox**. By examining how educational attainment influences expectations, perceived overqualification, and job satisfaction, this study provides a foundation for future research exploring how organizations and educational institutions can better support graduates during the transition from education to employment. Such insights are increasingly important in contemporary labor markets characterized by rising educational attainment and growing competition for high-skill positions.

### Managerial Implications

The findings of this study provide several important implications for managers, organizations, and human resource practitioners responsible for recruiting and developing highly educated graduates. While higher education equips individuals with valuable knowledge and skills, organizations must recognize that graduates entering the workforce often carry elevated expectations regarding their career trajectories, job responsibilities, and opportunities for professional growth. If these expectations are not effectively managed, organizations may encounter dissatisfaction among highly qualified employees during the early stages of employment.

**First**, organizations should recognize the importance of **effective job design and skill utilization** when employing highly educated graduates. Research on perceived overqualification suggests that employees who believe their qualifications exceed job requirements may experience lower job satisfaction and engagement (Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006; Erdogan & Bauer, 2009). Managers should therefore strive to design roles that allow employees to apply their knowledge and skills in meaningful ways. Providing challenging assignments, opportunities for problem-solving, and involvement in decision-making processes can help reduce perceptions of underutilization and enhance job satisfaction among highly educated employees.

**Second**, organizations should invest in **structured early career development programs**. Entry-level roles are often necessary for building foundational experience, but graduates may become discouraged if they do not clearly understand how these roles contribute to long-term career progression. Structured onboarding programs, mentorship initiatives, and rotational assignments can help employees see how their early career roles fit into broader career pathways. Such initiatives may reduce the expectation–reality gap by providing transparency regarding career advancement opportunities.

**Third**, managers should focus on **managing career expectations during recruitment and onboarding**. Graduates often develop expectations about work environments and career progression while pursuing higher education. If these expectations are unrealistic or misaligned with organizational realities, dissatisfaction may emerge once employees begin their roles. Organizations can mitigate this risk by providing realistic job previews during the recruitment process and clearly communicating the nature of early career responsibilities and growth opportunities.

**Fourth**, organizations should recognize the importance of **continuous learning and skill development opportunities** for highly educated employees. Providing training programs, professional development workshops, and opportunities for cross-functional collaboration can help employees feel that their skills are being further developed rather than underutilized. Such opportunities can enhance perceived person–job fit and reduce dissatisfaction associated with perceived overqualification (Edwards, 1991).

**Fifth**, managers should foster **supportive organizational cultures that encourage career exploration and innovation**. Organizations that allow employees to contribute ideas, participate in strategic initiatives, and engage in creative problem-solving may help highly educated graduates feel that their knowledge and perspectives are valued. Encouraging such involvement may reduce feelings of underutilization and improve employee engagement.

Finally, this study highlights the need for organizations to adopt a **long-term perspective on graduate talent management**. While early career positions may initially involve routine tasks and structured learning, organizations that actively support skill utilization and career development are more likely to retain highly educated employees and benefit from their capabilities over time. By proactively addressing the potential challenges associated with perceived overqualification, organizations can transform early career experiences into opportunities for engagement, growth, and long-term organizational commitment.

Overall, the managerial implications of this study emphasize that the **Overqualification Paradox** is not simply an individual-level phenomenon but also a challenge that organizations must actively manage. Through thoughtful job design, transparent career pathways, and supportive development programs, organizations can better align graduates' expectations with workplace realities and enhance early career satisfaction among highly educated employees.

### Limitations of the Study

Despite the theoretical contributions offered by this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. Recognizing these limitations is important for clarifying the scope of the research and identifying opportunities for future investigation.

**First**, this study adopts a **conceptual approach**, and the relationships proposed in the conceptual framework have not been empirically tested. While conceptual research plays a crucial role in developing theoretical insights and guiding future research directions, empirical studies are necessary to validate the proposed relationships between educational attainment, expectation–reality gaps, perceived overqualification, and early career satisfaction. Future research could employ quantitative methods such as surveys, longitudinal studies, or large-scale labor market datasets to empirically test the propositions developed in this study.

**Second**, the study primarily focuses on theoretical insights derived from **human capital theory, person–job fit theory, and expectation–disconfirmation theory** (Becker, 1964; Edwards, 1991; Porter & Lawler, 1968). Although these theoretical perspectives provide a strong foundation for explaining the Overqualification Paradox, other theoretical frameworks—such as career construction theory, signaling theory, or labor market segmentation theory—may offer additional insights into how educational attainment influences early career outcomes. Future research could integrate these perspectives to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

**Third**, the conceptual framework assumes that perceived overqualification generally leads to lower job satisfaction. However, prior research suggests that the effects of overqualification may vary depending on individual and contextual factors (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009). For example, some highly educated employees may view entry-level roles as temporary opportunities to gain experience and develop professional networks. In such cases, perceived overqualification may not necessarily lead to dissatisfaction. Future studies could explore individual differences—such as career orientation, personality traits, or resilience—that may influence how graduates respond to perceived overqualification.

**Fourth**, the study does not explicitly examine **cross-cultural and labor market differences** that may influence the occurrence of the Overqualification Paradox. Labor market structures, educational systems, and employment opportunities vary significantly across countries. In some economies, the availability of high-skill jobs may better match the supply of highly educated graduates, reducing the likelihood of overqualification. Conversely, in highly competitive labor markets with limited high-skill positions, graduates may be more likely to experience skill underutilization. Comparative research across different national contexts would therefore be valuable for understanding how institutional factors shape the relationship between education and early career satisfaction.

**Fifth**, while this study identifies organizational support and career development opportunities as potential moderating factors, these variables are not examined in depth within the current framework. Organizational practices such as mentoring programs, job redesign, and internal mobility opportunities may significantly influence whether perceived overqualification leads to dissatisfaction or serves as a temporary stage in career development. Future research could explore how specific organizational interventions mitigate the negative effects of perceived overqualification.

In summary, although this study provides a novel conceptual perspective on the **Overqualification Paradox**, its theoretical nature and focus on selected frameworks present certain limitations. Addressing these limitations through empirical investigation, cross-cultural analysis, and the incorporation of additional theoretical perspectives will help deepen understanding of how higher education shapes graduates' early career experiences and satisfaction.

### Conclusion

The rapid expansion of higher education has transformed labor markets around the world, producing an increasingly large population of highly educated graduates entering the workforce each year. While higher education has traditionally been associated with improved employment opportunities and long-term career success, emerging evidence suggests that the early stages of graduates' careers may not always align with the expectations formed during their educational journeys. This study explored this paradoxical outcome through the concept of the **Overqualification Paradox**, which suggests that higher educational attainment may sometimes lead to lower early career satisfaction due to expectation gaps and perceived skill underutilization.

Drawing on **human capital theory** (Becker, 1964), **person–job fit theory** (Edwards, 1991), and **expectation–disconfirmation theory** (Porter & Lawler, 1968), this research developed a conceptual framework explaining how higher education can shape graduates' career expectations and influence their perceptions of early career experiences. While education increases individuals' knowledge and employability, it may also raise expectations regarding meaningful work, career progression, and opportunities for skill utilization. When early career positions involve routine responsibilities or gradual professional development, graduates may perceive a mismatch between their qualifications and job roles, leading to feelings of overqualification and reduced job satisfaction.

The study contributes to the literature in several important ways. First, it introduces the concept of the **Overqualification Paradox** as a theoretical lens for understanding the relationship between educational attainment and early career satisfaction. Second, it integrates insights from multiple theoretical perspectives to explain the psychological and structural mechanisms underlying perceived overqualification. Third, it highlights the importance of the transition from education to employment as a critical stage in shaping graduates' career attitudes and experiences.

The findings also underscore the broader implications of expanding higher education systems for organizations and labor markets. As the number of highly educated graduates continues to increase, organizations may encounter employees whose qualifications exceed the immediate demands of entry-level roles. While such roles often provide valuable experience and opportunities for long-term career growth, organizations must carefully manage graduates' expectations and provide opportunities for skill utilization to maintain engagement and satisfaction.

Importantly, the Overqualification Paradox does not suggest that higher education is inherently problematic. Rather, it highlights the complex interaction between educational investments, labor market conditions, and organizational job structures. Higher education continues to provide substantial long-term benefits, including enhanced career mobility and higher lifetime earnings. However, the short-term experiences of graduates entering the workforce may not always reflect these long-term advantages.

In conclusion, understanding the **Overqualification Paradox** is increasingly important in contemporary labor markets characterized by rising educational attainment and intensifying competition for high-skill positions. By examining how educational expectations interact with workplace realities, this study provides a foundation for future research exploring how organizations, educational institutions, and policymakers can better support graduates during the transition from education to employment. Addressing these challenges will be essential for ensuring that higher education continues to fulfill its promise of promoting both professional success and long-term career satisfaction.

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