

China's narrowing opportunities

In 1997, China had fewer than 3.5 million undergraduate and graduate students. In 2019, there were more than 33 million, not counting online schools and adult higher education institutions

China's economy has largely rebounded from the coronavirus pandemic, with data released in January 2021 showing it has become perhaps the only major economy [to have grown last year](#). But the recovery has been mostly fuelled by [blue-collar sectors](#) such as manufacturing, on which the Chinese economy still relies heavily. The one area of the economy that remains sorely lacking? The supply of desirable, well-paying jobs for the country's rapidly ballooning count of university graduates.

China's Ministry of Education announced at the height of the outbreak that it would order universities to [expand the number of master's candidates](#) by 189,000, a nearly 25 percent increase, to ease unemployment. Undergraduate slots would also increase by more than 300,000.

Even before the pandemic, the country's graduates complained that there were not enough suitable jobs. Now, many Chinese have worried that the expansion of graduate slots will increase already fierce competition for jobs, dilute the value of advanced degrees or postpone an unemployment crisis. And so, 3.77 million new graduates took the national entrance exam for graduate school in December 2020 - an 11 percent increase from the year before and more than double the number from 2016.

It is, of course, only a delaying tactic – and one that is unlikely to have much success. Chu Chaohui, a researcher at China's National Institute of Education Sciences, [told the state-owned Global Times tabloid](#) that graduates should lower their sights. If they did so, he said, they would find jobs in sectors such as food or parcel delivery.