

The Post-Credential Society: An Analysis of the Future of Credentialism in the Age of AI

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Received: 06 / 04 /2026

Accepted: 03 / 06 /2026

Published: 10 /06 /2026

Abstract: This study investigates the structural transformations within the Credential Society amidst the current Artificial Intelligence revolution. Drawing upon Randall Collins' sociological framework of Credentialism as a system of education-based class stratification, the research posits that traditional bureaucratic rites of passage into the labor market are threatened with disintegration due to the automation of roles and professions previously monopolized by white-collar credential holders. Through a critical analytical approach, the study examines this structural crisis to conceptualize the emergence of a Post-Credential Society as an analytical framework for understanding this shift. The study concludes that this transformation will lead to credentials losing their value as symbolic capital and the erosion of middle-class employment. Consequently, this necessitates a redefinition of education to be based on Human-AI Integration, reshaping its relationship with labor to center on direct apprenticeship and the demonstration of functional skills within automated, real-world work environments.

Keywords: Credentialism; Randall Collins; Education; Artificial Intelligence; Post-Credential Society.

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I- Introduction :

For critical sociologists, education transcends being merely a social process based on the transmission of accumulated scientific knowledge across generations, isolated from the social and cultural forces of society. Therefore, these sociologists have long sought to understand how social structures shape the various aspects of education, and how education, in turn, shapes these structures, through a sociological analysis of the educational system in its relationship to society as a whole.

In this context, Randall Collins, in his seminal book (Collins, 1979), argued that education in modern societies constitutes a complex mechanism for producing class inequality in the labor market and for monopolizing social status and positions through what he termed Credentialism; in the context of his critical analysis of the Credential Society.

The core issue that Collins focused on in the midst of his criticism of the credential society is that the educational system, including higher education, in this society has transformed credentials (degrees, diplomas, and professional certificates) from tools for measuring scientific competence into a cultural currency subject to the laws of inflation, and into a safety valve that guarantees social positions for the benefit of certain groups. This has created a huge gap between the escalating educational requirements and the corresponding actual need for skills in the labor market.

The credential society that dominated the industrial and bureaucratic era, as theorized by Collins, viewed credentials as symbolic capital and a mechanism for class and social stratification rather than as evidence of practical competence. Over time, this society became mired in a crisis of credential inflation, where educational requirements for jobs increased continuously without a corresponding increase in the skills required, transforming education into a ritualistic bureaucracy aimed at protecting professional monopolies, particularly those holding prestigious positions in society.

Today, this bureaucratic system, which has endured for decades, stands on the brink of decline due to the rise of artificial intelligence, which has begun automating certain roles and professions, particularly those reliant on intellectual labor, that were previously monopolized by degree holders, primarily white-collar workers.

While Collins predicted the collapse of the credential society due to the rampant inflation of degrees reaching absurd and economically unsustainable levels, specifically when the cost of educational investment becomes prohibitively expensive compared to labor market returns, thus diminishing the value of degrees as cultural currency, whereby the credentialing system loses its economic utility and social credibility. Artificial Intelligence is the accelerating factor in this collapse by gradually automating professions and dismantling the professional monopolies protected by Credentials, thereby signaling the waning of the Credential Society and the emergence of the Post-Credential Society.

This paper seeks to construct the concept of a Post-Credential Society as an analytical framework for understanding the sociological implications of this transformation. The study's problematique arises from questioning the ability of academic degrees to persist as the sole criterion for meritocracy in an era where artificial intelligence (AI) is a transformative force reshaping the labor market through three progressive stages: from artificial narrow intelligence (ANI), which automates routine tasks, to artificial general intelligence (AGI), which shares complex cognitive tasks with humans, and finally to artificial superintelligence (ASI), which threatens leadership and thought itself.

Through an in-depth analysis of the erosion of middle-class employment opportunities resulting from this transformation, and the move toward apprenticeships within Human-AI integration as an alternative to unproductive years of educational incubation, this study attempts to envision the features of a new social contract that links AI-integrated education with real environments of work and production through the reinvention of education in general and higher education in particular

II– The Structural Crisis of the Credential Society:

In the late 1970s, sociologist Randall Collins introduced a distinctive and critical sociological perspective addressing the ever-increasing requirements in education for employment in modern societies. Collins argued that these rising demands are not a reflection of a genuine need for complex technical skills in the labor market, but rather a consequence of a social struggle for prestigious jobs and resources.

Within this critical framework, he introduced the concept of The Credential Society to describe a social system where credentials are the primary visa for labor market entry, and a form of cultural currency traded for prestigious positions. This occurs within an educational system that has transformed from a means of acquiring knowledge and technical skills into a social ritual that grants monopolistic licenses used to obtain prestigious jobs and social standing. This constitutes a complex structural mechanism that functions to reproduce and legitimize class inequality (Collins, 1979). The following details how this system contributes to deepening the structural crisis of the credential society, according to Collins' perspective:

1. The Credential Inflation

Collins applied the economic concept of inflation to the education system, likening educational degrees to monetary currencies, whose value depreciates as their supply increases. In other words, as more individuals obtain advanced qualifications and degrees, and the supply of these degrees in the labor market grows, the educational requirements for specific jobs automatically rise.

This system drives individuals to pursue higher qualifications and degrees to maintain their competitive edge in the modern labor market, not because jobs have become more difficult or complex, but because the credentials people possess have eroded in value due to oversupply. The credentials lose their symbolic value, much like currency loses its purchasing power, and this is the essence of Collins' concept of credential inflation.

In this regard, Collins refutes the myth of technocracy; the prevailing view which claims that the continuous rise in educational requirements is merely an inevitable response to technological evolution that requires more complex skills. He argues that this view is fallacious and lacks empirical evidence, asserting that what drives the elevation of educational requirements is not technological necessity, but rather the need to reduce the number of competitors in the labor market for prestigious jobs (Collins, 1979), this ultimately leads to a state of permanent credential inflation.

2. The Credential as a Cultural Currency

In the credential society, which Collins conceptualizes as a social market designed for the distribution of status and power, diplomas are not considered tools for determining scientific and technical competence, but rather symbolic mediums of exchange within this market. As a cultural currency, a credential provides its holders with social purchasing power and granting them access to specific job markets within this society.

Following the inherent logic of any market, an oversupply of this cultural currency inevitably leads to a depreciation of its exchange value, forcing individuals to accumulate more degrees and diplomas to maintain their social standing or position. Thus, credentials in this society are less about proving intellectual level and more about possessing cultural capital used as a currency for social acceptance and as a visa for entry into a specific social hierarchy.

Therefore, employers in the credential society are not looking for individuals with abstract intelligence, but rather for those with normative loyalty and cultural conformity. The degree awarded by educational institutions, especially elite ones, serves as proof that an individual has been assimilated into middle-class or upper-class culture and possesses the values of discipline and loyalty accepted by organizational elites.

In this sense, educational institutions act as incubators for class culture; they do not teach technical skills as much as they instill specific patterns of behavior, values, and standards. A student's ability to progress through education and obtain academic degrees reflects their normative discipline and compliance with the institution's instructions and bureaucracy more than their intelligence or creative abilities. Consequently, the degree becomes a reference point and proof for the employer that its holder is qualified to belong to a particular class and become one of its members (Collins, 1979). This system facilitates the sorting and exclusion of those lacking such cultural capital, relegating them to lower social level or class.

3. The Credential as a Tool of Social Stratification

Collins contends that credentials (degrees, diplomas, and professional certificates) function as tools of social stratification in the modern era, acting as a contemporary surrogate for the genealogical lineages that characterized aristocratic societies, inspired by the ideas of sociologist Max Weber (Weber, 1978). In other words, and according to Collins, credentials are a class weapon disguised in a socially and legally acceptable educational attire.

In this context, Collins offers a profound sociological analysis of education, from a frankly critical perspective, describing it as a structural mechanism aimed at achieving social closure and professional monopoly in the credential society. Credentials operate as artificial legal and regulatory barriers to reduce the number of qualified candidates for prestigious or lucrative positions, thus ensuring their monopoly by holders of specific degrees.

Credentials, Here, do not necessarily reflect functional job skills; they are political and cultural symbols traded to affirm affiliation with elite groups recognized by dominant market forces. This grants individuals who possess such Credentials the right and legitimacy to access the income and status associated with a particular job, while those who lack these Credentials are denied these privileges, regardless of their actual skills.

This means that credentials serve as a modern alternative to ethnic or tribal affiliations, dividing society into closed status groups and thus reproducing social stratification under the guise of educational meritocracy. According to Collins, research indicates that social mobility rates have remained almost stagnant since the 19th century, despite the enormous expansion of the education system. He attributes this to the fact that upper classes simply increase their educational investments whenever lower classes gain access to basic degrees, thereby maintaining roughly the same social distance (Collins, 1979).

4. Schools as Institutions of Standardization

In his critique of the educational system in modern societies, Collins views schools as institutions of standardization, not innovation. The bureaucratic educational system does not focus on generating new technical skills or stimulating creativity and the invention of new knowledge and expertise. Rather, its fundamental role lies in the codification and patterning of knowledge and skills that have already been innovated in actual fields of work, then inculcating them into students after transforming them into standardized bureaucratic symbols (Collins, 1979).

Collins deconstructed the prevailing claim that continuous technological change is what drives the raising requirements for educational qualification. He relied on a logical argument that most advanced technological skills are acquired in actual fields of work and practical applications, while educational systems, including schools, attempt to standardize these skills after the fact. Instead of schools and institutes being the locomotive leading innovation, they have become the carriage, forced to follow its path only to reformulate it into rigid academic templates that drain it of its spirit and disconnect it from its original context.

What drives schools to rely on standardization is the guarantee of their own administrative efficiency as formal organizations. Schools require formal, codified curricula to ensure that the educational product (the student) passes through the same production line. They also need standardized testing as a basis for evaluating students and measuring their compliance with required standards, as well as a strict bureaucratic hierarchy to ensure the regular promotion of large cohorts

of students. Standardization here functions for classification, evaluation, and ranking; thus, academic success becomes linked to the ability to comply with unified standards.

The goal of this patterning, according to Collins, consists of two primary points: first, transforming diverse knowledge and accumulated experience into credentials that serve as a unified currency for social prestige and job entry. Second, is the standardization of student behavior according to middle-class culture (such as discipline, punctuality, and compliance), making them, upon graduation, standardized products that employers can easily manage and predict (Collins, 1979).

Since schools are forced to wait for ideas, knowledge, and expertise to mature before transforming them into a curriculum and measurable, examinable subjects, it is difficult for schools to be sites of creativity and innovation, if they are not indeed the cause of its delay. History proves that great innovators in various fields of knowledge often achieved success after bypassing the bureaucratic path of the school, and some even left this path early on, while their innovations remain today as symbols of unparalleled human creativity; examples include Thomas Edison, Michael Faraday, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and others.

In this context, Collins argues that societies with higher levels of education, or at least higher levels of qualifications, are not necessarily more innovative or productive than those with lower levels of education (Khoo, 2019). The knowledge imparted through formal education is often dead knowledge; it fails to foster innovation because it has lost its essence after being uprooted from its primary womb and severed from its true reality, leaving the learner unable to touch or grasp its core, and thus it is often forgotten. In contrast, knowledge acquired during work is witnessed by its possessors, where they witness its creation firsthand, thus stimulating their creative and innovative faculties.

Collins also observed the deep entrenchment of the tendency toward standardization within higher education institutions, even among newer universities, which tend to mimic the traditional models of prestigious universities to ensure their social legitimacy. Once a prestige hierarchy is formed among universities, institutions at the bottom of the pyramid, or those newly established begin to imitate it. This prevents them from innovating new and different educational forms from the familiar models. They work on mimicking curricula, academic standards, social rituals, and even sports activities, leading ultimately to the dominance of a familiar standardized model that serves the existing system of social stratification (Collins, 1979).

Instead of having diversity in higher education institutions and a variation in the type of education, ideas, and knowledge, we end up with different levels of the same type of education. The level of each educational institution is determined by its proximity to the prestigious elite model at the top of the hierarchy and its strict commitment to the standards adopted by that model. This ultimately leads to the loss of the essence of education for the sake of this social standardization, which has turned education into a tool for domesticating and patterning minds, stripping them of the capacity for innovation and creativity.

Accordingly, it becomes clear that schools, from Collins's perspective, are nothing more than bureaucratic institutions serving social closure by providing academic credentials as an official seal on skills and knowledge sourced from outside the school and as tools for labor market entry. It also appears that schools are institutions concerned with building cultural standardization and producing cultural homogeneity (adopting specific normative values, a common language, and unified credentials) for the sake of reproducing the class system, while creative work and true innovation remain an activity outside the confines of educational institutions trapped in a bureaucratic cage governed by rigid regulations.

III- The Future of Credentialism: Towards a Credential Abolitionism :

The conflict perspective in sociology interrogates the relationship between education and knowledge or skills, the actual nature of academic credentials, the existing link between higher education and the labor market, and the very essence of the labor market itself. While the relationship between higher education and today's shifting labor market is perhaps more complex than it was in the 1970s, Collins' critique of academic qualifications remains a pivotal axis within

the sociology of education, the sociology of work and organizations, and the sociology of knowledge (Khoo, 2019).

In his seminal work, Collins presents a radical critique of the credential system, advocating for credential abolitionism (Collins, 1979) as a fundamental and radical solution to the structural crisis that gripped the credential society in the late twentieth century. This proposal is not merely a call for educational reform within the existing system, but rather a project to redefine the socio-economic contract that links education to power relations within the labor market.

Collins argues that the first step toward the desired change begins with legislation, through the enactment of laws that abolish the mandatory requirement of a degree as a prerequisite for employment. He contends that such requirements constitute a form of social discrimination in favor of specific interest groups. He points out that the job skills currently demonstrated by degrees can easily be acquired through apprenticeships, learning on the job, and field-based vocational training to keep pace with new technologies, allowing workers to keep pace with technological shifts without returning to academic studies.

Collins also advocates for severing the forced link between years of study in a particular field and the eventual right to a job in that field. This does not imply the elimination of education; on the contrary, Collins believes this measure would restore the pure epistemic purpose of educational institutions (Collins, 1979).

Individuals would then pursue education out of genuine intellectual passion, rather than viewing it as a mandatory pathway to earn a living, and a long-term educational incubator that consumes decades of an individual's life before they are permitted to engage in productive work. In addition, the individual may eventually become frustrated and dissatisfied with his job when he discovers that the job he occupies does not utilize the cognitive abilities he spent years accumulating.

The issue of Credential Abolitionism advocated by Collins, will, according to his perspective, result in breaking the artificial class barriers in the labor market. These barriers are perpetuated by credentials through the separation between blue-collar and white-collar workers, which ultimately leads to the denial of promotions despite the possession of actual skills. Furthermore, Credential Abolitionism will compel individuals in comfortable jobs and professions to compete in an open and fairer market, particularly regarding the wages individuals receive in exchange for the occupations and roles they hold.

However, Collins acknowledges that his radical proposal faces profound structural obstacles that may render its realization unlikely in the foreseeable future, given how deeply the credential system is embedded in the economic, political, and social fabric of modern societies (Collins, 1979).

According to Collins, the most significant of these obstacles is that the educational system in a credential society functions as an economic safety valve, absorbing millions of young people as surplus labor and keeping them away from the job market by enrolling them in schools and universities, thereby mitigating the unemployment caused by technological advancement and dwindling job opportunities (Collins, 1979).

Moreover, powerful professional elites stand behind the credentialing system and will fiercely defend it, resisting any change that threatens their social position or deprives them of their accrued privileges, such as high salaries and social prestige.

Additionally, there are a vast number of employees within the educational system itself, such as teachers, academics, and administrators depend on the continued inflation of credentials for their livelihoods. Consequently, they will be unwilling to accept the collapse of the credentialing system, even though many of them recognize its futility. This includes us as academics; we present this idea for discussion, but we find it difficult to accept as a reality. This may constitute one of the most significant obstacles facing Collins's proposal regarding Credential Abolitionism; for while it is assumed that academics themselves should take the lead in implementing this proposal, they remain incapable of doing so.

IV- Toward a Sociology of the Post-Credential Society :

While Collins acknowledged the difficulty of realizing his proposal without a comprehensive revolution in the social contract, he anticipates that credential abolitionism will eventually become a necessary option, particularly when the expansion of the credential system reaches absurd and economically unsustainable levels, such as requiring a PhD for a mid-level technical roles leading to a sharp rift between social expectations and economic reality, given that the credential system serves as a mechanism for accessing the job market. As the cost of educational investment becomes exorbitant relative to labor market returns, credentials lose their value as cultural currency, and the system loses both its economic utility and social credibility. Collins likens this impending moment to the Protestant Reformation, which shattered the Church's monopoly over spiritual credit and indulgences (Collins, 1979).

It appears that this pivotal moment is beginning to emerge on the horizon through the unprecedented revolution in artificial intelligence, sparking profound academic debate regarding the future of human labor and the professional world, which derives its bureaucratic legitimacy from the hegemony of credentialism; a system perpetuated by the credential society for decades. Today, this debate raises the issue of robots replacing human labor, necessitating the reinvention of education (Khoo, 2019).

Experts indicate that the evolution of artificial intelligence will progress through three consecutive stages: Artificial Narrow Intelligence (ANI), Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), and Artificial Superintelligence (ASI), categorized by the scope of cognitive capabilities and performance relative to human intelligence (Bostrom, 2014; Kalota, 2024).

Each stage carries qualitative implications for the labor market. ANI, currently the only stage achieved, is designed for specific tasks with high efficiency, surpassing human intelligence within a narrow scope; such as recommendation systems, image recognition systems, text and document analysis systems, and others. ANI is currently automating routine duties such as legal document review, accounting data entry, and medical imaging analysis (Bostrom, 2014; Kalota, 2024).

This will be followed by AGI, which will possess the capacity to perform any intellectual task a human can do with cognitive flexibility across diverse contexts (Kissinger et al., 2021; Kalota, 2024). At this stage, we may witness a total displacement in non-creative cognitive professions; automation systems will be capable of drafting complex contracts, conducting financial audits, providing accounting advice, and diagnosing diseases with a precision that likely surpasses human capabilities.

Finally, the hypothetical ASI stage would outperform human intelligence in all cognitive aspects, including scientific creativity, problem-solving, and social-emotional skills (Bostrom, 2014; Kalota, 2024). Consequently, high-level creative and managerial professions may also face displacement as thought and leadership themselves become automated.

As previously noted, Collins asserts that the modern education system performs a fundamental social function beyond simply supplying the labor market with useful and productive skills. This function is the production of symbolic capital, represented by credentials. These credentials do not always reflect the competence of the individuals who hold them; rather, they have become mere documents granted by educational institutions and universities as work permits with social legitimacy and credibility. These permits are later translated into specific jobs and positions, serving as a mechanism for the social stratification of individuals in the labor market.

This background is crucial to understanding why credentials are prone to erosion when mechanisms of evaluation and sorting shift. Jobs and professions anchored solely in the social symbolism and bureaucratic legitimacy of a degree are threatened as we enter the age of artificial intelligence, which will fundamentally transform the world of professions and jobs, through three progressive stages: from artificial narrow intelligence (ANI), which automates routine tasks, to artificial general intelligence (AGI), which shares complex cognitive tasks with humans, and finally to artificial superintelligence (ASI), which threatens leadership and thought itself. potentially

leading to the decline of the Credential Society and the rise of the Post-Credential Society, based on the following new structural mechanisms:

1. Credential Abolitionism as a Necessity

In the age of AI, Collins' idea of Credential Abolitionism as a radical solution to the crisis of the Credential society, by making it illegal to require degrees for employment, is no longer a mere theoretical proposal but a structural necessity to prevent the collapse of social and economic systems in a radically transformed labor market.

When Artificial Superintelligence (ASI) replaces intellectual elites by automating the cognitive labor that justifies advanced degrees in professions such as law, accounting, and education, society must dismantle the hollow bureaucratic barriers of education, which function as a mechanism for class and social stratification without offering any real professional benefit. Consequently, this necessitates a return to a direct apprenticeship system as the new gateway to the labor market. People will cease investing their time and money in long years of educational incubation that fail to produce real functional skills, moving instead toward machine-integrated learning model based on artificial intelligence tools or complex manual crafts that intelligent machines cannot replicate.

Consequently, lengthy university programs may be replaced by short, concentrated learning paths integrated with AI. This will allow students to collaborate with machines instead of simply memorizing information that AI can retrieve more efficiently. Ultimately, this will ensure students' direct integration into the job market in record time.

While degrees may not vanish entirely, especially in high stakes fields like medicine and engineering where human safety is paramount. In such as fields, a university degrees will remain essential, but their attainment will be redefined through machine-integrated learning within real-world environments, centered on skill, achievement, and practical assessments. In other, more dynamic professional sectors like programming and digital marketing, a traditional university degree may not be necessary; skill-based legitimacy will suffice for entry into these professions.

This means that degrees will become secondary to direct evidence of skill and achievement. In other words, a post-degree society will witness a radical shift from symbolic capital to tangible performance, and legitimacy will transition from university-granted paper permit to direct proofs of skill and achievement, such as completed projects and work samples that measure the ability to solve complex problems beyond the reach of automation.

Naturally, manual crafts requiring technical dexterity and care-based professions relying on social-emotional skills, such as complex plumbing or childcare will remain resilient in front of these transformations. In fact, these vocations may even gain new value, as they rely on skills that intelligent machines cannot perform; as apprenticeship in such fields becomes financially more stable and secure than the vanishing roles of the middle class due to automation.

2. The Erosion of Middle-Class Employment

Historically, the white-collar middle class emerged as a byproduct of the bureaucratic rationalization of the educational system, a process that shaped the labor market in modern societies, where this class plays a pivotal role. Analyzing this trajectory, Collins observed that the computerization of middle-class labor since the last decade of the 20th century has proceeded at a much faster pace than the mechanization of manual labor, which took almost the entire 19th century and three-quarters of the 20th century (Collins, 2013).

In this context, according to Collins, technological advancements and artificial intelligence are now displacing middle-class roles, precipitating mass structural unemployment. New technologies create fewer jobs than they destroy, leaving no easy escapes to prevent a massive and permanent decline in middle-class employment opportunities. Therefore, Collins anticipates a polarization of the labor market; where advanced technology roles remain the preserve of a few specialists, while the majority of service and administrative functions are automated, leading to the decline of the middle class in the economy. The loss of middle-class employment could lead to

severe political instability, as the class loses its dual role as a pillar of stability and a critical driver of consumption (Collins, 2013).

Middle-class workers typically occupy offices and service sectors, relying on intellectual rather than physical labor. However, as we enter the age of artificial intelligence, the structural foundations upon which this class has rested since the Industrial Revolution; namely, intellectual labor and the legitimacy derived from academic degrees are increasingly threatened by automation or integration with intelligent systems. This foreshadows a gradual erosion of job opportunities for this class in the future.

As previously discussed, the impact of artificial intelligence on the labor market will unfold in three crucial phases, and during these phases, white-collar work will be fundamentally reconfigured. Artificial Narrow Intelligence (ANI) currently automates repetitive, routine tasks such as legal document review, accounting data entry, and medical data analysis, thus reducing the need for entry-level employees in these fields.

In the Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) phase, we may witness a total displacement of non-creative cognitive professions. Automated systems will be capable of drafting complex contracts, conducting financial audits, providing accounting advice, and diagnosing diseases with accuracy that may surpass human capabilities. This will transform the role of the lawyer, financial advisor, or physician into a manager of specialized AI systems within the framework of human-AI integration. Here, AI replaces the paper pusher, leading to the hollowing out of the middle, where only low-wage manual jobs or elite leadership roles remain.

In the stage of artificial superintelligence (ASI), even high-level creative and managerial professions may face displacement through the automation of thought and leadership. In this case, perhaps even the medical profession will not be spared from this transformation; Elon Musk, founder of SpaceX, has remarked that enrolling in medical school is becoming increasingly futile due to rapid AI evolution in healthcare, predicting that intelligent robots will outperform human surgeons within years (Sisodia, 2026).

This crisis is further complicated by the phenomenon of credential inflation, which already plagues the middle class, forcing its members to accumulate more academic qualifications to maintain their competitiveness for jobs that previously required less. With the ability of Artificial Intelligence, especially in its advanced stages, when it becomes capable of performing complex mental tasks, the degrees held by these individuals will lose their value as a visa for entering the labor market. This places the middle class before a dual challenge: the rising cost of education on one hand, and its diminishing professional return on the other.

As a skill-based society emerges as an alternative to a credential-based society in the age of AI, the very essence of the middle class's cultural capital will shift; excellence in the labor market will no longer be linked to mere affiliation with a prestigious academic institution, but rather to the ability to manage AI agents at work.

Accordingly, the middle-class labor market in the age of artificial intelligence will face a radical shift from professional legitimacy based on credentials to professional legitimacy based on skills and integration with the intelligent machine. This transition will not be easy for white-collar workers, and it may create new levels of inequality and marginalization if it is not accompanied by flexible social protection policies, extensive vocational rehabilitation programs, and a reshaping of the relationship between education and labor in a post-credential society.

3. Reframing the Education-Work Social Contract

The transition to a post-credential society will bring about a revolution in the structure of professional legitimacy that dominated the industrial and bureaucratic era, and will redefine the social contract between education and work. In traditional society, education served as a long, mandatory preparatory stage before entering the labor market. This path will no longer be possible in a post-credential society; it will be replaced by short, intensive, and flexible educational pathways designed for rapid and continuous integration into the workforce. In other words,

education will no longer be an isolated phase preceding employment, but will accompany professional and career life.

Naturally, universities will lose their absolute authority as the sole entity granting entry visas to the labor market. At the same time, new accreditation channels will emerge, including technology companies, digital platforms, and professional associations, which will have their own reliable mechanisms to prove the actual skills that qualify for entry into the labor market.

Consequently, the symbolism of the degree as a signal of competence without actually guaranteeing it, will be shattered. This will force the educational system to redefine learning as Human-AI Integration. The competent learner will be defined not by their ability to store information, but by their capacity for Human-AI Collaboration. Education focused on rote retrieval or routine cognitive tasks will become obsolete as artificial intelligence takes over these tasks with greater efficiency. Therefore, the new educational model will emphasize the skill of managing knowledge flow and AI agents, in addition to other skills that automation cannot replicate, such as strategic thinking and social empathy.

This new pattern of education will impose upon educational institutions, including universities and specialized institutes, a return to direct apprenticeship. It will render education and work a concurrent process rather than education being a preparatory stage that precedes professional life, since real and actual skills are often acquired in the field and not in traditional bureaucratic classrooms.

In a post-credential society, learners will spend less time on theoretical education and more time in AI-integrated learning within real work environments, where learners are evaluated based on their actual practical skills that measure their true ability to solve complex problems that automation cannot handle.

This has become a tangible reality in China, where universities have begun redefining the doctoral degree. Instead of a written theoretical thesis, students are awarded the degree for scientific innovation within the framework of the applied and practical doctoral track, launched in 2010 in the context of large-scale educational reform and subsequently ratified by Chinese laws issued in 2024. This new track allows Chinese students to obtain a PhD in exchange for innovating a product or implementing an applied engineering project without being required to produce a traditional research paper, as students undergo a dual academic and industrial supervision system. This shift transcends traditional academic forms, to reflect a new strategic educational vision that re-engineers the concept of the academic degree according to the principle of applied and practical skills (You, 2026).

This transformation signals the beginning of reframing the relationship between education and labor in the coming post-credential society, transforming education from the goal of obtaining a degree into an innovative partner in building a post-credential system, and thus moving from a society that sanctifies the passage through educational rituals to a society that sanctifies the capacity for achievement and integration with artificial intelligence.

V- Conclusion:

This study concludes that we stand today on the cusp of a paradigmatic shift that redefines the essence of education in its relationship to labor in the age of artificial intelligence. The move toward a post-credential society does not imply the destruction of education as a cognitive value; rather, it liberates it from its role as a gatekeeper for the stratification system and hierarchies in the labor market.

For the first time in history, AI will shatter the iron cage of educational bureaucracy by dismantling the credentialism that made academic degrees the primary criterion for prestigious employment regardless of actual skill, forcing individuals into an endless race of accumulating credentials to maintain social status, within a class-sorting mechanism disguised in educational garb.

Analysis demonstrated that Collins's prophecy of credential abolitionism is no longer merely a radical proposal to reform the education system, but has become a structural necessity in our contemporary society, an inevitability imposed by the dynamics of the AI revolution. The credential society, built on academic indulgences guaranteeing entry into the labor market, faces today its lutheran moment led by AI algorithms. These algorithms will gradually bring an end to the priestly monopoly over work licenses as AI undergoes three decisive evolutionary stages:

In the first stage, as artificial narrow intelligence (ANI) systems automate routine cognitive tasks, they reveal that a large portion of what we grant academic degrees for, is in fact algorithmic processes that the machine can perform. Consequently, just-in-time skills provided by AI to practitioner become more valuable than years of theoretical study.

AI will act here as a tool for the demystifying of academic degrees, exposing the falsity of the correlation between years of schooling and actual productive capacity, leading to the gradual erosion of the degree's social credibility and the beginning of its decoupling from the labor market.

In the Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) stage, we move towards the automation of cognitive functions. Here, the inevitability of credential abolitionism emerges under the weight of the economic failure of educational investment; when AGI surpasses a university graduate in legal or medical analysis, the cost of obtaining the degree (return on investment) becomes negative.

This acute imbalance between social expectations (obtaining a job in exchange for a degree) and material reality (the superiority of intelligent machines) will lead to a revolution against the credential system and the shattering of the educational bureaucracy's iron cage.

Bureaucratic standards that relied on the degree as a primary hiring criterion will become an obstacle to productivity. Employers and companies will be forced to adopt post-credential standards to ensure economic survival, signifying the end of traditional middle-class employment opportunities. The illusion of the degree equaling a comfortable office job will vanish in a post-credential society, forcing the middle class to redefine itself not through the credentials it possesses, but through its skills in managing AI agents and integrating with intelligent machine at work.

In the phase of Artificial Superintelligence (ASI), we move towards the automation of creative and leadership roles. Here, credentials lose their function as symbolic capital. It will no longer make sense to differentiate individuals based on their years of study or the degrees they hold.

Society will shift from a class-sorting system based on education (credentialism) to a system based on practical competence and field skills in collaboration with AI. This will force the entire educational system to redefine education as Human-AI Integration as a new educational curriculum, and return to direct apprenticeship.

The learner will spend less time in theoretical education and more time in AI-integrated learning within real work environments, where they are evaluated based on actual practical skills that measure the true ability to solve complex problems that elude automation. Thus, the degree falls as a sacred idol, and apprenticeship will remain as an authentic human act, augmented by unprecedented machine intelligence.

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