

# **Stretching the Horizon: Navigating the Shift Toward Non-Academic Careers among HASS PhDs**

## **1. Research Overview**

Global higher education saturation has forced Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) PhD graduates into non-academic labour markets where academic capital is frequently misrecognised. This qualitative study explores how graduates perceive structural barriers and navigate career possibilities, focusing on the interpretations and decision-making process that define their shift toward non-academic employment.

## **2. Purpose**

Current scholarship often overlooks post-graduation transitions by focusing on pre-graduation supervision and mental health (Shakuliyeva et al., 2025). This reliance on a “skills gap” model frames employment struggle as “individual deficiency”, neglecting how structural hierarchies lead to the misrecognition of HASS capital (Choe & Borrego, 2020). To address this, this study investigates graduates’ perception of structural obstacles. It examines how their internal conversations and interpretations of career horizons influence subsequent employment decision-making and the dynamic moments of transformation.

## **3. Conceptual Framework**

This study employs Hodkinson and Sparkes’ (1997, 2008) Careership Theory, viewing transitions as social processes instead of technical human capital calculations.

**a. Horizons for Action.** These are the perceived boundaries of possible or suitable careers shaped by an individual's habitus and social position. Academic socialisation often constrains these horizons, although external structures only influence the likelihood of specific decisions.

**b. Pragmatic Rationality.** Career decisions are workable solutions within a constrained horizon. This rationality is pragmatic and driven by personal values, emotions, and life pressures instead of purely objective data.

**c. Turning Points and Routines.** This pillar examines the transition between routines, which are stable periods in the academic habitus, and turning points, which are moments where structural or strategic forces require a change in direction.

## **4. Methods**

A qualitative research design was employed to capture the nuances of graduates’ subjective experiences and psychological landscapes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 HASS PhD graduates (N=24) who had successfully or partially transitioned into non-academic employment. The sample included participants from diverse disciplines to capture the HASS experience across different symbolic hierarchies. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), with coding protocols specifically mapped onto the three dimensions of Careership Theory.

## 5. Results and Discussion

The findings reveal that the transition for HASS PhDs is not a linear path but a complex interaction between their academic habitus and external market logics. The study identifies two distinct possibilities within each conceptual pillar:

### **a. Horizons for Action: Persistence vs. Plurality**

In the first instance, some graduates displayed a persistence in academic value, where they maintained a rigid attachment to their doctoral identity. For these individuals, the horizon was narrow; non-academic roles were perceived as temporary compromises or “waiting rooms” for a return to academia. Their choices were constrained by the belief that only intellectual or high-culture roles were worthy of their status. In contrast, the second possibility demonstrates a plurality of identity, where graduates successfully decoupled their personal value from the academic calling. By viewing the PhD as a suite of high-level transferable competencies, they expanded their horizon to see diverse sectors—such as consultancy or industry—as legitimate and rewarding professional arenas.

### **b. Pragmatic Rationality: Safety vs. Breakthrough**

Regarding decision-making, many graduates opted for “safe” choices rooted in institutional shelter. These pragmatic decisions prioritised roles where the PhD title still held formal currency or allowed for the bypass of entry exams, such as higher education administration, the civil service, or teaching. Conversely, a second group achieved “breakthrough” choices in sectors where a PhD was not a prerequisite (e.g., investment banking or international NGOs). Their pragmatic rationality involved leveraging the PhD as a unique “value-add”, demonstrating how they reconfigured their doctoral capital to fit the efficiency and commercial logic of the non-academic field.

### **c. Turning Points and Routines: Reactionary Shift vs. Proactive Integration**

The study found that many experienced a reactionary shift. These graduates remained in a constant academic routine (focusing solely on publications and teaching) until the final stages of their thesis. Consequently, their turning point was forced by the immediate threat of unemployment, often leading to restricted career options. Alternatively, some graduates practised proactive integration, maintaining dual-track routines by combining research with industry networking or internships. For these individuals, the turning point was strategic; they accumulated non-academic symbolic capital early on, facilitating a smoother and more intentional transition.

## 6. Conclusion

The transition for HASS PhDs is a profound reconfiguration of habitus and horizons. Future research should expand beyond Global North contexts (Hwami & Shakuliyeva, 2025) to examine how different institutional and economic factors shape these trajectories worldwide. Policy interventions must move beyond simple skills training to focus on expanding the “horizons for action” within doctoral programmes. Recognising that “pragmatic rationality” is often a response to the symbolic violence of a hierarchical labour market is essential for supporting HASS graduates in navigating their shift toward meaningful non-academic careers.

## References

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