

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0377

Talent Spotting, Political Projects and Finding Affinities: Precarious Transitions into Academia

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**Research Domain:** Postgraduate Scholarship and Practice (PGSP)

**Abstract:**

The expansion of higher education, the multiplication of doctoral routes (including Professional Doctorates and PhDs by publication) and the increased precarity of academic jobs have been associated with more uncertainties regarding the transition to a permanent academic position (Le Feuvre, 2015). There is also increasing evidence that the 'returns' of doing a PhD are gendered, classed and 'raced' (Leathwood and Read, 2020). These uncertainties and the rise in the costs of HE borne by doctoral students, the majority of whom are self-funded (HEPI, 2020), have well-identified effects on the well-being and mental health of doctoral and early career researchers (Moreau and Robertson, 2017). Thirty-five semi structured interviews were conducted with PhD students who had graduated less than 18 months ago and with PhD supervisors to understand how they navigated the transition to early career researcher. Feminist post-structuralist theory alongside Bourdieu's theories of capitals and habitus were used to analyse and theorise the data.

**Paper:** The data informing this paper is a study of the transition from PhD to academic position (Precarious transitions? Doctoral students negotiating the shift to academic positions, funded by British Academy-Leverhulme, 2020-2022). The study explores how students enrolled on a PhD programme in the UK build up to an academic career and how they navigate the transition from PhD student to academic, drawing on their symbolic, social, cultural and economic capitals. Particular attention is drawn to the role of supervisors and institutions as gatekeepers, able to give and withdraw opportunities, and to how this transition process is framed by gender, social class, ethnicity and age.

Specifically, we address the following objectives:

- 1- To understand how PhD students negotiate the transition from doctoral student to academic and come to take up an academic position;
- 2 - To consider the role of PhD supervisors and institutions in enabling access to capitals and resources in relation to gaining an academic position;
- 3 - To explore how capitals are mobilised and converted in academic (employment-related)

opportunities throughout the transition period, with specific reference to the student-supervisor relationship;

4 - To investigate how, during the transition process, intersections of gender, social class, ethnicity and age influence the mobilisation and conversion of capitals in academic opportunities in a context where the number of PhD holders outnumber the number of positions available.

This study focuses on the traditional PhD due to the scale of the project and to acknowledge that this degree has long been viewed as leading to an academic career in some academic disciplines, eg the social and natural sciences.

The article is informed by Bourdieu's (1977) theoretical concepts of economic, symbolic and cultural capitals, articulated with post-structuralist feminist analysis (Davies, 2003) to provide analytical consideration of the way the participants are positioned within discourses of academia and negotiate particular pathways linked to their identities and biographies (Mendick, 2006). Consistent with these theoretical orientations, the study acknowledges the significance and intersection of power relationships of gender, social class, ethnicity and age in influencing opportunities for building an academic career (Clegg and Rowland, 2010; Deem, 2003; Leathwood and Read, 2008, 2020; Morley et al, 2003).

Thirty-five interviews were conducted, of which twenty-five with students who had completed a PhD in a UK institution less than 18 months ago and ten with UK-based supervisors. The interviews were conducted online and lasted 45-60 minutes. Participants are based in a range of institutions across the UK (pre-1992, including Russell group institutions, and post-1992 universities) and across a range of subject areas (including the social sciences, arts and humanities and STEM). We sought diversity rather than representativeness in relation to these multiple criteria. This is consistent with the 'long-established tradition of post-positivist qualitative, narrative analysis' (Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant 2003, 96; Herman & Vervaeck, 2019), with the main concern lying with how individuals negotiate their identities within specific national, sectorial and institutional cultures. We interviewed five supervisors, based in similarly diverse institutions, to understand how they support students seeking a career in higher education.

The transcripts were subjected to a discourse analysis (Gee, 1996; Locke, 2004). The research complies with the ethical protocols set out by the British Education Research Association (BERA) (2018) revised ethical guidelines; the BSA (2017) ethical guidelines; and Anglia Ruskin University and Brunel University London's ethical guidelines. The research will involve semi-structured interviews with consenting adults and therefore the ethical concerns addressed are issues of confidentiality, anonymity in terms of protecting the participants' identities and obtaining informed consent.

In terms of contribution to knowledge, the article confirms that transition from doctoral research to early career academic is eased by supportive supervisors. But there are uneven patterns of support provided by at the level of the supervisor, department, institution and field of study. For some students, support encompassed help with establishing a publications profile, access to research posts and teaching opportunities, and access to informal and formal supervisor networks. For others, the support was piecemeal, conflicting within the supervisory team and discouraging. Institutional and department provisions for, and expectations of, doctoral researchers, varied notably between

different fields of study. For example, in the natural sciences it was common and expected that students would publish with supervisors. In the social sciences, whilst also expected that students would publish, it was less frequently with their supervisors. Department and institutional level training varied in quality, frequency and value with some early career researchers noting excellent support, while others felt overlooked or marginalised in their area of study. The findings suggest that need for change in the structure and delivery of doctoral supervision in the UK.

**References:**