



# Capitals, capabilities, and the conversion of commodities: the case of neurodivergent graduates' transitions to the labour market

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## Abstract

The employment opportunities and outcomes of disabled graduates has gained increased international attention among researchers, policymakers and HE practitioners. This article explores the early employment transitions and experiences of neurodivergent graduates, a group who have been shown to experience significant barriers in accessing competitive employment. We offer a new framework which incorporates aspects from both capabilities and capitals perspectives to appraise the personal and socially mediating influences that shape graduates' initial labour market opportunities and outcomes. Drawing on a qualitative dataset from 228 survey responses and interview data from 14 recent neurodivergent graduates, we analyse the experiences of graduates to understand how they convert the graduate capitals they have garnered in HE into meaningful capabilities and employment functionings. As such, this article adds empirical insight and conceptual novelty in illuminating the personal, contextual and environmental conversion factors which facilitate and/or constrain early career outcomes. Our findings raise implications for policymakers, practitioners, and employers in the UK and beyond for supporting neurodivergent graduates towards developing meaningful employment outcomes.

**Keywords** Neurodivergent graduates · Employability · Capabilities · Capitals · Value

## Background

More students than ever are reporting a disability to their higher education institutions both in the UK and internationally (Grimes et al., 2019). The Higher Education Statistics Agency suggest that, in the UK, since 2014/2015 this number has increased by 47% with

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disabled<sup>1</sup> students now making up 16% of the overall university population (HESA, 2024). Neurodivergent students represent a section of the disabled population, although their strengths, challenges and support needs are different from those with physical impairments or other health conditions. In broad terms, neurodiversity has come to mean ‘variation in neurocognitive functioning’ and seeks to normalize and celebrate diverse cognitive profiles (Kapp, 2020:1). To this end, it refers to all people both neurotypical and neurodivergent, including those who have a diagnosis of or self-identify with autism, dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder, Tourette’s syndrome, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Developmental Co-ordination Disorder, Dyscalculia, acquired brain injuries, and some psychiatric conditions, such as Schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. The neurodiversity paradigm offers a way of recognising neurocognitive differences but situating these within a social context; thus, with the right support and attitudes, neurodivergent individuals can thrive and succeed (Doyle, et al, 2022; Russell et al., 2019).

Few studies focus specifically on neurodiversity in higher education; of those that do these tend to examine the barriers encountered whilst enrolled at university. Clouder et al. (2020) offer one of the few systematic reviews of this topic and identify practical difficulties including the initial transition, developing relationships and sustaining independence. Like Friedman and Nash-Luckenbach (2024), they make a case for alternative approaches to teaching and assessment processes, which have, at times, been identified as ableist for this group (Nieminen, 2023). This paper, however, broadens the scope to include the transition out of higher education into the labour market, which has been relatively under-researched.

Despite achieving commensurate academic outcomes to non-disabled peers (Bakker et al., 2023), neurodivergent graduates have been reported to experience challenges when entering the labour market, including delayed entry, exclusion and experiences of direct or indirect forms of discrimination (Pesonen et al., 2021; Vincent, 2020). Evidence indicates that neurodivergent graduates, and autistic graduates in particular, experience lower rates of full-time employment, struggle to find desired forms of employment or are underemployed (Vincent & Ralston, 2023; Pesonen et al., 2021, 2022). The most recent Graduate Outcomes survey data in the UK indicate that those with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) report full-time employment rates at 59%, just below their peers with no known disability at 61%; however, the gap was much more pronounced for those with two or more conditions at 47% or autistic graduates at 40% (AGCAS, 2024). The challenges appear to start during the job application stage where they may experience overt and tacit discrimination in the way in which job advertisements are framed and how recruitment practices are organised, often derived from neurotypical performance and appraisal frameworks (Vincent & Fabri, 2022). Employers have been shown to make largely commercially orientated hiring selections based on retention, training costs and turn-over potential, with neurodiversity and other disabilities framed as a risk signal (Davies et al., 2023; Vincent et al., 2024). There is continued debate as to whether the use of AI and applicant tracking systems can reduce or reinforce job-seeker discrimination (Souto-Otero & Brown, 2024). However, if successfully recruited, neurodivergent graduates are more likely to experience

<sup>1</sup> We recognise that the language surrounding disability varies internationally with some preferring person-first (person with disabilities); however, in the UK context where the paper is situated, there is a preference for identity-first language (disabled person) derived from the Social Model of Disability (Barnes, 2019) and reflected by, for example, the Disabled Students UK). Moreover, whilst not all neurodivergent students would consider themselves disabled, in the UK when a student with an impairment — including those under the umbrella of neurodivergence — gain additional funding, support or accommodations, they access Disabled Students’ Allowance ([www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowance-dsa](http://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowance-dsa)).

difficulties with workplace integration, stigmatising attitudes, and a lack of adjustments to accommodate their needs (Vicent, 2020; O'Shea et al., 2023).

Labour market contexts can also compound challenges for higher-risk groups: in a tighter graduate labour market, where available jobs are more widespread, graduates may have greater opportunities to attain suitable employment. However, since the 2008 recession, labour markets for first-time entrant have become generally weaker and more precarious, a situation compounded during the Covid- 19 (Forsythe et al., 2022; Hooley et al., 2023; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020; Mayhew & Anand, 2020). This context is more penalising for those with impairments and/or health conditions who are more prone to experience immediate and longer-term employment exclusion and employment scarring (Tomlinson et al., 2022; AGCAS 2024).

This article offers novel insights into the career transitions of recent neurodivergent graduates. The aims of this paper are to develop a range of empirical, conceptual and practical insights into the early employment narratives and outcomes of neurodivergent graduates both in the UK and beyond. Firstly, it aims to report how neurodivergent graduates experience and manage the transition from higher education to the labour market, including their scope to capitalise on their capability sets, early career capital and emerging employability narratives. This extends to their perceptions of barriers, challenges and potentially enabling factors that influence these initial experiences. Secondly, it aims to offer a new theoretical framework for understanding the relative experiences and outcomes of neurodivergent graduates. Both the Capabilities Approach (Sen, 1993, 2009) and the Graduate Capitals Model (Tomlinson, 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2022) have been important for highlighting the relational nature of individuals' unfolding employment trajectories. Whilst there have been a few examples of integrative models of this kind (Abel & Frohlich, 2012) these have not been applied to disabled or neurodivergent university graduates. The third aim is to offer practical insights to support neurodivergent graduates' in accessing employment outcomes that might include full-time employment but also potentially other valued outcomes.

## Conceptual framework

In both higher education and disabilities literature, there appears a reframing of what constitutes successful employment outcomes. Traditional human capital orientated approaches have emphasised utilitarian reasoning (Moodie & Wheelahan, 2023), where achievement is through the accumulation and transference of formal qualifications and related skills. The ends are measured in returns on the investment in such human capital, reflected in enhanced wages and labour market opportunities (Brown et al., 2020; Marginson, 2018). Such approaches have been extensively challenged for reducing agency to narrow forms of value sets and goals, hollowing-out any conception of people's relationship to the labour market, as well as their own labour value. International policy discourses have explicated the value of university education on how effectively it generates economic returns in the form of a graduate-level employment (Hooley et al., 2023).

However, attention is also placed on the relational nature of employment, including people's lived interactions and social exchanges in negotiating the labour market opportunities and progression within. Whatever individuals privately own in terms of skills and human capital is only given relevance in the contexts in which these are appraised, applied and further developed. This represents more than the technicist exchange of formally acquired

qualifications and skills that have utility function. There has also been an expanding literature on meaningful work and the search for value in one's societal and economic contribution both in the nature of the work and through the relationships it engenders (Bailey et al., 2019). Relatedly, not all the dominant markers of employment success used in common metrics for graduate outcomes — for example, gaining a significant financial return and job status — are used to frame individual career goals and aspirations.

To this end, the Capabilities Approach developed by Sen (1985; Sen, 2009) offers conceptual scope for connecting individual choices for achieving wellbeing freedoms within actual social environments. At its core is an emphasis on capabilities, represented as positive freedoms or possible opportunities of leading a life which a person has reason to value (Sen, 1985, 1993; Nussbaum, 2011; Robeyns, 2017). In the right context, such capabilities can be converted into functionings or 'doings and beings'. Whilst Nussbaum (2011) indicates a normative framework of basic capabilities that every person should be entitled to, as a matter of human dignity, we opt for Sen's (1993, 2009) more expansive approach, centred on individual wellbeing and choice. Like others who apply the Capabilities Approach to HE (Lozano et al., 2012; Walkington et al., 2018), we situate education as having an intrinsic value, due to its capacity to lead to improved functionings for health, self-esteem, consciousness, imagination and reasoning power (Nussbaum, 2011; Walker et al., 2017). Similarly, employment serves as an important functioning for enabling 'people to earn a livelihood and to be economically secure...[it] unleashes human potential, human creativity, and the human spirit' (UNDP, 2015:1). However, as Powell and McGrath (2014) note, it is more than just achieving work; rather real freedom is one's capability to choose a job that has value and generates wellbeing. In the context of this study then, rather than framing graduates' success as simply by gaining work within 15-months of graduation, the Capabilities Approach allows us to focus on the substantive freedoms and choices they have to achieve different meaningful 'beings and doings'.

Importantly, Sen (1993) draws a distinction between commodities and capabilities, arguing that the former (goods and services) are not ends in themselves but serve to enable individuals to achieve valuable functionings. He asserts that different people might need different commodities to achieve similar functionings. For example, a neurodivergent graduate may need more or different resources to achieve the same level of employment success as a neurotypical graduate. The achievement of this kind of functioning is, however, dependent on the graduates' capacity to convert resources and capabilities into functionings. Conversion factors can include *personal conversion factors*, which are internal to the individual, such as neurotype, physical condition, or gender; *social conversion factors* that stem from the society in which one lives and include public policies, social norms, societal hierarchies, or power relations; and *environmental conversion factors* which emerge from the physical or built environment in which a person lives or might seek to work (Robeyns, 2017). Recognising both the capability sets that neurodivergent students have and their capacity to convert these into meaningful outcomes is important for appraising their post-graduate trajectories into employment.

Another theoretical dimension in individuals' access to valued employment is the accumulation and exchange of career resources that influence their prospects of gaining and sustaining suitable employment. Concepts of career or 'employability' capital have gained considerable traction in recent years (Fugate et al., 2004; Clarke, 2018; Peeters et al., 2019), because they highlight key resources, derived from educational, social and work-related experiences, that potentially equip individuals for success when entering the labour market. Capitals, as employment assets, add value to a graduate's emerging employment profile and enable individuals to negotiate access to labour market opportunities. This,

again, is more than technical or formal knowledge or employability skills and instead concerns set of employment resources or asset that boost individuals' perceived employability and emerging employment narratives. The accumulation and mobilisation of human, social, psychological, cultural and identity capitals, is important in enabling them to operate as currencies of value that than can empower a graduate on entering the labour market (Tomlinson, 2017). For instance, a graduate's human capital in terms of subject-specific technical knowledge needs to be presented and mobilised within contexts in which this knowledge has value and application. Similarly, the development of social and cultural capital relating to a graduates' span of social relations and wider repositories of socio-cultural knowledge that help them negotiate varied occupational fields, needs to be mobilised through the interaction graduates have with significant others. This serves to recognise, confirm and reinforce — or otherwise — their value as a resource and their acceptance into workplaces. An individual's ability to form, maintain and actively draw upon relational ties and networks influences the extent to which they can leverage favourable outcomes.

The concept of graduate capital has been applied to diverse groups of graduates, including those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, international graduates, and neurodivergent graduates (De Schepper et al., 2024; McCafferty et al., 2024). Research with neurodivergent graduates across Finland, France, England and the Netherlands (Pesonen et al., 2021) reports graduates not having sufficient levels of capital or not being able to capitalise on them when seeking opportunities. There are tensions and gaps in formation and mobilisation of different forms of capitals. Whilst graduates may self-perceive to have strong technical skills and abilities and may have crystallised career goals, these might be in tension with perceived difficulties in forming meaningful social connections or in responding favourably to dominant cultural expectations or customs within workplaces (Otu & Sefotho, 2024). Consequently, they may experience disaffirmation of early career identities formed during higher education: a graduate essentially receives an unfavourable signal that they are not the 'right' sort of person to assume an occupational role to which they had started to develop a sense of future self. Being 'right' for a job carries implicit or explicit markers of neuro-typicality that may not align with the identities a graduate invests in or presents.

In this article, we integrate and apply both Capabilities and Capitals approaches towards understanding the employment transitions and experiences of neurodivergent graduates. We work from the premise that both capitals and capabilities are significant in influencing employment prospects, but that they need to be effectively mobilised within the employment spaces graduates have reason to value. Moreover, that these are shaped by a range of contextual and socio-environmental factors that influence how well they can be converted into successful employability-enriching outcomes. Crucially, these help graduates pursue future courses of action they have reason to value and prosper as individuals with diverse cognitive profiles.

## Methodology

This was a mixed-methods study amongst graduates from UK HEIs who were either formally diagnosed or self-identified as neurodivergent and had graduated within the previous 5 years. We deployed an online survey and semi-structured interviews to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data regarding this group's self-evaluation of graduate capitals and experiences of employment although only qualitative data are reported here. The research instruments were

developed collaboratively by a steering group, which included neurodivergent graduates, careers consultants, and researchers. The invitation to participate was disseminated through alumni networks facilitated by AGCAS's Disability Task Group, as well as via social media adverts on LinkedIn and X.

The survey was constructed on SmartSurvey and included open qualitative items on neurodivergent graduate perceptions of current employment, satisfaction and perceived suitability of role, as well as open questions on perceived strengths and challenges associated with being neurodivergent. Gaining a relatively large sample was important for revealing broader trends across the neurodivergent graduate experience of accessing the labour market (Boddy, 2016). Over 400 survey responses were received but after data cleaning, a final sample of 228 was returned which had been fully completed. This was a fair overall response rate, although non-completion may be explained by the length of the survey (approx. 15-min to complete) and the time and attention demands this may have placed on some respondents. Of this, 59% of graduates identified as female, 36% as male, 4% as non-binary and just under 2% preferring to self-identify. Our sample were predominately within the 22–40 age category with 33% of graduates aged between 22 and 26, 30% between 31 and 40 and 21% between 27 and 30. There were differences in the highest qualification of the sample: 4% had completed Foundation degrees; 54% had completed first degree qualifications 27% reported postgraduate taught degrees; just under 10% had completed teaching qualifications (PGDE, PGCE), and 4% had research degrees (PhD).

Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with a smaller subset of those who completed the survey and opted to participate in this second phase. These explored participants' higher education experiences and covered questions relating to degree choices, readiness for employment, levels of support received, and what further support they might have required. The interview then addressed the graduates' employment situations, their experiences of entering the labour market, challenges and opportunities relating to their neurodivergence, as well as broader issues around recruitment, workplace experiences, and the attitudes of employers and colleagues. Interviews took place online, via Microsoft Teams, and lasted approximately 60 min. To maximise accessibility, we provided participants with a range of adjustments in advance. These included providing the questions in advance, turning off the camera, taking breaks, posting the questions in the chat, and re-stating the question.

Fourteen graduates participated in interviews and their profiles are outlined in Table 1 below.

We employed an abductive approach to data analysis, where our inductive interpretation of interview material was informed by the theoretical frameworks outlined (Brinkmann, 2014). This process entailed an initial inductive approach, where themes were individually identified by the authors, based on graduates' accounts of their transition through HE and into employment (Saldaña, 2015). Preliminary themes were refined by the two authors and then conceptually sensitised with reference to the Capabilities Approach and Graduate Capitals (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). We developed various iterations of the thematic map to authentically represent our theorised themes and their relationships to graduates' employment outcomes.

## Findings and discussion

Our data suggest that the conversion of capitals and capabilities into meaningful employment outcomes is an interaction between the internal, by which we mean the individual neurodivergent graduate including their skills, traits, knowledge etc.; and the external,

**Table 1** Participant details

Pseudonym	Gender	Most recent qualification	Programme	Employment status	Employment role
Victoria	Female	MSc	Environment Development	Full-time employment	Head of Capacity Building
Terry	Male	MSc	Forensic Science	Full-time employment	DNA Laboratory Technician
Nicki	Female	BSc	Politics and International Relations	Full-time employment	Senior Climate Policy Manager
Rose	Female	MSc	Art & Design	Self-employed	Print Designer
Hannah	Female	MRes	Social Sustainability	Full-time study	PhD studies
Katina	Female	BA	International Studies	Part-time employment	Brand ambassador
Andrea	Female	BSc	Psychology	Full-time employment	University student support
Lisa	Female	BA	Spanish	Full-time study	PhD Studies
Noora	Female	MSc	Visual Communication	Full-time employment	University Lecturer
Priscilla	Female	MSc	Education Studies	Unemployed	
Carly	Female	BA	Fine Arts	Full-time employment	Freelance Technician
James	Male	BSc	Applied Mathematics	Full-time employment	Data Analyst
Megan	Female	PGCE	Health Science	Full-time employment	SEN Teacher
Jenny	Female	MSc	Business Information System	Full-time employment	HE Senior administrator

which we take to be the context and social commodities (Robeyns, 2017; Sen, 1993). Figure 1 reflects the interaction between these representing at the core the neurodivergent graduate capable of achieving varying outcomes or functionings. The graduate is encompassed by psychological, cultural, human, social and identity capitals (Tomlinson, 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2022), which represent internal–external resources necessary for conversion to meaningful outcomes. Above and below are the external social context and commodities including the provisions and adjustments as well as attitudes and recruitment processes, which either enable or constrain the conversion of capitals and capabilities into meaningful ‘doings and beings’.

Our analysis is structured into three sections. The first outlines the varied outcomes that neurodivergent graduates reported; the second examines the role that internal traits and graduate capitals play; and the final section considers the wider social context and commodities that made conversion of capitals and capabilities more or less possible. Each will be elucidated with data from the interviews and qualitative survey responses.

### Variegated graduate outcomes

Our qualitative accounts suggest a nuanced and varied picture with respect to graduate outcomes. Some were able to convert their graduate capitals and capabilities into meaningful ‘beings and doings’ (Sen, 1993). This tended to be the ability to secure graduate-level job roles which they had reason to value, either in that they aligned with their values and skill-set or that they offered the capacity to use their neurodivergent traits to their advantage.

I will be training as a secondary school teacher and I think my neurodiversity gives me unique skills to excel as a teacher, given that social expectations are slightly different when dealing with children as opposed to other adults (Survey\_Female\_BA\_FineArt)

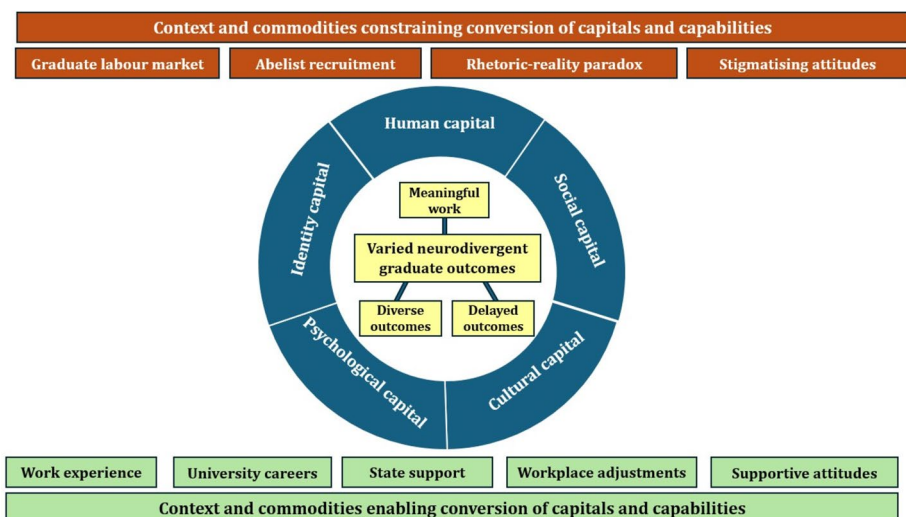


Fig. 1 Thematic map



I've always had this conviction to do politics. I'm very staunch in my views. I feel very strongly about things. And I couldn't do a job if I didn't believe in it, at all. I couldn't go work for a business. (*Interview\_Victoria*)

I am currently working as a Lay Chaplain for a Church of England school and it is my dream job (*Survey\_Male\_PGDE\_Theology*)

Such successes align with recent graduate outcomes data (AGCAS 2024), which show that graduates with SpLD were often able to achieve employment outcomes comparable to their non-disabled peers. However, what is interesting in our accounts is that achieving 'successful' graduate employment outcomes (immediate employment, good wages or status) was secondary to finding roles that were the outcomes of 'real freedoms' (Sen 1993) and/or make a worthwhile societal contribution.

Others took more diverse routes to achieving functionings and some delayed this process as a result of finding a job or role through active choice or were delayed due to external constraints.

I've done several careers but I originally worked as a mechanical engineer, when problems kept happening I redesigned things so they wouldn't keep failing. This principle I carry into everything. I'm looking for better ways to improve things and do things better. (*Survey\_Male\_BA\_Theology*)

I work in the Civil Service, I have not been able to find a role in the field I studied that pays adequately. I am now applying for apprenticeships in order to change field. (*Survey\_Female\_BA\_Music*)

These data indicate the heterogeneous nature of neurodivergent graduate success and echo the centrality of agency, as an intrinsic end in itself (Sen, 1985). Such an expansion of agency was not, however, always possible for our neurodivergent graduates, as the following sections outline.

## Conversion of graduate capitals into valued 'beings and doings'

Our analyses locate the graduate at the core, recognising the varying ways in which situated personal histories and active neurodivergent traits interact as personal conversion factors (Robeyns, 2017) with the capacity to convert graduate capitals (identity, human, psychological, social and cultural) and capabilities leading to different employment outcomes. The neurodivergent graduates indicate the iterative nature of this, recognising the skills and talents they garnered through higher education but also perceiving these to be part of a process of postgraduate acquisition and realisation.

A clear motif in graduates' accounts of how important their future employment was to them, was the empowering nature of emerging professional identities as expression of an ideal selfhood that could be actualised in working life. This was also connected to their values, ideal modes of future being and the extent to which their future employment provided opportunities for the realisation of their capabilities.

I am who I am, and that fits the stereotypes of being a PhD student or an academic, somebody who's quite intellectual, likes to analyse things, is theorising about stuff all the time. I think I would be doing that, no matter what I was doing. I would still be academic-y or fit that personality, so it's more like I've just gone for the thing... (*Interview\_Hannah*)

Those, like Victoria, who had found employment which they perceived to be suitable and aligned to their interests revealed developing their professional identities and gaining validation through their work. To this extent, employment was empowering for those who found positive alignment between their emerging identities and targeted or current employment, in part compensating for some of the interpersonal and cultural tensions.

Unifying the responses was the desire to engage autonomously and find alignment between their identity, values and employment activities. To this end, many respondents were successful in mobilising their identity and psychological capital, indicating positive overall self-perceptions with respect to what they could offer workplaces in terms of talents, interests and values. Whilst not universally the case, most graduates framed neurodivergence as a set of novel and productive traits, for example, having considerable attention to detail, creativity, advanced technical skills and empathy.

I am good at thinking outside the box and coming up with new ideas, strong attention to detail and become highly passionate about the projects I work on, ensuring perfection in the work that I do. (Survey\_Female\_BA\_BusinessManagement)

I'm very creative, excellent pattern recognition for where processes aren't as effective as they could be, bouncing ideas off others, being able to hyperfocus on areas I'm really interested in, highly empathetic, understanding of other people experiencing any kind of struggles. (Survey\_Female\_MRes\_Psychology)

Such descriptions align with other evidence (Fung, 2024; Russell et al., 2019) and for some participants metaphors such as 'super-power' and 'weapon' were deployed, indicating the unique identity capital they associated with being neurodivergent. Such self-understanding was an integral part of their graduate identity capital and framed around what they could offer and wished to become in the labour market. The foregrounding of strengths rather than deficits often characterised such views:

I guess my ability, instinct to avoid things that definitely don't look good, I think that's a skill. It feels like an instinct, where it's like they will have some kind of terms on their inclusivity stuff, but something would just be wrong about the application process which will make me think, maybe this isn't the right one. I guess that comes into attention to detail too. (Survey\_Male\_BSc\_ComputerScience)

I see it as important as well because I have ADHD, I am neurodivergent. I feel it would help others. I think that's really important for how I see myself as a person. So, I do see myself as helpful and I want to add value to things I care about and my interests. (Survey\_Female\_MSc\_Psychology)

The scope to find 'neurodivergent modes of flourishing' (Chapman & Carel, 2022) in the labour market was a dominant concern although as Walker (2015) contends, thriving among this group can look quite different to neurotypical groups.

The data revealed the extent to which neurodivergent graduates were able to mobilise the human and social capital they had developed and recognised as having value to their employment prospects. Many in our datasets placed significant value on educationally-derived human capital, namely subject-related knowledge and technical skills that played into their perceived skills-sets as specialists who could offer exclusive insights and advantages. Connections were made between certain aspects of neurodivergence and perceived employability potential through the development of advanced specialist human capital.

I feel like there are thousands of students and graduates, that just have my skillset already, that are laboratory trained and everything. Perhaps I'm more qualified in this

position, because I have a forensic background, and I know the importance of the law and science, and how they combine, and how that's mixed. And having an overview of seeing how our samples will affect outside of the laboratory. And also, knowing procedures of how to keep a laboratory DNA free, or DNA clean. (Interview\_Terry)

Many were keen to further develop their HE-acquired human capital in niche employment areas where such specialisms were available. As per Terry's comments, the respondents indicated strong levels of affiliation with job areas where their skills were seen offer specialist or technical value.

Social and cultural capital also emerged strongly in the data as resources that graduates recognised to facilitate their transition to meaningful outcomes. Many of the respondents acknowledged the significance of forming trusting and sustainable relational ties that had purchase when trying to find suitable employment. There was a clear awareness of the facilitating role of bonding and bridging (Claridge, 2018) relationship with significant others as a way of accessing their chosen fields. Graduates who had been able to nurture positive social relations referred to the advocacy role of others, especially those who themselves had substantial network ties within the specific job market field and similar levels of identity capital.

The person who referred me for the job I'm looking at currently, once he was my colleague and then he became kind of my boss/manager, but he was one of the clients that my PR agency worked for. And he has autism and ADHD. One of the things that enabled me to find work was him because he was one that recommended me for my current job that I'm about to go into... So I think good connections was a big thing. (Interview\_Katina)

These accounts indicate the potential that neurodivergent graduates see in themselves, including abundant bundles of technical ability, specialist skills and knowledge that could be channelled beneficially. This is allied with emergent identities that have been formed during HE toward future work, often related to their perceived difference and offering something different. Future employment is perceived as an area which can potentially facilitate their capacity to function according to life goals and in ways which they have reason to value. Yet, as outlined below, this can also prove to be more challenging.

## Enabling and constraining commodities and contexts

Alongside personal factors were social and environmental conversion factors (Robeyns, 2017). These impact on neurodivergent graduates' capacity to mobilise their capitals and capabilities into meaningful outcomes. Broadly, respondents acknowledged the importance of social or economic commodities (Sen, 1993) including the wider social context, recruitment processes and social attitudes; all of which, at times, worked to enable and/or constrain their efforts to achieve desired employment goals.

### Labour market context

The labour market context was generally perceived to be challenging; there were concerns over the weakened graduate labour market, the rise in graduate under-employment and increased competition for graduate-level jobs. These were often placed in a related context of a more marketized and costly HE system and a diminished welfare state. The Covid-19 response 'put a spanner in the works' due to reduced due to employer recruitment freezing

and lack of appropriate job training or work experience at a national and international level (Mok et al., 2021; Tomlinson, 2021). The respondents raised concerns that those in more vulnerable positions due to disability or other health challenges which they were ‘not adapting to’ (*Interview\_Priscilla*). Progress developed during HE for some had become significantly challenging in this context.

## Recruitment

The recruitment process constrained opportunities for many graduates, particularly formal assessment procedures and the lack of flexibility in accommodating neurodivergent candidates. Graduates reported applications, assessment centres, and interviews as being framed and organised around neurotypical protocols, with in-built assumptions regarding the speed and nature of interactions, with an implicit set of cultural scripts.

Job applications I find are extremely difficult for neurodivergence. They rarely have specific information on what information they want on applications, they tend to be repetitive and do not seem to have any room for inserting anything about a person, only their skills. (*Survey\_Female\_MSc Education*).

I feel that my neurodivergence (primarily issues with dyslexia, preceptive reasoning, time management, and mental wellbeing) can negatively impact my job search or job applications. This feels like something I have to deal with by myself and I can’t or don’t know to seek additional advice for, particularly when it comes to interview preparation. (*Survey\_Queer/AFAB\_BA\_FineArt&Art History*).

Such experiences signal the well-evidenced dissonance between the rhetoric that many companies espouse with respect to inclusion and accessibility and the concrete reality as experienced in recruitment processes, where requests for reasonable adjustments are not understood and are considered an inconvenience to hiring managers (Branton et al., 2023). The current study revealed that, for some neurodivergent graduates, this can be a marked barrier in being to present or express their employment potential in way of their choosing, leading to some misattribution of how their perceived (under)performance would translate into workplace performance.

The interview process was also identified as a social conversion factor where neurodivergent graduates experienced both overt and subtler forms of discrimination. For some like Carly, who based on her neurological condition, revealed tensions between her ability to be both technically and socially capable (i.e. human and identity capital) and a pervasive set of attitudes positioning her as incompetent and ‘othered’ in the workplace:

And a lot of people, employers, said to volunteer until they decided to offer me a job. And then I found a vacancy in a ceramics studio as a technician and had an interview. And in the interview, the owner asked if I was nervous, and I said, oh, I always talk like this. And she stopped the interview and looked at me and said, oh, if you’re going to talk like that, you’ll find it too hard to work here, and then she said, and people like you can just go on benefits. (*Interview\_Carly*)

In her case, employers ultimately justified their decision by defaulting to experiential shortfalls, which, ironically, are also likely to be a result of previous disadvantages in accessing experience for the same reasons, as Carly put it: ‘And they’ll say, oh, we thought you were absolutely wonderful, and your achievements are fantastic, and unfortunately, there was someone else who has more experience’. Experiences such as these provide

a vivid example of how human capital and psychological capital (persisting in the face of prejudice) cannot necessarily be converted into meaningful functionings that enable a graduate to pursue wellbeing and career goals.

Overall, given that recruitment processes were almost unanimously identified as constraining the conversion of capitals and capabilities into the kinds of employment outcomes graduates sought to realise, they might be thought of as causing ‘unfreedoms’ (Sen, 1985). This revealed the tension in having perceived capabilities sets and early forms of human capital and the social and environment constraints within a process that prevented these from being expressed or given social recognition.

## External attitudes towards neurodivergence

The other contextual aspect that served to both enable and constrain the conversion of neurodivergent graduates’ capitals and capabilities into meaningful employment outcomes was social attitudes. These are obviously pervasive across the entire graduate experience although they have particular import for accessing the labour market and building success in the workplace. Social attitudes were reported to be both positive and negative. In the former case, these provide a conducive context of understanding endeavour to facilitate the skills and challenges graduates brought. In the latter case, they often generate both visible and less visible barriers that constrained their abilities within their work environment.

Data from both the survey respondents and interviews related many accounts of stigmatising attitudes expressed by hiring managers, colleagues, or line managers, which aligns with much of the extant literature (Davies et al., 2023; Doyle et al., 2022; Nieminen, 2023; Vincent & Fabri, 2022). These ranged from reports of uncomfortable interpersonal dynamics through to overt delegitimisation of workplace performance:

I think it was about three, four years ago, I changed role, and I’d got a new manager, who was quite direct. Sometimes I’d be doing something in Excel, and he’d stand over me and say, why are you doing it that way, that’s stupid? ... I said, it’s not stupid, it’s just different to your way, we get the same result, so don’t call me stupid again. (Interview\_Jenny)

These attitudinal factors imbued with risk the decision to disclose their neurodivergent identity to colleagues and managers. However, by not disclosing, many were concerned that their workplace difficulties would not be recognised as a legitimate factor that impacts on their performance and relations.

I have experienced disappointments in previous jobs with regards to my neurodivergence - telling employers about having a disability doesn’t necessarily mean they will accommodate... As my neurodivergence affects the way I work, I am concerned future employers will not be receptive to that. (Survey\_Female\_BSc\_Biomedical Sciences).

As noted, despite a more general positive shift in neuro-inclusive rhetoric in workplaces where diverse profiles are celebrated, a number of graduates were sceptical of the authenticity of companies who presented a public version of themselves. This disjuncture might be considered the rhetoric-reality paradox for neurodivergent graduates. Understood as the ‘flip sides’ of a neurodivergent capability, where unique talents and skills become barriers and are misrecognised as problematic to a workplace’s dominant normative orders.

Working for a University, and working closely with the Careers team, I thought neurodivergence would be much better understood and appreciated. However, I'm rewarded when I mask, told I'm doing "much better" and "fitting in more" with no thought to how this impacts me or my mental health. There is a lot of questions in my head about whether I'll ever find employment that values my neurodivergence, because I understand why it could have drawbacks to the workplace. (Survey\_Female\_BSc\_Psychology)

As this respondent's account reports, the rhetoric-reality paradox meant that it was necessary to camouflage differences, often at the expense of mental and physical wellbeing, which can lead to neurodivergent burnout (Tomczak & Kulikowski, 2024).

Conversely, there were examples of supportive environments and workplace attitudes. Many of the conversion factors appear to be enabled by significant others, not least employers, in shaping how well graduates are integrated into workplaces, felt able to grow as early career employees, and benefit from accommodating work practices. Much of this depended on the support structure that graduates have access to, especially for those who did not have the immediate social support buffers from families and peers who can help them navigate. Often underpinning these was an acceptance of the graduate's neurodivergence and an understanding of effective workplace adjustments.

And my manager now is much more approachable. She's a bit younger. She's just got a completely different attitude. So, we went through my probation, and she was like, now this is your opportunity for us to know what we can help you with. Is there any more support you need on anything? And that's the point where I went, I don't know if you know already, but I have got this autism diagnosis. On the whole, I'm absolutely fine with it, things are going quite well, I'm enjoying the way that we're doing things, but it's just useful for you to know. (Interview\_Nicki)

In Nicki's case, simply encountering a manager who was open and actively seeking ways to support her without even knowing about her neurodivergent identity created a psychologically safe environment where it was possible to disclose (Vincent et al., 2024). Establishing such workplace cultures was deemed essential for the conversion of skills and capabilities into meaningful employment 'doings and beings' for neurodivergent graduates.

Overall, these findings indicate the variable experiences of transitioning into the employment, and the main areas of recruitment and early workplace integration are significant ones which either facilitate or constrain graduates' conversions of their employability and related capitals into resources that enable them to express capabilities in way of choosing.

## Conclusions

The goals of this research were to explore the experiences and insights of a recently graduated cohort of neurodivergent graduates as they transitioned from HE to the labour market. In charting graduates' narratives of challenge and success, we have shown the salience of capabilities which entails the freedom to choose and mobilise key employment-related resources. We have highlighted how such negotiations are mediated through contextual factors that enable or constrain the realisation of the capabilities and forms of capital that these graduates have acquired to date. This has been applied to a category of graduates who can encounter more barriers than most (AGCAS, 2024;

Vincent & Ralston, 2023). Yet as with the case of the wider graduate population, neurodivergent graduates are not a homogenous group and employment trajectories are often diverse (Jackson & Dean, 2023). The accounts revealed varied ‘beings and doings’, including, for some, the achievement of meaningful employment outcomes but for others more difficult trajectories marked by constrained career capitals and capabilities.

This paper has also contributed conceptually. In integrating the Capabilities Approach (Sen, 1993, 2009) with the graduate capitals model (Tomlinson, 2017), it demonstrates the worth of a more sensitised appraisal of graduate outcomes and the conversion of employment resources within socially-mediated contexts. Whilst capability sets and resources have a personal dimension based on graduates’ unique educational and early employment trajectory, they are influenced by social and environmental factors that enable or constrain their conversion into valued outcomes. Furthermore, recognising the complex factors that shape conversion of capitals into meaningful outcomes helps move beyond overly agential or instrumentalist approaches to capital formation and mobilisation. The article has added to previous literatures on neurodivergent graduates’ transition to employment by illustrating the factors that influence the mobilisation of their career resources into desired and valued outcomes.

The study also raises salient international policy implications for supporting neurodivergent graduates in finding employment outcomes that they have reason to value. Ultimately, this might not be full-time ‘graduate-level’ work and so invites policymakers to think differently about the value of employment. For higher education leaders, it signals an imperative to support graduates building early career resources, recognise the value of these resources, and encourage their development throughout their university journey (Hooley et al., 2023; O’Shea et al., 2023). Graduates in this study, as in previous ones (Pesonen et al., 2021, 2022) were aware of the importance of building relational networks and cultural fit but were also less confident in engaging in experiences that helped developed this. Support in this area will potentially empower graduates towards realising their capabilities in ways which maximise their value and expression in the labour market. Universities may need to work holistically with neurodivergent students (Butcher & Lane, 2024) enabling them to develop capabilities, values and conceptions towards meaningful work.

Finally, many well-intentioned careers-focused provisions have limited impact where policy and practices are not addressed at the labour market side (Foster & Scott, 2015; Jackson & Dean, 2023; O’Shea et al., 2023). Our research signals the recognition of personal and social resources as these are converted into meaningful outcomes. Significantly, recruitment practices require adaptation and customisation for some groups of neurodivergent graduates given the barriers these present to job offers. Workplaces employing neurodivergent graduates also need flexibility to adapt toward creating neuro-affirming ‘diversity cultures’ (Vincent et al., 2024) and structures that allow them to flourish and express their identities. The importance of mentoring, supervision and effective line management is crucial to these graduates feeling valued, supported and psychologically safe. Both universities and employers ought to work collaboratively with neurodivergent graduates and associated support organisations to generate understanding about neurodiversity, inclusive recruitment, and sustainable support and development.

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## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

**Ethics approval** Ethical approval was sought and approved for the research on which this paper is based. This was approved by the University of Southampton's Faculty of Social Science ethics committee (application number 79817). The participants all gave their consent to participate in the study and for their data to be anonymously used in research dissemination.

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