Professional Service Firms (PSFs) Employability Skills Development for Social Sciences Students in UK Higher Education

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MSc in Education (Higher Education), 2025

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Thesis Submitted for the Degree of

Master of Science in Education (Higher Education) by

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Abstract

Background: Amid neoliberal marketisation and growing labour market precarity, employability skill development has become central to the UK higher education (HE) agenda. This debate is especially pronounced in the social sciences (SS), which face persistent scrutiny over perceived deficits in employability and graduate work readiness. Employer-reported skills gaps—particularly in Professional Service Firms (PSFs), where effective skill application is critical—have heightened these concerns. Whilst SS graduates are often credited with generic skills, no research has explored how they adapt to PSF careers, or how skills developed in SS programmes align with PSF demands. This study addresses this gap by examining how SS graduates from UK HE acquire employability-related skills and apply them in PSF contexts.

Methodology: Sixteen recent SS graduates from UK HE working in PSFs were recruited via convenience and purposive selection. Online semi-structured interviews were conducted and thematically analysed to explore their employability skill development, application, and perceptions of programme preparedness.

Findings: UK SS programmes can foster PSF-relevant skills through both curricular and co-curricular ways, though the latter was largely absent in practice. Beyond generic skills, SS education also fosters disciplinary knowledge, with those developed applicable across all stages of PSF work. Whilst skill development varied across degree levels, instructional design, rather than UG or PGT status, emerged as the key determinant. Despite these gains, participants generally viewed SS programmes as offering limited preparation for PSF roles, attributing this to outdated instructional strategies, degree-related stereotypes, restricted opportunities, and a broader negative stance toward SS from the UK government. Notably, external PSF dynamics were observed to hinder the effective application of these skills, warranting further attention.

Conclusion: This study offers a holistic understanding of the relationship between SS education and PSF employability through graduate interviews. It addresses a key scholarly gap by analysing the specific nexus between SS education and PSF work, while providing practical insights to guide curriculum reform and strengthen institutional strategies for enhancing graduate employability. The findings challenge the notion that SS is inherently misaligned with PSF careers, emphasising instead that its potential can be fully realised only through deliberate, context-sensitive reform. The study calls for a shift from generic, one-size-fits-all employability agendas toward discipline-sensitive approaches that foster both individual development and systemic change, paving the way for a more integrated and sustainable future for SS education.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HCT	Human Capital Theory
IR	International Relations
PGT	Postgraduate taught
PSF	Professional Service Firms
UG	Undergraduate
WBL	Work-based learning
WIL	Work-integrated learning

List of Tables and Figures

Table of Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Research Context

Since the 1980s—a period marked by broader shifts in global economic discourse—the rise of neoliberal ideology has redefined the purpose of higher education (HE) in the UK, transforming it from a public good to a private investment (Piketty, 2017). In this context of marketisation and labour market precarity, the development of employability skills has become central to the HE agenda (Miller et al., 2013). Higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly expected to equip students with not only academic knowledge but also "key", "transferable", and "generic" skills deemed essential for professional success (Mason et al., 2009; Robson, 2023). This expectation extends across all disciplines—including those traditionally regarded as less vocational, such as the social sciences (SS) (Baron & McCormack, 2024).

Whilst traditionally being at the heart of universities, SS programmes are now subject to increasing scrutiny in relation to employability, economic return, and accountability (Baron & McCormack, 2024). Persistent concerns regarding certain SS graduates' perceived lack of work readiness remain widespread (McCormack & Baron, 2023; Karaca-Atik et al., 2023). When combined with the frequently non-linear and uncertain career trajectories characteristic of SS graduates, these concerns have fuelled a broader narrative that questions the economic value and return on investment (ROI) of SS degrees (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010; Doidge et al., 2020). Whilst recent research has highlighted the presence of transferable skills and employability-enhancing practices within SS education (Cadet & Griffiths, 2023), concerns over graduate outcomes persist, particularly within less professionally oriented SS disciplines (Prospects, 2024)—positioning the field as one in need of closer empirical examination.

Beyond curricular concerns, employers have continued to highlight perceived skills gaps among graduates (Jackson, 2010; Cappelli, 2015). These concerns are particularly salient within Professional Service Firms (PSFs), which form the focus of this study. Whilst PSFs vary in structure and expectations, many rely heavily on employees' soft and transferable skills as key sources of value creation (Von Nordenflycht, 2010). Such firms are often regarded as skill-intensive workplaces that demand high levels of professional competence. Importantly, PSFs tend not to impose strict academic requirements (Suseno & Pinnington, 2017). Rather, they actively encourage individuals from diverse degree backgrounds to apply and offer a range of resources and support to facilitate this process (Bain & Company, n.d.). Employees with less vocational-oriented degrees frequently share career narratives, underscoring that success in PSFs is achievable if applicants can demonstrate relevant capabilities (Forvis Mazars, n.d.), which aligns with the sector's skills-focused ethos. This raises an important empirical question: if success within certain PSF roles depends on demonstrable capabilities, and if SS programmes are assumed to develop such skills, then SS graduates should, in theory, be well-positioned to perform effectively in these contexts. Investigating this proposition provides an opportunity to challenge prevailing narratives that portray SS graduates as less employable, while offering a more nuanced understanding of the value of SS education in the contemporary labour market.

Regrettably, despite growing interest in graduate employability and the expanding role of PSFs as major graduate recruiters, there remains a notable absence of empirical research examining how SS graduates transition into and adapt to careers in PSFs. Whilst it is often assumed that the transferable skills cultivated through SS education may align with the competencies demanded in PSF environments, this alignment has

not been critically or systematically investigated. A search conducted on Google Scholar in 2025 using keywords such as “Professional Service Firms employability skill development” and “Social science student employability” yielded no directly relevant studies. In response to this gap, the present study explores how SS graduates from UK HE develop employability-related skills and how these are applied within the context of PSF work.

1.2 Research Rationale

The rationale for conducting this research stems from the researcher’s personal experience and the aforementioned research gap in existing studies. As a student who has studied social sciences at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, I have frequently observed the strong appeal of PSFs among my peers, many of whom are eager to explore career opportunities in this sector. Despite having personally encountered and critically engaged with the ongoing debates concerning the perceived employability of SS graduates, many of my peers have successfully transitioned into PSF roles and continue to thrive in them. Furthermore, I have also noticed institutional efforts to address these concerns through curriculum reform. My undergraduate programme, for example, introduced a placement module designed to enhance employability through practical exposure.

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These experiences have prompted my interest in the current landscape of employability skill development in UK HE: How has the concept evolved in recent years? More critically, have SS programmes—often perceived as less directly aligned with employability agendas—genuinely advanced their capacity to foster key professional competencies in recent years? Drawing on empirical interviews with 16 SS graduates,

this study offers both scholarly and practical contributions. It addresses a significant gap by examining how SS graduates transition into PSF roles—an underexplored intersection in existing research—while providing practical insights to inform SS curriculum reform and strengthen institutional strategies for enhancing graduate employability.

1.3 Research Outline

The remainder of this dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter 2 provides a critical review of the existing literature, tracing the evolution of the employability discourse, introducing the concept of PSF, and examining existing research on the development of PSF-relevant skills among SS students. It concludes by outlining the research aims and questions. Chapter 3 details the research design and methodology, including the justification for adopting a qualitative interview approach, the use of purposive sampling, and the application of thematic analysis. Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings, organised according to the study's three research questions (RQs). Chapter 5 discusses these findings with the existing literature and addresses the RQs. The dissertation closes by reflecting on the study's limitations, identifying implications for policy and practice, and proposing directions for future research.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

This chapter reviews literature relevant to the development of employability skills among SS students, following a funnel structure (Figure 1) that narrows across five sections to establish the scholarly context and highlight gaps this study seeks to address.

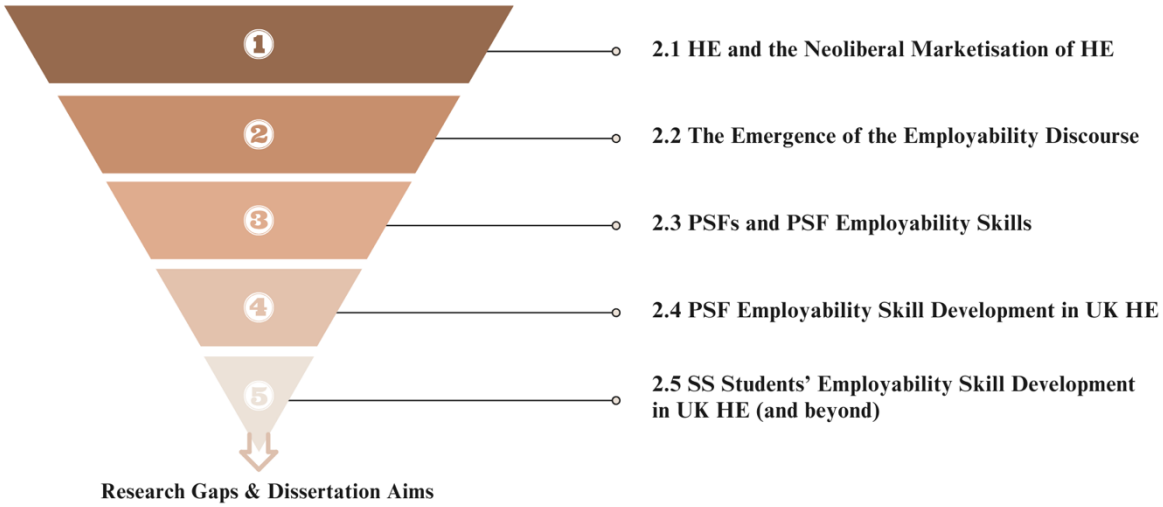

Figure 1. The Literature Review Funnel

2.1 HE and the Neoliberal Marketisation of HE

Neoliberalism has profoundly shaped UK HE policies and practices, reframing the sector as a site for producing economically valuable skills and competencies (Sauntson & Morrish, 2011). As such, understanding the neoliberal restructuring of UK HE is crucial for contextualising the emergence of employability as a dominant policy and institutional agenda.

Defined by Harvey (2005, p. 3) as the promotion of individual entrepreneurial freedoms within a context of free markets and minimal state intervention, neoliberalism manifests through the development of Human Capital Theory (HCT) in the context of education

(Besley & Peters, 2007). HCT conceptualises education as a form of personal investment that generates returns in the labour market, typically reflected in higher lifetime earnings (Brewer et al., 2010). Simultaneously, it frames education as a driver of national economic growth and broader societal benefits, thereby justifying its value from both individual and public policy perspectives (Bellitto, 2015). Within this framework, individuals are positioned as entrepreneurial agents who are self-regulating, consumption-oriented, and ultimately responsible for their well-being (Lynch, 2006). Consequently, the failure to acquire the requisite skills and knowledge is frequently attributed to individual shortcomings instead of broader structural factors (Edeji, 2024).

When neoliberal individualism converged with the economic crises of the 1970s, it catalysed a major reconfiguration of the UK welfare state, leading to the privatisation of public services (Foskett, 2011). To reduce public expenditure, responsibilities for sectors such as education and healthcare were increasingly shifted to individuals (Brown, 2019). Within this context, the 1979 Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher introduced market mechanisms to govern the education sector (Backhouse, 2002). Markets, conceived as systems that regulate supply and demand through price signals to optimise resource allocation, were expected to incentivise HEIs to enhance performance in areas such as cost-efficiency, service quality, and innovation to maintain competitiveness within the sector (Brown, 2011).

However, this represents an idealised conception of a “pure market”. As Kirp (2003, p. 2) cautions, the HE market does not function following the standard economic assumptions. In reality, the state continues to exert substantial influence over its structure and functioning. Consequently, Teixeira et al. (2004) suggest that HE is more accurately described as a “quasi-market”, a hybrid model that combines hierarchical

state control with market-based competition. This system features inter-institutional competition, partial privatisation, and increased institutional autonomy, yet remains shaped by state mechanisms such as tuition fee regulation, public funding allocation, and quality oversight (Foskett, 2011). This perspective aligns with Marginson's (2018) four-quadrant framework for analysing public/private distinctions in HE, which suggests that HEIs are economically private but politically public. According to Marginson and Yang (2025), such a policy environment laid the groundwork for a parallel shift in focus toward graduate employability, aiming to achieve economic returns.

2.2 The Emergence of the Employability Discourse

The quasi-marketisation of UK HE, alongside an increasing emphasis on economic returns, positioned graduate outcomes as a key indicator of institutional value (Coates, 2015). In this policy climate, employability emerged as a central organising principle as it directly links HE provision to labour market performance, promising economic benefits for both individuals and society (Brown et al., 2003).

The Dearing Report (1997) marked a pivotal moment, explicitly calling on HEIs to prioritise graduate employability and formalising the discourse in UK HE (Thompson, 2019). Since then, national initiatives such as the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (2017) have embedded employability as a core indicator of institutional performance (DBIS, 2016; OfS, 2023). These developments have institutionalised employability as a strategic priority across the HE sector.

2.2.1 Definition: Employability

Before examining the development of the employability discourse in greater depth, however, it is essential to address: what is employability? For this study, the definition adopted by the Higher Education Academy (HEA, now Advance HE), which draws on the work of Yorke (2006), will be employed. Yorke (2006, p. 2) defines employability as "a graduate's achievements and his/her potential to obtain a graduate job," further elaborating that it comprises "skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy" (p. 8). However, employability remains an inherently complex and contested concept. As Sin and Neave (2014, p. 1448) argue, it functions as a "floating signifier", with meanings vary across different HE stakeholders and are shaped by a range of contextual factors (Sin & Amaral, 2017). Consequently, adopting any single definition risks privileging certain perspectives while marginalising others—a limitation addressed later in the chapter.

Despite sustained critiques, a skill-based framing of employability remains dominant, reinforced by the intersecting influences of government policy and institutional practice (Mawson & Haworth, 2018). For example, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation's (Ofqual) 2025–2028 strategy clearly outlined its role in driving skills reform, reflecting broader governmental efforts to embed such competencies into the education and training (GOV.UK, 2025). Likewise, HEIs, responding to policy imperatives, have increasingly aligned themselves with this framing (Frankham, 2017). According to The University of Manchester (n.d., para. 1), to be employable, "you will be expected to have at least some of the skills needed to do the job, or the potential to acquire them". This persistent emphasis raises a critical

question: why has a skill-based employability discourse achieved such widespread institutional and policy legitimacy?

2.2.2 Factors Affecting the Rise of Employability Discourse in UK HE

A substantial body of literature has examined the emergence of the employability agenda (e.g., Beaumont et al., 2016; Kornelakis & Petrakaki, 2020; Robson, 2023). These accounts converge in recognising the interplay of structural, institutional, and individual-level drivers—an approach aligned with Tomlinson's (2017) macro, meso, and micro framework. This section, therefore, adopts this structure to explore how these forces have shaped the employability discourse.

At the macro level, employability has become embedded within broader structural and systemic transformations associated with capitalism (Tomlinson, 2017). In the UK, HE market-oriented reforms aimed at reducing public expenditure and increasing institutional accountability have coincided with the rise of the knowledge economy, which placed a premium on high-level, transferable skills (Brown & Carasso, 2013; Brown et al., 2010). Together, these developments shifted the policy focus toward individual skill acquisition as a key strategy for navigating labour market uncertainty, marked by trends such as digitalisation, deindustrialisation, and precarious employment (Inkson et al., 2015; Tomlinson, 2019). This policy shift laid the groundwork for the emergence of the employability discourse.

At the meso level, both HEIs and employers have mediated the employability agenda (Tomlinson, 2017). HEIs, situated within a competitive market, face what Xing and Dervin (2014) describe as "dancing in fetters"—navigating the tension between institutional autonomy and structural constraint. Whilst required to articulate distinct

missions and strategies for survival (Foskett, 2011), universities are also subject to regulatory and market pressures, particularly the expectation to promote national economic growth while producing employable graduates (Orton, 2011). In response, they increasingly exhibit "institutional isomorphism" (Clegg & Bailey, 2008; Durazzi, 2021), often emulating successful peers rather than fostering innovation. As Dimaggio and Powell (2004) note, such convergence leads to homogenised organisational behaviours. Consequently, despite the appearance of competition, HEIs commonly adopt similar employability-focused, skills-based curricula. Employers, meanwhile, have reshaped graduate expectations. Wharton and Horrocks (2015) note a growing emphasis on transferable skills, while Cheng et al. (2022) argue that academic credentials no longer serve as reliable proxies for potential. Within a deregulated labour market (Hall & Soskice, 2001), responsibility for skill development has shifted to HEIs, reinforcing the employability agenda embedded within HE (Busemeyer, 2014).

At the micro level, individuals also interpret and actively promote the development of employability. Whilst previously perceived as the least powerful actors within structural systems, students have been reconfigured as fee-paying consumers with heightened rights and expectations (Furedi, 2011). With access to public information sources, such as league tables and student satisfaction surveys, they possess greater choice and bargaining power, enabling them to articulate demands aligned with their perceived needs (Foskett, 2011). Chief among these is the pursuit of enhanced employability, as students increasingly recognise the volatility of contemporary labour markets and seek to improve their competitiveness (Ingleby, 2015). Taken together, the rise of the employability discourse reflects the interplay of macro-level policy transformations, meso-level institutional behaviours, and micro-level individual strategies. Ultimately, however, as stated by Kornelakis and Petrakaki (2020), it is the

neoliberal logic of marketisation that produced a knock-on effect across all levels, shaping how diverse actors interact to co-construct the emergence and development of employability discourse.

2.2.3 Evaluating the Employability Discourse: Significance and Limitations

2.2.3.1 Benefits. Within traditional economic theory, graduate employability is considered both a private and a public return on investment in HE (Robson, 2023). At the individual level, employability development equips students with labour market-relevant skills and workplace awareness, thereby enhancing job prospects and increasing the likelihood of a graduate earnings premium (Holmes & Mayhew, 2016; Jackson, 2015). For example, Delis and Jones (2023) found that students who completed professional placements earned an average of £1,686 more in starting salaries than those who did not. For employers, graduates with relevant skills offer higher ROIs. Such individuals are typically more adaptable and technically competent, contributing to productivity gains and innovation (Humburg & Van der Velden, 2015; Tomlinson, 2012).

HEIs also benefit from engagement with the employability agenda. Demonstrated alignment with policy priorities can attract public funding and enhance institutional viability (Boden & Nedeva, 2010). The Department for Education (2025) allocated an £84 million budget to the Office for Students (OfS) for employability-related initiatives, distributed across more than 330 HEIs. The University of Westminster (2022), for instance, received £5.8 million to build an employability hub focused on skills-based training.

At the macro level, investment in employability reform can yield substantial economic returns. According to Universities UK (2024), every £1 of public funding invested in UK universities generates approximately £14 in economic benefit. Between 2014 and 2019, a high-skilled workforce contributed nearly 0.3 percentage points to productivity growth, outperforming capital investment (Universities UK, 2025). Overall, the employability discourse appears to align the interests of students, institutions, and national policy, generating both private and public returns (Robson, 2023).

2.2.3.2 Critical Perspectives. Despite its perceived value, the employability agenda is not without limitations. First, employability does not necessarily yield aggregate social benefit. Tangible and intangible resources—such as employment opportunities—are often perceived as zero-sum, wherein one's gain comes at the expense of another (Johnson et al., 2022). Given the scarcity of desirable jobs, individuals may advance (gaining employment) only by displacing others (McCowan, 2015). Thus, whilst employability may offer individual competitive advantages, it does not generate collective benefits unless the labour market simultaneously expands to create more high-skilled roles (McCowan, 2015).

Second, the presumed private returns of employability development are neither linear nor guaranteed, reflecting the dual nature of employability (Sin et al., 2017). Whilst employability skill-building may enhance students' competencies (Payne, 2018), this overlooks the positional nature of graduate outcomes (Tholen, 2015). Amidst the HE massification and increasingly competitive labour markets, the relative advantage conferred by a degree, along with its associated employability-enhancing strategies, has diminished (van der Velden & Bijlsma, 2016). Green and Henseke (2021), for example, found that the graduate premium across seven European countries declined by over 1%,

undermining assumptions of proportional returns. Moreover, even when graduates possess the necessary skills, opportunities within PSFs are often mediated by factors beyond skill alone (Ashley & Empson, 2013). Consequently, even equally skilled graduates may face unequal access to opportunities if they lack the required attributes for PSF work. Taken together, these critiques suggest that a purely skill-oriented employability discourse is limited, as it overlooks the social, institutional, and demographic factors shaping employability outcomes (Tomlinson, 2017). In this context, Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of field, habitus, and capital provide a valuable analytical lens for understanding these complex dynamics.

2.2.3.3 Bourdieu's Capital Theory. Bourdieu (1984) conceptualises society as comprising distinct fields governed by internal rules. The PSF labour market represents one such field, wherein individuals internalise dominant norms (habitus) and mobilise different forms of capital (Gaddis, 2013). Bourdieu (1985) identifies three main forms of capital: economic (financial and material resources), social (access to networks of mutual recognition), and cultural (credentials, knowledge, and skills). As Bourdieu (1979) contends, possession of certain capital valued within a given field confers distinction and power on the individual. Within PSFs, certain forms of socio-cultural capital are especially prized. In their study of London law firms, Cook et al. (2012, pp. 1755, 1757) identified key capitals, including institutionalised cultural capital (e.g., degrees from elite HEIs) and embodied cultural capital (e.g., deportment and body language). Employers use these forms of capital as proxies for trustworthiness and professionalism (Hanlon, 2004), reinforcing the elite identity of PSFs (Ashley & Empson, 2013).

However, the use of such criteria for graduate selection and career advancement often goes beyond the scope of the skill-based employability agenda and could inevitably reproduce structural inequalities. Millar's (2021) research on employees from UK fund management PSFs underscored the persistence of social exclusion within this field. In this context, Tomlinson (2012) argues that employability initiatives in HE disproportionately benefit middle-class students who already possess the social and cultural capital necessary to access elite labour markets. With certain employability skill trainings, these students are further advantaged in PSF-dominated, high-skill sectors (Power & Whitty, 2006). Conversely, students from underprivileged backgrounds often face both subjective disidentification (Smart et al., 2009) or structural exclusion (Crawford et al., 2016), leading to subsequent exclusion and hindrance (Greenbank, 2007). Whilst some scholars (e.g., Sin & Neave, 2014) have noted increasing institutional awareness of external influences on employability, Cheng et al. (2022), through a document analysis of post-2010 UK literature, found little evidence of this awareness being translated into practice. This ongoing silence on structural disparities is consequential, as it risks leaving graduates with an incomplete understanding of the labour market context, thereby placing them at a disadvantage (Cheng et al., 2022). Recognising these limitations underscores the need for adopting a more critical and reflective stance toward the employability agenda in HE.

Nevertheless, whilst structural inequalities cannot be ignored, this study focuses specifically on employability skill development—an area where HEIs and faculties have the most tangible capacity for intervention and where students directly experience the employability agenda (Kivunja, 2014). Given the increasing prominence of PSFs in graduate career paths and their emphasis on high-level, transferable competencies

(Bühlmann, 2023), the following section explores what PSFs are, the key skills they prioritise, and how such skills are currently addressed within UK HE.

2.3 PSFs and PSF Employability Skills

2.3.1 PSF Introduction

With the continued rise of the knowledge-based economy, PSFs have attracted increasing scholarly and policy attention (Empson et al., 2015). Their distinctiveness lies in their reliance on specialised knowledge to address complex client problems, aligning closely with the demands of contemporary economic development (Reihlen & Apel, 2007). Von Nordenflycht (2010, p. 159) identifies three defining characteristics of PSFs: "knowledge intensity, low capital intensity, and a professionalised workforce".

The most widely recognised characteristic is knowledge intensity, whereby value creation is rooted in the expertise of individual employees (Segal-Horn & Dean, 2010). Low capital intensity implies minimal reliance on physical infrastructure, reducing exposure to capital risks. Professionalisation, meanwhile, refers to the use of specialised, self-regulated expertise supported by professional bodies such as the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW) (Von Nordenflycht, 2010; Malhotra & Morris, 2009). Nevertheless, not all PSFs exhibit every trait, though knowledge intensity is a defining feature. For example, "Professional Campuses" (e.g., hospitals) are highly professionalised but capital-intensive, whereas "Neo-PSFs" (e.g., consultancies) may display weaker formal professionalisation (Von Nordenflycht, 2010).

Regarding this study, the focus is on PSFs that reflect all three core characteristics, including both Classical and Neo-PSFs. Whilst Neo-PSFs have historically lacked formal professionalisation, recent developments—such as the Chartered Management Consultant (ChMC) accreditation—indicate increasing adoption of professional norms (Tibble, 2024). As such, they are relevant to the present analysis.

2.3.2 Core PSF Employability Skills

Given their reliance on highly skilled human capital, PSFs place significant emphasis on skill alignment; that is, the degree to which the competencies acquired by graduates from HE correspond to the requirements of specific roles (Cappelli, 2015). Nevertheless, much of the employability discourse has been shaped by top-down narratives dominated by governmental bodies, thereby lacking direct input from employers and limiting understanding of authentic skill requirements (Kornelakis & Petrakaki, 2020). Moreover, whilst skill classifications can be inconsistent and context-dependent, Keneley and Jackling (2011) argue that identifying and categorising core skill features facilitates a shared understanding. In response, this study draws on PSF websites, existing literature, and employer-developed frameworks to identify a set of employability skills, presented below.

Category	Skill Type	Skill Group	Specific Skill
Soft currencies (Transferable skills)	Cognitive skills	Appreciative skills	Critical thinking
			Evaluation
			Problem solving
		Analytical skills	Research
			Numeracy
			IT literacy
		Routine skills	Report/essay writing

			Act/think strategically
	Non-cognitive (behavioural) skills	Personal skills	Business/customer awareness
			Self-management
		Interpersonal skills	Communication
			Teamwork
			Collaboration
			Negotiation
			Presentation
			Leadership
Hard currencies	Qualifications Subject-specific knowledge		

Table 1. Employability Skills Specification

Source: Author's own, adapted from Deming and Kahn (2018), Keneley and Jackling (2011), and Pham and Thompson (2019)

Existing literature indicates that PSFs typically prioritise two types of skill currencies possessed by graduates: hard and soft currencies (de Lange et al., 2023). Hard currencies include academic qualifications and discipline-specific knowledge, while soft currencies encompass transferable skills (Pham & Thompson, 2019). In terms of knowledge, PSFs tend to prioritise core, job-relevant content—particularly business and technical knowledge—over more abstract or non-applied theoretical material (Morgan, 2019). Nevertheless, whilst this distinction is reinforced in Parry and Jackling's (2015) interviews with PSF managers and partners, they also highlighted an "almost universal consensus" on the primacy of generic skills (p. 526). Such skills, according to Lauder and Mayhew (2020), are increasingly recognised as essential for navigating both professional and personal spheres post-graduation. In Australia, for instance, Certified Practising Accountants (CPA) Australia (2009, cited in Keneley & Jackling, 2011, p. 609) proposed a hierarchy of generic skills organised into cognitive

and behavioural (non-cognitive) dimensions, further subdivided into five categories: routine, analytical, appreciative, personal, and interpersonal skills. This framework aligns with Deming and Kahn's (2018) analysis of 86,000 U.S. PSF job advertisements (2010–2015), which identified ten key skills—most mapping onto these categories—with a notable emphasis on cognitive and social competencies.

In the UK context, whilst skills are not always explicitly categorised, the competencies prioritised by employers and professional bodies broadly align with the cognitive and behavioural framework. For instance, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI, 2011, cited in Kornelakis & Petrakaki, 2020, p. 293) identifies seven key capabilities: self-management, teamwork, problem-solving, communication, numeracy, IT proficiency, and business/customer awareness—all of which correspond to cognitive and behavioural domains. Similarly, ICAEW (2018), expands on these by including leadership and adaptability, further highlighting behavioural competencies.

However, despite the general convergence around generic skills, the OECD's (2009, 2023) framework of 21st-century competencies highlights an additional dimension: cross-cultural/intercultural skills. Defined by Kivunja (2014) as the ability to understand and adapt to diverse national and socio-cultural norms, this skill is frequently assumed to be teachable through formal education. However, Bourdieu's (1985) concept of embodied cultural capital—acquired through prolonged and often unconscious socialisation—raises questions about whether such dispositions can be cultivated as generic, developable skills within HE (de Lange et al., 2023). Furthermore, the narrow and unequally distributed forms of cultural capital typically valued by PSFs pose additional challenges to the pedagogical feasibility of fostering the cross-cultural skills required for entry and progression within these environments. As stated by de

Lange et al. (2023, p. 265), "undertaking a university degree (in another country) for two to three years may not be sufficient to build this form of capital to the level required by employers". Whilst this observation primarily concerns international students, Attridge's (2021) study of British working-class students at the University of Oxford similarly illustrates the difficulty of acquiring middle-class cultural capital, underscoring the broader limitations of HEIs in developing the socio-intercultural competencies privileged in elite labour markets.

However, as Parry and Jackling (2015) argue, generic skills can be understood as a form of cultural capital, with HEIs playing a pivotal role in their development. The extent to which HEIs facilitate the development of intercultural competencies and the broader forms of cultural capital valued in PSF merits closer examination. Accordingly, the following section explores how these competencies, and, more broadly, PSF employability skills, are developed within UK HE.

2.4 PSF Employability Skill Development in UK HE

The role of HE in fostering skill development can be broadly categorised into curricular and co-curricular domains. Curricular employability-fostering activities are embedded within academic programmes, while co-curricular activities are institutionally supported but take place outside the formal curriculum (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021).

2.4.1 Curricular Strategies

Cleary and Noy (2014, p. 7) identify two key components: curriculum development and associated instructional strategies. Whilst the importance of curriculum design in fostering employability is increasingly recognised, many HEIs still provide limited

opportunities for students to acquire occupational knowledge and employability skills (Okolie, Nwosu et al., 2019). Cranmer (2006) cast doubt on the effectiveness of the classroom in developing skills required for employment. Tomlinson (2017), likewise, highlights a broader mismatch between university skill development and employer expectations, noting that while HE fosters broadly transferable skills, the ability to translate these into job-specific contexts is not always straightforward. This shortfall is largely attributed to curriculum developers—often academics with limited exposure to labour market demands—who may lack the contextual understanding necessary to integrate work-relevant knowledge and skill formation into programme design (Okolie, Igwe et al., 2019; Umar & Ma'aji, 2010).

In response, the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, 2014, 2024) introduced the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies, which outlines the general competencies expected of graduates to guide programme design. Sheffield Hallam University, for instance, integrated these principles into its applied criminology curriculum by emphasising problem-solving, reflective practice, and other key skills (Cadet & Griffiths, 2023), while also employing industry practitioners to incorporate professional insights into teaching (Dickinson et al., 2021). Likewise, Bass et al. (2015) embedded technology skills into computing programmes at Robert Gordon University, demonstrating—through classroom research and open-ended surveys—that this approach not only improved students' computer literacy but also enhanced their understanding of digital collaboration.

Once curriculum content is established, the instructional strategies employed by HEIs become critical in shaping skill acquisition. As Okolie and Yasin (2017) contend, traditional pedagogies often restrict students' engagement with diverse approaches,

thereby constraining the development of curriculum-based employability skills. However, recent studies have identified more effective instructional practices for fostering such skills (Segbenya et al., 2023). The table below synthesises current research on instructional strategies in HE and maps these onto the PSF-relevant skillsets discussed earlier.

	Instructional strategies	**PSF employability skill**
Classroom-based activities	• Group discussion/presentation	Teamwork (Hogan & Young, 2021)
	• Problem-based learning (PBL) case study	Problem-solving (Smith et al., 2013)
	• Individual/group presentation, debate	Communication (Collard & Looney, 2014; Iksan et al., 2012)
	• Portfolio/reflective blog, thesis	Essay/report writing, planning and organisation (Marques, 2016)
	• Online quizzes/discussion forums	Computer literacy (Kornelakis & Petrakaki, 2020)
Experiential learning activities	• Simulation, role-play	Business and customer awareness (Sheikh et al., 2023)
	• Virtual board room (business projects)	Collaboration, negotiation, self-management (Purdie et al., 2013)
	• (Virtual) placements	Professionalism (Anderson & Novakovic, 2017; Bishop-Monroe et al., 2022)

Table 2. Current Research on HE Instructional Strategies

As illustrated in Table 2 above, embedding the employability agenda into disciplinary curricula—accompanied by carefully designed teaching and assessment strategies—can significantly foster students' skill development. For instance, empirical evidence supports the efficacy of PBL in fostering employability-related competencies. In a study conducted by Smith et al. (2013), 108 undergraduate students enrolled in a UK sports and exercise psychology programme completed a mixed-method questionnaire comprising Likert-scale and open-ended items. Regardless of students' attitudes toward

PBL—whether positive, negative, or neutral—the majority reported that the approach had contributed to the development of key employability skills, including problem-solving, communication, and time management. Swansea University's Career Development Course (CDC) further exemplifies how structured, discipline-sensitive employability training can improve graduate outcomes (Kamenova, 2023). Developed in collaboration with academic staff, the course integrated subject-specific examples, case studies, and application tasks to ensure relevance across disciplines. Consequently, CDC not only facilitated the development of competencies such as self-awareness and decision-making, but also contributed to improved graduate outcomes: 84% of surveyed graduates who completed the course secured graduate-level roles.

2.4.2 Co-Curricular Initiatives

Co-curricular initiatives supporting employability development in UK HE typically take two primary forms: structured experiential learning opportunities and institutional career services.

Experiential learning, often referred to as work-integrated learning (WIL), involves structured engagement with external partners and overlaps with work-based learning (WBL), positioning both within the co-curricular domain (Smith, 2023). WIL typically includes activities such as industry panels, start-up incubators, and virtual placements (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021), while WBL occurs directly within workplace settings through internships and placements (Atkinson, 2016). Both forms have been shown to significantly enhance employability skills (Atfield et al., 2021). For instance, Purdie et al. (2013) surveyed 716 undergraduates at the University of Huddersfield and found that although WIL had limited academic impact, it strengthened self-efficacy, goal-setting confidence and study skills. Similarly, Anderson and Novakovic (2017) reported

that accounting students who completed placements developed time management skills and business-related knowledge. However, Fakunse and Pirrie (2020), drawing on interviews with 19 international students at UK HEIs, highlighted structural barriers, particularly a lack of curricular inclusivity, that hindered participation in WIL and limited the associated benefits. Encouragingly, recent scholarship has begun to address this challenge. Goodwin and Mbah (2017), for example, proposed a framework to help HEIs systematically support diverse student groups, highlighting the growing importance of tailored career support services.

Another form of co-curricular employability support is dedicated career services. As Watts (1996, p. 127) notes, UK HEIs offer "the strongest example of specialist careers guidance services". A recent review by Minocha et al. (2017) across 35 UK HEIs further demonstrated the presence of career units in all institutions studied, where advisers support students in career planning, job applications, and employer engagement (Fotiadou, 2021). However, the effectiveness of career services remains uneven. Donald et al. (2018), through interviews with 38 final-year undergraduates at a UK university, found that while students valued support with job applications, employer engagement, and networking, they also identified nine key areas for improvement, particularly the need for more personalised and proactive provision. Similarly, Bradley et al.'s (2019) survey of 258 psychology undergraduates revealed that fewer than 50% engaged with career service activities, with insufficient information about events significantly reducing attendance (0.55 times). One possible solution could be Taylor and Hooley's (2014) curriculum-embedded career management skills (CMS) initiative, which advocates for the stronger integration of career services within academic programmes. Their case study demonstrated that

introducing a CMS module could lead to a 31% increase in graduate employment within six months of completion.

Moreover, some HEIs have taken further steps to enhance the visibility and accessibility of career support by restructuring institutional infrastructure. Liverpool John Moores University, for example, implemented a university-wide employability initiative based on "super-convergence"—the co-location of library and non-academic services to increase student engagement (Davies, 2011). Complementary measures included regular staff training, the assignment of dedicated career consultants to each faculty, and the delivery of at least 120 hours of tailored support per faculty (Tyrer et al., 2013). These efforts enhanced both the efficiency and quality of consultations, leading to a 30% increase in service usage—from 16,553 to 21,558 consultations in one year—alongside steady improvements in graduate employment outcomes.

2.4.3 Gaps in Current Employability Initiatives

Whilst such initiatives demonstrate the role of HEIs in supporting PSF-relevant skill development, much of the existing literature adopts a generalised approach with limited attention to disciplinary variation (Williams et al., 2024). Although Williams et al. (2015, cited in Williams et al., 2024, p. 3) identify "commonalities across disciplines in the conceptualisation of employability," Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) caution that discipline-neutral employability provision may prove ineffective. Furthermore, despite emerging discipline-specific research—such as Winberg et al.'s (2020) review of engineering programmes—studies focusing on SS remain scarce. Given that SS education often emphasises transferable over occupation-specific knowledge, there is a pressing need to investigate how employability skills are fostered within SS disciplines in UK HE (Williams et al., 2024).

2.5 SS Students' Employability Skill Development in UK HE (and beyond)

2.5.1 Defining the Scope of Social Sciences

SS encompass disciplines concerned with "the study of contemporary human societies, economies, organizations and cultures, and their development" (Bastow et al., 2014, p. 4). According to the Campaign for Social Science (2018) and HESA (2012), SS encompasses six main fields: social studies, business and administrative studies, architecture, building and planning, law, education, and psychology. These disciplines have historically played a central role in HEIs, valued for their contributions to understanding social processes and fostering societal cohesion (Gould et al., 2018; Mwelwa et al., 2021).

2.5.2 Employment Outcomes and Sector Perceptions

However, the growing emphasis on employability outcomes under neoliberal reforms has challenged the perceived value of SS degrees (McCormack & Baron, 2023). Whilst Leech-Wilkinson (2013) reported higher employment rates among SS graduates compared to arts and STEM peers in 2013, more recent figures suggest otherwise. According to Prospects (2023), just over 50% of UK SS graduates secured full-time employment, with an unemployment rate of 5.5%, exceeding the national average of 5%. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that employment outcomes differ considerably across SS disciplines, with graduates of professionally oriented programmes (e.g., law and business) typically experiencing more favourable employment prospects (Prospects, 2023). Prospects' (2024) latest graduate surveys indicate that 63.9% of business graduates secured full-time employment (compared to 59% overall). In contrast, a significant proportion of graduates from less vocationally

focused SS disciplines were found in non-graduate roles—46.6% for sociology and 45.9% for psychology (Prospects, 2024). Reflecting these divergences, recent datasets have begun to disaggregate business from other SS fields (Prospects, 2023, 2024). In light of this, this research will focus on less vocationally defined SS disciplines, which face greater scrutiny regarding their capacity to foster graduate employability (Lee et al., 2014).

2.5.3 Existing Research on SS Skills

Nevertheless, this is not to suggest that the employability of SS students has been entirely overlooked in existing research. Firstly, as Karaca-Atik et al. (2023) argue, SS graduates are typically required to draw on broader competencies, beyond subject-specific knowledge, to advance their careers. Whilst this increasing emphasis on generic skills raises concerns about the marginalisation of academic knowledge—particularly within SS disciplines that traditionally uphold the depth and integrity of scholarly learning—it is also seen as an inevitable consequence of individualised and market-oriented labour market dynamics (Lynd, 2015; Sin & Neave, 2014). Aarts and Künn (2019), for instance, found that the likelihood of securing suitable employment increased when graduates possessed strong social, analytical, and lifelong learning skills, in addition to disciplinary expertise. A survey by ComRes (now Savanta) and Universities UK (2019) similarly identified a range of competencies that SS students and graduates self-reported developing during their studies, including research skills, time management, independence, and critical thinking. These findings are supported by both systematic reviews (e.g., Karaca-Atik et al., 2023) and empirical studies (e.g., Mwita et al., 2023). In the latter, student participants identified soft skills cultivated through HE, such as customer orientation, communication, decision-making, and problem-solving. Similarly, Karaca-Atik et al. (2023), examining both graduate and

employer perspectives, found a consistent emphasis on communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking, with employers also highlighting the importance of social and cross-cultural competence, self-direction, and computer literacy.

However, as the only systematic synthesis on the topic to date, Karaca-Atik et al.'s (2023) review highlights key research gaps. Most studies focus on identifying key skills, offering limited insight into how and why these skills are valued. Moreover, whilst SS students frequently report acquiring employability-related competencies during their studies, few studies empirically examine how such skills are cultivated within UK SS programmes. Accordingly, the following section presents existing research on the employability development of SS students in the UK, while also drawing on international literature to address the paucity of domestic evidence. This review reveals a multi-layered research gap, which provides the foundation for the present study.

2.5.4 Existing Research on SS Skill Development

Lee et al. (2014) examined Politics and International Relations (IR) programmes in pre- and post-1992 UK HEIs and found that both incorporated employability components, such as communication, presentation, time management, and critical thinking. However, these initiatives were often tied to specific modules. In pre-1992 HEIs, in particular, efforts tended to align students with predetermined career trajectories through traditional methods—for example, internships with Members of Parliament or policy-focused curricula (Lee et al., 2014).

It is important to note, however, that Politics and IR—and more broadly, various SS subjects—are inherently non-vocational (Karaca-Atik et al., 2023). Whilst some students aspire to political careers, HEI Key Information Sets (KIS) indicate that the

majority do not pursue careers that are directly related to politics (Lee et al., 2014). This raises questions about the appropriateness and effectiveness of narrowly defined, career-specific initiatives. Echoing this concern, Kalamatianou and Kougioumoutzaki's (2012) study of over 4,000 SS graduates in Greece similarly found that more than half worked outside their field of study. Whilst senior academics argue that SS graduates acquire transferable skills suitable for a wide range of sectors (McCormack & Baron, 2023), existing research has yet to explore how SS programmes prepare students for roles beyond the public, voluntary, and charity sectors (Lee et al., 2014). Given the widely asserted transferability of skills gained from SS programmes, and the notable proportion of these graduates entering professional services (22% of the 2017 UK graduate cohort) (HESA, 2020), this study aims to address the existing gap by investigating how the skills cultivated in SS programmes are transferred and applied within the context of PSFs.

When examining specific initiatives aimed at developing employability skills within SS programmes, it becomes evident that most HEIs and existing studies also concentrate on curricular and co-curricular approaches. Following Lee et al. (2014), Politics and IR departments have implemented both explicit modules and credit-bearing schemes (e.g. placements and study-abroad programmes) as well as implicit skill-building mechanisms (e.g. report writing, simulations, poster presentations, and exhibitions) to enhance employability skills. More specifically, Hauhart and Grahe's (2010) survey of 95 US HEI faculty members from psychology and sociology departments found that capstone projects—functionally similar to UK dissertations—were widely regarded as effective in fostering self-directed learning and academic writing skills, with over 90% of respondents affirming these benefits. Whilst their study focused on one specific initiative, it remains significant given the centrality of capstone

projects within SS curricula. Nevertheless, inadequate student preparation remained a key concern, calling for the provision of targeted guidance and structured preparation (Hauhart & Grahe, 2010). However, whilst the importance of guidance is acknowledged, Skaniakos et al. (2019), drawing on an internet-based survey of students at a Finnish HEI during 2010–2013, found that those in SS faculties reported the lowest levels of satisfaction with study guidance, generic skill development, and work-life orientation. Whilst national differences must be considered, these findings raise concerns about the adequacy of support embedded within SS programmes.

Admittedly, some UK SS programmes have begun embedding guidance mechanisms within the curriculum. Cadet et al. (2023), through a reflective analysis of a criminology course at a post-1992 HEI, underscored the pivotal role of lecturers in simulation-based teaching, highlighting their capacity on reflective learning, professional modelling, and independent problem-solving. The study also highlighted project-based modules involving team tasks as effective for fostering teamwork and problem-solving skills, particularly when the employability benefits were explicitly communicated to students. Nonetheless, such initiatives remain predominantly curriculum-based, with limited attention given to co-curricular approaches.

Addressing this gap, Irwin et al. (2019) examined 175 Scottish SS students, employers, and academics using fictional CV rankings and open-ended surveys. Their findings revealed that external work experience, especially in high-level graduate roles, was valued more highly than curricular placements, though the reasons behind this preference were not explored. Beyond the UK, Mwelwa et al. (2021) investigated the impact of internships on SS students in Zambia through questionnaires and interviews with 162 students, lecturers, and employers. Similarly, they reported that 79.1% of

students found internships valuable, with faculty deans highlighting their role in enhancing business and industry awareness. These findings also align with McCormack and Baron's (2023) qualitative research involving 17 directors of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences faculties at Australian public HEIs, which revealed that 10 institutions were restructuring programmes to integrate more WIL and internship opportunities, seen as effective in developing transferable skills and student agency.

Within the UK, the University of South Wales has implemented both in-house and external placements to enhance Law students' employability. Whilst graduate outcome data was not yet available, students widely reported gains in confidence and interpersonal qualities such as assertiveness, supportiveness, and engagement (Coburn & Rees, 2023). Likewise, Williams et al. (2024) found that psychology students perceived voluntary work and internships as more effective for enhancing employability than traditional classroom-based learning. Nevertheless, the study also revealed persistent shortcomings in university career services, including inaccurate information and disengaged staff, which undermined students' trust, self-efficacy, and confidence in securing graduate-level employment. Indeed, as Harvey and Knight (2005, cited in Bradley et al., 2019) caution, relying solely on employability services to deliver employability teaching is likely to be ineffective, as these units are often under-resourced and unable to support the diverse needs of an entire student body. These findings underscore the need for further research into how SS programmes can more effectively integrate both curricular and co-curricular strategies to support graduate employability.

2.5.5 Research Gaps and Research Questions

Despite growing interest in employability, existing studies, including those reviewed above, have primarily centred on the perspectives of academic staff, employers, and current students, while overlooking a key stakeholder group: SS graduates. As individuals who have completed their degrees and transitioned into the workforce, graduates are uniquely positioned to offer a dual perspective that encompasses both educational processes and real-world implementation (Savage et al., 2009), unlike current students, whose views may be shaped by limited exposure to professional settings (Crew & Märtins, 2023); employers, who observe only outcomes (Eldeen et al., 2018); or HEI governors, who may lack visibility into post-graduation skill application (McCormack & Baron, 2023).

This study, therefore, seeks to address three major gaps in the literature: (1) limited research on how SS programmes in UK HE foster employability skills across curricular and co-curricular domains, (2) insufficient understanding of the alignment between SS education and PSF skill demands, and (3) the absence of graduate perspectives. It is guided by the following RQs:

1. What employability skills do graduates gain from SS programmes in UK HE that are relevant to employment in PSFs?

2. How are these skills applied in their day-to-day work, and what approaches are used in SS programmes to foster them?

3. How do SS graduates perceive the extent to which their degree programmes prepared them for employment in PSFs?

RQ1 explores the relevant employability skills developed in SS programmes. RQ2 examines how these skills are both cultivated through educational practices and applied in PSF settings. RQ3 investigates graduates' perceptions of how well their SS degrees prepared them for PSF careers, highlighting strengths, shortcomings, and opportunities for improvement. By addressing these questions, this study aims to make both scholarly and practical contributions. Scholarly, it expands employability research by centring on SS graduates and their pathways into PSFs—an underexplored intersection in existing literature. Practically, it offers empirical insights into how SS programmes might better support student employability through curriculum reform and institutional strategy. The following chapter outlines the research methods used to investigate these questions.

Chapter 3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the key processes, considerations, and evaluations involved in designing and conducting the research. It begins by establishing the research paradigm, followed by an overview of the research design. It then details the strategies and criteria for sampling, data collection, and data analysis. Finally, the chapter offers a critical discussion of the study's trustworthiness, the researcher's positionality, and the ethical measures undertaken throughout the research process.

3.1 Research Philosophy and Paradigm

Before detailing the specific research methods, it is essential to present the research paradigm underpinning this study, as paradigms form the philosophical foundation on which the entire research process rests (Grix, 2004). This study is grounded in a constructionist ontology and adopts a corresponding interpretivist epistemology (Elliott, 2022b).

Ontology concerns the nature of reality—what exists to be known (Elliott, 2022b). This research assumes that SS graduates' perceptions of employability development are socially constructed through their interactions with both tangible and intangible aspects of HE. A constructionist stance is therefore philosophically consistent with the study's aims. Epistemology addresses how such knowledge can be acquired and conveyed (Cohen et al., 2007). Here, an interpretivist approach is adopted, which views knowledge as generated through human interpretation and social interaction (Scotland, 2012). By prioritising the perspectives of SS graduates, this study treats their accounts as subjective interpretations of their experiences, aligning with an interpretivist worldview. As Crotty (1998) notes, ontological and epistemological positions directly

inform methodological choices. In this case, the constructionist–interpretivist foundation supports a qualitative design that privileges meaning-making and lived experience, leading to the methodological decisions set out in the following section.

3.2 Research Design

As Cohen et al. (2007) and Creswell (2021) observe, interpretive research commonly employs qualitative methods to generate rich, contextualised data. Accordingly, this study adopts a qualitative research design, as the development of employability skills is inherently complex, socially constructed, and individually experienced (Morley, 2001). Rather than merely cataloguing skill sets, qualitative methods enable a deeper examination of how such skills are cultivated, interpreted, and applied within specific educational and professional contexts.

Semi-structured interviews (SSIs) were employed, offering a balance between structure and flexibility. This approach ensured that key themes were addressed across participants while allowing space to probe unanticipated but relevant insights (Maxwell, 2013; Tolan & Deutsch, 2015). Given that perceptions of employability are inherently complex, multi-layered, and shaped by individual experiences (Chadha & Toner, 2017), SSIs offered an effective approach to capture this diversity. Whilst a longitudinal ethnographic approach, incorporating multiple interviews across different stages, could offer "richly nuanced data about how employability is perceived, developed, embodied and articulated" (Nolan, 2020, abstract), such an approach was not feasible within the time and resource constraints of a master's-level project.

3.3 Participants

3.3.1 Criteria for Inclusion

As stated by Friedman et al. (2010), the research procedure should clearly describe the type of participants to be studied. Based on the study focus, four inclusion criteria were established, shown in Table 3.

Criteria for inclusion
Criterion 1: University
• A UK university
Criterion 2: Graduate Status
• Recent graduates from undergraduate (UG) or postgraduate taught (PGT) degree (graduated between 2023-2025)
Criterion 3: Subject Studied
• A SS subject that excludes professional and vocational-oriented subjects, e.g. Law, Business, Economics, etc.
Criterion 4: Professional Status
• Currently working full-time in a PSF (e.g. accounting, tax, consulting, human resources, and financial companies).

Table 3. Criteria for Inclusion

3.3.2 Rationale for the Inclusion Criteria

Firstly, the inclusion of graduates from UK HEIs aligns with the research context. Whilst institutional differences may shape employment outcomes and experiences (Ashley & Empson, 2017), the core focus of this study lies in examining how components of SS programmes foster employability skills and how these skills are subsequently applied in PSF contexts. Therefore, rather than confounding the analysis, variation across institutions is likely to enrich the study by offering a wider range of practices and initiatives to evaluate.

Regarding inclusion Criteria 2 and 4, this study focuses on recent graduates—both home and international—at UG and PGT levels who are currently employed in PSFs. Given the career-oriented focus of both UG and PGT degrees (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014; Stebleton et al., 2019), and in light of this being the first study to explore the specific link between SS education and PSF work application nexus, a broader inclusion strategy was adopted to provide a more comprehensive view of skill transferability and application. The primary aim was not to compare across degree levels, but to identify common patterns and challenges encountered by SS graduates navigating PSF careers. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that degree level may shape graduates' learning experiences and opportunities for skill development (McPherson et al., 2017)—an issue that is touched upon in the findings chapter. Likewise, home and international graduates may experience different employability development pathways due to factors such as linguistic or cultural barriers (Huang & Turner, 2018). Whilst these variables were not analysed comparatively in this study, they constitute critical contextual factors that may influence how employability is developed and perceived, thus warranting more targeted attention in future research.

Criterion 3 reflects the study's focus on generalist SS programmes, as opposed to professionally accredited or vocational disciplines. Generalist programmes primarily emphasise more abstract disciplinary knowledge and the development of generic and transferable skills, making them particularly relevant for examining how such capabilities are interpreted and applied in PSF contexts where explicit vocational alignment is less common. However, it is important to acknowledge that generalist SS disciplines are also diverse in orientation, content, and pedagogical approach (Karaca-Atik et al., 2023). Fields such as Sociology, Politics, or Education may cultivate different configurations of analytical, communicative, or critical thinking skills,

depending on their curricular structure and epistemological traditions. Whilst this study does not seek to compare across disciplines, this disciplinary heterogeneity also represents another contextual factor necessitating future research.

Accordingly, the target population comprises all graduates meeting the specified criteria, while the sample refers to those selected for participation (Hogan, 2006). The following section outlines the selection approach and participants in greater detail.

3.3.3 Selection

This study employed purposive selection to recruit participants based on predefined criteria aligned with the RQs, thereby maximising the relevance of the sample to the phenomenon under investigation (Elliot, 2022a). The term "selection" is used instead of "sampling" to reflect the non-probability nature of purposive strategies, which, as Yin (2018) notes, do not produce statistically generalisable samples. However, this limitation aligns with the study objectives, which do not aim for statistical generalisation but rather seek in-depth insights from participants best positioned to address the RQs (Rai & Thapa, 2015).

Participant selection occurred in two stages. The first combined convenience and purposive selection (n = 3), identifying participants through personal networks. Contacts were approached via WeChat and WhatsApp—two widely used messaging platforms—and given preliminary project details to gauge interest. Snowball sampling was then attempted, but proved unsustainable due to limited personal reach. This limitation may be attributed to the competitive nature of PSF recruitment and the relatively small proportion of SS graduates entering such roles (Ashley & Empson, 2017; Prospects, 2024). Consequently, this approach was discontinued.

The second stage employed purposive selection via LinkedIn, chosen for its high user engagement, the researcher's familiarity with the platform, and its advanced search functionality, which enables targeted identification of individuals based on job roles and academic backgrounds (Utz, 2016). As Griffiths et al. (2025) note, such features are particularly advantageous for purposive selection aligned with degree and occupation-based criteria. Three sets of keywords related to SS programmes, PSF careers, and study country were used to identify suitable candidates, who were then contacted via direct private messages (see Appendix E for a sample message).

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that certain LinkedIn features utilised in the recruitment process, such as unlimited searches, extended profile access, and direct messaging, are restricted to premium members (LinkedIn Help, 2025). With subscriptions costing £50-£100 per month (LinkedIn, n.d.), this presents a significant financial burden for master's students. In this study, recruitment was completed using a one-month free trial. Without such access, these costs could present a barrier for students and early-career researchers undertaking similar work.

In summary, the second phase yielded an additional 13 participants, resulting in a total sample of 16. As Crouch and McKenzie (2006) argue, a sample size of approximately 20 is appropriate for qualitative interview studies, as it enables close researcher–participant interaction and supports in-depth, context-rich exploration of the research topic. Accordingly, the final sample is deemed sufficient for this study.

3.3.4 Participant Information

Table 4 presents the demographic and educational profiles of the 16 participants. Notably, there is an imbalance between UG (n = 5) and PGT degree holders (n = 11). Whilst this may partly result from the non-probabilistic sampling strategy employed (Rai & Thapa, 2015), it also reflects broader structural dynamics—such as degree inflation—whereby students increasingly pursue postgraduate qualifications to strengthen their competitiveness in saturated labour markets, particularly in high-demand sectors such as PSFs (Araki & Kariya, 2022). Nevertheless, despite this imbalance, the inclusion of both UG and PGT graduates offers a holistic overview of employability skill development while enabling comparison of the extent to which each SS degree fosters PSF-relevant skills.

In terms of nationality, whilst it was not a formal inclusion criterion, the sample contains a high proportion of international (Chinese) graduates. This outcome is likely linked to the recruitment process, which relied on purposive and convenience sampling through personal networks and LinkedIn outreach. Given the high proportion of international students in UK SS programmes—particularly at postgraduate level (Consoli, 2024)—this overrepresentation is unsurprising. Whilst it introduces a degree of demographic skew, the sample remains consistent with the inclusion criteria and reflects an intentionally inclusive approach to exploring shared experiences of employability skill development and application among SS graduates. Nevertheless, the limitations associated with this skew, along with the aforementioned degree imbalances, are acknowledged and will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

Participant	Graduate status	SS programme studied	PSF job role	Recruitment approach
1	Postgraduate	Social Anthropology	Account Manager	Personal network
2	Postgraduate	Social Sciences	Market Researcher	Personal network
3	Postgraduate	Education	Business Analyst	Personal network
4	Undergraduate	Sociology	Audit	LinkedIn
5	Undergraduate	Sociology	Consultant	LinkedIn
6	Undergraduate	Social Sciences	Strategy Analyst	LinkedIn
7	Postgraduate	Education (Arts and Culture)	Technology Consultant	LinkedIn
8	Postgraduate	Education	Audit	LinkedIn
9	Postgraduate	Psychology	Research Executive	LinkedIn
10	Postgraduate	Urban, Community and Regional Planning	Audit	LinkedIn
11	Undergraduate	Politics	Consultant	LinkedIn
12	Undergraduate	Human, Social and Political Sciences	Consultant	LinkedIn
13	Postgraduate	Digital Media and Culture	Audit	LinkedIn
14	Postgraduate	Human Sciences Medical Anthropology	Analytics and Sales associate	LinkedIn
15	Postgraduate	Applied linguistics (TESOL)	Audit	LinkedIn
16	Postgraduate	Social and Visual Anthropology	Operation Analyst	LinkedIn

Table 4. Participants' Demographic Profile

3.4 Data Collection

As noted, this study employed SSIs as the primary method of data collection. To establish "an inventory of the categories and relationships that the interview must investigate" (McCracken, 1988, p. 32), an interview schedule was developed following Prescott's (2011) 10-step guidelines (see Appendix F for details). This process involved a literature review, self-reflection, and one pilot interview to ensure thematic clarity and enable effective probing (see Appendix D for the full schedule). The final schedule comprised six sections, addressing participants' background, skill development, application, and perceptions of preparedness. Given the flexible nature of SSIs, both

the content and sequencing of questions were adapted where necessary to ensure relevance to the research objectives.

All interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams between May and June 2025. Given participants' work commitments and limited availability, in-person interviews were not feasible. This highlights the practicality of virtual interviews—several participants, for instance, were able to join during lunch breaks. Each interview lasted between 40 and 76 minutes and was conducted in a mix of Mandarin and English. As some participants, including the researcher myself, were native Chinese speakers, they were offered the option to participate in Mandarin (n=8). Whilst this choice introduced additional complexity during transcription and analysis, it was adopted to promote linguistic equity and facilitate more detailed, authentic responses through the use of a shared native language (Marschan-Piekkari & Reis, 2004).

3.5 Data Analysis

Upon completion of all interviews, the recordings and auto-generated transcripts were downloaded for analysis. Thematic analysis was selected for its capacity to "summarise key features" of the data and "generate unanticipated insights" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 97), and their six-phase framework was employed (see Appendix G for details).

However, the bilingual nature of the interviews required additional preparation before analysis. For interviews conducted in Mandarin, a meaning-based decentring translation approach was adopted, prioritising the accurate conveyance of meaning over literal equivalence (Eckhardt, 2004). The process began with cleaning the original transcripts to correct errors and remove filler words or repetitions. The cleaned

Mandarin transcripts were then translated into English using DeepL, a high-accuracy online translation tool (Bunga & Katemba, 2024). Each translation was subsequently reviewed and refined to ensure clarity, contextual fidelity, and readability for an English-speaking audience. Table 5 provides an example where direct translation would have failed to capture the intended nuance.

Translation process	
Original Mandarin Script	我们专业就是花开富贵，很佛系的状态。
Literal Translation	Our major is like a flower blooming in prosperity, very Buddhist.
Meaning-based Translation	The whole programme had a rather laid-back, laissez-faire atmosphere.

Table 5. Meaning-based Translation Example

The refined transcripts were exported onto Nexus365 for secure storage and subsequent analysis. For the English interviews, a similar cleaning process was undertaken, involving the correction of transcription errors to ensure clarity and readiness.

Following the collection and preparation of 16 interview transcripts, a project was created in NVivo, and all relevant materials were imported. Initial coding was carried out using an open coding approach, whereby codes were inductively generated from the data to identify and categorise key themes (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). This data-driven method, as opposed to a deductive approach, was chosen to facilitate the emergence of unexpected insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The resulting codes were then compared, refined, and grouped into overarching themes concerning the development and application of employability skills.

3.6 Research Trustworthiness

Ensuring trustworthiness is vital for establishing the credibility and reliability of qualitative research findings—both of which are crucial for advancing cumulative scholarly knowledge and informing practical improvements (Ahmed, 2024). This study ensured trustworthiness by addressing four dimensions: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1965).

Credibility refers to how accurately findings reflect participants' experiences (Ahmed, 2024). Consistent with Adler's (2022) view that prolonged engagement enhances credibility, rapport was established through informal pre-interview conversations, encouraging deeper and more nuanced insights. Whilst shared academic backgrounds with some participants fostered openness, an objective stance was maintained throughout data collection, analysis, and interpretation to minimise bias and preserve authenticity (Dodgson, 2019).

Transferability denotes the applicability of research findings to other, similar settings (Daniel, 2019). This was supported through thick description of the research setting, sampling strategy, and participant characteristics (Forero et al., 2018), as outlined in the literature review and earlier sections. Additionally, dependability, concerning the consistency of findings over time (Kakar et al., 2023), was enhanced by maintaining a transparent "audit trail" documenting methodological decisions, data collection, and analysis procedures (Ahmed, 2024). This enables external researchers to assess the study's rigour and, if desired, replicate the approach in comparable contexts (Eryilmaz, 2022).

Confirmability relates to the objectivity of findings and the minimisation of researcher bias (Kakar et al., 2023). In this study, confirmability was strengthened through reflexive practices embedded across the research process, notably the maintenance of a reflexive journal to document evolving thoughts, decisions, and analytical reflections. The researcher's positionality and its potential influence on data interpretation are discussed in the following section. Together, these measures promote transparency, minimise subjectivity, and strengthen analytical credibility (Ahmed, 2024).

3.7 Researcher Positionality

Positionality "reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study" (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 71, cited in Holmes, 2020, p. 2). Reflecting on one's positionality contributes to research confirmability while reducing bias or partisanship in the research process (Rowe, 2014). Through reflexive self-examination, it became evident that this research was conducted from an insider–outsider positionality. Whilst Merton (1972) originally conceptualised insiders as members of the group being studied and outsiders as non-members, subsequent scholarship has highlighted the fluid and situational nature of these categories, allowing for dual positionality (Chacko, 2004; Kusow, 2003).

Specifically, as a SS graduate from a UK undergraduate programme, I share a similar academic background with some participants, positioning me as an insider. This status facilitated trust, rapport, and the ability to ask contextually informed questions, often yielding richer, more authentic data (Holmes, 2020). Nevertheless, as a current postgraduate student without experience working in a UK PSF, I also occupied an outsider position. Whilst this may limit my full comprehension of participants'

professional contexts, it allowed me to pose questions that insiders might overlook due to assumed familiarity (Naaeke et al., 2010). Moreover, my outsider status may facilitate more open dialogue, as participants are less likely to perceive a conflict of interest or professional affiliation (Holmes, 2020). This dual positionality carried both advantages and challenges, which I sought to balance through sustained reflexivity, critical self-awareness, and strategies to ensure research trustworthiness, ultimately supporting the production of rigorous and insightful findings.

3.8 Ethical Consideration

This study adhered to the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research established by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024) and obtained formal approval from the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) (see Appendix C for evidence of approval). Before data collection, participants were sent an email containing two documents: an information sheet outlining the study's aims and scope, and a consent form confirming their voluntary agreement to participate. Signed consent was obtained before each interview. Participants were also informed at the start of each interview that they could leave the study or refuse to answer any questions at any time. Upon conclusion of the interview, I expressed appreciation for their participation and reiterated that they could raise any questions or concerns at any stage. Samples of the information sheet and consent form are included in Appendices A and B.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Participants' real names were not used; instead, numerical codes were assigned in all documentation and reporting (Kaiser, 2009). Whilst specific keywords were employed

for participant recruitment, all identifying details—including university and PSF names—were removed to ensure participant anonymity. Interviews were recorded only with participants' explicit consent, and both audio files and transcripts were stored securely on the researcher's University of Oxford OneDrive account, protected by password encryption. Access to these materials was restricted to the researcher.

Chapter 4. Findings

The research findings are organised according to the three research questions guiding this study. For each question, participants' perspectives were synthesised into key themes, which structure the subsequent presentation of findings.

4.1 SS Graduates' Skill Acquisition

4.1.1 Perception of Skill Acquisition from SS Programmes

During the interviews, participants were first invited to introduce their current roles within PSFs and their previous SS degree programmes. They were then asked to reflect on their experiences of skill development and to identify the specific competencies acquired through their degrees. Whilst the majority of participants acknowledged the relevance and benefits of their SS education to their current roles, two PGT participants (P8, P15) expressed the view that their degree had not contributed meaningfully to their professional work. Both attributed this to the limited duration of PGT studies and the lack of instructional approaches aimed at fostering employability skills. As P8 noted:

> I don't think the course was particularly helpful for me... It was only one year with all those large lectures, I didn't get much out of it. (P8)

Among the remaining participants, responses regarding skill development through SS programmes that are relevant to PSF work coalesced into three key themes: hard, soft, and abstract skills.

4.1.2 Skill Acquisition-Hard Skill

First, several participants, both at the UG and PGT levels (P3, P9, P12), highlighted the applicability of disciplinary knowledge in their current roles. This finding is noteworthy

given the commonly perceived disconnect between SS degrees and careers in PSFs. For instance, P9 stated her studies provided "a baseline knowledge that I need for this job". However, the majority of participants felt that the knowledge gained was not transferable or particularly helpful in the actual work setting. As P6 explained:

> I wouldn't say that the knowledge was really transferred because what I'm doing right now doesn't relate to it.

Instead, she emphasised that "it's more like skills rather than knowledge", a view shared by most participants.

4.1.3 Skill Acquisition-Soft Skills

Participants' responses for soft skills gained were categorised into two sub-themes: input-related and output-related soft skills.

4.1.3.1 Input-type Soft Skills. Participants across both levels reported gaining input-related skills, such as reading comprehension (P2, P12), research (all but P8 and P15), synthesis (P2, P4, P5, P6, P16), time management, and working under pressure (P9, P11, P12). Nevertheless, P15 stated that her time management ability emerged rather "spontaneously", and "had nothing to do with my research or studies", suggesting a more intuitive process of skill acquisition independent of formal SS education.

4.1.3.2 Output-type Soft Skills. Communication was frequently cited, though views were somewhat polarised. A majority (P1, P3, P4, P10, P11, P13, P16) reported enhancement. Notably, P16 described the programme as transformative, stating that:

> I'm naturally introverted and not good at making conversation with others. But in anthropology… I felt that my communication skills improved significantly.

In contrast, two participants—one UG (P12) and one PGT graduate (P8)—offered divergent views, asserting that their SS education did not support the development of communication skills. P12 further noted a lack of experience in "teamwork, group work, presenting", and "didn't get any of that". This contrasts sharply with the experiences of other participants, many of whom highlighted gains in oral and written presentation skills (P3, P7, P9, P10) and teamwork (P6, P11, P13). Nevertheless, all participants reported developing essay writing skills.

4.1.4 Skill Acquisition-Abstract Skills

Though often implicit, abstract skills—referring to cognitive dispositions and modes of thinking—were frequently reported by participants across both levels as outcomes of SS education. Foremost among these was critical thinking (P2, P13), followed by the cultivation of a macro-level social science perspective (P2, P4, P7, P12). As P4, a UG sociology graduate, observed:

> It (SS) equips you with a lens that transcends economic and political systems. You start to consider issues on a broader, more structural level.

Participants also referred to enhanced perspective-taking. Specifically, P1 and P16 highlighted the value of developing localised perspectives, while P4 and P10 noted increased sensitivity to social issues; P3 and P7 further emphasised the development of empathy, which they viewed as crucial for understanding others in both personal and professional contexts. However, it is noteworthy that none of the participants

mentioned the development of business awareness or familiarity with corporate behaviours through SS education. As P1, a PGT social anthropology graduate, observed:

> Before starting work, I had no real idea how a company or the corporate world operates. That's something you don't learn at university.

4.2 From Development to Deployment: How SS Graduates Apply Their Skills in PSF Work

4.2.1 Were the Skills Applied?

Building on the aforementioned disconnect between SS education and PSF work, it is also important to note that not all participants found their skills transferable to their current roles due to the nature of the work. P14 and P16, who work as an Analytics and Sales Associate (customer-facing) and an Operations Analyst, respectively, expressed a more negative view:

> I feel like they (what I studied and the skills I gained) aren't directly related to the work I'm doing now. (P16)

> I would say, unfortunately, my current role really destroyed me a little bit, because I wasn't able to apply any skills. What you're facing in a customer service role is essentially people who are already angry… so I think it didn't allow me time to think, to answer critically, utilise my presentation skills. There weren't many skills I could transfer, not even writing skills, because often the customer doesn't need you to write an essay or even a paragraph. They just want bullet-point answers—boom, boom, boom. (P14)

Nevertheless, these participants noted instances in previous roles where their skills were more evidently transferable. For example, reflecting on a marketing internship, P14 shared:

> In those times, I was able to use my presentation skills and come up with ideas by considering everyone's opinions and consolidating them into a whole argument… so I do think that previous internship experiences better demonstrate such transferable skills.

These accounts underscore the contingent and role-specific nature of skill application within PSFs, as also noted by participants (P4, P10), who emphasised that the alignment between skills developed in SS programmes and workplace demands often depends on the operational characteristics of specific roles.

4.2.2 Forms of Application

When participants discussed how they applied their skills in practice, their responses clustered into three key phases: pre-task preparation, task execution, as well as post-task social engagement. This structure reveals not only the skills employed but also shows how participants' SS education influenced their thinking and behaviours before, during, and after their professional work.

4.2.2.1 Pre-Task Preparation: From Academic Inquiry to Professional Readiness. The project-based work in PSFs demands substantial preparatory tasks, during which participants emphasised the importance of disciplinary knowledge and skills related to research, interpretation, and critical reflection.

4.2.2.1.1 Disciplinary Knowledge. As mentioned earlier, several participants reported that academic knowledge is applicable in their day-to-day work. Specifically, P12, a consultant, noted that she applied disciplinary insights to propose tailored solutions:

> In crisis simulations with clients, I role-play as social media users reacting to a scenario using a simulated platform. My academic studies on social media in protests help me understand how it mobilises public opinion, which I apply when engaging in these exercises.

P9, who studied educational psychology and now works in the education team at a market research firm, explained that tasks such as developing consent forms and interview schedules were directly informed by her SS training. Nevertheless, she acknowledged that even in a relatively aligned role, a degree of adjustment was required:

> I think there's a huge difference between university research, which is academic, and the sort of research I do now, which is more corporate and involves working with a client.

4.2.2.1.2 Research and Information Synthesis. Participants frequently highlighted research and information synthesis as key transferable skills developed through essay writing and dissertation work. P2 noted that navigating a fragmented dissertation topic taught her to synthesise scattered information—a skill now essential in her role:

> Some of the (dissertation) information came from key readings, but a large part of it I had to seek out myself. I had to find alternative literature that wasn't on the same subject but still offered related insights. That skill—figuring out how to make sense of scattered information—is definitely helpful.

Similarly, P4, an auditor, noted that the reading and writing skills developed through her sociology background enabled her to approach compliance and risk documents with greater nuance. She even observed that her firm recognises this strength by assigning

SS graduates to the non-financial audit team, where the ability to process large volumes of textual data is crucial.

4.2.2.1.3 Critical Thinking. Critical thinking was also considered essential during the preparation phase, laying the groundwork for effective client interactions. Participants, such as P1, P4, and P12, emphasised the value of considering issues from multiple perspectives—an ability developed through fieldwork, seminars, and independent research in SS education across both UG and PGT levels. P1, for instance, reflected on how anthropology trained him to adopt a "local perspective", which now supports more empathetic client engagement, often trying to think from their point of view— "what do they want to achieve from our service?". P7 also highlighted the importance of deep reflection early in a project, particularly in identifying potential client pain points. Furthermore, several participants (e.g. P4, P12, P16) observed that the emphasis on current affairs and real-world issues in SS programmes heightened their awareness of social, economic, and geopolitical dynamics, which in turn strengthened their professional interactions. As P4 explained:

> One transferable aspect is how I approach work—I'm more attuned to questions like, what risks might the client face in the future? It allows me to support clients by completing tasks while identifying future directions beyond the immediate scope of work, which helps build trust and sustain long-term partnerships.

However, some participants presented a more critical view of whether and how these skills could be meaningfully applied in practice. P5, for example, reflected on the standardising effect of workplace training in shaping employee thinking:

> I think the job itself, through the same type of training and the work you do, slowly shapes you into a similar type of person, which I guess sounds bad.

Whilst he acknowledged the value of critical thinking, he also questioned its practical utility under structured managerial expectations:

> Ultimately, this will be guided by your managers on how to approach the task. So I don't think there's any specific insight you can bring in.

4.2.2.2 Task Execution: Navigating Client Work Through Communication and Problem-Solving. Following the preparatory phase, participants reported transitioning into the client-facing stage of their work, where output-related skills became central.

4.2.2.2.1 Idea Generation and Presentation. Many participants emphasised the importance of idea generation and verbal presentation in their roles (P4, P6, P9, P12). For example, P11, an undergraduate, explained that her SS degree involved small-group PBL tutorials, where she was expected to "come up with an argument, defend it, and deliver a clear presentation". This skill, as noted by P4, could "actively drive project momentum". However, this format was not reported by PGT participants. Several (P8, P10, P15) described their programmes as predominantly lecture-based, offering limited opportunities for verbal engagement. Whilst some PGT participants reported developing such skills, these were typically acquired through occasional presentation tasks and, more commonly, through independent thinking and writing. By contrast, P6, a social sciences undergraduate, reported having frequent and structured presentation tasks during her studies, which she credited with building the confidence and clarity needed to lead meetings effectively with clients.

That said, not all UG participants reported strong verbal engagement. P12, working in consulting, highlighted the limitations of her essay-based assessment experience in preparing her for workplace communication tasks:

> I spend 80% of my day working with PowerPoint, which is a crucial skill in consulting. Yet this is something I've had to learn from the ground up. Since my degree was essay-based, it didn't teach me how to structure a presentation or convey information visually.

Nonetheless, whilst verbal presentation was not central to all participants' roles, most (e.g., P2, P6, P10) still drew on written communication skills developed during their studies, across both UG and PGT levels. P2 explained that writing market reports required her to apply sociological reasoning and maintain a clear logical structure to convey insights effectively. Similarly, P10 reflected that the habits cultivated through academic essay writing, such as citing credible sources and maintaining coherence, contributed directly to the quality of her audit working papers—a view supported by feedback she received from managers.

4.2.2.2.2 Teamwork and People Engagement. Teamwork emerged as another key theme in task execution, encompassing both internal collaboration and external stakeholder engagement. While often considered a core competency developed through SS programmes, participants across both UG and PGT levels offered mixed accounts of their development of collaborative skills.

Several participants drew strong parallels between their SS education and their current PSF work. For instance, P13 reflected on the similarities between group-based academic assignments and client-facing team structures:

> When we're working on our assignments, we sit together, have endless meetings and discussions… That's what I'm doing now. We work in groups, with a team for each client. You have to communicate thoroughly within your team.

P7 echoed this view, noting that seminar-based and debate-oriented teaching helped her develop the interpersonal and coordination skills required to manage multiple workstreams in a large organisation. Co-curricularly, P3's WBL placement provided valuable experience in engaging with external stakeholders, a skill that directly translates to his current role. However, not all participants reported comparable opportunities for collaborative learning. P15, a PGT graduate, explained that her courses were largely theoretical and offered limited scope for practical application or peer interaction. P12, again, described her UG programme as highly individualised and lacking in interpersonal interaction:

> I had five hours of contact time per week. That's crazy. I never really interacted with people or discussed things massively.

She further reflected on how this limited preparation impacted her day-to-day work in professional settings:

> That's been really hard in the corporate world—going up and presenting to people, trying to convince and persuade—because I had no practice.

4.2.2.3 Post-Task and Social Aspects: Informal Learning and Relationship-Building.

Whilst participants were primarily asked to reflect on the application of skills in formal work settings, several spontaneously discussed how their SS education supported them in navigating the often-unspoken dimensions of PSF workplace life.

P6, for instance, attributed her ability to "read the room" and anticipate unspoken workplace norms—such as knowing when and how to engage with colleagues—to the social awareness developed during her SS degree. She noted that these interpersonal cues were not explicitly taught, but were instead cultivated through peer-based academic environments and seminar discussions.

A more novel yet thought-provoking perspective came from P4, who reflected on the influence of SS content, particularly topics related to inequality and social justice, on her ability to gain awareness of the importance of relevant cultural capital, thereby navigating workplace behaviours. As an Asian female professional, she described developing subtle strategies for blending in:

> I've learned to recognise the attitudes and behaviours that are valued in the workplace, and I try to align myself with those by staying neutral and professional. It helps me navigate biases and build stronger relationships with colleagues.

Similarly, P2 described the workplace as a "miniature society", marked by tacit hierarchies and affective relationships. Drawing on her training in fieldwork-based disciplines like anthropology and sociology, she explained:

> I learned to observe how people interact, understand group dynamics, and learn from others.

This observational skill enabled her to better adapt, reflect, and build rapport in a complex organisational culture.

4.3 SS Graduates' Perceptions of Degree Preparedness for PSF Employment

4.3.1 Overall Perceptions

Despite offering numerous examples of transferable skills and speaking positively about their SS education, including having no regrets (P11) and being proud of and shaped by it (P12), most, across both UG and PGT levels, described its role in preparing them for professional work in PSFs as limited. As P16 reflected:

> When I was job hunting, I realised that many roles require some professional or technical skills, not just the ability to conduct fieldwork or interviews. These hard skills weren't really covered in our curriculum. The biggest issue was an overemphasis on soft skills, which meant I couldn't even pass the first-round online assessments.

P12 similarly observed that her workplace readiness came largely from outside SS programme:

> I think academics shaped my worldview and way of thinking, but it was the extracurriculars that developed my practical skills and experience.

Others were more explicitly critical. P7 and P6 questioned the employability focus of their programmes:

> To be honest, I don't think my SS degree provided me with many directly employable skills. (P7)

> In my degree, not at all. In fact, there was a kind of anti-corporate sentiment, so I wouldn't expect them to teach those skills. (P6)

Whilst SS programmes were valued for their intellectual and personal development, their perceived effectiveness in preparing graduates for PSF employment was generally limited.

4.3.2 Perceived Strengths

Given that most participants expressed relatively critical views regarding the preparedness offered by their SS degrees for PSF employment, the findings in this section are limited, with favourable perceptions largely consistent with earlier accounts of skill development. However, several participants (e.g., P1, P2, P10, P13) emphasised that such skills were not exclusive to SS education. As P10 explained:

> I think this is something present across different disciplines. I don't think encouraging students to engage in deep thinking is exclusive to any single discipline.

Despite this, most participants acknowledged that SS programmes tended to place greater emphasis on certain interpersonal and reflective skills. P1, for example, highlighted the discipline's increased focus on human interaction:

> I think they do [develop these skills], because SS strongly emphasises communication with people. There's always a people engagement component, which is important.

In addition, several participants also referred to programme-level initiatives that supported professional development. These included alumni events featuring professionals working in PSFs (P11, P14, P16), although the support is somewhat limited.

4.3.3 Perceived Gaps

Two sub-themes were identified concerning the perceived gaps between SS education and PSF employment: degree stereotypes and opportunity barriers.

4.3.3.3 Degree Stereotypes. Many participants identified implicit stereotypes within their SS programmes that discouraged or limited interest in PSF careers. These stereotypes often shaped both students' perceptions of viable career paths and the level of institutional encouragement they received when pursuing non-traditional trajectories.

P9 described feeling constrained by dominant narratives within her educational psychology programme:

> I found it quite frustrating that, in educational psychology, there's a strong stereotype around career paths—you're expected to work with children or become a teaching assistant. But that's not necessarily what everyone wants… It felt like the options were either overly stereotyped or heavily focused on academia, with little in between.

Such assumptions were not only embedded in curricular content but also reinforced through faculty attitudes. P16 reflected on the implicit norms surrounding career preparation:

> The whole programme had a rather laid-back, laissez-faire atmosphere. If you were actively looking for internships, you were seen as an outlier—like, "you're actually applying for internships?"

This culture of passivity, combined with the lack of early career guidance, led some students to delay job exploration. As P2 noted, by the time many peers realised the need to prepare for employment, it felt too late to catch up.

4.3.2.2. Opportunity Barriers. Despite the perceived flexibility of SS programmes, participants across levels reported restricted interdisciplinary access, limited departmental support, and a disconnect between academic learning and career preparation. These issues were especially pronounced at the PGT level. P3, an undergraduate, described the difficulty of enrolling in business-related modules, which, though beneficial for career development, were challenging to access. For PGT students, this restriction appeared more absolute. As several participants noted (e.g., P1, P8, P15), such cross-disciplinary opportunities were largely unavailable within their one-year master's programmes. P10 further reflected on the relatively insular nature of SS departments, particularly when compared to more professionally oriented disciplines such as engineering:

> They (engineering) always talk about how your learning connects to the workplace. In social sciences, we just stayed in our bubble of academic theories. We didn't get the same kind of exposure.

Several participants also expressed frustration with limited departmental support, particularly in relation to career guidance. P12 noted a lack of engagement from academic staff:

> My supervisors never spoke to me about employment. We had a director of studies who didn't care what I was going to do afterwards. Nothing was done to help us understand what career opportunities could look like.

This view was echoed by P11, who compared her experience unfavourably to students in other departments:

> My flatmates had a lot of support from their department. I didn't have that in my department at all. If you want something else, (they'll say) go to careers.

However, when participants attempted to engage with their universities' career services, all reported negative or disappointing experiences. P3 noted, "We've had very few career fairs". Similarly, P10 reflected on the lack of communication around these opportunities:

> I couldn't expect things like career fairs to appear in my inbox—I had to actively search for them.

Even those who did use the service found it to be poorly publicised. P11 explained:

> Many people in my course didn't even know that was an option. When I mentioned seeing a careers advisor, they were like: "What? We have that?". I feel like it's not really talked about or publicised enough.

P16 further contrasted her experience with that of students in other programmes, noting that while some departments hosted events with both academic scholars and industry panels, her own course remained purely academic in nature. She further described her frustration with the career service's lack of subject knowledge:

> When I visited the career department to revise my CV or participate in a mock interview, they had no idea what anthropology students actually study. They couldn't provide any useful support—I even had to stop and explain what our degree involved.

This experience reinforced her sense of helplessness and highlighted the structural disconnect between career services and the needs of SS students.

4.3.4 Don't Undermine the SS Core!

Despite the previously discussed concerns about limited preparation for PSF employment, nearly all participants expressed resistance to altering the core content of SS programmes. They emphasised that SS education serves as a space for intellectual exploration and critical inquiry, and argued that its academic integrity should be preserved rather than reshaped to meet instrumental labour market demands. As P7 explained:

> I believe that many students are truly passionate about the topics they study. The university offers these courses precisely to create a space for such intellectual engagement. Therefore, there is no need to modify the curriculum itself.

This view was echoed by various participants, who expressed a strong identification and appreciation in their discipline (e.g., P12, P13, P16). P13 articulated this view clearly:

> I don't think the curriculum should change. It's called social science for a reason, and I genuinely enjoy it. It teaches you how to think—and I believe that's invaluable. Just because others may not see its relevance doesn't mean it should be changed.

4.3.5 If Not the Core Content, Then What?

Whilst most participants did not support altering the core content of SS programmes, they were generally in favour of integrating complementary components. More notably, many expressed concerns that SS is increasingly devalued within HE. As P12 remarked on the UK undergraduate education:

> I've got a feeling—and maybe this is super cynical of me—but because British HE charges the same tuition across disciplines, minimal effort is put into the social sciences to save resources for subjects that are more costly to run, like medicine, or biochemistry. So they try to keep the SS as cost-effective as possible, with minimal lectures.

In response, participants called for renewed institutional investment in SS programmes. Their suggestions also fell into two categories: curricular and co-curricular initiatives.

4.3.4.1 Curricular Initiatives. Although most participants felt that embedding employability training into the SS curriculum would compromise its intellectual foundations, they advocated for modernising pedagogical methods at both UG and PGT levels to better showcase transferable skills:

> Even if graduates go on to work in charities, they don't spend their days writing essays. They collaborate and debate ideas. The ways we work in SS programmes should more closely reflect the ways we work in SS professions. (P12, UG)

> In a one-term course with eight sessions, only one involves presentations, and that session often has ten groups squeezed in. There isn't enough time for meaningful exchange. (P8, PGT)

In terms of content, over half the participants supported introducing data processing modules that could be meaningfully linked to existing SS training. Yet several

participants (P1, P16) acknowledged potential resistance from academics to such changes. Consequently, a frequently proposed alternative was increased flexibility in module selection, particularly cross-departmental access (e.g., P3, P4, P6). Some advocated for a US-style generalist model, although this view was not unanimous; P13, for example, valued predetermined content consistency within SS programmes.

4.3.4.2 Co-curricular Initiatives. Participants overwhelmingly called for stronger institutional links with external organisations and improved promotion of existing opportunities. As P2 reflected:

> My undergraduate programme had a placement year, but I had no idea how it worked, so I never considered it. Looking back, it could've been really useful for my career planning. But the university didn't give any guidance.

Participants also recommended SS-specific career services that can be accessed by students at both UG and PGT levels, including tailored advice (P16), clearer job role information (P14), and walkthroughs of application processes (P1). Many suggested offering free, high-quality workshops to build practical skills and enable interdisciplinary peer learning (e.g. P5, P6, P7). Crucially, they emphasised that career service staff must better understand the strengths and challenges of SS students, especially those transitioning into new fields. They also stressed the need for a non-judgmental, supportive approach:

> Even if they (the staff) are not very knowledgeable when it comes to advising on career changes, don't discourage us just because we want to. (P10)

Overall, while participants rejected wholesale curricular reform, they framed employability not as a threat to SS, but as something that can be fostered in parallel with its critical and intellectual traditions.

Chapter 5 Discussion

This chapter interprets the findings from Chapter 4 in relation to existing literature on employability skill development in SS education and PSFs. It addresses the three RQs and identifies areas for further research on employability development in UK HE, particularly within SS programmes.

5.1 RQ1-What employability skills do graduates gain from SS programmes in UK HE that are relevant to employment in PSFs?

The empirical findings indicate that most participants believed their SS programmes supported the development of relevant employability skills. This aligns with much of the existing literature on skill development in SS education (e.g., Karaca-Atik et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2014) and with the perspectives of key HE stakeholders (Mwelwa et al., 2021). However, two PGT participants reported that their programmes did not equip them with any employability-related skills—an outlier finding that is particularly noteworthy given the widely acknowledged role of SS in fostering transferable competencies (ComRes & Universities UK, 2019). Whilst PGT courses are often praised for their in-depth academic focus, they appear, in these cases, to have failed to provide adequate opportunities for developing essential generic skills. This limitation, coupled with prior studies highlighting SS graduates' lower satisfaction with their professional preparedness (Skaniakos et al., 2019) and the broader challenges of embedding employability within academic curricula (Campbell, 2010), reinforces persistent concerns regarding SS programme design. As Brennan et al. (1996) argue, the structure and content of degree programmes play a pivotal role in shaping graduate employability. Therefore, despite the existing attention and initiatives, further research

is needed to evaluate and enhance the alignment between SS curricula and evolving professional demands.

Among the remaining participants, the skills identified largely aligned with the conceptual framework outlined in the literature review. However, a key divergence emerged from prior studies by Karaca-Atik et al. (2023) and Aarts and Künn (2019), which suggested that disciplinary knowledge in SS holds limited relevance to PSF roles. In contrast, this study found that several participants not only engaged with their SS curricula but also applied this knowledge in their PSF work (discussed in the next section). This supports literature affirming the public value of SS knowledge (Lewis et al., 2023) while extending it by suggesting that, under certain conditions, SS knowledge can be transferable to PSF contexts. If such transferability can be substantiated, it challenges the claim by Sin and Neave (2014) that employability-oriented reforms necessarily undermine academic quality. Instead, these findings suggest that disciplinary knowledge and labour market responsiveness can coexist within HE curricula—an idea that warrants further empirical exploration.

Among the soft and abstract skills identified by participants, most aligned closely with the skill framework outlined by PSF employers (Table 1) and discussed in the literature review, albeit with some variations and overlaps in thematic labels. Notably, however, not all employer-required skills were developed through SS education. Some participants explicitly stated that key competencies, particularly teamwork and presentation, were not meaningfully fostered during their studies. This concern was reported at both UG and PGT levels, and stands in contrast to the generally positive findings in self-reported data and empirical research (e.g., Karaca-Atik et al., 2023; Mwita et al., 2023).

One potential explanation may lie in Cheng et al.'s (2022) observation that the type and status of HEIs influence how employability agendas are interpreted and enacted. Although mainstream employability frameworks promote a wide range of curricular and co-curricular initiatives, the degree to which these are adopted varies across institutions. As Boden and Nedeva (2010, cited in Cheng et al., 2022) argue, post-1992 universities are more likely to embed employability strategies as a means of enhancing their market competitiveness, whereas pre-1992 institutions tend to prioritise disciplinary knowledge and the development of cultural capital, often embedding fewer practice-oriented components within SS programmes. The intensive and content-driven structure of PGT degrees may further limit the integration of instructional strategies that support skill development. Notably, the participants who expressed more critical views regarding employability preparation were all graduates of pre-1992 institutions. Whilst this study does not seek to systematically examine institutional differences—and only a subset of participants explicitly reported an absence of skill development—this finding nonetheless raises important questions about the generalisability of skill development outcomes across SS programmes. It underscores the need for further research that explores how institutional context and degree level shape the implementation and effectiveness of employability initiatives in SS education.

Second, although business awareness is widely cited in the literature as a skill developed through SS programmes (McCormack & Baron, 2023; Mwelwa et al., 2021), this study found no evidence of its development among participants. One possible explanation is the exclusion of professionally oriented disciplines such as law and business from the sample. However, given that prior research often treats SS as a unified category while identifying business awareness as a core employability skill, this

finding highlights the need for greater disciplinary specificity in future studies. Without such precision, there is a risk of overgeneralising conclusions from particular subfields to the broader domain, leading to conceptual ambiguity and potential misrepresentation.

Nevertheless, this study identified skills not previously addressed in the literature, particularly within the category of abstract skills. Notably, the development of an SS perspective and sensitivity to social issues—both reported as applicable in PSF contexts—have largely been overlooked. One explanation may be that such competencies are closely tied to disciplinary knowledge and are often excluded from employability-oriented frameworks (Setiawan, 2024). In the contemporary landscape where the employability discourse is increasingly dominant, a narrow interpretation of SS employability may, as Cheng et al. (2022) caution, cause institutions to overlook more holistic opportunities to support student skill development.

Overall, the analysis of RQ 1 reveals a complex and uneven landscape of skill development within UK SS programmes. Whilst several participants reported gaining relevant employability skills, others described only partial development—or, in some cases, a complete absence of such competencies. Notably, PGT graduates, despite being further along the academic ladder, often experienced more limited skill development. These findings underscore significant variability in the effectiveness of SS education across both institutional and degree-level contexts.

Importantly, this study also draws attention to an underexplored dimension in existing literature: the potential transferability and application of disciplinary knowledge itself. Taken together, these insights point to the need for a more nuanced understanding of how SS programmes contribute to graduate employability. The following section

explores how these skills and forms of knowledge are cultivated within SS education and subsequently applied in PSF environments.

5.2 RQ2-How are these skills applied in their day-to-day work, and what approaches are used in SS programmes to foster them?

Given the limited research directly linking skill development within SS programmes to their application in PSF roles, this study provides a foundational exploration of this relationship to fill the identified research gap. Firstly, participants' reflections suggest that the transferability and applicability of skills acquired through SS education vary depending on the specific nature of their roles within PSFs. This variation can be partially explained by Von Nordenflycht's (2010) typology, which highlights the distinctive characteristics of different PSF types. However, since this study focuses on firms that exhibit most or all of these characteristics, it also uncovers challenges that appear common across PSFs. Notably, even when graduates possess a wide range of employability skills, the rigid operational procedures and hierarchical structures typical of PSFs often constrain their ability to transfer and effectively deploy these skills.

This finding aligns with Bourdieu's (1984) conceptualisation of PSFs as "fields" governed by internalised norms and practices, where success depends not only on possessing transferable skills, but also on the ability to internalise dominant dispositions (habitus) and mobilise diverse forms of capital (Gaddis, 2013). When SS graduates' habitus fails to align with workplace expectations, and they are unable to leverage their existing skillsets, they may experience disorientation or a sense of helplessness. Furthermore, as Tomlinson (2017) argues, a persistent mismatch often exists between generic employability training in HE and the specialised demands of professional roles.

This may further explain the variation in skill applicability across different PSF contexts—a point explored below.

Participants reported applying their skills across all phases of PSF work, including post-task social engagement. Broadly, the development of these skills reflects the curricular and co-curricular strategies outlined by Jackson and Bridgstock (2021). During the pre-task preparation phase, participants predominantly drew on input-related skills such as research and analysis, acquired through academic curricula and pedagogical practices. This mirrors Cleary and Noy's (2014) findings and reinforces the value of SS knowledge in informing idea generation, planning, and understanding standard procedures. However, the relatively limited number of participants emphasising such knowledge, along with the absence of a direct alignment between academic content and workplace demands, also lends support to Okolie Nwosu et al.'s (2019) argument that HE often fails to sufficiently develop occupationally specific knowledge, despite some relevant overlaps.

Nonetheless, several widely discussed employability skills were evident in this study, and their development processes echoed those documented in the literature. For example, consistent with Hauhart and Grahe (2010), participants reported that completing substantial research projects, such as dissertations or capstone projects, cultivated transferable skills, including self-directed learning, research, and academic writing. These were translated directly into PSF practices, such as information synthesis and problem-solving. Regarding critical thinking and idea generation, participants commonly attributed their development to a combination of pedagogical practices, including seminar discussions, fieldwork, and independent research. However, among the PGT participants in this study, such competencies were primarily developed

through individual projects and lectures, as opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction and small-group discussions appeared limited. Despite these variations, critical thinking was consistently applied in PSF roles—particularly in analysing client needs and interpreting them within broader socio-political or economic frameworks. This finding supports Lee et al. (2014) and McCormack and Baron's (2023) conclusions that SS programmes help develop a diverse set of transferable skills with utility even in private sectors, such as PSFs.

During the task execution phase, output-related and interpersonal skills—specifically communication, presentation, and teamwork—were deemed essential. These skills were primarily developed through curricular teaching. Consistent with Smith et al. (2013), PBL was identified as instrumental in fostering creative thinking and effective communication, thereby supporting both value delivery to clients and overall project progression. Presentation skills, in both verbal and written forms, were reported to stem from coursework involving speaking tasks and academic writing, aligning with findings by Iksan et al. (2012) and Marques (2016).

However, despite the literature's emphasis on the benefits of co-curricular initiatives such as WIL and WBL (Atfield et al., 2021), this study found limited evidence of such practices being embedded in SS curricula. Consequently, students—regardless of degree level—whose programmes lacked structured pedagogical strategies such as project-based learning, group work, or industry engagement, struggled to develop key employability competencies. They therefore reported difficulties transferring into PSF roles, ultimately impeding their professional performance. From this view, these findings support Okolie and Yasin's (2017) argument that it is not degree level per se, but rather traditional pedagogies that constrain employability skill development by

limiting students' exposure to diverse learning experiences. If a degree programme does not include structured opportunities for presentation, it is unlikely that students—whether UG or PGT—will acquire this skill organically.

Moreover, a notable additional finding was the use of SS-acquired skills during the post-task phase. This suggests that SS graduates have gained forms of cultural capital valued within PSFs through their education, thereby challenging de Lange et al.'s (2023) claim that specific types of cultural capital cannot be acquired through HE. In particular, participants demonstrated the ability to recognise the forms of cultural capital privileged in PSF contexts, assess these in relation to their dispositions, and consciously adopt behaviours that align with workplace expectations. Viewed through this lens, the findings support Parry and Jackling's (2015) argument that the generic skills and disciplinary knowledge fostered through SS education can function as forms of cultural capital, facilitating SS graduates' smoother transitions into PSF workplaces. Taken together, Table 6 summarises the identified skills, their development approaches, and their application in PSF contexts.

Skills	Development Approaches	Application Methods in PSFs	Degree Application
Disciplinary knowledge	• SS content	✓ Client assistance	Limited
Research & information synthesis	• Essays & dissertations tasks	✓ Document analysis ✓ Textual data processing	High
Critical thinking	• Fieldwork • Seminars • Research	✓ Client engagement	Limited (restricted by PSFs)
Idea generation & verbal presentation	• Small-group tutorials (UG) • Presentations • Independent	✓ Client presentations ✓ Meetings	Limited (role-dependent)

	thinking & writing (PGT)		
Written communication	• Essay writing • Sociological reasoning	✓ Material preparation (audit working papers, market reports)	High
Teamwork	• Group assignments • Debates	✓ Group projects ✓ Workstream management	High
Workplace navigation	• Peer-based academic environments • SS content • Fieldwork	✓ Reading workplace dynamics ✓ Maintaining professional behaviours	High

Table 6. Synthesised Findings on Skill Acquisition and Application in PSF Work

In sum, whilst the development processes of employability skills among SS graduates largely mirror those identified in existing literature, this study highlights persistent limitations in SS programmes, including the underutilisation of co-curricular strategies and a lack of alignment with occupational demands. These shortcomings constrain the comprehensive development and effective workplace deployment of key competencies. Notably, the findings also reveal variation across degree levels: despite their advanced academic standing, PGT graduates often lacked access to key components—such as collaborative learning and practice-oriented instruction—that support the development of employability skills, and therefore had to seek alternative means to acquire them. However, this issue was not exclusive to PGT programmes. UG participants who reported a lack of structured pedagogical practices also failed to develop key skills, suggesting that the decisive factor might be the presence or absence of intentional, skills-focused instructional design, rather than degree level.

Importantly, by examining how graduates apply these skills across all phases of PSF work—including the often-overlooked post-task stage—this study offers an original

contribution to the literature. It extends current understandings not only of how employability skills are developed, but also of how they are mobilised and adapted within complex professional environments.

5.3 RQ3-How do SS graduates perceive the extent to which their degree programmes prepared them for employment in PSFs?

The findings of this study indicate that SS graduates at both UG and PGT levels perceive their degree programmes as offering limited preparation for roles within PSFs. This echoes the findings of Skaniakos et al. (2019), who argue that SS programmes often lack a strong orientation toward the world of work. Nonetheless, the present study adopts a more optimistic view regarding SS programmes' capacity to support the development of generic employability skills. However, these skills were not seen as unique to SS education; rather, their acquisition appeared to depend on the presence of components broadly available across HE. This aligns with Winberg et al.'s (2020) observation that many effective employability-enhancing approaches are not discipline-specific.

That said, the study also found that SS programmes possess particular advantages in fostering such competencies, likely due to the nature of SS disciplines themselves. Their focus on social issues and human complexity inherently demands the use of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills (Gould et al., 2018). In this way, SS education may provide a distinctive context for developing transferable skills and capabilities. However, these strengths are unlikely to be fully realised without instructional catalysts—namely, pedagogical practices and curriculum design elements that intentionally facilitate skill development (Segbenya et al., 2023). Whilst UG

programmes were generally perceived to offer more varied and structured instructional approaches than their PGT counterparts, the overall picture remains concerning. To conclude, whilst this study presents a hopeful perspective on the employability potential of SS education, it also highlights the need for more intentional and structured teaching strategies to better support students' professional preparedness across all degree levels.

The research findings also reveal two significant limitations within SS programmes regarding employability preparation: degree-related stereotypes and opportunity barriers. These findings partially align with existing literature while offering new insights.

Building on Lee et al. (2014), who argue that SS curricula often channel students into predetermined career paths, this study finds that such limitations stem not only from instructional content but also from programme ethos and faculty culture. Discouraging attitudes from peers and staff reinforced narrow views of "acceptable" careers, making it harder for graduates to apply transferable skills without institutional affirmation or support.

In terms of opportunity barriers, the study identified three interrelated constraints: restricted access to interdisciplinary learning, limited departmental support, and a disconnect between academic training and career preparation. Whilst these challenges echo concerns in prior research, this study offers further nuance. Participants—particularly within the PGT cohort—reported difficulties accessing modules beyond the traditional SS curriculum, especially in business or technical areas, thereby limiting their exposure to PSF-relevant competencies. This could be attributed to a perceived

misalignment between SS content and other disciplines, compounded by the rigid, specialised structure of PGT programmes, which collectively restricts elective choice.

However, beyond curriculum design, participants also identified a lack of institutional and departmental support for employability development. This finding aligns with earlier studies (e.g., Okolie Igwe et al., 2019; Umar & Ma'aji, 2010) that highlight gaps in faculty engagement. Academics were frequently perceived as lacking the knowledge, interest, or capacity to offer meaningful career guidance, and few examples of proactive support were reported. This is particularly striking given the availability of national frameworks (e.g., QAA, 2014, 2024) and emerging models of employability integration within SS curricula (Cadet & Griffiths, 2023). In practice, responsibility for career preparation was often deferred to centralised university career services, which participants viewed as disconnected from the disciplinary and pedagogical contexts of their academic programmes.

Even more concerning, the study identified the absence and ineffectiveness of co-curricular support provided within HEI, a concern echoed in Williams et al. (2024). Similar to findings by Bradley et al. (2009), many participants reported minimal or no engagement with university career services. Furthermore, the empirical data confirmed issues raised by Donald et al. (2018): the absence of personalised, proactive, and context-aware service provision. A key underlying reason appeared to be a significant information gap among career service staff, particularly with SS knowledge and graduate trajectories. This placed SS students at the periphery of employability initiatives in HE—not only unable to develop skills relevant to PSF roles but also excluded from accessing baseline career information. This may help explain the

persistently low employment rates of SS graduates in graduate-level roles (Prospects, 2024).

In response, graduates consistently called for SS-specific employability services and accessible, skills-based workshops, reinforcing the need for contextualised and proactive support. This aligns with Donald et al.'s (2018) argument that career services must be more personalised and discipline-sensitive. Notably, participants also criticised what they perceived as the institutional marginalisation of SS, which they attributed to cost-efficiency imperatives within marketised HE systems (Brown, 2011). Such perceived devaluation risks diminishing both students' educational experiences and their societal recognition—factors that may ultimately hinder their employability outcomes.

Research findings also reveal a nuanced tension between preserving the intellectual integrity of SS programmes and adjusting them to better support graduate employability. On the one hand, SS graduates often resisted reducing academic content in favour of employability-driven reforms, thereby challenging HEIs' market-oriented responses to policy agendas (Orton, 2011). On the other hand, participants advocated for complementary curricular and co-curricular enhancements. In particular, they advocated for modernised pedagogies, including more interactive teaching and greater emphasis on presentation skills, which aligns with Jackson and Bridgstock's (2021) call for learning approaches that mirror contemporary workplace practices. The expressed demand for data-oriented modules and broader interdisciplinary access also signals a growing need for hybrid literacies, now seen as critical in knowledge-based economies (Lauder & Mayhew, 2020).

In summary, the discussion of RQ3 indicates that SS graduates generally perceive their degree programmes as offering limited preparation for employment, particularly within PSFs. Whilst participants recognised the distinctive strengths of SS education—especially in fostering critical and transferable skills—they also emphasised that the realisation of these benefits is constrained by structural barriers embedded within HEIs. Although graduates expressed reservations about compromising academic content in response to market-driven agendas, they strongly advocated for enhanced pedagogical support and the provision of SS-specific career services to better prepare students for PSF roles and broader professional contexts. This discussion offers important empirical insights from the graduate perspective, addressing a notable gap in the literature and providing concrete suggestions for how SS programmes might more effectively support employability. Ultimately, it underscores the need for systematic, discipline-sensitive reform that balances academic integrity with practical preparation.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

6.1 Research Summary and Contribution

As knowledge-based economies expand—and with PSFs offering attractive remuneration and career prospects—this skills- and knowledge-intensive sector has become increasingly appealing to HE students and graduates (Empson et al., 2015). In response to labour market demands and pressures from government and market forces, UK HEIs have sought to equip students with a broad range of competencies (Busemeyer, 2014), extending employability initiatives to groups traditionally overlooked, such as SS students. Nonetheless, SS graduates continue to be perceived as less competitive in securing graduate-level roles (McCormack & Baron, 2023). Against this backdrop, this study examines how UK SS programmes foster the employability of graduates entering PSFs, focusing on the types of skills developed, their application in professional contexts, and graduates' perceptions of programme preparedness. Drawing on qualitative interview data, the findings offer a nuanced yet hopeful view of SS education's role in fostering employability in the increasingly competitive labour market.

The findings of this study suggest that SS graduates generally perceive their degree programmes as somewhat supportive in the development of PSF employability skills. Beyond commonly recognised generic skills such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving, this research highlights the significant role of disciplinary knowledge and the associated SS perspective in being transferred and applied to PSF contexts. This not only affirms the value of SS education but also expands the understanding of its distinctive contribution to PSF-related employability skill development.

Another scholarly contribution of this research lies in its exploration of the development-to-deployment process of employability skills—that is, how such skills are acquired through SS programmes and subsequently applied within real-world PSF contexts. Unlike previous studies that primarily evaluate curriculum content or measure whether graduates possess certain attributes, this study focuses on the lived transitional experiences of graduates. This provides a more grounded and context-sensitive account of how employability is developed and enacted within the SS–PSF nexus.

Findings from the preceding analysis suggest that employability skills can be cultivated through both curricular and co-curricular strategies embedded in SS programmes, such as research-based projects, interactive seminars, fieldwork, and external placements, though co-curricular strategies were largely absent in practice. These pedagogical practices not only enhance students' competencies in information synthesis, critical thinking, and communication but also prepare them to navigate interdisciplinary and intercultural work settings. More importantly, participants reported that these skills were not confined to academic settings—they were actively transferred and applied across different stages of PSF-related tasks, such as preparatory research, client engagement, teamwork, and reporting.

However, the study also found that the application of these skills is often constrained by the internal structures and cultures of PSFs. In environments characterised by hierarchical organisation, rigid procedures, and highly specialised task divisions, SS graduates' creativity, critical thinking, and broader skill application may be inhibited. This underscores that, while the employability discourse shaped by HEIs is undoubtedly important, external structural factors—particularly those embedded in the professional workplace—also play a significant role in determining whether and how

skills are deployed. These findings highlight the need for a more comprehensive understanding of employability — one that acknowledges the dynamic interplay between educational preparation and workplace realities. For key stakeholders aiming to enhance employability outcomes, this means moving beyond a narrow focus on curriculum reform or individual skill acquisition. Instead, it requires fostering a mutually supportive ecosystem in which HEIs and employers collaborate to ensure that skills are not only developed but also meaningfully recognised, mobilised, and sustained within professional settings. Only through such an integrated approach can the full potential of SS graduates be effectively realised.

Nevertheless, substantial improvements are still needed on the part of HEIs. Firstly, the research underscores the importance of integrated pedagogical approaches that combine disciplinary knowledge with active learning. It was not content alone, but its mode of delivery—through seminars, fieldwork, and collaborative tasks—that most effectively supported skill development. This is particularly critical for PGT SS programmes, which, due to compressed timeframes and rigid curricular structures, often failed to incorporate such approaches and, consequently, struggled to cultivate key workplace competencies. To address this, SS programmes must adopt more intentional, practice-informed teaching strategies that move beyond traditional, theory-heavy instruction.

In parallel, the study also reveals persistent structural constraints within HE, including limited access to interdisciplinary learning, a lack of effective co-curricular strategies, such as discipline-sensitive career services, and enduring stereotypes that position SS as intellectually rich but professionally detached. Nevertheless, whilst graduates advocated for both pedagogical and structural reforms—such as greater curricular

flexibility and more tailored career support—they simultaneously resisted the instrumentalisation of their discipline in response to marketisation pressures, expressing a desire to preserve its critical and reflective ethos while making it more responsive to contemporary work realities.

Finally, the findings point to the broader marginalisation of SS under marketised HE systems. Perceived lower ROIs often lead to underfunding and reduced innovation, further weakening graduate outcomes and reinforcing negative stereotypes. This creates a cyclical challenge for the relevance and sustainability of SS education. To address this, universities and policymakers must adopt a more balanced approach to resource allocation—one that recognises both the economic utility and the broader societal contributions of SS disciplines. This includes investing in pedagogical innovation, enabling interdisciplinary collaboration, and embedding context-specific employability support, thereby safeguarding the future of SS education while enhancing its alignment with evolving labour market demands.

By capturing graduate perspectives across these three dimensions—perception, application, and evaluation—this study contributes a holistic understanding of the relationship between SS education and PSF employability. It argues that SS is not inherently misaligned with PSF careers, but that its potential can only be fully realised through deliberate, context-sensitive reform. In doing so, it calls for a shift beyond one-size-fits-all employability agendas toward discipline-sensitive strategies that support both individual development and institutional reform, thereby achieving a more integrated and sustainable future for SS education.

6.2 Limitations and Future Studies

This study has several methodological limitations that warrant reflection. First, whilst the use of both convenience and purposive selection facilitated access to participants, the reliance on the researcher's personal networks and subjective selection introduced potential sampling bias. This led to an imbalance in the composition of the sample—particularly between UG and PGT participants, as well as between home and international graduates. Future research seeking to explore the broader landscape of employability skill development in SS education should consider adopting more systematic selection techniques to better capture the full diversity of graduate experiences and ensure more balanced representation across demographic and educational variables.

Second, the study relied on retrospective self-reports, which are inherently susceptible to recall bias. Whilst all participants had graduated within two years and were in employment, memory distortion or post-hoc rationalisation may still have influenced their reflections. Although clear and precise interview questions were formulated to minimise interpretive discrepancies (Khare & Vedel, 2019, p. 673), alternative approaches, such as in-person interviews (Brusco & Watts, 2015), may yield richer and more reliable insights in future work.

Third, this study adopted a broad-brush approach to categorising both SS disciplines and PSFs, without disaggregating findings by subject area (e.g., anthropology versus politics), degree level (UG versus PGT), or institutional type (pre- versus post-1992 HEIs). Such generalisations risk obscuring important variations across and within disciplines, potentially leading to oversimplified assumptions about skill development.

The differences observed between UG and PGT participants further underscore the need for future research to engage more explicitly with this heterogeneity. Whilst this limits fine-grained analysis, the study nonetheless provides a foundational account of how SS education fosters, and how graduates perceive, employability skills relevant to PSF careers. Future research could build on this foundation in two ways: first, by examining skill development pathways across different SS disciplines and degree levels to account for intra-disciplinary variation; and second, by comparing how graduates from varied SS backgrounds apply these skills within specific PSF sectors.

Despite these limitations, the study makes a timely contribution by foregrounding graduate perspectives—an often-overlooked voice in employability research. It provides a clearer understanding of the strengths and limitations of SS programmes in preparing graduates for work in PSFs and identifies both pedagogical and structural barriers to skill application. As a social science graduate myself, I hope these findings stimulate further inquiry and inform meaningful reforms that recognise and support the full potential of SS education in contemporary professional contexts.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet

Professional Service Firms (PSFs) Employability Skills Development for Social Sciences Students in UK Higher Education

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: EDUC_1282456

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

Why is this research being conducted?

While many students aspire to enter Professional Service Firms (PSFs), and these firms actively recruit candidates from diverse academic backgrounds, including social sciences, there is little explicit discussion on the specific advantages and skills that social sciences graduates bring to these roles. The competencies that PSFs seek from social sciences graduates remain underexplored, and there is a lack of comprehensive research assessing how university programmes enhance employability for these careers. Existing studies have either focused on students, who may not fully understand the specific skills required in PSFs, or senior employers, who may not be directly familiar with the day-to-day tasks of entry-level roles. Therefore, this research aims to bridge this gap by interviewing recent social sciences graduates working in PSFs to understand how their degrees contributed to both securing their positions and performing effectively in their roles. By capturing insights from those directly transitioning into these careers, this study will provide a more precise understanding of the employability value of social science degrees in PSFs.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You are invited to participate in an interview as you meet the inclusion criteria for this research study. This study explores how social sciences graduates develop employability skills and transition into roles within PSFs, such as consulting, accounting, and law. To gain deeper

insights into this topic, I am conducting interviews with recent graduates who have secured graduate jobs in PSFs. Your participation will help enhance our understanding of the role of higher education in graduate employment, the skills acquired through a social sciences degree, and how these skills align with the expectations of PSFs.

Eligibility Criteria for Participation:

- Recent graduates (within the last two years) from an undergraduate OR postgraduate taught programme in one of the social sciences programmes[1] at a UK higher education institution, and are
- Currently working in a Professional Service Firm[2] in the UK.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the study, without giving a reason, and without negative consequences, by advising me of this decision. The deadline by which you can withdraw any information you have contributed to the research is 14 August 2025. Should you choose to withdraw, all data and digital files will be deleted and destroyed permanently, to comply with the UK General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018.

What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

If you plan to take part, you will expect to have a 45-60 minute interview with the primary researcher (me). Please find the following for details of the interviews:

- All interviews will be conducted online (through Microsoft Teams), subject to your availability.
- The interviews will take 45 to 60 minutes. No preparation in advance is necessary, and no follow-up sessions will take place.

[1] Social sciences include disciplines like social studies, sociology, anthropology, architecture, building & planning, education and psychology.
[2] Professional Service Firms include industries such as legal services, accounting and auditing, consulting, and architecture.

- This will be a semi-structured, conversation-style interview, where the researcher will prepare questions in advance and ask about your experiences. I will also ask follow-up questions based on your response.
- An information sheet (this document) and consent form will be provided, and all participants are required to sign the consent form to participate.
- With your consent, I would like to audio record and video record you so that I can have an accurate record of our conversation for further analysis.
- All participants can withdraw from the study without giving a reason and without negative consequences by advising me of this decision.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

Although no significant disadvantages or risks are anticipated in taking part, if you experience any discomfort, you are free to withdraw from the research at any time. All data and information collected will be fully anonymised, ensuring that participants are not directly identifiable. The only details disclosed will be those related to the eligibility criteria for participation. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms or numerical codes will be used to anonymise responses, and any identifying details shared during the interview will be removed or generalised during transcription and analysis.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

While there are no immediate benefits for participants, this research aims to enhance the understanding of how social sciences graduates develop employability skills for PSFs. Findings may help UK higher education institutions to improve employability support and assist employers in recognising the unique strengths of social sciences graduates, ultimately bridging the gap between higher education and PSF career demands.

What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

This study will collect the following types of data:

- **Demographic and Educational Background** – Information such as degree programmes, university attended, and year of graduation to understand how different social sciences disciplines contribute to employability in PSFs.
- **Career Pathway and Professional Context** – Information such as current role and responsibilities, nature of the organisation and industry and career trajectory post-graduation to understand participants; current work context.

- **Employability Skill Development during Higher Education** – Information such as the specific skills developed through their social science degree, as well as teaching methods, learning experiences, or institutional initiatives that supported skill development.
- **Workplace Experiences and Skill Application** – Reflections on how well their degree prepared them for their job, any skills that could be directly applied, and additional skill/knowledge gaps they encountered.
- **General Views on Higher Education and Employability** – Opinions on whether university education effectively fosters employability skills for careers in PSFs and any suggestions for improvement.

The collected data is expected to provide valuable insights into social sciences graduates' perspectives on how effectively UK higher education prepares them for careers in PSFs. Additionally, it will help identify the key skills most relevant for excelling in these roles, directly addressing the research question and fulfilling the study's objectives.

Identifiable data (including consent forms) will be stored safely and carefully on the University's Nexus365 cloud, which is Oxford's approved data storage platform and is available for all University staff and students.

They will be stored for a minimum period of three years after the submission of the final dissertation (14th August 2025-14th August 2028). Once audio and video recordings are transcribed and anonymised, they will be permanently deleted. Only the primary researcher and supervisor will have access to the research data.

Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

The findings from the research will be written in a master's thesis. Given that all information that could reveal the participant's identity will be anonymised, it will be unlikely that the participants would be identifiable from the outputs of the research. I would like your permission to use direct quotations but without identifying you in any research outputs.

A copy of my thesis/ dissertation will be deposited online in the Oxford University Research Archive where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in future research.

Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance website at https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights.

Who has reviewed this research?

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: EDUC_1282456).

Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact [redacted] or [redacted] We will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the University of Oxford Research Governance, Ethics & Assurance (RGEA) team at rgea.complaints@admin.ox.ac.uk or on +44 (0)1865 616480.

Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Primary Researcher:

[redacted]

Department of Education, University of Oxford, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY

Appendix B: Consent Form

Consent to take part in:

Professional Service Firms (PSFs) Employability Skills Development for Social Sciences Students in UK Higher Education

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: EDUC_1282456

Purpose of Study: This study aims to examine how recent social sciences graduates from UK higher education develop employability skills relevant to Professional Service Firms (PSFs) and how well their academic programmes have prepared them for careers in these sectors.

	Please initial each box if you agree with the statement
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point until **14/August/2025**, without giving any reason.	☐
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	☐
I understand the extent to which I could be identifiable from any publications.	☐
I consent to being audio recorded.	☐
I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs if I am not identifiable.	☐
I give permission for you to contact me again to clarify information.	☐
I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	☐

I agree to take part. ☐

_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of participant	Date	Signature

_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of person taking consent	Date[3]	Signature

[3] To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant. Once this has been signed by both parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form. The original signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents, which must be kept in a secure location.

Appendix C: CUREC Approval Letter

Applicant: [redacted]
Principal Investigator: [redacted]
Department: Education

Study title: Professional Service Firms (PSFs) Employability Skills Development for Social Sciences Students in UK Higher Education
(Version: 1.0)

Ethics reference: Education (Educ) DREC - 1282456

Dear [redacted],

On behalf of the Committee, I confirm that the above research study described in the application and other supporting documentation submitted to the committee has been carefully considered on behalf of the Education (Educ) DREC in accordance with the University's regulations and policy for ethics approval of research involving human participants, human tissue and/or personal data. The opinion is as follows:

Opinion of Research Ethics Committee: Favourable Opinion

Subject to the following conditions:

Decision Date: 5 May 2025, 17:41

Opinion End Date: 5 Nov 2026

If favourable, insurance-provided indemnity arrangements will be in place between the decision date and opinion end date and you may now commence your study activities. Should you plan to continue the research beyond the end date above, it is your responsibility to ensure that you request, and receive, an extension (via amendment) from the committee for indemnity to remain in place. You may be required to provide a justification.

Please note the following:

Amendments: Should there be any subsequent changes to the reviewed study, applications for amendments can be made via the Oxford Ethics Application System (Worktribe Ethics).

Reports: Studies considered by OxTREC are expected to submit an *annual progress report* on each anniversary of study approval, until the study is completed. An end of study report is also required.

Audit: This study may be selected for audit at the discretion of the Research Governance, Ethics and Assurance Team.

Data safety: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all data collected during the course of the study is stored and transferred safely and securely in accordance with University requirements. Further guidance and advice are available from the Research Data Team. Additional information is available at https://researchsupport.web.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics

Yours Sincerely

Education Ethics Officer

Response:
Dear [redacted]

I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and approval has been granted.

The ethics reference is: EDUC_1282456. Please make sure to include that in all the supporting documents.

You can download your decision letter from the top right menu, under "Templates".

All the best for your research - we hope it goes well!

The Research Team

Notified [redacted]
Set Decision Date to 5 May 2025, 17:41

Appendix D: Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule (Full)

Please note that this interview schedule is by no means exhaustive and that the questions were not always asked in the exact order.
[The information sheet and consent form were read and signed prior to the interview.]

Introduction to the Topic: Hi, I am [redacted]. I am currently researching Professional Service Firms (PSFs) Employability Skills Development for Social Sciences Graduates in UK Higher Education. The interview should take between 45 minutes and 60 minutes. Feel free to ask me any questions at any point. I would be happy to answer them. If you do not have any questions at this point and are ready, is it okay if I start the interview?

[After consent was given, start with Section 1]

Section 1: Personal Experience Questions (Expected: 15 min)

- Let's start with a few basic questions. Could you briefly describe your educational background (undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, including subjects studied)?
- Moving on to the present. Could you tell me your current role at a professional service firm (PSF)?
- How long have you been working in this role, and what attracted you to pursue a career in this PSF and in this job after studying social sciences?
    - What do you think about your job? (Good or bad? Happy or not?)

Section 2: Skills Developed in University

Now I want you to connect your HE experience with your work, firstly…

- Can you describe the key skills you gained during your (social science) degree?
    - This could include academic, interpersonal, or even practical skills.
    - *[optional]For example, did you develop skills in critical thinking, communication, analysis, teamwork, or project management?
- Which of these skills do you consider relevant or transferable to your current work?
    - hard/soft/generic/tech/digital skills
        - 1) Learning and Innovation Skills, which include creativity, innovation, critical thinking, problem solving, communication
        - 2) Information, Media, and Technology Skills, which involve information literacy, media literacy and ICT literacy;

        - 3) Life and Career Skills, which entail flexibility, adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills; productivity and accountability, leadership and responsibility
    - Or is it more something you learn on the job?

Section 3: How Skills Were Developed

- Can you describe how your degree helped you develop these skills — through teaching, assignments, group work, or other experiences?
- [If interviewee only said general information] Were there any particular modules, projects, or assignments during your degree that you feel significantly contributed to your skill development?
    - Beyond your academic programme, were there any other experiences — such as internships, part-time jobs, volunteering, or extracurricular activities — that helped you develop skills relevant to your current role?
    - Looking back, which do you feel had a greater impact on your preparedness for work in a PSF: your academic programme or your extracurricular experiences? Why?
- Did your programme explicitly focus on employability or transferable skills? How was that communicated to you?

Section 4: Application of Skills in the Workplace

- How frequently do you draw on those skills in your day-to-day tasks?
- Can you describe a situation in your current job where you used a skill developed during your studies?
- Have you noticed any particular strengths or unique perspectives you bring to your work as a social science graduate, especially in comparison to colleagues from different academic backgrounds?
    - How about limitations?
- (no need to compare between peers, but compare between HE degree and job) Are there any gaps you've noticed between what your job requires and what your degree prepared you for?
    - How were these gaps addressed?
    - Did the company offer any assistance? Was this assistance sufficient?
    - *If limitations are mentioned, ask:
        - From the company's perspective, despite these shortcomings, could you think of any reasons why the company chose to recruit social science students (students without relevant experience or background)? What is the purpose of the company's recruitment?

Section 5: Perceptions of Preparedness

- Looking back, how well did your degree prepare you for entering the professional workforce?
- If you could change or add something to your degree programme to better support your career, what would that be?
- Is the university (as a whole) more important in supporting you for your job than the courses? Why?

Section 6: Final Reflections and Wrap-Up

- While it may be argued that social science programmes were not originally designed with a strong vocational focus—particularly not with elite or prestigious PSF careers in mind—it's undeniable that many students are still eager to pursue roles in professional service firms.
    - In light of this, what do you think all those relevant stakeholders (such as higher education institutions, social science curricula, or individual lecturers and professors) could do to better support these students? Do you have any suggestions?
    - Do you think SS course needs to be adjusted? to become more work/employment oriented? Why?
- Do you have any advice for current social science students aspiring to work in PSFs?
    - How about advice to Higher education institutions/social science programmes/lecturers/professors, etc.?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share?
- Any questions for me before we end the interview?

Thank you — your insights have been incredibly valuable.

Feel free to contact me should you have questions or concerns regarding my research. Have a lovely day!

Appendix E: Sample Message for LinkedIn

Hi ,
Hope this message finds you well. I'm a master's student doing MSc Education (Higher Education) at the University of Oxford and am currently working on my dissertation exploring how social science graduates develop employability skills during their studies and apply them in professional service firms (e.g. consulting, auditing, legal, PR or marketing firms).

Given your education and work background, I'd love to hear about your experiences through a 45–60 minute online interview. Your insights would be incredibly valuable to this research, and everything shared will remain anonymous.

If you're open to it, I'd be happy to share more details (including the information sheet) and arrange a time that works for you. Thank you so much for considering!

Best regards,

[redacted]

Appendix F: Prescott's (2011) 10-step Model for Designing and Implementing Qualitative Interviews

Steps of the validation process	Described in section
1) Review of the literature	5.1
2) Review of documents and course descriptions	5.1 Appendix A
3) Self-reflection and self-interview	5.2
4) Asking teachers to define academic writing and explain the purpose of teaching it (using a brief survey)	5.3 Appendix B
5) Semi-structured interview with a highly experienced teacher about the development and purpose of the course	5.4 Appendix C
6) Semi-structured interviews with two teachers about how they teach the course	5.5 Appendix D
7) Informal interviews with students to get their views on the course	5.6
8) Preparation of provisional interview schedule	5.7 Appendix E
9) Asking for feedback on the schedule from other Academic Skills teachers	5.8
10) Piloting the interview schedule	6

Source: Prescott (2011, p. 21)

Appendix G: Braun and Clarke's (2006) Six Phases of Thematic Analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Source: Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87)