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## NAVIGATING POST-PHD CAREER TRANSITIONS: SELF-LEADERSHIP AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT AMONG ALUMNI OF A MALAYSIAN PUBLIC RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

\*Zhao Qiang<sup>1</sup>, Zuraidah Abdullah<sup>2</sup>, & Muhammad Danial Azman<sup>3</sup>

[1]  
Institute for  
Advanced Studies  
(IAS), Universiti  
Malaya

[2]  
Department of  
Educational  
Management,  
Planning and Policy,  
Faculty of Education,  
Universiti Malaya

[3]  
International  
Institute of Public  
Policy &  
Management  
(INPUMA), Universiti  
Malaya

*Corresponding Author:*  
*chairman@cici.my*

### ABSTRACT

Global higher education institutions have undergone significant changes as a result of the growth of PhD programs; however, the scarcity of academic employment has made post-PhD career transitions increasingly problematic. Although doctoral enrollment and research output have increased at Malaysia's public research universities, structured training for a variety of job paths has not received sufficient attention. In the first year following graduation, this study investigates how doctorate graduates handle early professional transitions. Fifteen doctoral graduates from five different fields, education, science, engineering, business and accounting, and languages and linguistics, were interviewed semi-structuredly using a qualitative interpretative methodology. Findings reveal three dominant transition patterns: planned academic continuity, strategic industry transition, and adaptive career redirection. Disciplinary opportunity structures significantly shaped perceived career options, with STEM and Business alumni demonstrating stronger industry integration compared to Education and Languages graduates. Despite structural constraints, alumni exercised proactive agency through goal structuring, skill repositioning, and psychological resilience. Self-leadership emerged as a central mechanism in managing uncertainty and professional identity reconstruction. While participants acknowledged strong research preparation, they reported limited structured institutional career support and reliance on supervisor-dependent guidance. The study integrates Career Construction Theory, Social Cognitive Career Theory, and Self-Leadership Theory to conceptualize career transition as an interaction between personal agency, disciplinary contexts, institutional preparation, and labor market conditions. The findings highlight the need to embed structured career development frameworks within doctoral programs. By providing contextual evidence from a Malaysian public research university, this study contributes to doctoral education reform discussions and offers cross-disciplinary insights into strengthening career readiness in contemporary higher education environments.

**Keywords:** Doctoral education, self-leadership, career transition, graduate employability, higher education management, Malaysia.



# MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

## INTRODUCTION

Doctoral education has traditionally been viewed as preparation for an academic career. For many years, universities positioned the PhD as a direct pathway to research-focused academic roles, where success was largely measured by publications, research grants, and the ability to supervise postgraduate students (McAlpine, 2014). However, the landscape of doctoral careers has considerably changed. Increasing global competition, a limited number of tenure-track positions, and shifting labour market demands have reshaped the professional trajectories of PhD graduates (Chen, 2021; Skakni et al., 2026).

Although doctoral enrolment has expanded across higher education systems, the growth of permanent academic positions has not kept pace. As a result, many graduates now face structural pressures to pursue diverse career pathways beyond academia (McAlpine, 2016). In the Malaysian context, public research universities have intensified doctoral enrolment and internationalisation efforts to enhance national research capacity and strengthen global competitiveness. Despite these developments, it remains unclear whether doctoral training adequately prepares graduates for early career transitions across different disciplines.

Much of the existing research still evaluates doctoral success through measurable indicators such as completion rates, supervision quality, and research productivity (McAlpine, 2020). Although these indicators are undeniably important, they tell only part of the story. They often overlook the lived realities that PhD graduates encounter once they leave the structured environment of their doctoral programmes. In particular, limited attention has been paid to how alumni navigate the immediate postdoctoral phase, especially within Malaysian public research universities, where institutional expectations and employment landscapes may differ from Western contexts.

International studies indicate that career aspirations are not fixed; rather, they evolve throughout the doctoral journey (Etmanski, 2020; McAlpine & Emmioğlu, 2015). Many graduates eventually move into non-academic roles, sometimes as a deliberate strategic choice and sometimes due to limited academic opportunities. The transition from doctoral candidate to early-career professional is therefore rarely straightforward. It often involves uncertainty, the reshaping of professional identity, and continuous negotiation between the training provided by universities and the realities of the labour market (Li & Horta, 2024). In this sense, understanding doctoral outcomes requires moving beyond metrics to examine how individuals make sense of, and adapt to, life after the PhD.

This study explores the real-life experiences of 15 doctoral graduates from five different academic disciplines at a Malaysian public research university. Rather than viewing their journeys only through institutional statistics or employment outcomes, it listens closely to how these alumni describe their early career transitions, including the uncertainties, challenges, and adjustments they faced after completing their PhD. The study pays particular attention to how they practised self-leadership, made decisions under pressure, and navigated complex professional environments. It also examines how they experienced and evaluated the institutional support provided during and after their doctoral studies.

By comparing experiences across disciplines, the research offers a richer and more nuanced understanding of how career pathways may differ depending on academic background. Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of centring alumni voices when evaluating doctoral education. Their lived experiences provide valuable insights into whether current doctoral systems genuinely prepare graduates for today's evolving employment landscape and where meaningful structural improvements may be needed.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Diversification of Post-PhD Career Pathways*

This study explores the real-life experiences of 15 doctoral graduates from five different academic disciplines at a



# MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

Malaysian public research university. Rather than viewing their journeys only through institutional statistics or employment outcomes, it listens closely to how these alumni describe their early career transitions, including the uncertainties, challenges, and adjustments they faced after completing their PhD. The study pays particular attention to how they practised self-leadership, made decisions under pressure, and navigated complex professional environments. It also examines how they experienced and evaluated the institutional support provided during and after their doctoral studies.

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### ***Identity Reconstruction and Professional Repositioning***

Career transition at the doctoral level is not simply about finding a job after graduation; it is also about redefining oneself as a professional. During the PhD journey, candidates are immersed in academic norms, values, and expectations that gradually shape their sense of what a "successful" career should look like. This academic habitus often positions research-intensive university roles as the most legitimate or prestigious pathway (Galimberti, 2023). As a result, when graduates choose or are compelled to move into non-research or non-academic roles, the shift is not merely practical but deeply personal. This process of identity reconstruction can generate uncertainty and tension, particularly when university cultures continue to privilege academic trajectories as the benchmark of success.

For international graduates, the transition may be even more layered. Beyond professional repositioning, they often navigate issues of mobility, recognition of qualifications, visa regulations, and a sense of belonging in new socio-cultural environments (Adhikari & Bastola, 2025). Consequently, understanding identity development is crucial for analysing how doctoral graduates interpret, negotiate, and ultimately navigate their post-PhD careers.

### ***Disciplinary Opportunity Structures***

Not all doctoral journeys lead to the same kinds of opportunities. Although the PhD is often portrayed as a universal qualification, its value and portability vary considerably across disciplines. Research shows that graduates from STEM and business-related fields frequently encounter broader employment options beyond academia. Their expertise often aligns more directly with industry needs, enabling smoother transitions into corporate, technological, or innovation-driven sectors (Hatt et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). In contrast, graduates from humanities and education-related disciplines may find that career pathways remain more closely tied to academic institutions, where tenure-track positions are limited, and competition is intense.

These differences are not simply about employability; they reflect deeper structural patterns embedded within disciplines. Each field carries its own traditions, labour market connections, and implicit definitions of what counts as "success." In some disciplines, moving into industry may be viewed as a natural and even prestigious progression. In others, leaving academia may be perceived as a deviation from the expected scholarly trajectory. As Hatt et al. (2024) suggest, the perceived value of doctoral training is interpreted differently across fields, shaping how graduates evaluate stability, achievement, and professional identity.

While cross-disciplinary mobility is becoming more common, opportunity structures remain uneven (Zhang et al., 2025). Graduates often make career decisions within the constraints of these structures. For example, a doctoral graduate in engineering may assess employment risks differently from a graduate in education because the range and visibility of alternative career options differ significantly. These structural variations influence how individuals plan their job searches, manage uncertainty, and construct their professional futures.



## MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

Understanding these disciplinary dynamics is therefore essential. Without cross-field analysis, discussions of doctoral career outcomes risk oversimplification. Recognising how opportunity structures vary across disciplines allows for a more nuanced appreciation of doctoral graduates' lived experiences and the strategic choices they make when navigating complex and uncertain labour markets.

### ***Self-Leadership and Career Adaptability***

Career transitions are rarely shaped by qualifications alone. At the heart of successful career adaptation lies individual agency, the capacity of individuals to take ownership of their direction, decisions, and development. Research increasingly shows that self-leadership is not just a personal trait but a practical strategy that strengthens career adaptability, resilience, and proactive goal-setting (Chuanyou et al., 2025). In other words, those who consciously guide themselves by setting clear goals, monitoring their progress, and adjusting their strategies are better equipped to navigate uncertainty.

Beyond strategic planning, psychological resources are also important. Emotional intelligence and mindfulness, for instance, help individuals regulate their emotions, remain composed under pressure, and make thoughtful decisions during periods of transition (Hattingh, 2023; Tenschert et al., 2025). Career shifts, especially at the doctoral level, often involve ambiguity, delayed outcomes, and identity renegotiation. Graduates who cultivate self-awareness and reflective practices are therefore more capable of adapting constructively rather than reacting defensively.

Importantly, adaptability does not emerge from individual effort alone. Graduates who engage in structured planning and ongoing reflection tend to demonstrate stronger adjustment outcomes, yet their experiences are also shaped by the institutional environments in which they operate. Organizational career development systems, such as mentoring structures, professional development programs, and transparent progression pathways, significantly influence job satisfaction and performance (Iis et al., 2022; Rapuano & Valickas, 2023). This suggests that while personal initiative is essential, it unfolds within broader structural contexts that can either enable or constrain career growth.

Taken together, these insights highlight why self-leadership provides a valuable analytical lens for examining doctoral career transitions. It allows us to understand how individuals actively interpret challenges, mobilize internal resources, and respond to external conditions. Rather than viewing career outcomes as solely structurally determined or entirely self-driven, this perspective recognises the dynamic interplay between personal agency and institutional context.

Supervision and doctoral pedagogy do more than guide students through research; they quietly shape how doctoral candidates imagine their futures. As highlighted by Green et al. (2023), the ways supervisors mentor, advise, and model career pathways often influence whether students see academia as the primary goal or consider broader professional options. In many cases, however, career conversations happen informally, depending largely on the supervisor's personal experience, network, and priorities, rather than being intentionally built into the doctoral curriculum itself.

This informal, supervisor-dependent approach can create uneven experiences. Some students benefit from mentors who actively discuss diverse career possibilities, while others receive little structured guidance beyond completion of research. Recognizing this gap, scholars such as Teperek et al. (2022) have called for a rethinking of rigid academic structures. They argue that professional development should not be treated as an optional add-on, but as an integrated and explicit component of doctoral education. Embedding career preparation within formal training could help normalize multiple career trajectories and reduce uncertainty among candidates.

At the same time, new technological developments offer promising, but still limited, support. For example, Gedrimiene et al. (2024) point to the potential of AI-supported career analytics to help doctoral students identify



# MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

transferable skills, explore labour market trends, and make more informed career decisions. Yet, such tools remain underdeveloped and are rarely tailored specifically to doctoral-level transitions. Their promise has not yet translated into widespread institutional practice.

In the absence of structured personal development planning frameworks and systematic alumni mentoring systems, many doctoral graduates must rely heavily on their own initiative. As noted by McAlpine (2020), this self-directed navigation can be empowering for some but overwhelming for others, particularly in increasingly complex and competitive labour markets. Consequently, understanding how alumni perceive their preparedness, support systems, and career navigation experiences becomes crucial. Their lived experiences provide valuable insights for institutions seeking to reform doctoral education in ways that are more responsive, inclusive, and aligned with contemporary employment realities.

## **PURPOSE OF STUDY**

Building upon the identified gaps in doctoral career transition research, this study aims to systematically examine how doctoral alumni navigate the early post-PhD phase within a Malaysian Public Research University context. The objectives are designed to capture both individual agency and structural influences, while allowing cross-disciplinary comparison across five academic fields. Each research objective is directly aligned with a corresponding research question in ensuring conceptual coherence and methodological clarity. The research objectives for this study are listed as follows:

1. RO1: To explore how doctoral alumni across five disciplines describe their early post-PhD career pathways.
2. RO2: To examine the self-leadership strategies alumni employ in managing career transitions and uncertainty.
3. RO3: To evaluate alumni perceptions of institutional preparation and support during doctoral training.
4. RO4: To analyse how disciplinary context and structural conditions interact with personal agency in shaping career outcomes.
5. RO5: To generate evidence-based recommendations for strengthening doctoral career preparation in Malaysian public research universities.

Subsequently, the research questions are listed as follows:

1. RQ1: How do doctoral alumni from different disciplines describe their career trajectories within the first year after graduation?
2. RQ2: What self-leadership strategies do alumni use to manage uncertainty, goal-setting, and professional identity development?
3. RQ3: How do alumni perceive the adequacy of doctoral training and institutional career support?
4. RQ4: How do disciplinary background, labour market structure, and institutional policies influence career decision-making?
5. RQ5: What institutional improvements do alumni recommend to enhance doctoral career readiness?

## ***Underlying Theories for The Study***

Doctoral education was once widely imagined as a straight road leading into academia, complete the PhD, secure a postdoctoral position, and eventually obtain a tenure-track position. Today, however, that pathway is far less predictable. Research on doctoral education and employability consistently shows that the PhD journey has become increasingly complex and diversified. As doctoral enrolment expands while tenure-track opportunities remain limited (Chen, 2021; McAlpine, 2016; Skakni et al., 2026), many graduates find themselves exploring career directions beyond the traditional academic route.

Rather than representing failure or deviation, this shift reflects broader structural realities. Increasing numbers of



## MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

PhD holders are moving into industry, public policy, consultancy, and interdisciplinary environments (Etmanski, 2020; McAlpine, 2024). These transitions often require more than a simple change of workplace; they involve reinterpreting one's expertise, translating research skills into new contexts, and redefining what it means to be a "doctor." Importantly, disciplinary background shapes these possibilities. Graduates from STEM and business-related fields tend to experience smoother entry into non-academic sectors, while those from humanities disciplines may face narrower opportunity structures (Hutt et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025).

These patterns suggest that post-PhD transition is not merely about securing employment but about reconstructing professional identity. Career Construction Theory offers a helpful perspective in this regard, viewing career development as an ongoing narrative process. From this lens, doctoral graduates are not passive recipients of labour market outcomes; they are active agents who interpret, adapt, and craft new professional stories in response to changing contexts (Li & Horta, 2024; Galimberti, 2023). In this sense, the contemporary PhD journey is less a linear ladder and more a dynamic process of meaning-making and identity negotiation.

Focusing only on identity construction does not fully capture how doctoral graduates actually make career decisions. Beyond redefining who they are professionally, graduates must weigh risks, consider possible outcomes, and respond to structural realities in the labour market. Research shows that career intentions are not fixed; they evolve as individuals encounter new information, shifting opportunities, and perceived barriers (Amirbayeva & Moqbil, 2025; McAlpine & Emmioğlu, 2015). Disciplinary employment patterns, institutional hiring practices, and concerns about long-term stability all shape how graduates interpret their options (Hatt et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025).

In this regard, Social Cognitive Career Theory offers a useful lens. It explains how self-efficacy beliefs (confidence in one's abilities), outcome expectations (anticipated consequences), and contextual supports or constraints interact to shape career goals and decisions. Graduates who see a strong fit between their skills and market needs tend to articulate clearer and more confident career pathways. In contrast, those who face limited openings or structural constraints often adjust their aspirations, not necessarily because of diminished ability, but in response to environmental conditions (McAlpine, 2020; Chen, 2021).

Career transition, therefore, is not simply a matter of personal identity reconstruction. It is a dynamic process in which individual cognition and external opportunity structures continuously influence one another.

While identity construction helps us understand how doctoral graduates see themselves, it does not fully explain how they actually make career decisions in uncertain environments. Beyond questions of "Who am I as a scholar?" graduates must also ask, "What risks am I willing to take?" "What opportunities are realistically available?", and "How secure is this pathway?" Research on doctoral career transitions shows that intentions often shift over time as individuals encounter changing labour markets, institutional expectations, and personal circumstances. Career decisions are therefore shaped not only by aspirations, but also by perceived barriers, disciplinary job prospects, and judgments about stability and growth.

In this regard, Social Cognitive Career Theory offers a useful lens. It highlights how self-efficacy (belief in one's ability), outcome expectations (belief about likely results), and contextual supports or constraints work together to influence career goals. Graduates who feel confident in their competencies and see a clear match between their skills and market demands tend to move forward with greater clarity and purpose. In contrast, those who face limited opportunities or structural barriers may adjust, delay, or redirect their aspirations. Career transition, therefore, is not a simple shift from one role to another, but a dynamic negotiation between personal beliefs and the realities of the environment.

Beyond identity and cognitive reflection, navigating post-PhD uncertainty also requires strong behavioural self-regulation. Transitioning from doctoral study into the workforce is not only about how graduates see themselves,



# MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

but also about what they actively do. Research on self-leadership shows that graduates who set clear goals, monitor their own progress, and remain resilient in the face of setbacks are better able to adapt to changing career landscapes (Chuanyou et al., 2025; Tenschert et al., 2025). In uncertain environments, these proactive behaviours become critical survival tools rather than optional strengths.

At the same time, psychological resources are crucial. Emotional intelligence and mindfulness help graduates manage stress, regulate emotions, and cope with ambiguity during career transitions (Hattingh, 2023). However, individual effort alone is not sufficient. Organizational career systems and institutional support structures shape the opportunities available and influence how effectively graduates can translate their initiative into professional outcomes (Iis et al., 2022; Rapuano & Valickas, 2023).

By integrating Career Construction Theory, Social Cognitive Career Theory, and Self-Leadership Theory, this study frames post-PhD transition as a dynamic interaction between personal agency and structural conditions. Career development is therefore understood not as a purely individual journey, but as a negotiated process shaped by disciplinary contexts, institutional preparation, and broader labour market realities. This integrated perspective provides a clear and coherent foundation for examining how doctoral alumni in a Malaysian Public Research University navigate their early career paths within complex and evolving environments.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive research design to gain a deeper understanding of how doctoral alumni experience and navigate their post-PhD career transitions. The decision to use an interpretive approach was intentional and aligned with the core purpose of the research, to explore how individuals make sense of their career journeys after completing their doctorate.

Career transition is not merely a change in employment status; it involves shifts in identity, aspirations, expectations, and professional positioning. For many doctoral graduates, the transition period includes uncertainty, negotiation of self-concept, and strategic adaptation to evolving opportunities. An interpretive design was therefore appropriate because it allowed the study to move beyond surface-level outcomes and instead focus on participants' lived experiences within their specific institutional, cultural, and professional contexts.

Rather than relying on predefined variables or standardized measurements, this research prioritised participants' narratives, reflections, and interpretations of their own journeys. The emphasis was on understanding how meaning is constructed, how alumni interpret their doctoral training, how they perceive institutional support, and how they strategically respond to opportunities and constraints in the labour market. Such meaning-making processes are central to understanding career transitions, particularly at the doctoral level, where identity and expertise are deeply intertwined.

By situating participants' experiences within their real-world contexts, the study was able to capture the complexity, nuance, and individuality of their career pathways. Table 2 presents an overview of the methodological design, outlining the key components that guided the research process.

**Table 2**  
*Overview of Methodological Design*

Component	Description
Participants	15 doctoral alumni from a Malaysian Public Research University
Disciplinary Distribution	Education (3), Science (3), Engineering (3), Business and Accountancy (3), Languages and Linguistics (3)



# MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

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Sampling Strategy	Purposive sampling
Data Collection Method	Semi-structured in-depth interviews
Data Analysis Approach	Thematic analysis using theory-informed coding
Comparative Strategy	Cross-case comparison across disciplines
Ethical Considerations	Confidentiality assured, voluntary participation, institutional ethics approval obtained

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This study was carried out with 15 doctoral alumni from a Malaysian Public Research University, each of whom had recently completed the demanding journey of a PhD. Rather than treating them simply as data sources, the study approached them as individuals navigating a significant life and career transition.

To ensure that the findings reflected a range of academic cultures and career pathways, participants were drawn evenly from five disciplines: Education, Science, Engineering, Business and Accountancy, and Languages and Linguistics. Three alumni represented each field. This balanced structure made it possible to compare how transition experiences unfolded across disciplines, while still preserving the depth and nuance within each academic context.

All participants had graduated within the past one to three years. This timeframe was intentionally chosen so that their reflections would remain fresh, emotionally resonant, and closely connected to the realities of early career adjustment. Their experiences captured the uncertainty, decision-making, and identity negotiation that often characterize the immediate post-PhD period.

Purposive sampling guided participant selection. Alumni were invited not only because of their disciplinary background, but also because they were willing to engage thoughtfully and critically with their own transition journeys. The focus of the study was not statistical generalization, but a rich, contextualised understanding. Recruitment continued until thematic sufficiency was reached, when additional interviews no longer introduced substantially new insights, but instead reinforced emerging patterns.

Data for this study were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This approach provided a balance between consistency across participants and the flexibility to explore each person's unique experiences. Conversations focused on participants' career paths, self-leadership practices, perceptions of institutional support, and the broader structural factors influencing their transitions. With participants' consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed word-for-word.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, starting with coding informed by existing career development and self-leadership theories, then refined inductively to capture new insights that emerged from the interviews. Comparisons across different disciplines helped identify common patterns as well as unique variations in career transitions. Ethical approval was secured from the university's review board, participation was entirely voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used and identifying information was removed, with data stored securely and accessible only to the research team.

## FINDINGS

### *Summary Description of Participants*

Table 1 shows that the 15 participants ranged in age from 31 to 38 years old, reflecting early-career professionals who are within the first stage of postdoctoral transition. This age range is consistent with typical doctoral completion timelines in Malaysian public research universities, placing the participants within a critical career



# MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

consolidation period.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Profile of Participants (N = 15)*

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Field of Study	Current Occupation
P1	33	Female	Education	Senior Lecturer, Private University
P2	35	Male	Education	Curriculum Consultant, Education Consultancy Firm
P3	32	Female	Education	Research Officer, Educational NGO
P4	34	Male	Science	Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Public University
P5	36	Female	Science	R&D Scientist, Biotechnology Company
P6	31	Male	Science	Data Analyst, Environmental Research Agency
P7	37	Male	Engineering	Senior Engineer, Multinational Corporation
P8	33	Female	Engineering	Assistant Professor, Technical University
P9	35	Male	Engineering	Project Manager, Engineering Consultancy Firm
P10	34	Female	Business and Accountancy	Financial Analyst, Investment Firm
P11	38	Male	Business and Accountancy	Senior Lecturer, Public University
P12	32	Female	Business and Accountancy	Strategy Manager, Corporate Sector
P13	36	Female	Languages and Linguistics	Lecturer, Public University
P14	33	Male	Languages and Linguistics	Language Policy Officer, Government Agency
P15	35	Female	Languages and Linguistics	Academic Editor, International Publishing Firm

In terms of gender distribution, the sample includes eight female and seven male alumni, indicating a relatively balanced representation. This distribution allows the study to capture diverse perspectives while avoiding gender dominance within the dataset. The participants represent five major disciplinary clusters. Education, Languages, and Linguistics alumni are primarily positioned within academic and policy-related roles, reflecting traditional career pathways in these fields. Science and Engineering alumni demonstrate a stronger presence in industry, research and development, and technical consultancy, although academic positions are also represented. Business and Accountancy alumni exhibit the most diversified pathways, including academia, corporate management, and financial analysis roles. This disciplinary spread provides insight into how structural opportunity patterns differ across fields.

Regarding current occupations, participants are employed across multiple sectors, including public universities, private universities, multinational corporations, research institutes, government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and corporate firms. This diversity highlights that doctoral graduates do not follow a single linear academic pathway but instead pursue varied professional trajectories shaped by disciplinary context, personal agency, and market conditions.

Overall, the participant profile demonstrates balanced disciplinary representation, gender diversity, and sectoral variation. This diversity enhances the credibility of the study by ensuring that the findings reflect a broad range of post-PhD transition experiences, rather than being confined to a single professional pathway.



***Findings for RQ1***

RQ1: How do doctoral alumni from different disciplines describe their early post-PhD career trajectories?

Analysis of the interview data revealed three major themes that describe early post-PhD career pathways: (1) Planned Academic Continuity, (2) Strategic Industry Transition, and (3) Adaptive Career Redirection. These themes reflect variation across disciplines while highlighting the role of opportunity structures and personal decision-making.

**Theme 1: Planned Academic Continuity**

**Codes: Academic Aspiration, Postdoctoral Positioning, Research Identity Stability**

Several participants described a relatively linear transition into academia. These alumni, primarily from Education, Science, and Languages and Linguistics, reported that their doctoral training aligned closely with their intended academic careers. They viewed their PhD as preparation for teaching, publishing, and securing postdoctoral or lecturer roles.

One participant from Education (P1) explained:

From the beginning of my final year, my plan was very clear. I wanted to stay in academia. I applied for lecturer positions even before submitting my thesis because I saw myself as a researcher and educator long-term.

Similarly, a Science graduate (P4) described the transition as structured and goal-driven:

I knew that postdoctoral experience was necessary to strengthen my publication record. So, I treated my final year like preparation for the next research phase, not the end.

A Languages and Linguistics alumnus (P13) reflected:

Teaching and research felt like a natural continuation of my doctoral identity. I did not seriously consider industry because my professional identity was already academic.

These narratives illustrate identity continuity, where doctoral training reinforced rather than disrupted academic career aspirations.

**Theme 2: Strategic Industry Transition**

**Codes: Market Awareness, Skill Repositioning, Career Pragmatism**

Participants from Engineering, Science, and Business and Accountancy were more likely to describe a deliberate shift toward industry. Rather than perceiving industry entry as a compromise, these alumni framed it as strategic career optimization.

An Engineering graduate (P7) shared:

During my final year, I realised that academic positions were limited. I began networking with industry contacts and positioning my research skills as applied problem-solving experience.

A Business and Accountancy alumnus (P10) noted:

The corporate sector offered faster career progression. I evaluated my options based on stability, income, and



growth potential, not just academic interest.

A Science participant (P6) explained:

Data analytics was a skill I developed during my PhD. I saw that industry demand was high, so I adjusted my direction accordingly.

These accounts demonstrate calculated decision-making influenced by labour market realities and transferable skill awareness.

### **Theme 3: Adaptive Career Redirection**

**Codes: Expectation-Reality Gap, Transitional Uncertainty, Identity Reconstruction**

A third group of participants described career pathways that diverged from their original intentions. These alumni experienced uncertainty and recalibrated their goals during or after graduation.

An Education alumnus (P2) reflected:

I initially planned to become a lecturer, but after several unsuccessful applications, I started exploring consultancy work. It was not my first plan, but it became a meaningful alternative.

A Languages and Linguistics graduate (P14) described:

I thought I would remain in academia, but policy-related roles opened up unexpectedly. It required me to rethink how my expertise could be applied.

An Engineering alumnus (P9) stated:

The transition period was stressful. I had to rethink my professional identity because the opportunities I expected did not materialise immediately.

These quotations highlight identity flexibility and adaptive reconstruction when facing structural constraints or unmet expectations.

**Cross-Disciplinary Observations.** The findings suggest that disciplinary structure shapes early career trajectories significantly. STEM and Business alumni demonstrated stronger industry integration, while Education and Languages showed greater academic continuity. However, across all disciplines, participants emphasised strategic evaluation and adaptation rather than passive transition. Overall, early post-PhD career pathways were not uniform or predetermined. The interaction between professional identity, labour market conditions, and personal agency has shaped them.

### **Findings for RQ2**

RQ2: What self-leadership strategies do alumni use to manage uncertainty, goal-setting, and professional identity development during the post-PhD transition?

Analysis of the interviews revealed three major themes related to self-leadership: (1) Proactive Goal Structuring, (2) Strategic Skill Repositioning, and (3) Psychological Self-Regulation and Resilience. Across disciplines, alumni demonstrated active agency in navigating uncertainty rather than relying solely on institutional guidance.



# MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

## **Theme 1: Proactive Goal Structuring**

**Codes: Structured Planning, Milestone Tracking, Career Mapping**

Participants described setting clear short-term and long-term goals during their final doctoral year. Rather than waiting for opportunities, they created structured transition plans.

A Business and Accountancy alumnus (P12) explained:

I broke my transition into phases. First, I updated my CV and LinkedIn. Then I targeted five companies every week. Having clear milestones reduced my anxiety.

An Engineering participant (P8) shared:

I created a personal timeline six months before graduation. I listed publication targets, job applications, and networking events. It gave me direction.

An Education graduate (P3) reflected:

I maintained a simple personal development document. Every month, I reviewed my progress and adjusted my goals.

These narratives illustrate planning and forward-thinking behaviour, reflecting strong internal self-direction.

## **Theme 2: Strategic Skill Repositioning**

**Codes: Transferable Skills Awareness, Professional Branding, Market Alignment**

Many alumni emphasised reframing their doctoral competencies to align with external demands. This was especially evident among those entering the industry.

A Science alumnus (P6) stated:

Instead of saying I did research on environmental modelling, I presented myself as someone skilled in predictive analytics and data interpretation.

An Engineering graduate (P7) noted:

I realised companies don't care about your thesis title. They care about solutions. So, I translated my research into practical outcomes.

A Languages and Linguistics participant (P15) explained:

I reframed my academic editing experience as project management and quality assurance skills.

These accounts show conscious identity repositioning and skill translation, indicating adaptive self-leadership.

## **Theme 3: Psychological Self-Regulation and Resilience**

**Codes: Emotional Regulation, Coping with Rejection, Cognitive Reframing**

Participants described managing emotional stress during the job search and uncertainty. Rejection and delay were common experiences.



# MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

A Languages and Linguistics alumnus (P14) shared:

After two rejected applications, I felt discouraged. But I reminded myself that rejection is normal. I treated it as feedback, not failure.

An Education graduate (P2) reflected:

There were moments I doubted my competence. I had to consciously manage negative thoughts and focus on what I could control.

A Science participant (P5) stated:

Waiting for job responses was stressful. I kept myself productive by improving my technical certifications instead of overthinking.

These responses reveal cognitive reframing, emotional self-control, and constructive coping strategies that sustained motivation throughout uncertainty.

***Cross-Disciplinary Insights.*** While goal structuring was common across all fields, skill repositioning was more prominent among STEM and Business alumni transitioning into industry roles. Psychological resilience appeared universal, suggesting that emotional regulation is a central feature of post-PhD transition regardless of discipline. Overall, alumni did not describe their transition as passive or institution-driven. Instead, they demonstrated self-directed planning, adaptive learning, and reflective adjustment, indicating that self-leadership played a critical role in career navigation.

### ***Findings for RQ3***

RQ3: How do alumni perceive the adequacy of doctoral training and institutional career support during their transition?

Analysis revealed three major themes:

1. Research-Centric Preparation with Limited Career Orientation
2. Supervisor-Dependent Support Structures
3. Institutional Gaps in Structured Career Services.

While participants acknowledged strong research training, many perceived institutional career preparations as uneven and informal.

### **Theme 1: Research-Centric Preparation with Limited Career Orientation**

**Codes: Research Competence, Academic Focus, Industry Unpreparedness**

Most alumni described their doctoral training as rigorous in research methodology, publication skills, and critical thinking. However, they noted limited structured preparation for broader career pathways.

A Science alumnus (P4) reflected:

Academically, I was well prepared. I could publish, design studies, and supervise projects. But when it came to preparing for non-academic careers, there was no formal guidance.



# MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

A Business and Accountancy participant (P10) stated:

The program trained us to become researchers, not necessarily professionals outside academia. I had to figure out corporate expectations on my own.

An Engineering graduate (P9) explained:

Technical depth was strong, but industry exposure was minimal. I had to learn how to translate my expertise for employers.

These responses suggest that doctoral training emphasised academic productivity but did not systematically integrate career diversification support.

## **Theme 2: Supervisor-Dependent Support Structures**

**Codes: Informal Mentoring, Unequal Access, Individual Variation**

Participants reported that career preparation often depended on the individual supervisor rather than institutional systems. Alumni with proactive supervisors experienced stronger career guidance.

An Education participant (P1) noted:

My supervisor encouraged me to apply for conferences and introduced me to colleagues. That networking support made a difference.

A Languages and Linguistics alumnus (P13) shared:

Career advice depended entirely on the supervisor. Some of my peers received more strategic mentoring than others.

A Science graduate (P5) stated:

There was no structured career briefing. If your supervisor was supportive, you benefited. If not, you were on your own.

This theme highlights structural inconsistency and reliance on informal mentoring rather than institutionalized career systems.

## **Theme 3: Institutional Gaps in Structured Career Services**

**Codes: Limited Workshops, Lack of Transition Programs, Absence of PDP Framework**

Participants consistently reported limited structured career services specifically targeted at doctoral students. While general career centres existed, they were perceived as undergraduate-focused.

An Engineering participant (P7) commented:

The university had career fairs, but they were more suitable for bachelor students. Doctoral-level guidance was missing.

A Business alumnus (P12) explained:



# MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

There was no structured personal development planning. If we had systematic career mapping sessions in the final year, it would have reduced uncertainty.

A Languages and Linguistics graduate (P14) reflected:

I felt the transition after graduation was abrupt. Once you submitted your thesis, institutional support almost disappeared.

These accounts indicate a perceived gap between doctoral completion processes and post-graduation career integration mechanisms.

***Cross-Disciplinary Observations.*** STEM participants expressed stronger concerns about industry linkage gaps, while Education and Languages alumni emphasised the need for academic career mentoring pathways. Across all disciplines, alumni highlighted the absence of a structured doctoral-level career framework. Despite these gaps, participants did not entirely attribute transition challenges to the institution. Instead, they described institutional preparation as academically strong but strategically incomplete. Overall, the findings suggest that Malaysian public research universities provide solid research training but lack integrated, discipline-sensitive, and structured doctoral career transition systems.

### ***Findings for RQ4***

RQ4: How do disciplinary background, labour market structure, and institutional policies influence career decision-making?

Analysis revealed three interconnected themes:

1. Disciplinary Opportunity Structures
2. Labour Market Realities and Economic Considerations
3. Institutional and Policy Constraints.

These themes demonstrate that career decisions were not purely personal choices but were shaped by structural environments interacting with individual agency.

### **Theme 1: Disciplinary Opportunity Structures**

**Codes: Field-Specific Pathways, Academic Saturation, Industry Absorption Capacity**

Participants consistently indicated that their academic discipline strongly shaped the range of available career options.

An Engineering alumnus (P7) stated:

Engineering graduates are absorbed quickly by industry. Companies value technical expertise. That influenced my decision to move into the corporate sector.

A Science participant (P5) reflected:

Postdoctoral positions are competitive but available in research-heavy fields. However, long-term academic security remains uncertain.

In contrast, an Education graduate (P2) explained:



# MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

In Education, academic roles are the most visible pathway. Industry options are less structured compared to Engineering or Business.

Similarly, a Languages and Linguistics alumnus (P14) noted:

Our discipline is narrower. Opportunities exist, but they are fewer and often linked to academia or policy institutions.

These findings suggest that disciplinary structure determines perceived opportunity breadth and shapes risk tolerance in career decisions.

## **Theme 2: Labour Market Realities and Economic Considerations**

**Codes: Salary Differentials, Employment Stability, Market Demand**

Participants described evaluating career pathways based on economic and market conditions rather than purely academic preference.

A Business and Accountancy graduate (P10) stated:

The salary gap between academia and corporate roles was significant. Financial stability became a practical consideration.

An Engineering alumnus (P9) explained:

Industry offered faster career progression and clearer performance metrics compared to waiting for academic openings.

A Science participant (P6) shared:

The job market influenced my direction. Data-related roles were in high demand, so I aligned my skills accordingly.

These responses illustrate rational career decision-making shaped by economic incentives and employment security concerns.

## **Theme 3: Institutional and Policy Constraints**

**Codes: Recruitment limitations, Contract-based roles, Bureaucratic barriers**

Participants highlighted structural limitations within public universities and national employment systems.

An Education alumnus (P1) remarked:

Public university recruitment cycles are slow and limited. Even qualified candidates may wait long periods.

A Languages and Linguistics graduate (P13) noted:

Contract-based positions are common. Permanent appointments are increasingly difficult to secure.

A Business alumnus (P11) stated:



# MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

Institutional hiring policies are highly competitive and sometimes unpredictable. That influenced my decision to diversify my options.

Participants described these constraints as shaping their level of risk tolerance and prompting career diversification strategies.

***Interaction Between Agency and Structure.*** Across disciplines, participants demonstrated active decision-making within structural limits. While labour markets and institutional policies shaped opportunity boundaries, alumni did not describe themselves as powerless. Instead, they strategically adapted their choices to contextual realities.

For example, an Engineering graduate (P8) explained:

I assessed the academic market carefully. When I realised positions were limited, I strengthened my industry portfolio instead of waiting passively.

This reflects adaptive agency operating within structural constraints.

***Cross-Disciplinary Patterns.*** STEM and Business alumni reported broader industry pathways supported by strong market demand, while Education and Languages graduates faced narrower, more academic-centred options. Across all disciplines, economic stability and institutional hiring constraints influenced risk assessment and career choices. Overall, career decisions reflected the interaction between disciplinary opportunity structures, labour market demand, and institutional limitations rather than personal preference alone.

## ***Findings for RQ5***

RQ5: What institutional improvements do alumni recommend to enhance doctoral career readiness in Malaysian public research universities?

Analysis of the interviews revealed three major themes:

1. Structured and Early Career Planning Integration
2. Industry and Cross-Sector Exposure
3. Alumni-Based Mentoring and Transition Support Systems

Participants consistently emphasized that career preparation should not begin at the point of thesis submission but should be embedded throughout doctoral training.

### **Theme 1: Structured and Early Career Planning Integration**

**Codes: Formal PDP framework, Early intervention, Career mapping workshops**

Many alumni recommended integrating structured career planning into doctoral programs from the early stages rather than limiting preparation to informal advice.

A Business and Accountancy alumnus (P12) stated:

Career discussions should start in the first year, not in the final semester. If we had structured career mapping earlier, decisions would have been more strategic.

An Education graduate (P3) explained:



# MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

A formal personal development plan reviewed annually would have helped clarify goals and reduce last-minute uncertainty.

An Engineering participant (P8) reflected:

Doctoral training should include mandatory career planning sessions, not optional workshops that few attend.

These responses indicate strong support for institutionalized and monitored career development frameworks rather than voluntary or ad hoc initiatives.

## **Theme 2: Industry and Cross-Sector Exposure**

**Codes: Internship Opportunities, Applied Collaboration, Employer Engagement**

Participants across STEM and non-STEM disciplines highlighted the need for stronger industry linkage and practical exposure.

A Science alumnus (P6) noted:

Short industry attachments during the PhD would have made the transition smoother. We had strong theory training but limited exposure to real industry expectations.

An Engineering graduate (P7) shared:

Collaboration projects with companies should be encouraged. It builds networks before graduation.

A Languages and Linguistics participant (P15) commented:

Even in non-technical fields, exposure to policy agencies or publishing sectors would expand our professional awareness.

These findings suggest that cross-sector engagement enhances employability confidence and reduces the gap between academic preparation and professional demand.

## **Theme 3: Alumni-Based Mentoring and Transition Support Systems**

**Codes: Alumni Mentoring Network, Transition Workshops, Post-Graduation Support**

Participants recommended leveraging alumni networks to guide current doctoral students through realistic transition experiences.

An Education alumnus (P1) explained:

Hearing from alumni who recently transitioned would make career planning more realistic and less abstract.

A Business participant (P11) stated:

Universities should maintain structured alumni mentoring platforms, not just informal networking events.

A Science graduate (P4) reflected:



# MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

Support should continue after graduation for at least six months. The immediate post-PhD period is the most critical.

These responses highlight the need for sustained transitional support beyond thesis completion.

**Cross-Disciplinary Observations.** Although STEM participants emphasized industry linkage more strongly, all disciplines supported structured career planning and mentoring mechanisms. Participants did not dismiss the value of academic preparation but argued for broader career readiness integration. Across all five disciplines, alumni consistently framed career preparation as a shared institutional responsibility rather than an individual burden alone.

## DISCUSSION

### ***Discussion of RQ1: Early Post-PhD Career Trajectories***

The findings for RQ1 reveal that life after a PhD is far from a straight, predictable path. Instead, graduates navigate a landscape full of twists, turns, and personal choices. Three main patterns emerged: Planned Academic Continuity, where alumni remain in the academic world; Strategic Industry Transition, where they deliberately move into non-academic sectors; and Adaptive Career Redirection, where they reshape their careers in response to changing circumstances. These patterns mirror global research showing that doctoral outcomes are increasingly diverse (Chen, 2021; Skakni et al., 2026).

For those who stayed in academia, the results highlight the enduring influence of doctoral identity, echoing the idea of academic habitus, where the habits, values, and ways of thinking developed during doctoral training continue to guide professional choices (Galimberti, 2023). Yet, not all alumni follow this familiar path. Many strategically moved into industry or pivoted toward entirely new roles, illustrating McAlpine's (2016, 2024) point that career trajectories are shaped less by rigid academic ambitions and more by the opportunities available in the broader professional landscape.

Importantly, the study also emphasizes the active role graduates play in constructing their careers. In line with Career Construction Theory, alumni did not simply react to structural constraints; they reimagined their professional identities, creatively weaving their doctoral skills and experiences into new career narratives (Li & Horta, 2024). In other words, post-PhD careers are not merely about following a path. They are about building a story, where each graduate negotiates, adapts, and reshapes their journey in a way that is uniquely their own.

Disciplinary background played a key role in shaping how alumni navigated their career paths. Those from STEM and Business fields tended to move more smoothly into industry, reflecting broader opportunities and stronger connections with non-academic sectors, a pattern supported by prior research on field-specific absorption capacities (Hatt et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). In contrast, alumni from Education and Languages often stayed closer to academia, following more traditional and limited pathways. These differences highlight how the structural realities of each discipline influence graduates' sense of what is achievable in their careers. Overall, the findings from RQ1 underscore that professional identity and structural context are deeply intertwined, shaping not only career choices but also how feasible those choices feel to graduates.

### ***Discussion of RQ2: Self-Leadership and Transition Management***

The findings for RQ2 show that self-leadership played a deeply personal and practical role in how alumni navigated life after the PhD. Rather than waiting for opportunities to appear, many took deliberate steps to structure their goals, upgrade their skills, and reposition themselves strategically in the job market. They did not simply react to uncertainty; instead, they planned milestones, monitored their own progress, and adjusted their direction when necessary. At the same time, their stories revealed quiet psychological resilience, the ability to stay focused despite



## MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

rejection, delays, or unexpected changes. These experiences reflect the core principles of Self-Leadership Theory, where individuals guide their own thinking and behaviour intentionally. Overall, the findings suggest that adaptability after the PhD is less about luck and more about conscious, reflective self-management.

In addition, the findings closely reflect the principles of Social Cognitive Career Theory. Participants did not make career decisions passively; instead, they carefully considered labour market demands, reflected on possible outcomes, and adjusted their goals based on what seemed realistically achievable. This process highlights how career development involves continuous self-evaluation and responsiveness to context rather than fixed long-term planning. As noted by McAlpine and Emmioğlu (2015), doctoral career intentions often evolve through reflection and feedback from surrounding opportunities and constraints. The resilience strategies described by participants, such as reframing rejection and maintaining motivation, further illustrate the importance of psychological regulation during uncertain transitions. Overall, the RQ2 findings show that self-leadership among Malaysian doctoral alumni is not abstract, but a practical and adaptive process shaped by real-world conditions.

### ***Discussion of RQ3: Institutional Preparation and Career Support***

The findings for RQ3 suggest that although doctoral training is intellectually demanding and research-intensive, structured career preparation within institutions remains inconsistent and, at times, fragmented. While candidates are trained to become strong researchers, they are not always equally supported in preparing for the diverse career realities that await them. This reflects McAlpine's (2020) concern that doctoral education continues to prioritise research productivity over broader career development.

Many participants described how their career guidance depended largely on their supervisors. For some, this mentorship was transformative; for others, it was minimal or narrowly focused on academic pathways. This variation reinforces Green et al.'s (2023) argument that supervisory influence plays a pivotal role in shaping career direction, yet its impact depends heavily on individual supervisory practices. Furthermore, the limited presence of structured personal development planning frameworks meant that graduates often navigated the job market through trial and error. As noted by Amirbayeva and Moqbil (2025), such gaps in institutional guidance can leave graduates feeling underprepared when facing employment challenges. Overall, the findings highlight a need for more systematic and inclusive career preparation within doctoral programmes.

Importantly, the alumni did not question the intellectual strength of their doctoral training. They acknowledged that their PhD experience equipped them with rigorous research skills, critical thinking abilities, and deep disciplinary expertise. However, many felt that while the academic preparation was strong, it did not fully prepare them for the broader realities of the contemporary job market. In their reflections, the gap was not about quality, but about scope.

This distinction is significant. It suggests that the challenge lies less in how research is taught and more in how career development is integrated into doctoral education. Alumni experiences point to the need for more structured and intentional career guidance embedded within the doctoral journey. In this sense, the findings support ongoing calls for systemic reform, particularly the inclusion of career readiness frameworks within doctoral curricula (Teperek et al., 2022), so that graduates are not only academically competent but also strategically prepared for diverse career pathways.

### ***Discussion of RQ4: Disciplinary and Structural Influences on Decision-Making***

The findings for RQ4 show that career decisions are rarely made in isolation. Instead, they grow out of a constant balancing act between what individuals want and what the system allows. Participants did not simply "choose" their careers based on passion or preference alone. Their decisions were shaped by disciplinary job markets, institutional hiring practices, and the realistic chances of securing stable employment. These structural conditions influenced how much risk they were willing to take and how they evaluated different career options.



## MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

For example, those in disciplines with stronger industry links or broader employment pathways felt more confident exploring non-academic roles. In contrast, participants from fields with narrower career routes tended to make more cautious decisions, often prioritising stability over aspiration. This reflects existing research showing that different disciplines offer unequal opportunities in terms of job absorption and mobility (Hatt et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025).

Overall, RQ4 highlights that career decision-making is not purely a matter of individual ambition. It is a negotiated process, shaped by both personal agency and the structural realities surrounding each graduate.

### ***Discussion of RQ5: Institutional Reform and Career Readiness Integration***

At the same time, the alumni's stories show that circumstances did not shape them simply. Instead of feeling trapped by limited opportunities, they responded with awareness and intention. When academic positions seemed scarce, many did not view this as failure or defeat. Rather, they reassessed their strengths, reconsidered their options, and made thoughtful decisions about alternative pathways. Their actions reflected choice and strategy, not resignation.

This lived experience aligns closely with Social Cognitive Career Theory, which explains that career decisions emerge from the interaction between external conditions and internal beliefs. Contextual barriers may exist, but how individuals interpret those barriers and how confident they feel about navigating them matter too. The graduates in this study demonstrated strong self-efficacy and realistic outcome expectations, allowing them to adapt without losing direction. Therefore, the RQ4 findings highlight that career development is neither purely constrained by structure nor entirely self-determined; it is shaped through the ongoing dialogue between opportunity and agency.

The findings of RQ5 clearly show that alumni are not simply asking for minor improvements; they are calling for a more intentional and structured approach to career preparation from the very beginning of the doctoral journey. Many participants felt that career development should not be treated as an optional add-on at the final stage of the PhD, but as an integrated and continuous process. Their suggestions for formal personal development planning, meaningful industry exposure, and active alumni mentoring networks reflect a desire for clearer guidance and stronger institutional support.

These recommendations resonate with existing research that emphasises the need for systematic career development frameworks within doctoral education (McAlpine, 2020; Rapuano & Valickas, 2023). In particular, the strong emphasis on cross-sector exposure highlights alumni awareness that academic careers are no longer the only, or even the primary, pathway for many graduates. Their perspectives echo interdisciplinary education models that advocate employment-driven doctoral training (Zhang et al., 2025). Overall, the findings suggest that structured career integration is not merely beneficial but increasingly essential for preparing doctoral candidates to navigate diverse and evolving career landscapes.

Participants' suggestions make it clear that career preparation should not be treated as something optional or left until the final stages of the PhD journey. Instead, they see it as something that needs to be woven into the doctoral experience from the beginning and continuously supported. Their reflections echo wider international conversations about narrowing the long-standing gap between academic training and professional development (Teprek et al., 2022).

Importantly, the alumni move the discussion beyond the idea that career success depends solely on individual effort. While personal initiative remains important, they emphasize that institutions also carry responsibility. In this sense, career readiness becomes a shared commitment, one that requires structured support, clear guidance, and ongoing monitoring, rather than an expectation placed only on doctoral candidates themselves.



# MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

## ***Integrated Theoretical Implications***

Taken together, the findings from RQ1 to RQ5 show that doctoral career journeys are far from linear or predetermined. Instead, graduates actively made sense of who they were becoming, carefully weighed opportunities, adjusted their plans, and navigated the realities of institutional and disciplinary constraints. Their transitions reflected elements of Career Construction Theory, Social Cognitive Career Theory, and Self-Leadership Theory, but within the lived realities of a Malaysian public research university context.

Rather than passively following a fixed academic path, alumni described shaping their own professional directions, sometimes strategically, sometimes adaptively, within the opportunities and limits available to them. In doing so, this study adds important contextual insight to global discussions on doctoral transitions and underscores the need for more integrated, discipline-sensitive, and structured career development systems within doctoral education.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

### ***Institutional-Level Implications***

The findings indicate that Malaysian public research universities may need to move beyond a purely research-focused doctoral model and adopt a more balanced approach that integrates career development into the PhD journey. While doctoral programmes are strong in building research expertise, studies such as McAlpine (2020) and Skakni et al. (2026) highlight that many graduates feel underprepared for diverse career pathways outside academia.

Introducing structured Personal Development Plans, as suggested by Amirbayeva and Moqbil (2025), could help doctoral candidates think about their professional growth from the beginning rather than at the final stage. At the same time, discipline-specific career workshops are important because employment opportunities vary significantly across fields, as noted by Hatt et al. (2024) and Zhang et al. (2025).

In addition, structured alumni mentoring systems could provide consistent guidance, instead of leaving career advice solely to individual supervisors, which Green et al. (2023) describe as uneven and dependent on personal networks. By institutionalising these supports, universities can reduce uncertainty for doctoral candidates and help them navigate their careers more confidently and strategically.

### ***Policy-Level Implications***

At the policy level, what many doctoral graduates seem to need most is clarity and direction. When post-study employment pathways are unclear and recruitment systems lack transparency, uncertainty often pushes graduates to reconsider their original academic career plans. Limited tenure-track opportunities further shape these decisions, not because graduates lack commitment, but because the system itself offers few stable openings.

At the same time, stronger collaboration between universities and industry could make a meaningful difference. When doctoral candidates are exposed early to non-academic sectors, through placements, joint projects, or structured partnerships, they gain a clearer understanding of the wider career landscape. This kind of cross-sector engagement not only improves adaptability and employability but also helps bridge the gap between academic training and labour market realities.

Ultimately, policy reforms should move beyond viewing doctoral education as preparation solely for academia. By embedding structured industry partnerships and collaborative research platforms into doctoral programs, policymakers can better align advanced research training with national economic and workforce priorities.

### ***Doctoral Program-Level Implications***

At the program level, transferable skills development should no longer be treated as an optional add-on, but as a



# MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

core component of doctoral education. Many doctoral graduates discover, often too late, that while they possess highly valuable research capabilities, they struggle to explain how those skills translate beyond academia (Etmanski, 2020; McAlpine, 2024). The ability to analyse complex problems, manage long-term projects, communicate nuanced ideas, and lead collaborative work is deeply embedded in doctoral training, yet these competencies are not always made visible or consciously developed.

Integrating structured modules in communication, leadership, project management, and professional identity development can help students recognise and articulate their strengths with greater confidence (Chuanyou et al., 2025; Tenschert et al., 2025). Equally important is early and ongoing reflective career planning. As McAlpine and Emmioğlu (2015) note, doctoral career intentions often evolve throughout candidature. Creating formal reflection milestones would normalise exploration, reduce uncertainty, and ease the emotional pressure that frequently accompanies last-minute career transitions. In this way, doctoral programs can better support not only scholarly excellence but also sustainable and meaningful career pathways.

### ***Limitations of the Study***

Malaysian public research university, which naturally limits how far the findings can be extended to other institutions or countries. Doctoral education systems differ significantly across national settings, and international graduates in particular may encounter additional structural, visa-related, and mobility constraints, as highlighted by Adhikari and Bastola (2005).

Second, the qualitative design intentionally privileged depth over breadth. In line with interpretive traditions described by Creswell and Poth (2018), the study sought rich, contextualised understanding rather than statistical generalisation. While this approach offers nuanced insight into lived experiences, it does not aim to represent all doctoral graduates.

Third, the career accounts were self-reported and retrospective. Participants interpreted their own journeys, which means their narratives may reflect personal meaning-making as much as objective events. Fourth, although disciplinary representation was balanced, having three participants per field limited deeper comparison within each discipline. Finally, the absence of institutional administrators and industry stakeholders means the structural dynamics are viewed primarily through alumni perspectives. Including these voices in future research would provide a more holistic picture of doctoral career transitions.

### ***Suggestions for Future Research***

Future research should move beyond single-institution perspectives and examine doctoral career development across multiple universities. Looking at different institutional contexts would allow meaningful cross-comparisons and clearer policy benchmarking, helping to identify what works, for whom, and under what conditions. In line with recent calls for more dynamic career scholarship (McAlpine, 2024), longitudinal studies that follow graduates over several years would be particularly valuable. Such designs could illuminate how professional identities evolve, how aspirations shift, and how mobility patterns unfold beyond the immediate post-graduation period.

There is also strong value in comparative international research. Doctoral transition systems are shaped by national labour markets, funding structures, and higher education policies (Skakni et al., 2026). Examining these variations across regions would deepen understanding of how structural conditions influence career pathways. At a methodological level, mixed-method designs could test large-scale relationships between self-leadership, institutional support, and employment outcomes (Chuanyou et al., 2025) while still capturing the nuanced lived experiences of graduates.

Emerging tools such as AI-supported career analytics also warrant careful empirical investigation (Gedrimiene et al., 2024). While promising as decision-support mechanisms, their practical impact and ethical implications remain underexplored. Finally, future studies should include supervisors, policymakers, and industry partners.



# MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

Incorporating these stakeholders would provide a more systemic perspective and generate evidence capable of informing comprehensive and context-sensitive doctoral reform strategies.

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that early post-PhD careers do not unfold in a straight, predictable line. After graduation, alumni did not simply “move into a job.” Instead, they found themselves reflecting, reassessing, and often reimagining who they were as professionals. Some chose to remain in academia, holding on to a familiar identity as researchers and lecturers. Others stepped into industry roles, translating their expertise into new professional languages. A third group shifted direction more significantly, adjusting their aspirations in response to real-world opportunities and constraints.

What stands out is that these were not merely employment changes; they were moments of identity reconstruction. Alumni had to make sense of their skills, values, and ambitions within the realities of disciplinary norms, labour market demands, and institutional hiring limitations. In this process, self-leadership became crucial. Those who planned proactively, reframed their competencies, and managed the emotional uncertainty of transition were better able to navigate change with confidence.

Ultimately, career transition emerged not as a passive outcome of structural forces, nor as an entirely individual choice, but as a negotiated journey shaped by both personal agency and contextual realities.

At the institutional level, participants described their doctoral training as intellectually rigorous and research-focused, yet not fully equipped for the broader realities of today’s job market. They felt confident in their research skills and academic expertise, but many shared that career preparation depended heavily on individual supervisors rather than structured institutional support. As a result, some graduates felt well guided, while others had to navigate career decisions largely on their own.

These experiences highlight the need for doctoral programs to evolve beyond an exclusive focus on academic outputs such as publications and thesis completion. Graduates are entering a complex and rapidly changing professional landscape, both within and beyond academia. Integrating structured career planning frameworks, building stronger partnerships with industry, and creating formal alumni mentoring networks could provide doctoral candidates with clearer direction and more equitable support.

Overall, this study offers both empirical and theoretical insight into doctoral career transitions within a Malaysian public research university context. By bringing together identity development, thoughtful evaluation of opportunities, and proactive self-management, it presents a holistic understanding of how doctoral graduates make sense of uncertainty and actively shape their professional futures in an evolving higher education and labour market environment.

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# MALAYSIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT (MOJEM)

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