



ENHANCING NEURODIVERGENT GRADUATES' ACCESS TO GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT (ENGAGE)

A report on Neurodivergent Graduates' Employment Transitions and Outcomes

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many neurodivergent graduates, who are part of the disabled population, experience difficulties in accessing graduate employment. This is particularly noticeable in the employment outcomes reported by autistic graduates (Toogood, 2024). They have a greater chance of encountering difficulties in recruitment and other forms of job screening, including overt or tacit forms of employer discrimination and difficulties integrating into neurotypical workplaces (Coney, 2021; Pesonen et al., 2021; Vincent, 2020; Vincent and Fabri, 2020).

There is limited research regarding how neurodivergent graduates experience the transition from higher education to the labour market. This project sought to uncover the early employment experiences, outcomes, challenges, and strengths of neurodivergent graduates, to enhance both practice and policy in universities and workplaces, and to support employers in accessing the skills and talents of the increasing number of neurodivergent graduates (Hubble and Bolton, 2021).

The overall aim of this research was to enhance access to graduate employment for neurodivergent graduates, with subsidiary aims to:

- Increase understanding and focus among key policy and stakeholder groups.
- Understand the early employment experiences of neurodivergent graduates.
- Understand perceptions of employers as gatekeepers to employment for neurodivergent people.
- Work collaboratively with neurodivergent graduates, employers, and other professionals to develop useful resources to enhance access to graduate employment.

Two main theoretical frameworks informed the project. The first was the Capabilities Approach (Sen, 1999), which focuses on individuals' 'beings and doings'. This notes how what one might want to do after graduation or as one moves into adulthood could differ for each (neurodivergent) graduate. Therefore, there is no fixed outcome that all graduates ought to realise. The second theoretical framework is the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017), which conceives employability in terms of the accumulation and mobilisation of a range of resources, referred to as capitals. These

capitals have value to students' and graduates' emerging and continuing work-related profiles and potentially empower them to transition into the labour market, helping develop and maintain professional qualities and capabilities during their careers.

1.1. Methodology

This research was a mixed-methods study conducted between March 2023 and July 2023. Data were collected via a survey among n=228 neurodivergent graduates and n=14 interviews with neurodivergent graduates from UK higher education institutions (HEIs). The research instruments were constructed collaboratively by the steering group, which included neurodivergent graduates, careers consultants, and researchers.

1.2. Study population

Of the 228 neurodivergent graduates, 54% had been formally diagnosed with a neurocognitive condition. The remaining 46% were either in the process of receiving a formal diagnosis or self-identified. The majority (75.5%) indicated that they were open about acknowledging and discussing their status as being neurodivergent.

Most of the sample achieved a First (28.6%) or 2:1 (24.6%) degree classification at the undergraduate level. In total, 41% indicated they were employed in a graduate role, and just over half said they were in a non-graduate role. 72% reported that they were satisfied with their job role.

1.3. Graduate Capitals findings

There were mixed responses regarding how neurodivergent graduates perceived themselves or how they felt they would be perceived. Most felt they would not be sufficiently accommodated in workplaces and that employers would not understand their neurodivergence. Consequently, just over half indicated being happy to share information about neurodivergence with employers.

Whilst neurodivergent graduates perceived their specific degree-related skills favourably, with 74% indicating that this element of their human capital would enhance their employment prospects, there was a sense that they could not convert these skills through the recruitment process. Just over half agreed that they were able

to perform well at interview while only 34% felt they would perform well in assessment centres.

Over three-quarters of graduates felt knowledgeable about job roles to which they were suited and over half (65%) were able to name employers of interest to them. However, networking was a challenge, only around 40% indicated being confident when talking to people they did not know. Graduates reported high levels of psychological capital, with 62% reporting to be adaptable and over 70% being able to formulate plans in the face of change.

1.4. Emerging themes

Qualitative data, derived from both open-text questions in the survey and interviews, reflect a richer picture of neurodivergent graduates' experiences of the transition to the labour market. Data were analysed to identify 6 themes.

- *Misunderstanding neurodivergent identities* centred mainly on others' misunderstanding of neurodivergence. This theme also addresses the extent to which other people may perceive neurodiversity to be 'problematic' in terms of performance and interactions in work.
- *Employment barriers* related to difficulties in accessing graduate level employment and challenges experienced during their time in employment.
- *Employment success*, conversely, revealed evidence of employment success, which tended to be due to early career exploration, gaining work experience during or after the degree programme, and having a sense of confidence in the skills that they could bring to the workplace.
- *The Neurodivergent paradox* focused on the emotional labour that goes into trying to manage their own and others' expectations of their needs against strengths like attention to detail, subject knowledge, creativity, hyper-focus.
- *Managing by masking* centred on not feeling able to share their identity with others and evidence of internalized stigma derived from wider social and educational discourses around normalcy.
- *Developing and mobilising graduate capitals* focused on the different graduate capitals and ways in which they were able or unable to mobilise these through supportive and enabling social relations.

1.5. Recommendations

The recommendations are shown in table 1, presented in line with the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017). Each recommendation is aligned to the capital(s) predominantly focused on, or developed by that recommendation, and cross-referenced to the stakeholder(s) who should be responsible for delivery. This framing supports meaningful action by identifying relevant stakeholders and clarifying the need for genuinely collaborative, inclusive action.

Table 1 - Recommendations for action – aligned to the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017)

	HUMAN	SOCIAL	CULTURAL	IDENTITY	PSYCHOLOGICAL
Careers professionals	Ensure employability is embedded in curriculum from day one, alongside tailored 1:1 careers support, throughout all degrees and beyond graduation.	Recognise the importance of all neurodivergent graduates' capitals. Facilitate their meaningful growth through careers education, information, advice and guidance and the development and provision of associated networks and opportunities.			Recognise the additional emotional labour that neurodivergent staff and students may take on and create psychologically safe spaces to share information. Facilitate holistic approaches and a psychologically safe environment through the sharing of good practice and knowledge exchange between disability professionals and careers professionals both within institutions and across the HE sector.
HE institutions		Commit to training and education for all staff and students that is co-created and co-facilitated by neurodivergent people on neurodiversity and allyship.	Create supportive structures e.g. mentoring and supervision, where neurodivergent staff, students and graduates feel listened to, valued, and psychologically safe.	Work collaboratively with neurodivergent graduates and associated support organisations to educate employers about neurodiversity, inclusive recruitment, and sustainable support/development.	
HE policymakers and sector bodies	Create sustainable funding structures that support tailored and long-term support for neurodivergent graduates.	Commit to training and education for all staff that is co-created and co-facilitated by neurodivergent people on inclusive recruitment, neurodiversity and allyship.	Recognise that graduate employment is not necessarily the goal for all graduates and that there can be other outcomes that are meaningful, take longer or follow more diverse routes.		
Employers	Understand that neurodivergence can create challenges but also brings significant strengths that are needed in the workforce.		Create supportive structures e.g. mentoring and supervision, where neurodivergent staff feel listened to, valued, and psychologically safe.		
All stakeholders listed above	Establish partnerships between HE and employers to create tailored, inclusive opportunities for developing work experience that generate skills, networks, and confidence around recruitment processes.		Listen to and believe the experiences of neurodivergent students and graduates and work collaboratively together, to co-create supportive cultures, and evidence-based accessible provision and opportunities built from this understanding.		
			Trust the neurodivergent student or graduate in their articulation of their needs and understand the responsibility to provide reasonable adjustments.		

2. INTRODUCTION

The employment opportunities and outcomes of disabled graduates has gained increased attention among researchers, policy makers and higher education careers practitioners. The number of students in higher education with a known disability has risen over the past decade. In 2019/20, 332,300 UK higher education students shared with their institution that they had a disability of some kind, which is a 47% increase since 2014/15 when the equivalent figure was only 106,000 (Hubble and Bolton, 2021). The policy goal of supporting HE graduates into a more challenging labour market needs to be placed in a context of significantly differential outcomes across the graduate population. The problem of accessing equitable and sustainable outcomes from higher education is particularly evident amongst graduates who report a disability, and their likelihood of initial unemployment and longer-term job market exclusion is much higher (Toogood, 2024; Coney, 2021; Pesonen et al, 2021; Vincent and Ralston, 2023). The *What Happens Next in Challenging Times?* report from the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) demonstrates that the proportion of disabled first degree graduates from 2020/21 in full-time employment is still below that of their peers with no known disability (54% compared to 61%), a trend that has been evidenced for many years (Toogood, 2024).

Neurodivergent students and graduates represent one segment of the disabled university population, although their strengths, challenges and support needs are different from those with physical impairments or other health conditions. In broad terms, neurodiversity has come to mean "variation in neurocognitive functioning"; a broad concept that includes both neurodivergent people (those with a condition that renders their neurocognitive functioning significantly different from a "normal" range) and neurotypical people (those within that 'socially acceptable' range) (Kapp, 2020:1). Neurodivergence thus typically refers to those who identify with one (or often more than one) condition including autism, ADHD, dyslexia, developmental co-ordination disorder (DCD), Tourette's, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia, OCD, and some mental health conditions. Importantly, the neurodiversity paradigm does not minimize or erase neurocognitive differences but rather shifts the emphasis from a biomedical (deficit) perspective to one that perceives these as overlapping identities with potential strengths and difficulties which require adjustments (Chapman, 2020; Doyle, 2020). Whilst this project recognises that outcomes are different and often poorer for autistic graduates in comparison to their peers with Specific Learning Disabilities including dyslexia, ADHD, or DCD (Toogood, 2024; Vincent and Ralston, 2023), it did not seek to isolate any specific neurocognitive

condition. The project rather sought to understand the needs of this group as a whole, acknowledging the blurriness and overlapping nature of neurodivergent identities.

The employment context often presents a variety of challenges for neurodivergent individuals, including longer-term exclusion through a lack of adequate support, negative stereotyping, and, at times, misunderstandings in the workplace (Almuth, Doyle and Kiseleva, 2023). Neurodivergent graduates are also likely to experience poorer outcome following graduation from HE, including longer periods of unemployment. Recent evidence (Toogood, 2024) suggests that first degree graduates in 2020/21 who reported Specific Learning Difficulties had slightly lower rates of full-time employment (59% compared to 61%), but they were as likely to be in highly skilled employment as a graduate with no known disability. More concerning, autistic graduates from first degrees had rates of full-time employment more than 20% lower than those with no known disability (40% compared to 61%), along with lower levels of highly skilled employment and job security.

It is clear that many members of the neurodivergent graduate population continue to experience persistent barriers to accessing full-time employment. Evidence indicates that autistic graduates have experienced sustained employment barriers in relation to recruitment, overt or tacit forms of employer discrimination, and exclusionary workplaces (Coney, 2021; Pesonen et al, 2021; Vincent, 2020; Vincent and Fabri 2020; Vincent and Ralston, 2023). These problems appear to have been compounded for disabled graduates more generally through weaker and more precarious labour markets during and immediately following the Covid-19 pandemic (AGCAS, 2021).

Despite these clear challenges, some care is needed in avoiding a 'deficit narrative' framing of neurodivergent graduates' employment prospects. Neurodivergent graduates remain a heterogeneous group with different capabilities, profiles and educational backgrounds, including the many who flourish in their working lives and who can use their neurodivergent strengths to their advantage. Relatedly, with the appropriate environmental support and accommodating provisions, these graduates can carve out successful career trajectories and add value to workplaces (McDowall et al, 2023). One of the main challenges in employment is the potential interplay between neurodivergence and well-being, where a workplace climate of prejudice, misunderstanding and covert discrimination can lead to burnout and poorer mental health (Davies et al, 2023). The level of support received appears to be a crucial dimension in how well these graduates fare accessing and during employment. This can occur at many levels, from the support within a graduate's social and

familial environments; that experienced during their time in higher education; and, most importantly, flexible and supportive workplace practices that enable their capabilities to be realised.

Whilst the existing evidence indicates significant challenges for recent cohorts of neurodivergent graduates, there is still limited research on how neurodivergent graduates experience the transition from higher education to the labour market, including the access to employment and experiences during the early stages of working life. This research aimed to address that gap. By being substantive and action-orientated, and through developing further insights on the early employment outcomes, experiences and challenges of neurodivergent graduates, this research is intended to enhance practical and policy development around neurodivergent graduate support. This project therefore pursued the following aims:

Overall aim: to enhance access to graduate employment for neurodivergent graduates.

Subsidiary aims:

- Increase understanding and focus among key policy and stakeholder groups.
- Understand the early employment experiences of neurodivergent graduates.
- Understand perceptions of employers, as gatekeepers to employment for neurodivergent people.
- Work collaboratively with neurodivergent graduates, employers, and other professionals to develop useful resources to enhance access to graduate employment.

2.1. Conceptual approaches

Our research was broadly informed by a socio-environmental approach which recognises the important role of context and individuals' lived experiences of their education and work-related environments. The Capabilities Approach (Sen, 1999) offers a useful perspective on individual development with an emphasis on wellbeing and autonomous decision-making. The agency individuals exercise is facilitated or constrained by the environments they move within. Thus, rather than framing individuals' employability and job outcomes as the ability to get a job and meet employer demands, the Capabilities Approach centres this on the graduate's capability to pursue meaningful life trajectories or *functionings* and so flourish in ways of their own choosing. A graduate, for instance, may attain employment that appears to be appropriate to their qualification, but their lived experience of that employment may

not align to their values and desired ways of being. Conversely, a graduate may engage in activities which are not considered 'graduate employment' but represent outcomes that they have reason to value. Of further importance is the role of the environment in enabling individuals to convert their potential capabilities into meaningful outcomes, as well as building a career narrative that may be empowering.

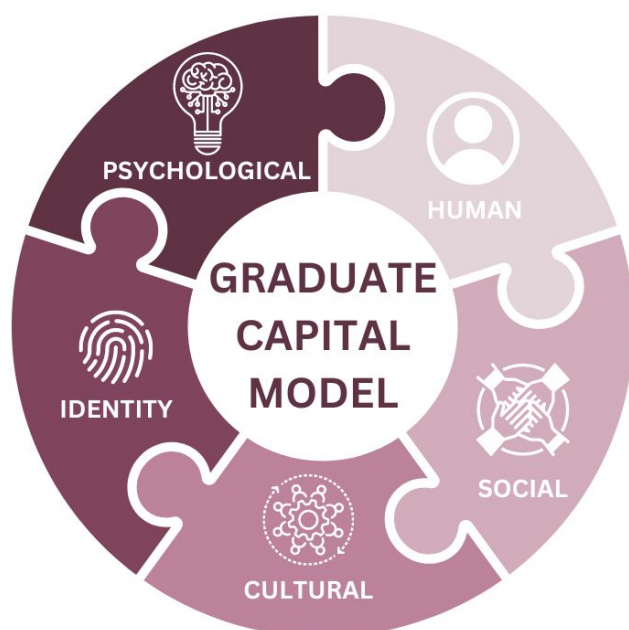


Figure 1 - Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017)

Another consideration in conceptual framing is the interplay between theory and practice, mainly in relation to how graduates might be able to negotiate future employment challenges. A variety of employability approaches or models have emerged over time and had differing degrees of influence in the HE and practitioner field (AGCAS, 2022). Some of these emphasise individual-level attributes and dispositions, whereas others explore the more relational aspects of employability. One model is the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017), shown in figure 1, which conceives employability in terms of the accumulation and mobilisation of a range of resources, referred to as capitals.

These resources add value to students' and graduates' emerging and continuing work-related profiles and potentially empower them in their transition to the labour market, helping them maintain professional qualities and capabilities during their careers. The model has been empirically tested (Tomlinson et al, 2022) and been applied to diverse graduate groups, including international graduates (Pham et al, 2020) and students from lower socio-economic

backgrounds (McCafferty, 2022). The model has been adapted qualitatively for autistic graduates (Pesonen et al, 2021) with evidence indicating that this group of graduates may struggle to develop various capitals – most notably social and cultural, in terms of relationship building and integrating into work cultures – which may impede their initial employment prospects. The Graduate Capitals Model is relational in concerning graduates' own relationship to the job market, as well as to those who shape opportunities in the education and labour market field.

Given the importance of employment-related capital in potentially shaping earlier employment outcomes, the study adopted this framework to study neurodivergent graduates' transitions to the labour market, their early employment experiences, and their outcomes. This also enabled further enquiry into key experiential episodes in graduates' initial employment trajectories and how these influence the development of resources and resourcefulness, as well as factors which may constrain their acquisition and mobilisation.

2.2. Methodology

This report is based on findings from a mixed-methods study that was conducted between March and July 2023. This involved a survey and interviews with graduates from UK HEIs who were either formally diagnosed or self-identified as neurodivergent and had graduated within the previous five years. The research instruments (survey and interview schedules) were constructed collaboratively by the steering group, which included neurodivergent graduates, careers consultants, and researchers.

2.2.1. The survey

A survey was set up on the SmartSurvey platform and disseminated through alumni networks facilitated by AGCAS's Disability Task Group, as well as via social media adverts on LinkedIn and X. Participant information and links to the survey were also made available on the ENGAGE project LinkTree. The survey was open over a five-week period between the last week of March and first week of May 2023. 400 responses were received in total and after data cleaning, a final sample of 228 was returned. Of this, 59% of graduates identified as female, 36% as male, 4% as non-binary and just under 2% preferring to self-identify. Our sample were predominately within the 22-40 age category with 33% of graduates aged between 22-26, 30% between 31-40 and 21% between 27-30. There were differences in the highest qualification of the sample: 4% had completed Foundation degrees; 54% had completed first

degree qualifications 27% reported postgraduate taught degrees; just under 10% had completed teaching qualifications (PGDE, PGCE), and 4% had research degrees (PhD).

The first part of the survey asked demographic questions including respondents' highest education qualification, gender and whether they identified as neurodivergent. This also contained questions about perceptions of their current employment, their satisfaction and perceived suitability of their role, as well as open questions on their perceived strengths and challenges of being neurodivergent. The survey then incorporated questions from the validated Graduate Capital Scale (Tomlinson et al, 2022) which contains self-assessment items on different forms of capital, before specific questions on perceptions of opportunities coming from being neurodivergent. A final open question invited respondents to comment on their neurodivergence in relation to their current employment situation.

2.2.2. The interviews

A total of 14 graduates were interviewed following indication of willingness on one of the final survey questions. Roughly a fifth of respondents who indicated willingness in the survey responded to the interview invite. Consistent with many other qualitative studies of this kind, there was an imbalance in gender representation as 12 of the interview participants identified as female. It is also noteworthy that the majority of the sample had attained postgraduate qualifications, perhaps indicating a clearer investment in and commitment to particular employment trajectories.

The profiles of the interviewees are summarised in table 2. The interviews were semi-structured, lasted on average an hour and were audio recorded. The interviews initially explored participants' higher education experiences and covered questions relating to degree choices, readiness for employment, levels of support received, and what further support they might have required. The interview then addressed the graduates' employment situations, their experiences of entering the labour market, challenges and opportunities relating to their neurodivergence, as well as broader issues around recruitment, workplace experiences, and the attitudes of employers and colleagues. The interview finally asked respondents to reflect on skills and other capabilities and covered themes of capitals development and their bearing on perceived employment prospects. Qualitative data were analysed inductively, using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012), by two members of the team and with further input from the steering group.

Table 2 – Summary of interview participants

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

3. QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

3.1. Neurodivergent graduates' background profiles

The majority of the sample achieved the two highest degree classification at undergraduate level with 24.6% attaining a First and 28.6% a 2.1, as shown in figure 2.

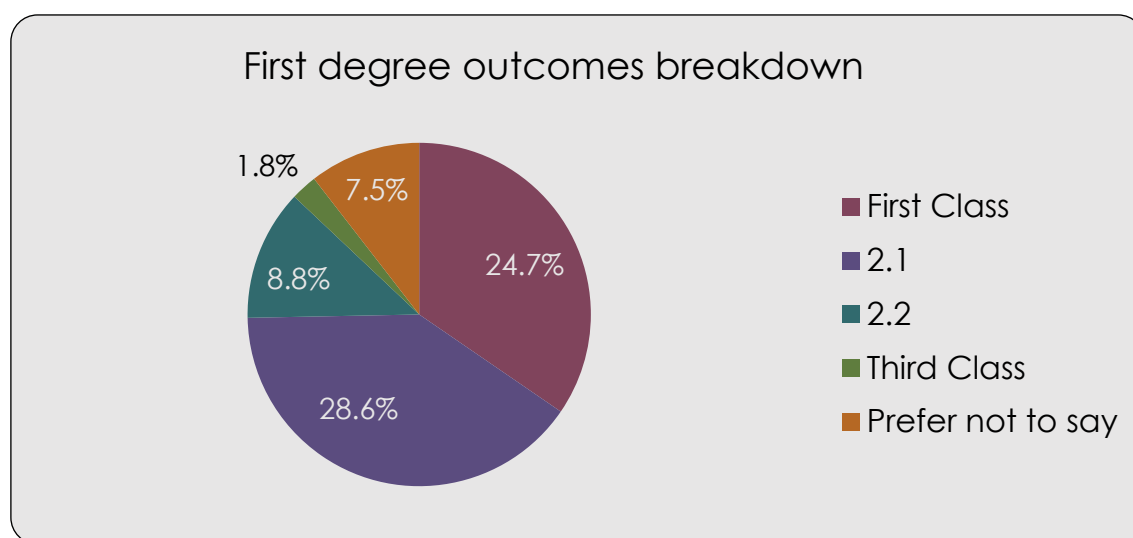


Figure 2 - Breakdown of first degree outcomes achieved by the survey participants

At postgraduate level, this was lower with 10.1% achieving Distinction and 12.3% a Merit, as shown in figure 3.

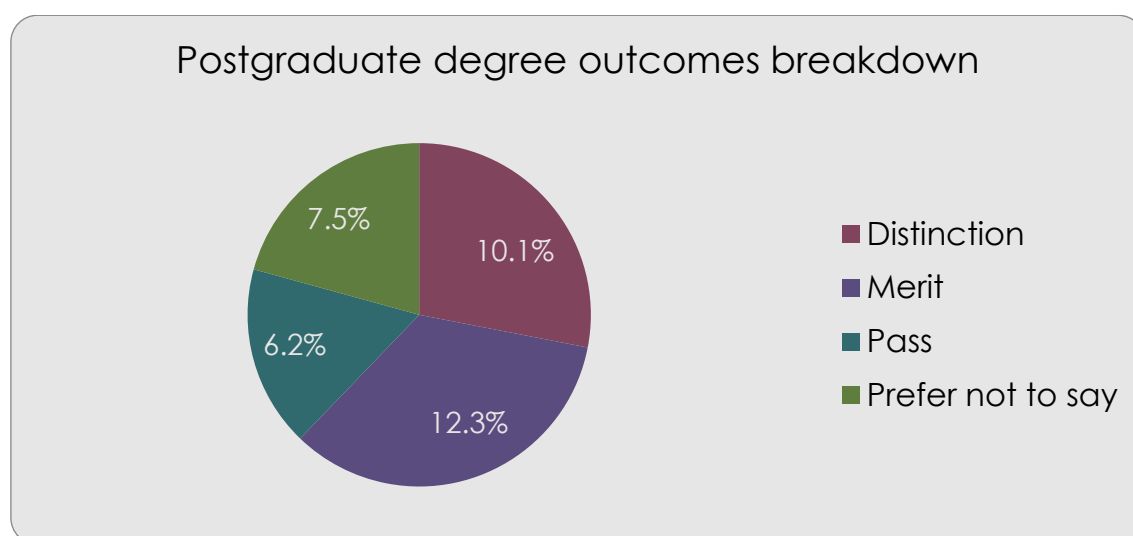


Figure 3 - Breakdown of postgraduate outcomes achieved by the survey participants

Of the sample, 41.7% indicated that they were employed in a graduate role, and just over half that they were in a non-graduate role (Figure 4).

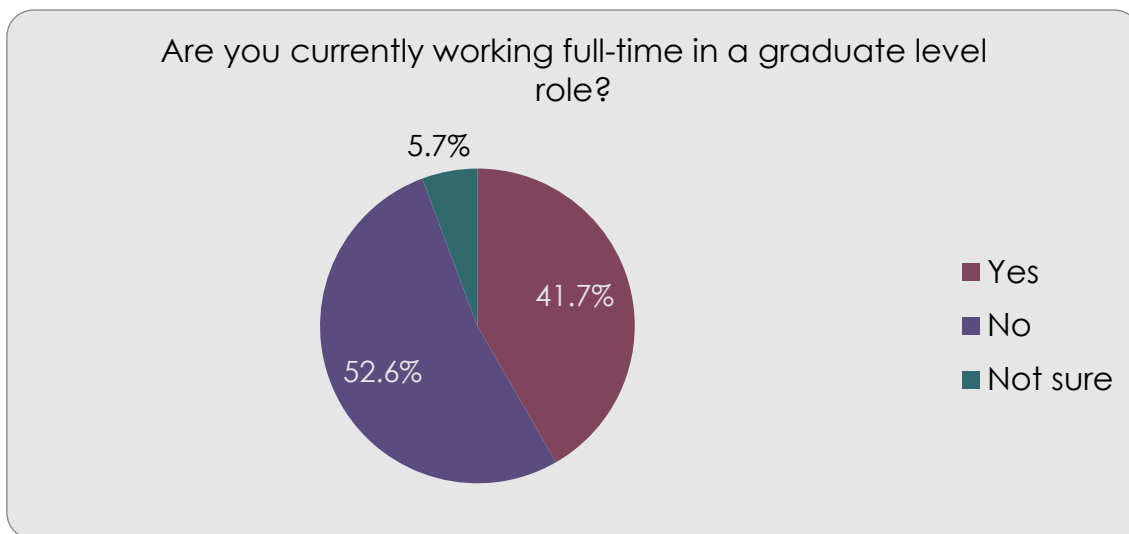


Figure 4 - Employment status of participants following graduation

72% were satisfied with their job role (Figure 5) and the same percentage found the recruitment process challenging. Female graduates (58%) were more likely than male graduates (38%) to be satisfied with their job role. Graduates aged 22 to 26 years (33%) were also more likely to be satisfied with their role compared to other age groups.

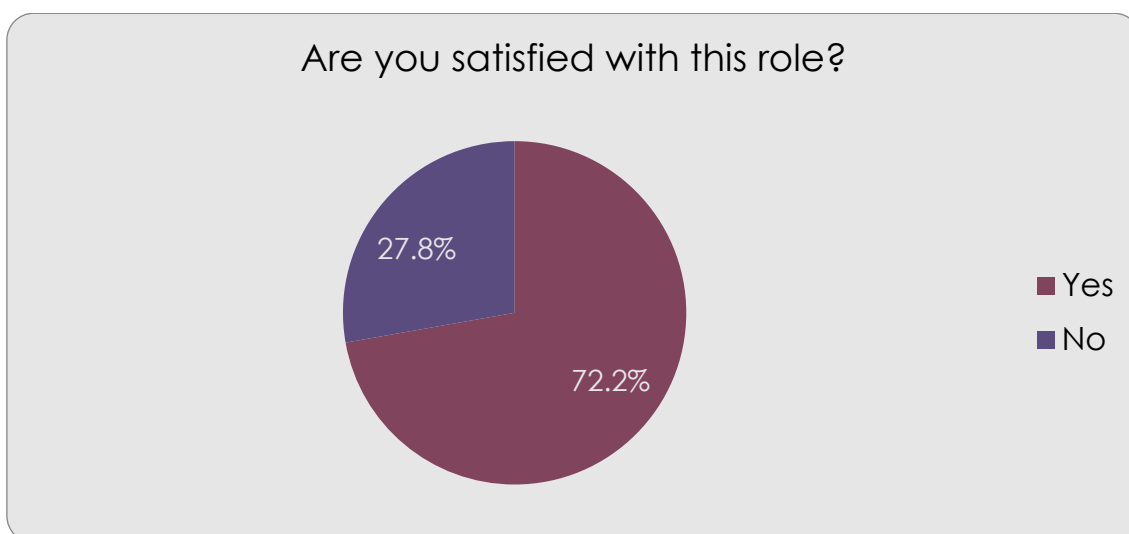


Figure 5 - Participants' level of satisfaction with role

Of the sample, 54% of graduates had been formally diagnosed with a neurocognitive condition although we did not request information as to which. The remaining 46% were either in the process of receiving a formal diagnosis or self-identified. The majority (75.5%) indicated that they were open about acknowledging and discussing their neurodivergent identity.

3.2. Neurodivergent graduates’ perceptions of the opportunities and challenges of being neurodivergent

The survey sought to explore graduates' perceptions of the opportunities and challenges presented by being neurodivergent. Figure 6 provides a breakdown of the responses and reveals some patterns, including that 72% found the recruitment process challenging. Moreover, nearly half of respondents disagreed that being neurodivergent would present opportunities in the job market with a similar proportion of respondents they would not be sufficiently accommodated in workplaces. Over half of the group felt that their neurodivergence would not be understood by employers. Whilst just over half indicated being happy to disclose being neurodivergent, a slightly higher percentage indicated that they felt they had to conceal their neurodivergence. More positively, the majority indicated that they would be able to express themselves through their employment.

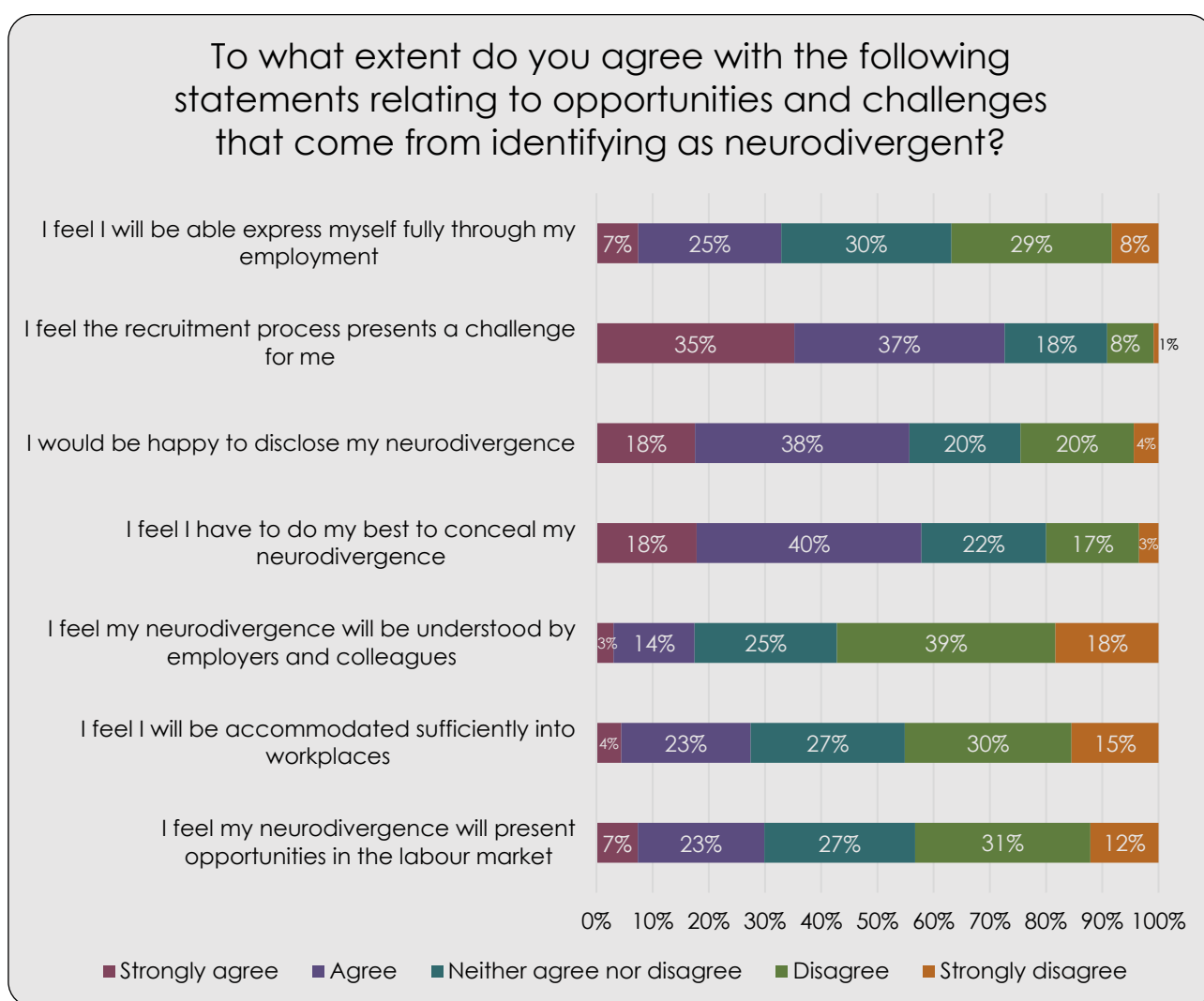


Figure 6 - Perceived opportunities and challenges that come from identifying as neurodivergent

Overall, these findings indicate that neurodivergent graduates have significant concerns about the challenges their neurodivergence may present. A tension is found in their willingness to share about their neurodivergent identity, which may indicate a desire for openness, and the concern of having to conceal this as a strategy for being accepted into workplaces. There are clearly worries about the recruitment process and how being neurodivergent may be interpreted by employers.

3.3. Graduate capitals

3.3.1. Human capital: degree and career-related skills

The survey focused on neurodivergent graduates' assessment of their human capital in relation to two main facets: specific skills and technical knowledge that may enhance employment outcomes and more generic, career-related skills. These are important as they provide relevant indications of how positively graduates appraise the technical aspects of their profiles and the value of their degree-related knowledge for targeted, and potentially niche, jobs.

Figure 7 shows that overall, the responses indicated that neurodivergent graduates perceived their specific degree-related skills favourably, with 74% indicating that their degree will enhance their employment prospects. A further 62% believed that their specific degree-related knowledge would be valued, and an overwhelming majority believed that they would be able to use their skills in future employment.

The assessments of more generic career-related skills were lower overall. just over half of respondents agreed that they were able to perform well at interview and only 34% felt they would perform well in assessment centres. The lower percentage for assessment centres may be partly attributable to perceived inflexibility in their format, including group work, sustained concentration, and time pressure which may not be favourable to some groups of neurodivergent graduates. This supports the earlier reported finding of the recruitment process being perceived as challenging. Overall, technical and subject-specific skills are perceived by the sample as being of high value to employers, and in future employment. Career-related skills such as personal branding and self-marketing (via social media platforms) are reported to be lower.

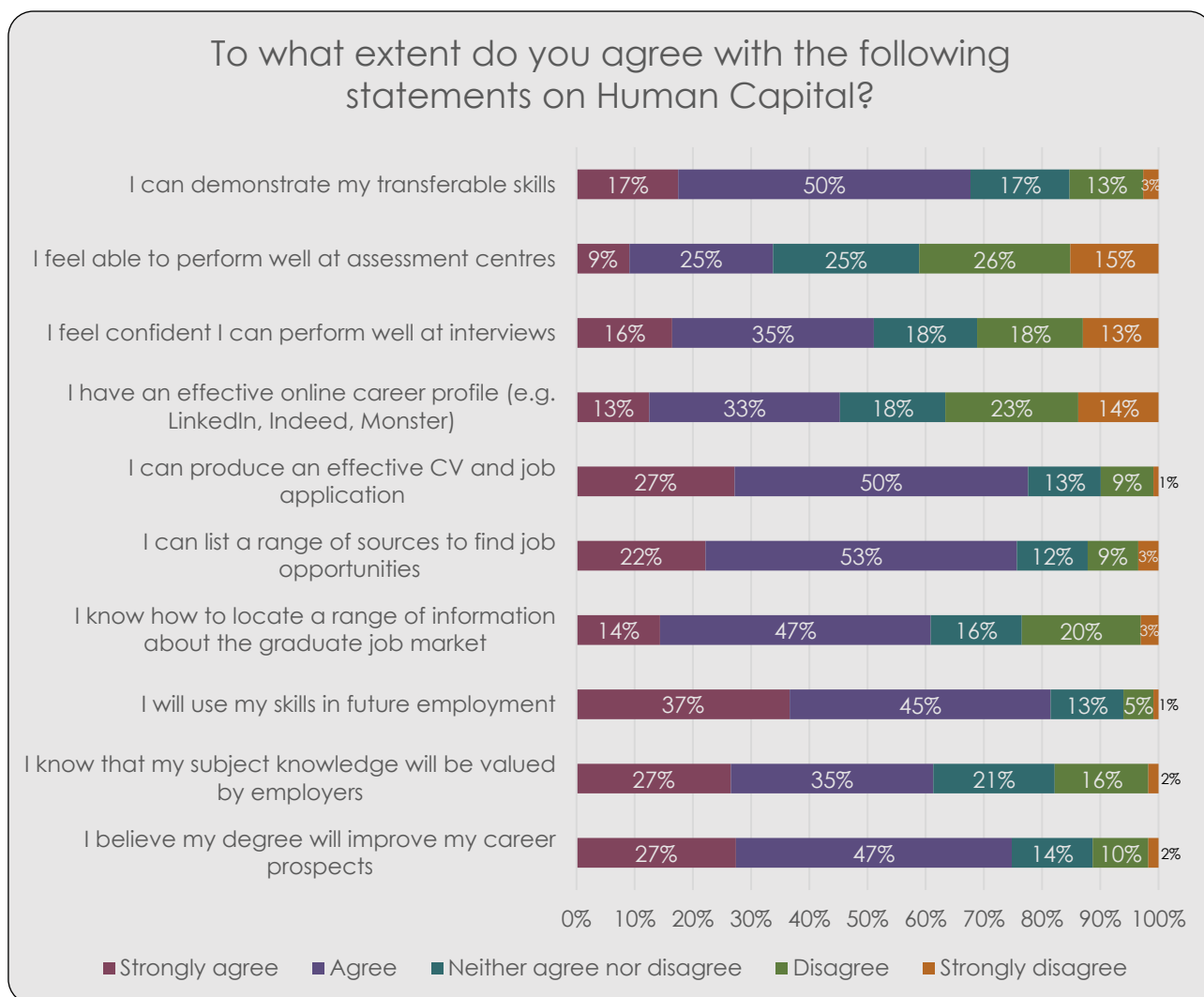


Figure 7 - Human capital: degree skills and career-related skills

3.3.2. Social capital: networks and social relationships

These items explored neurodivergent graduates' perceived levels of social capital in relation to the quality and strength of social relationships. Some of these items concerned graduates' wider job market awareness, including knowledge of employers and where to find available opportunities. Others addressed graduates' confidence in approaching and establishing connections with employers. The responses indicated that general social awareness of the graduate job market, employers and specific jobs was positive. Just over three-quarters of graduates were knowledgeable of job roles to which they were suited and over half (65%) were able to name employers of interest to them. However, the figures for relationship formation with others was lower. Just over 40% indicated being confident in talking to people they did not know and only 38% indicated having a network of contacts to inform career planning. The same figure was reported for having contacts with key employers.

Overall, there is a gap between graduates' awareness of opportunities and where to look, and their confidence in forming social networks. This may be an important component in helping graduates form the connections that support them to move from higher education to employment, but many of the graduates surveyed appear to find network and relationship formation challenging. Many graduates did say that their job application and job searching skills are strong, which may compensate in part the challenges of networking.

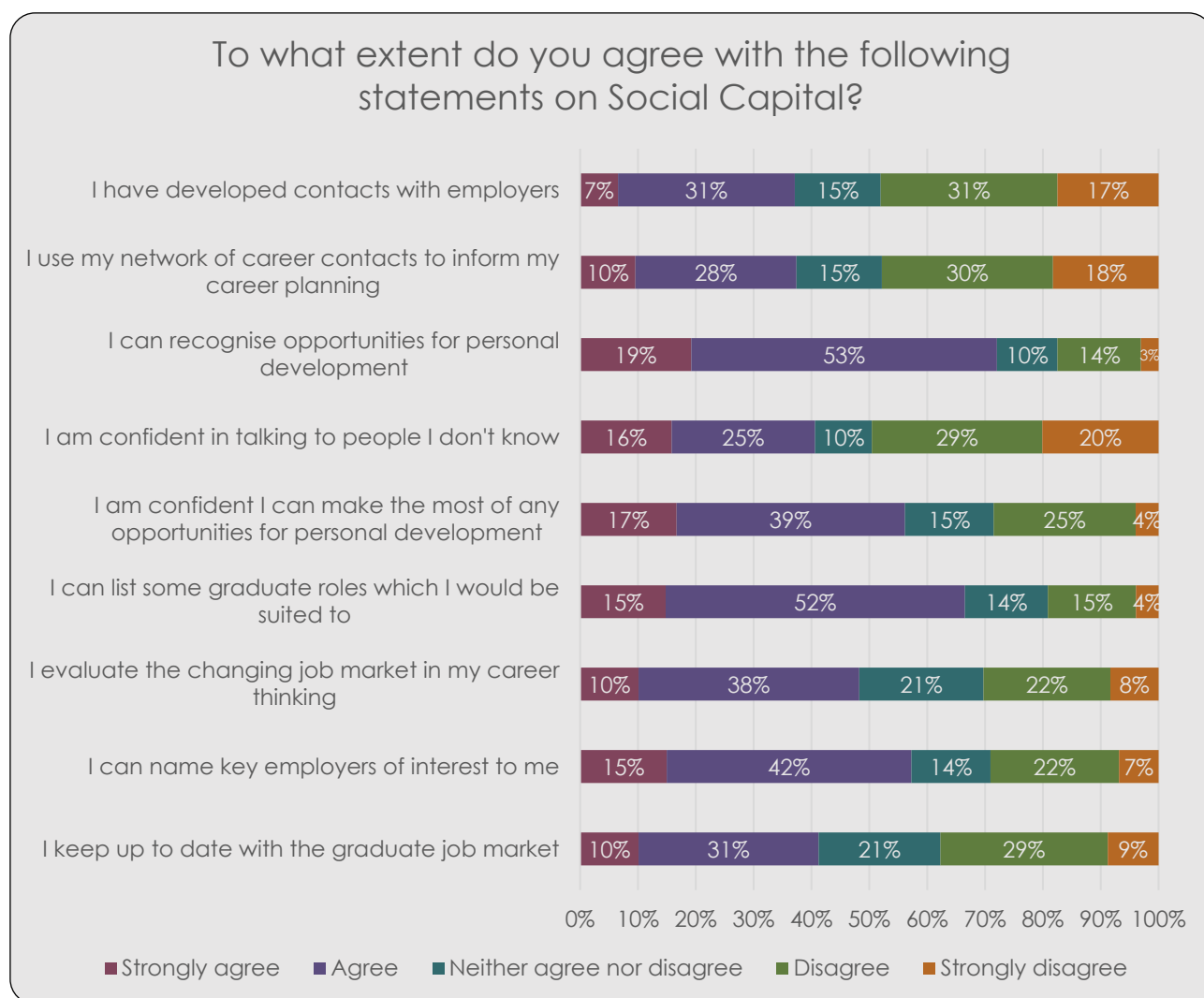


Figure 8 - Social capital: networks and social relationships

3.3.3. Cultural capital: employer connection and perceived fit

The extent to which graduates feel they connect with employers and workplaces is a significant dimension in how they appraise their employment prospects. The survey covered questions on neurodivergent graduates' perceptions of identifying role and employer organisation suitability, as well as self-presentation to employers and capitalising on the value of profile-enhancing achievements. The responses were largely positive on this issue. Just under 60% felt that they could judge whether an organisation would be suitable for them and just over 60% felt that they could present themselves well to employers, although a slightly lower percentage felt they could identify what employers most value in graduates (49%). Just under 60% felt that they had developed distinctive achievements which helped them stand out from other graduates. 70% were able to recognise and articulate the value of their extra-curricular activities.

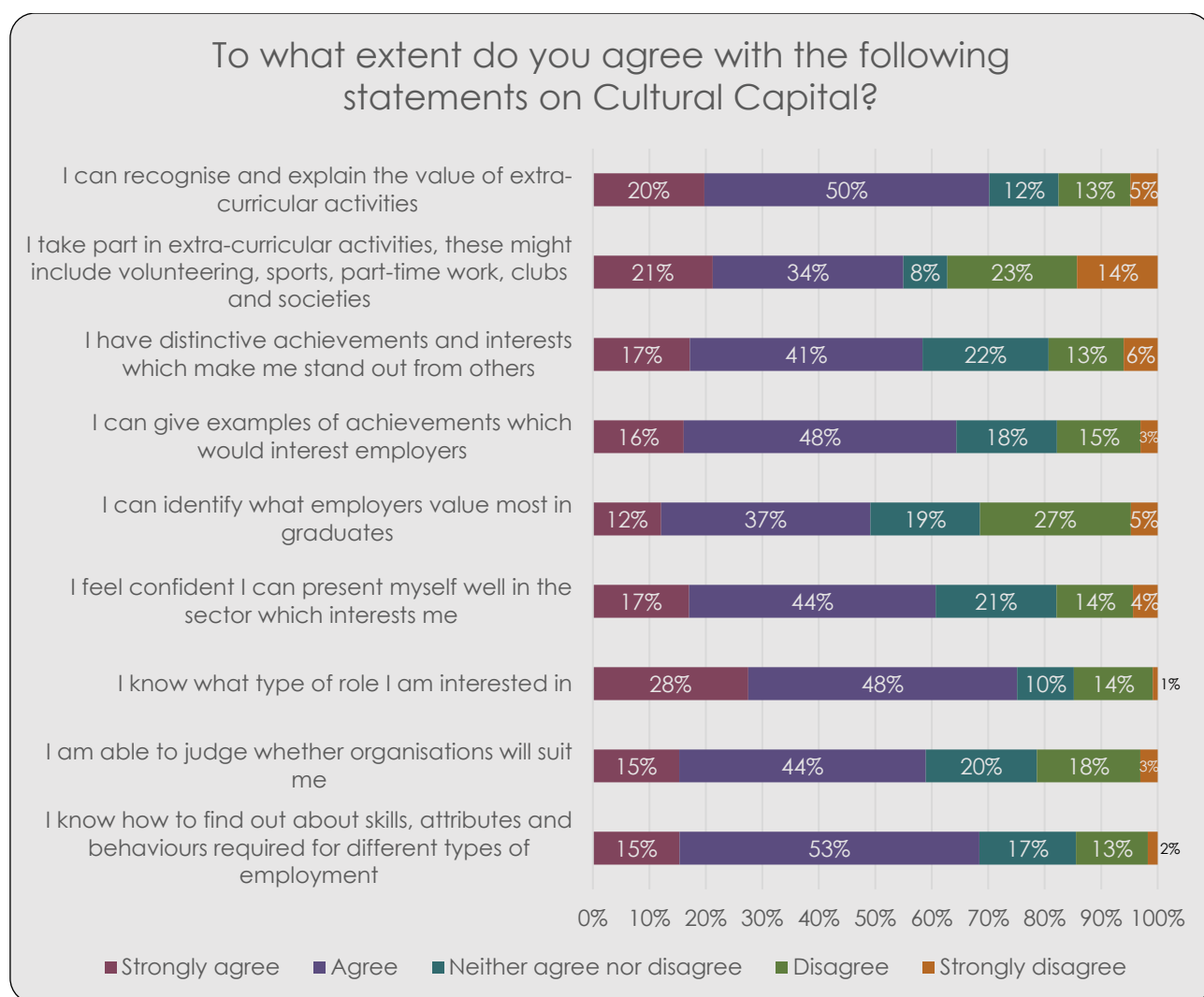


Figure 9 - Cultural capital: employer connection and perceived fit

Overall, these survey findings indicate some confidence in what graduates feel they can offer through the value of their profile and connection with employers. This may further reflect specific targeted employment of neurodivergent graduates and efforts to best align their values and profiles to organisations perceived to be suitable. How this is played out in recruitment and early career experiences requires some further qualitative exploration, which is considered later in this report.

3.3.4. Identity capital – employment exploration and future planning

The survey sought to explore the extent to which graduates perceived their future employment as a strong feature of their identity and a key area for self-expression and self-value. The extent to which graduates were invest in their careers, their identity capital, was reflected in survey questions pertaining to graduates' goals, motivations and the alignment between their values and future employment.

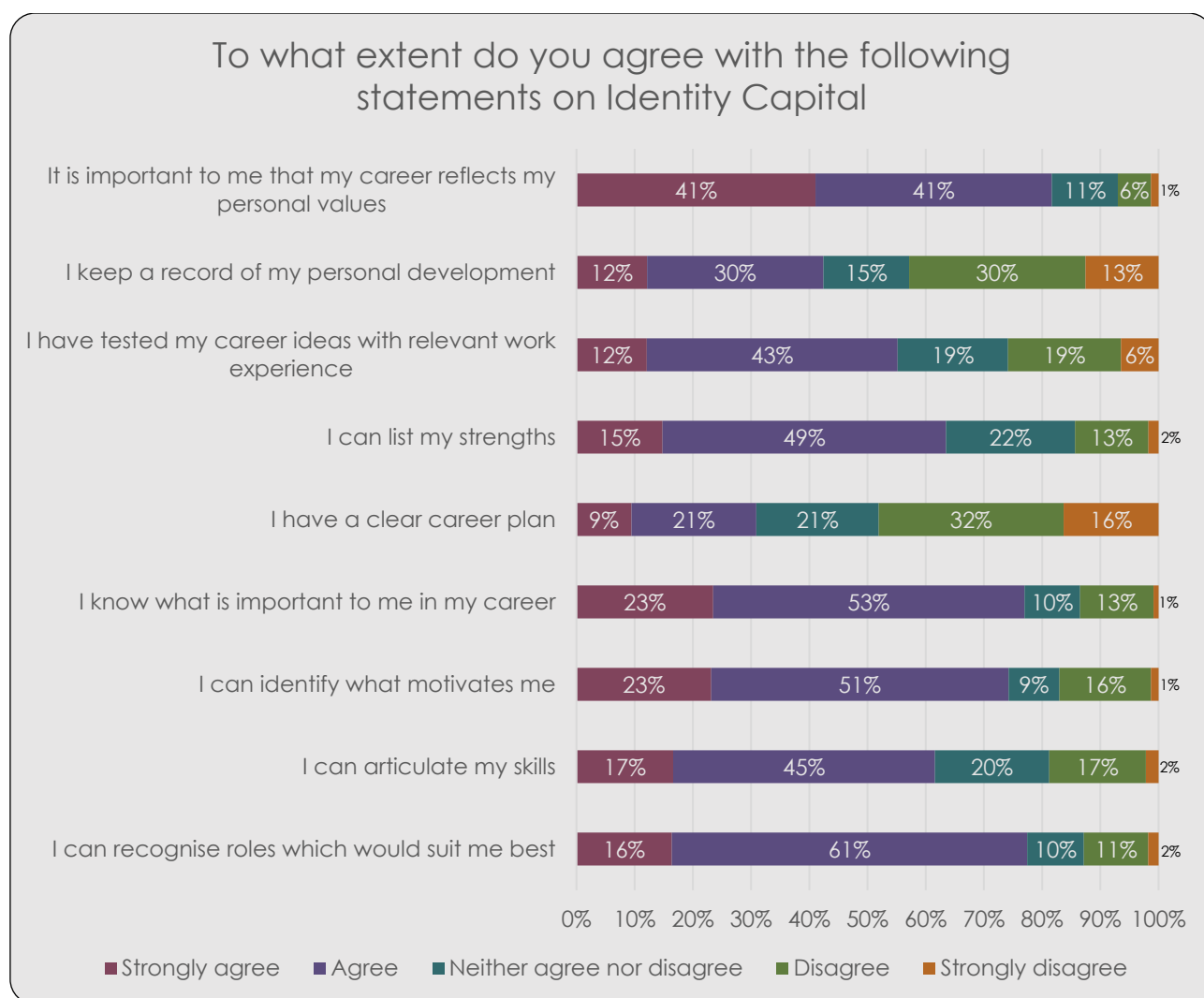


Figure 10 - Identity capital: employment exploration and future planning

These questions principally related to career exploration and testing. The responses were largely positive, indicating that the graduates surveyed viewed the role of future work and careers to be important. Just over 80% agreed with the importance of career reflecting personal values, and 77% and 74% respectively could identify suitable roles and what areas of employment motivated them. However, the evidence also indicated that these positive perceptions were not necessarily matched with levels of career planning and related personal development. 42% of graduates indicated that they kept a record of their personal development planning and only 30% indicated that that had a career plan. These findings indicate some potential tensions between graduates' more positive views of the value they place on their future career, and developmental strategies towards realising them.

3.3.5. Psychological capital – resilience and perseverance

Questions relating to psychological capital focused on graduates' self-perceptions of their resilience in the face of labour market challenges and setbacks. All the items for this capital dimension were rated positively, as shown in figure 11.

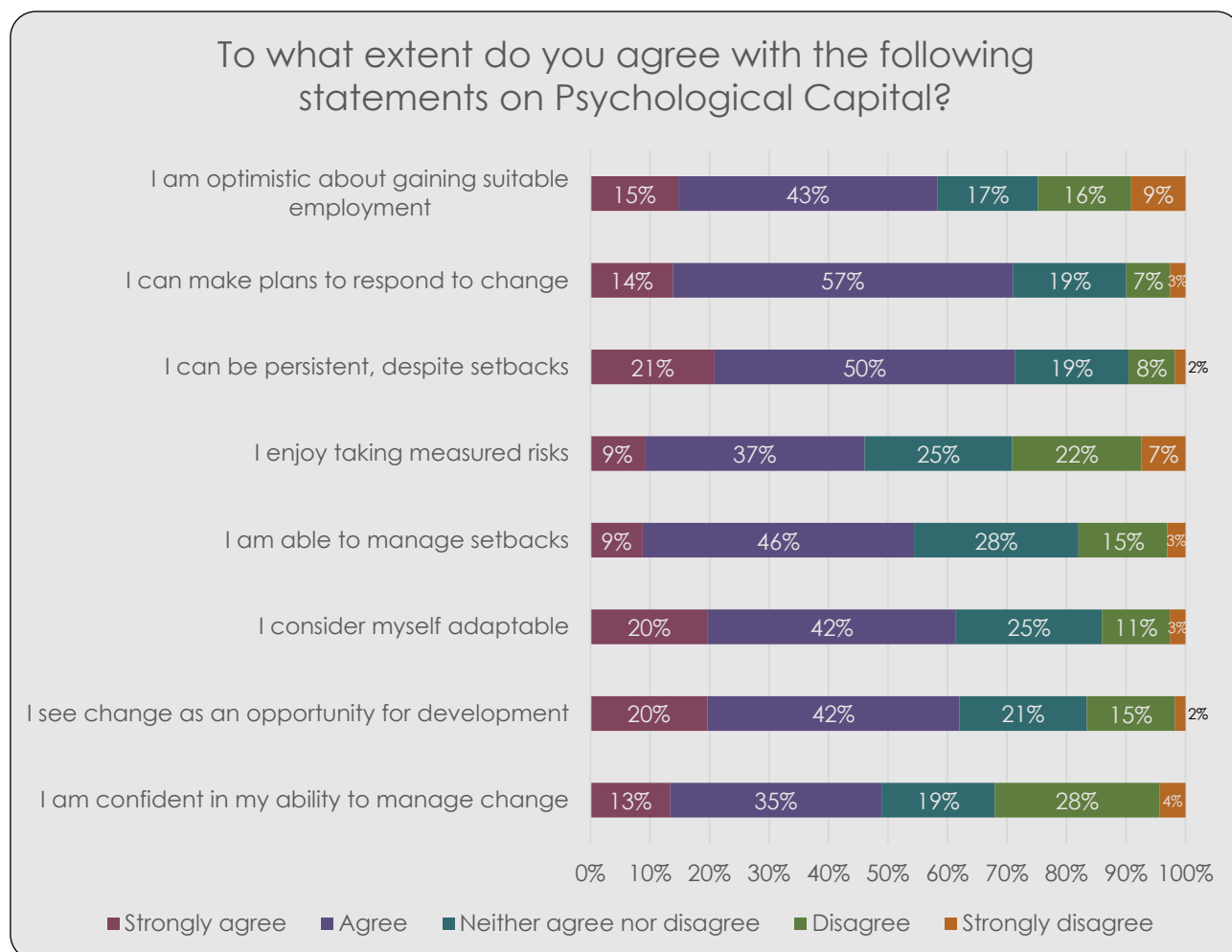


Figure 11 - Psychological capital: resilience and perseverance

Overall, 62% of respondents felt themselves to be adaptable and just under three-quarters believed they were persistent in the face of setbacks. Adaptability and responsiveness to change are closely related, including openness to change and being able to plan for uncertainty. Over 70% reported being able to formulate plans in the face of change. Optimism towards gaining suitable future employment was also high at 58%.

4. QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

The open codes in the survey and interviews both allowed for further exploration of the issues raised in the survey. This gave graduates the opportunity to share key experiences in their early career narratives, the impacts of being neurodivergent on their employment outcomes, accounts of barriers and successes, and the development and utilisation of career-related capitals. Examples of challenges and strengths were reported by participants in the qualitative items from the survey and these are tabulated in the appendices. The following six themes were identified:

- Misunderstanding neurodivergent identities
- Employment barriers
- Employment success
- The neurodivergent paradox
- Managing by masking
- Career resources

Each provide important insight into the perceived relationship between being neurodivergent and graduates' early employment trajectories and experiences.

4.1. Misunderstanding neurodivergent identities

Being neurodivergent, and how this is perceived in the labour market, presented challenges for many of those interviewed. This centred mainly on others not understanding neurodivergence or perceiving it to be 'problematic' in terms of performance and interactions in work. Accounts indicated the perceived risk of disclosure leading to being perceived negatively and as a potential burden in the workplace.

Being neurodiverse has ruined any chance of me ever getting a job that I enjoy, and disclosing any problems you have to an employer just makes you a burden in their eyes.

Whilst many had come to accept being neurodivergent and saw it as a potential strength, there were concerns that others may not understand its nuances or misinterpret behaviours as not aligned to the dominant modes of practice within workplaces. In some cases, graduates expressed concerns over colleagues misunderstanding why they may respond differently on work tasks or organisational protocols. For example, graduates who identified as dyslexic often referred to different speeds of processing information and needing more time to complete tasks, but without necessary support structures. Some with ADHD

indicated their work approaches or habits may be misinterpreted as poorly organised and haphazard, even though they felt their work was finally executed to a desirable level. Yet, this can be a double-edged sword if neurodivergence is misconstrued as a justification for performance differences, as the account below indicates:

I am not trying to justify my actions, but it feels like they feel that I'm trying to justify my actions. For example, if I'm late, oh, it's because... ADHD is not my get out of jail card. I'm just asking for a little bit more compassion... So, they know that I'm doing the best that I can [...] But I do feel there's this perception in certain family members that ADHD is my get out of jail card. And it's not.

4.2. Employment barriers

Graduates also reported a variety of barriers, both in applying for roles and during their time in employment. Some of the problems were task-orientated and related to the lack of flexible adjustments for a given work task:

From people with my particular diagnostic label, I've heard horror stories before, plenty of them, where even the most accessible seeming companies will ask you why you need an extra minute during your interview just to prepare your answer or why you need the questions in advance and why they can't do that. I think they see us as an inconvenience probably, and maybe an obligation as well, which is hard to digest.

Even when I've explained to her that I've got dyscalculia and I've got dyslexia, and my memory is really poor. And I'll say to her, how do I do that? And by the time she's finished answering, I've forgotten what she's said. And I can't write it down, because I don't understand what I've written. It could mean anything. She hasn't got the patience to go through it with me again. She doesn't understand why I don't get it.

Recruitment activities proved to be a significant barrier for some graduates, particularly when tasks needed to be completed in a limited time, or extended group activities placed pressure on candidates. Many acknowledged the unwritten judgments amongst employers of seeing neurodivergence as a higher-risk or burdensome category that might be difficult to manage if the graduate was hired. Neurotypical graduates may not carry the same resource or training demands. In one case, a graduate with hemianopia, which affected her speech patterns, experienced direct forms of prejudice in her interactions with employers:

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

She also perceived a subtle façade amongst some employers when justifying decisions. She recalled an interview where she had requested extra time, which was only partially actioned and various interview questions were omitted. Unfortunately, warm praise for her profile did not translate into successful outcomes:

So, there are unanswered questions, and because I'm under a time pressure, I don't provide all answers. And then, typically, I end up having a phone call for an interview for a job I'm highly experienced in. And they'll say, oh, we thought you were absolutely wonderful, and your achievements are fantastic, and unfortunately, there was someone else who has more experience. And I've lived in this city for years, and so I see who organisations employ after turning me down, and it isn't ever anyone who has a visible or oral disability.

Other challenges were in relation to the social dimension of workplaces and judgments. Subtle forms of exclusion and tacit discrimination were felt in workplace contexts where there was misunderstanding about a form of neurodivergence and stigmatising perceptions regarding diagnosis:

I think the hardest parts are more normally just waiting around and all the small talk or in the break room and stuff like that. And at lunchtime, I tend to just be more silent because, I don't know, a lot of people have had... Well, I just never know which experiences to bring out, especially with my quite different background.

This had nothing to do with it. It was just random comments that they had made about people being over-diagnosed and too much medication, especially in the United States, and all this stuff. I didn't tell them, so they didn't know. They were just making these comments about other things, and I didn't want to be, that's not true, you know? That's not actually the case.

Clearly, therefore, developing employers' understanding of neurodivergence and building capacity for inclusive recruitment processes are key aspects of practice that require continued focus and a nuanced approach.

4.3. Employment success

Importantly, the interviews also revealed evidence of employment success, often when a graduate had been able to find alignment between their interests, talents and the role. Success tended to be due to early career exploration, gaining work experience during or after the degree programme, and having a sense of confidence in the skills that they could bring to the workplace.

I don't possess some magic special skill with public speaking that someone else doesn't. I've just put myself in that situation often enough, that I have the confidence to do it. And you build on it every time. And I guess that's come from having decided to do stuff at uni, having done work experience and put myself in those situations.

There appear to be several factors that shape these outcomes, some of which may be related to external facilitation from others, including flexible and supportive employers and opportunity structures in certain employment areas. Findings indicate the importance of formal state-level or institutional support for providing clear and equitable structures for neurodivergent graduates. At the same time, informal support from families, friends and colleagues were also important for gaining initial access and sustained success.

I did an internship with the Scottish Government last year for three months

When I had that work experience... I actually impressed the person who gave me that work experience, and she backdated it and turned it into employment for me. So, I was quite lucky from that perspective.

Others relayed how success did not always immediately follow completion of their course, or that it took more diverse routes. This is important for understanding the multifarious ways that neurodivergent graduates might seek to explore career options after university.

Maybe it doesn't have to be just one thing, but the combination of funding from public and private bodies, and yes, and then these other things as well.

I've never been a person who's known what I want to do as a job. I'm very happy just going with the flow, and seeing what interests me, what crops up at the time.

I think I applied for a Local Government Programme and maybe a couple of other things, but didn't really think about applying for jobs that would start immediately after uni, because I had planned to take some time off.

These accounts signal that immediate graduate level employment is not necessarily the ultimate goal for all graduates and suggests that a flourishing life will look different to each individual. They also indicate the temporal mismatch between the emotional and physical resources that neurodivergent graduates might feel they have attained through their time at university and the life course expectations around graduate employment.

4.4. The neurodivergence paradox

Many of the participants were able to identify their strengths as neurodivergent employees. Skills reported included attention to detail, subject knowledge, creativity, hyper-focus, oral and written communication, determination, and high standards in the work produced. They noted how these could be used to advantage in the workplace, given the right context and supportive management.

I think also, I have insane attention to detail, which is something I'm proud of, but also it can hinder me sometimes, because I've honed that skill generally and it is a very ADHD kind of skill to have. I think if I were to be tested on it in any way... Even now, during my mentorship, my mentor has already spotted that and been like, that's really good, it's crazy how you noticed that because I never did, thanks for that. I think that's definitely helpful. It will help me just over my career.

Call it as a skill or not, I see it as a skill that I'm very, I don't know how to phrase it, stubborn is not the word I want to use. I'm very determined. And if I set my mind on something, I will see it through. And if I hit a setback, say I see a certain job, and I'm, like, right, yes, I want that one, that's it, I will do my absolute best.

Some of the graduates interviewed demonstrated strong awareness of the transferability of their own personal skillsets for future success. Where this was evident, they were frequently more confident and better able to navigate the labour market, reporting relatively high levels of graduate mobility.

However, there were also instances where the skills reported were perceived paradoxically. In this sense, what is typically considered a neurodivergent strength, including those listed above, actually become barriers to workplace success. As one participant put it, 'My ADHD

is my superpower. It's just exhausting'. In the case below, creative approaches to problem solving – which is often viewed as a desirable trait in many job roles – was actually viewed negatively and perceived as problematic by managers and colleagues.

One of the things I find most frustrating... is that people always say they want someone who thinks outside the box, but they don't. I don't have a choice to think outside the box. My box, it just doesn't align with everyone else's box. It's not an option. I'm not, ooh, look at me thinking outside the box. I wish I could think inside everyone else's box. That would be great, but that's not how my brain works.

Mental exhaustion means it's a constant battle to find the right balance to have the energy to enjoy both work and personal life.

Graduates related the emotional labour that goes into trying to manage their own and others' expectations of their neurodivergence. There is recognition of its potential to generate positive outcomes but at the same time the need to self-regulate or mask within particular contexts can lead to burnout.

4.5. Managing by masking

For various neurodivergent graduates, their 'superpowers' were not something that they felt able to share with others, which concurs with our survey findings. The 'superpower' framing, however, was not universally adopted in the sample. In fact, some interviewees reported internalized stigma derived from wider social and educational discourses around normalcy which had been persistently reinforced over time. Such experiences produced a scarring effect which had often begun before the graduates fully understood their neurodivergent identity. In the accounts below, the graduate's ADHD was perceived negatively and as a matter of shame which must be kept hidden from others.

I feel like if I revealed I had ADHD, even after my official diagnosis, people would be nice and attentive but also subconsciously expect less of me, or expect me to make more mistakes/pay more attention to any mistakes I might make. Right now I feel like I can mask it and be seen as a regular productive employee

When it comes to networking events and such, I think I mask up and just talk to everyone in an equal kind of way, and people seem to appreciate that a lot.

My experience in my current workplace ... is that there is no advantage to being your true neurodivergent self in the workplace and I wish I had carried on 'acting' at work as my future career prospects in the organisation might have been better if I had played the social/office politics game better.

Other accounts suggest that the need to 'develop a front that nobody sees past' persists even in the workplace in order to meet the social demands or expectations of managers, colleagues, or clients. For some, masking is perceived as a necessity to avoid the ableist attitudes or discrimination that they had experienced previously in the workplace. This illustrates the complex decision-making that neurodivergent graduates engage in as they navigate employment. The longer-term impact of masking can include feeling 'depressed and anxious, and then you don't want to go to work'.

4.6. Developing and mobilising graduate capitals

The interview data confirmed many of the survey responses. Overall, many were comfortable in their abilities and potential to add value to workplaces. Developing different forms of capital is important to an extent, although being able to mobilise these through supportive and enabling social relations is crucial for translating them into desired outcomes. Many graduates discussed the importance of knowing what adjustments they might ask for as being significant for maximising their potential.

... my line manager there, she was very understanding. I think she would've gotten it. I found out later, her husband actually worked for Autism Scotland for a while. Yes, I know, which is funny. He was doing money stuff, so he wasn't doing any...But I think she probably would've gotten it to some degree, but I was hoping because it was only three months, it wasn't really going to be necessary.

Where graduates had engaged with the careers services at their institution, they often noted the positive impact of this at the point at which they were entering the labour market, but also beyond.

Especially towards the end of my time at uni, I participated a lot more in the careers advice. They had specific disabled access to jobs, talks and workshops, which were really helpful. But also, the careers service offered I think a CV checking thing, careers advisors. I think I can still contact them now as well. I still get emails from them.

Careers support across universities varied, as did graduates' engagement with it. Most found embedded support through a programme useful, although some noted that this was not

always available and that having a more structured and integrated offer may suit neurodivergent students.

Probably the first step would be to increase the amount of structure surrounding careers engagement, to be honest. Having almost a structured programme, to ensure that students are hitting milestones in their career development.

Alongside careers consultants, participants also noted others who supported them informally, including lecturers, parents, friends, and wider networks. This reiterates the importance of understanding the neurodivergent graduate as situated within an employment ecosystem.

The interviews confirmed the survey findings on positive appraisals of subject-related skills and technical knowledge. Many of the interviewees indicated being comfortable in their skillsets and able to meet the technical demands of future employment. They were confident in what they could offer employers and this connected to favourable appraisals of their subject knowledge and expertise. This was especially the case for the graduates who had found work in, or were looking to enter, specialist fields:

I feel like there are thousands of students, and also graduates, that just have my skillset already, that are laboratory trained and everything. Perhaps I'm more qualified in this position, because I have a forensic background, and I know the importance of the law and science, and how they combine, and how that's mixed. And having an overview of seeing how our samples will affect outside of the laboratory. And also, knowing procedures of how to keep a laboratory DNA free, or DNA clean.

Social capital was often acknowledged as an important dimension in helping graduates navigate initial stages of employment. However, there was some variance in the extent to which graduates could acquire and meaningfully convert this into positive gain. In some cases, graduates had found their employment through key contacts who had advocated for them, including programme directors and tutors who guided them to less obvious job areas. Contacts who were also neurodivergent were particularly helpful in some cases. Others saw a clear link between being neurodivergent and the ease by which they could form sustainable social relationships that could act as a bridge to targeted employment. The accounts below illustrate the contrasting experiences of social connection and their role in facilitating job access:

So, what enabled me to find work? Really good connections. The person who referred me for the job I'm looking at currently, once he was my colleague and then he became kind of my boss

slash manager, but he was one of the clients that my PR agency worked for. And he has autism and ADHD.

It's really difficult when you aren't good at that part. I suppose I could probably try and mask my way through it, but then we'd run into other issues that I have about my body and being physically in the room with people [...] You get better jobs if you know people and you go and you chit-chat, and I'm not. That's not what I'm good at.

A similar tension was evident in projecting and performing expected behaviours and social roles, and embodying desirable behaviours for workplaces that required regular interactions between colleagues or with clients. Whilst being aware of expected neurotypical, and specifically British, cues and codes, some felt that they were not always able to respond to these in ways which allowed them to feel part of or valued within their workplace. Being able to convey desired forms of embodied cultural capital remained a challenge for some respondents in the study. In some cases, this interacted with their wider socio-economic background and nationality.

And arts as well, I really struggle to get along with people in arts. Sometimes it was great, but a lot of the time I felt like an outsider. I definitely felt imposter syndrome as a student. That's in the UK, but I didn't feel like the culture was right for me, or it wasn't diverse enough for me to feel comfortable. ...And that's a big part of it too. Like I said, I'm not British, so it was very Anglo-centric and, yes, it would have been difficult on many levels. And I probably wouldn't have been able to thrive because they wouldn't have recognised what I am capable of, I think.

The findings also indicated that, despite social and cultural challenges, many of the participants were motivated to gain sustainable and meaningful employment and use this as a platform for self-development and expression. There was a clear sense of respondents perceiving their future career and development as important and prioritising finding alignment between their values, interests, and their area of employment. Those who had found employment which they perceived to be suitable and aligned with their interests revealed developing their professional identities and gaining validation through their work. To this extent, employment can empower those who find positive alignment between their emerging identities and targeted or current employment. In part, this compensates for some of the interpersonal and cultural tensions indicated above:

I am who I am, and that fits the stereotypes of being a PhD student or an academic, somebody who's quite intellectual, likes to analyse things, is theorising about stuff all the time. I think I would

be doing that, no matter what I was doing. I would still be academic-y or fit that personality, so it's more like I've just gone for the thing...

I'm in the design industry, so it's hard enough to get a job in that anyway just because it's so competitive. So, I do graphic design and illustration, which is why I chose to do visual communication, it's a combination of those things, but I just thought about it in terms of... So, in my BA I realised what I didn't want to do and then by the end of that I was like I need to carry on studying so that I can explore what I am interested in personally.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This research indicates that neurodivergent graduates have the potential to access graduate level employment and to be successful. In keeping with the neurodiversity paradigm (Chapman, 2020) it recognises neurocognitive differences but balances these against positive representations and strengths. Both the survey and interview data affirm that neurodivergent graduates have acquired a number of the capitals present in Tomlinson's (2017) Graduate Capital Model, which have enabled them to enter the labour market and, in some cases, experience early positive career outcomes. In particular, graduates felt confident about their career-related skills and valued their degree-related knowledge for gaining future employment. Both of these indicate what higher education can offer neurodivergent graduates and the more technical knowledge and skills that are gained by engaging at this level.

Graduates reported high levels of psychological capital represented by adaptability, resilience and perseverance. Social and cultural capital presents some challenges, mainly in relation to instigating and maintaining social connections with unfamiliar neurotypical people. Yet this research notes how communication is necessarily bi-directional, placing some of this responsibility on employers. Those who had managed to form such connections and use these to their advantage were aware of its significance in their early transition to employment. Those who had found working environments where they could flourish and not have to overly conform to neurotypical social scripts also reported positive early career experiences. Graduates who were strongly invested in their careers and viewed their future work as a platform for self-expression were able to maintain positive identities despite, in some cases, experiencing discrimination and a lack of understanding. Many graduates have had to exercise resilience in response to adversities during their educational and other life experiences and this had shaped some of their outlooks.

However, it is worth emphasising that whilst capitals are significant resources that can facilitate positive early career outcomes, their formation and application do not occur independently from context. They appear to be mediated through important educational, social and work-related environments within and sometimes beyond graduates' immediate personal milieus. Much of the qualitative data revealed the importance of graduates' relationships with significant others, whether in their immediate family or extending to support structures in universities and workplaces. Capital formation is, therefore, not the sole responsibility of individual graduates. To have meaningful impact, they need to be

successfully converted and supported by others in the graduate's career journey. Adverse early employment experiences, including prejudice and discrimination, can deplete career goals and reduce the value of early capital development. This supports the earlier work of Vincent and Fabri (2021) who, focusing on autistic graduates' transition to employment, advanced an ecosystem model for competitive employment over time. They posit that successful employment operates dynamically at proximal and distal levels, from a graduate's self-perception and social environment through to HE institutions, workplaces and ultimately the sociopolitical context. For example, lack of knowledge and understanding among employers can serve as a barrier resulting in the delegitimizing of a graduate's neurodivergent status and damaging their confidence in the process of applying for, or working for, a targeted employer.

Interestingly, over half of the survey sample received a First or 2:1 degree classification, indicating their capacity to complete their studies to a high level. However, only 41.7% were in graduate level employment. Whilst this might initially appear to replicate the employment gap that is well documented for disabled, and particularly autistic, graduates (Toogood, 2024; Vincent and Ralston, 2023), what is interesting here is that 72% were satisfied with their position. Such data urges us to reconsider whether 'graduate level employment' is necessarily the preferred outcome and encourages us to perceive postgraduate trajectories more expansively.

In this regard, the Capabilities Approach (Sen, 1993; Sen, 2009) provides a useful framework for thinking about what to value and in doing so elevates choice and wellbeing over utility. For some graduates in the study, having the 'capability' to opt for more diverse or even delayed career paths was a 'valuable state of being' (Sen, 1993, p.30) and clearly generated satisfaction. For other neurodivergent graduates, the decision to delay after completing their degree was a choice precipitated by the need for self-care, sometimes physically or emotionally. What both of these outcomes indicate is that the transition to employment is often not linear and that there is value in allowing for flexibility and choice.

The data indicated certain ways in which the potential for neurodivergent graduate level employment could be realised. The first is by building the skills and capitals that graduates need for their career development into degree programmes, via both formal and informal opportunities. At times, this was a matter of not being able to mobilise or convert the skills and graduate capitals that they had accrued into actual opportunities. Specifically, not all graduates felt secure in navigating the graduate job market or building networks that could

lead to desired forms of employment. An important aspect of this is creating opportunities for meaningful work experience during or after degree programmes so that neurodivergent graduates can demonstrate their skills in practice. Another key dimension was the exposure to workplaces and supportive networks that it offered. Developing provision to identify strengths and needs was a significant factor in enabling graduate success. This allowed neurodivergent graduates to understand what accommodations to request but also to find alignment between their skills and potential roles (Coney, 2021; Pesonen et al., 2022).

Lastly, there is much work to be done at the most distal sociopolitical levels regarding a cultural change in attitudes regarding neurodivergence. Whilst there has been a positive shift in narrative, which some graduates themselves espoused regarding their strengths or even 'superpowers', we must recognise that this perception is not universally held. Moreover, we ought to be wary that such framing does not underplay the support needs that neurodivergent graduates may have, or commodify them as meeting a 'labour need' rather than treating them holistically. However, where universities and employers can create systems which recognise individual needs and work proactively and collaboratively to create accessible and inclusive environments, neurodivergent graduates have the potential to flourish.

The recommendations from this work were placed at the beginning of this report, as a call to action for all readers, whether within careers services, universities or employers, or engaged in sector-level policymaking. They are also reproduced on the next page to conclude this report. The actions within the recommendations show how holistic approaches, co-created with neurodivergent students, graduates and staff and supported at all levels of the education and employment ecosystem, have the potential to enhance neurodivergent graduates' access to graduate employment.

Table 3 (reproduced) - Recommendations for action – aligned to the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017)

	HUMAN	SOCIAL	CULTURAL	IDENTITY	PSYCHOLOGICAL
Careers professionals	Ensure employability is embedded in curriculum from day one, alongside tailored 1:1 careers support, throughout all degrees and beyond graduation.	Recognise the importance of all neurodivergent graduates' capitals. Facilitate their meaningful growth through careers education, information, advice and guidance and the development and provision of associated networks and opportunities.			Recognise the additional emotional labour that neurodivergent staff and students may take on and create psychologically safe spaces to share information. Facilitate holistic approaches and a psychologically safe environment through the sharing of good practice and knowledge exchange between disability professionals and careers professionals both within institutions and across the HE sector.
HE institutions		Commit to training and education for all staff and students that is co-created and co-facilitated by neurodivergent people on neurodiversity and allyship.	Create supportive structures e.g. mentoring and supervision, where neurodivergent staff, students and graduates feel listened to, valued, and psychologically safe.	Work collaboratively with neurodivergent graduates and associated support organisations to educate employers about neurodiversity, inclusive recruitment, and sustainable support/development.	
HE policymakers and sector bodies	Create sustainable funding structures that support tailored and long-term support for neurodivergent graduates.	Commit to training and education for all staff that is co-created and co-facilitated by neurodivergent people on inclusive recruitment, neurodiversity and allyship.	Recognise that graduate employment is not necessarily the goal for all graduates and that there can be other outcomes that are meaningful, take longer or follow more diverse routes.		
Employers	Understand that neurodivergence can create challenges but also brings significant strengths that are needed in the workforce.		Create supportive structures e.g. mentoring and supervision, where neurodivergent staff feel listened to, valued, and psychologically safe.		
All stakeholders listed above	Establish partnerships between HE and employers to create tailored, inclusive opportunities for developing work experience that generate skills, networks, and confidence around recruitment processes.		Listen to and believe the experiences of neurodivergent students and graduates and work collaboratively together, to co-create supportive cultures, and evidence-based accessible provision and opportunities built from this understanding.		
			Trust the neurodivergent student or graduate in their articulation of their needs and understand the responsibility to provide reasonable adjustments.		

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7. APPENDICES

7.1. Appendix A - Table of open-coded responses of challenges and strengths

Table 4 - Responses of challenges and strengths

Theme	Examples of challenges	Examples of strengths
Navigating social interactions	Understanding social cues, patterns, and hierarchies	Communicating with others, e.g., networking and public speaking
Managing self	Feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, and lacking concentration. Lacking self-confidence and dealing with imposter syndrome	Having a hyper-focus, thinking 'outside of the box', creative, attention to detail, problem solving, persistence and resilience.
Managing change	Trying to settle into new environments and routines	Not mentioned
Accommodations	Knowing what accommodations may be available and how to ask for them	Confident to ask questions and discuss ND status with others
Memory	Finding memory issues being perceived as not paying attention	Possessing excellent memory skills
Understanding instructions	Feeling confused by, or not understanding verbal instructions, and struggling to be understood	Identifying when instructions may be unclear
In the workplace	Experiencing problems with open plan offices (sensory difficulties) and dealing with office politics. Unclear job role boundaries, and difficulties in working in fast-paced environments. Asking for accommodations. Being perceived as demanding and a lack of openness with managers.	Not mentioned
Sensory difficulties	Experiencing issues with noise, heat, light and touch	Not mentioned
Conforming to others' expectations	Needing to mask to appear employable or to fit into the crowd	Not mentioned

Task completion	Struggling to multi-task, keeping track, and sticking to deadlines	Organising, managing, and completing tasks within deadlines
Collaboration	Preferring to work by oneself, rather than in a team	Not mentioned
Connecting with others	Finding it difficult to connect with others and the anxiety around perceived inappropriate expressions (e.g., laughing at the wrong time)	Understanding others and being emotionally intelligent
Applying for jobs	Being able to adapt to the job market. Recruitment processes feel stressful (e.g., interview anxiety) and uncertain what to disclose on CV. Sense of employer discrimination. Fear of rejection.	Not mentioned