TRaCE Transborder: A Report on Humanities PhD Career Pathways Across Five Continents

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Introduction

This report maps the career trajectories of humanities PhD graduates (graduating cohorts, 2013-2022) in the academy and beyond the academic realm. The analyses elucidate the diverse pathways, experiences, and outcomes of individuals from twelve universities across five continents. By shedding light on these outcomes, this report aims to provide valuable insights for academic institutions, graduate programs, policymakers, and graduate students themselves. We begin by providing a summary description of the variables of interest – institution, employment sector, job function, and gender. We then report findings showing the association between these variables. We also include geography and time dimensions in our analytical results. We end with an account of the limitations of the report’s findings and with some words of conclusion.

Data collection and analysis

We gathered quantitative information about humanities PhD programs and career outcomes from partner universities in Nigeria, Ghana, India, USA, England, Netherlands, and Australia as well as in Canada. Hence, we provide a larger and more informative account of humanities PhD outcomes than has been produced by university-specific, discipline-specific, or national studies.
Building on the work and the methodology of the three previous TRaCE projects (TRaCE pilot project, 2015-16; TRaCE 2.0, 2017-19 https://tracephd.com/ and TRaCE McGill, 2019-21 http://tracemcgill.com/), we collected quantitative data about PhD career pathways by scraping publicly available information on partner university websites, graduates’ employer websites, LinkedIn profiles, as well as on Facebook. We recruited and trained graduate student researchers (GSRs) from the 12 partner universities and collated data from the 12 universities in an excel spreadsheet.

The quantitative data helped to answer three questions: what are the grads doing now? when did they land the jobs they have now? and where have their careers taken them? The first step in scraping data about what grads are doing was to collect basic information about those who graduated between 2013 and 2022. The partner universities provided the names, home departments, year of graduation, gender (if available) and dissertation titles of the graduates. This data then helped the GSRs track graduates online on publicly available and accessible websites.

We first searched for the names of the graduates, their departments, and universities on Google, using Boolean “AND” and quotation marks to narrow the search results (e.g., “Stephan Pigeon AND History AND McGill”). The second stage of the search process involved verifying the information by visiting the official website of the grads’ current employers. For instance, for those working in the professoriate, we searched the university websites to check their current job titles and other affiliations. For those not in the professoriate, we searched on their employers’ websites for their titles and primary functions. For all the graduates, we collected further data on the current employer, primary job title, secondary job title (if available), country of residence, employer sector (e.g., academic, non-academic, government sectors), main field of employer, and job functions. The scraped data were then entered in Excel spreadsheet for further analysis. Data analysis was conducted in R using descriptive statistics.

One limitation about this data collection approach is that it is possible to fail to account for graduates who are not working in the professoriate because they might have no web presence. That being said, we nevertheless gathered sufficient substantial and reliable data to make our statistical analysis and findings revelatory of patterns of humanities PhD employment across five continents.
Results

Sample characteristics

The sample involves twelve institutions across five continents. Overall, the data contain 4,212 observations, although with large variations in the number of observations among the institutions (discussed in detail below). This is important to bear in mind, especially when results are drawn from the pooled sample. As a result, to represent the relationship more accurately between two variables of interest, we introduce the variable institution as a source of heterogeneity.

The data contain occupational information at two different levels of aggregation. These variables allow us to examine the career prospects of humanities PhD graduates in academia and outside the academy. The information collected on one of the occupational-related variables is more aggregated, which equates to the employment sector level (e.g., government, academic, self-employed). The information provided for the second occupational-related variable is more refined, which equates to the function of a specific employment (e.g., tenure-track academic job, management position). In this report, we will explore in depth both occupational-level variables, though particular attention will be given to the functional-level occupations as they reveal greater detail about the types of jobs the graduates in the sample attain.

Before delving into the results, it is also important to mention the completion rate for the main variables of interest. Our data contain information about the country of residence variables for approximately 84% of the sample, which will be recoded into fewer categories and, as a result, end up with larger cell counts. The completion rate for both levels of occupations is high, with 92.5% for the aggregated occupations and 91% for the less aggregated occupational variable.

Distribution of institutions, occupations, and gender

Below we present several graphs, along with a brief description of each, showing the composition of variables of interest in the sample.

Institutions

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the twelve institutions in the sample. UCLA has the highest proportion of the sample with 18.45%, while Delta State University has the lowest proportion.
(1.97%) of the sample. The distribution varies greatly among the institutions. As was noted before, we will investigate the institution as a main source of heterogeneity in the sample.

**Figure 1**: PhD graduates, sample composition

![Bar chart showing PhD graduates by institution and percentage composition](chart-image)

**Employment sector**

The employment sector is an important indicator in assessing the humanities PhD graduates’ labour market outcomes. As shown in Figure 2, most of the PhD graduates in the humanities enter the academic sector as this sector makes up the vast majority of the sample, with almost 67%. The self-employment sector and government sector are also popular among the graduates. The category “Unknown” is the second most common response in the sample; however, it is impossible to disentangle what employment sub-sectors are involved in this category. Very few graduates in the sample enter the health care sector (0.56%) and the entertainment sector – “Arts, Culture & Music” (0.15%). Unsurprisingly, not many PhD graduates enter the education sector involving pre-postsecondary school, K-12 (2.49%). This is more likely due to two main factors: one is that the graduates are overqualified for such an occupation and the second is that this sector is less likely to offer competitive salaries.
Within the finer occupational categories, it is possible to examine the breakdown of the academic sector into tenure-track and non-tenure-track positions. As presented in Figure 3, the tenure-track positions are the most popular in the sample for the graduates (39.85%). This suggests that a PhD in the humanities is a likely pathway to a tenure-track academic career. Although not surprising, the reports should be treated with some caution because of the nature of data collection such that it is possible for those in academia to have a higher online presence and therefore more likely to have been included in the sample. Professional jobs like management and administrative occupations also comprise a sizable portion. In contrast, very few graduates enter positions in the sales and marketing occupations, with less than 1% of the overall sample. This is not surprising as humanities disciplines seem set at a distance from marketing and sales in contrast to fields in the social sciences and in management studies.

**Figure 2: Aggregated Occupational-Level, sample composition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Sector</td>
<td>2598</td>
<td>66.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>9.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For-profit organization</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>6.68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed/Entrepreneur/Freelancing</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>5.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>5.39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not-for-profit organization</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>3.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educator (K-12)</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>2.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care system</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts, Culture &amp; Music</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gender
As shown in Figure 4, there are more women in the sample than men. There are very few who were reported to have gender identities other than female and male. Accordingly, only the two categories of female and male will be kept for the results.
How do occupations differ by gender and institution?

We look at the distribution of broader occupational classification by gender. For this graph, the “Arts, Culture & Music” and “Health care system” categories have been excluded as each comprises a small number of counts. As shown in Figure 5, women have a higher percentage working in the academic sector (~53%). For non-academic jobs, a slightly higher percentage of men (51%) work in the education K-12 sector compared to women (49%).

Figure 5: Distribution of Aggregated Occupational-Level by Gender

To better understand this relationship, we further break it down by the institutional variable in Figure 6. This will provide a clearer picture because, as was previously mentioned, there is a large variation of distribution among the universities. An immediate observation is the blank cells across certain categories. For example, Delta State University does not have any observation for several of the employment sector categories. Overall, the post-graduation employment transition for women is likely into the academic sector. Notably, female graduates from the University of Massachusetts (UMass) have the highest chance of obtaining academic jobs. The institutional factor is important as it reveals that universities shape the probability of men and women entering different occupations.


Figure 6: Distribution of Aggregated Occupational-Level by Gender and Institution

Figure 7: Distribution of Academic vs. Non-Academic Sectors by Gender and Institution
To further explore the distribution of the employment sector, this variable was recoded into academic and non-academic sectors. Figure 7 above shows that across the majority of universities, both female and male graduates are more likely to transition into academic occupations compared to non-academic occupations. One exception is the Australian National University (ANU), whose PhD graduates in the humanities fields are more likely to enter non-academic jobs. This may be partly related to ANU’s location in Canberra, Australia’s capital city, which consists largely of public servants and others working for government (federal or local). Again, we need to be on the side of caution as it is possible for graduates ending up in the academic sector to have a larger online presence. This would have made it more likely for them to be included in the sample.

As stated, the employment sector variable is a classification based on a more aggregated level of occupation. To better capture the occupational information of graduates within the academic sector, we examine the refined distribution of occupations. Figure 8 shows that the proportion of men (approximately 51%) is slightly higher in the tenure-track position compared to those of women (49%). The difference, however, is not large. In contrast, the difference is substantially large between men (46%) and women (54%) in the non-tenure-track positions. The results can be interpreted as although women are more likely to hold jobs in the academic sector compared to men, their advantage rests mainly because of their large presence in non-tenure-track positions.

Figure 8: Distribution of Tenure vs. Non-Tenure Track Occupations by Gender
In Figure 9, the institution variable is introduced into the analysis to examine how it affects the relationship between gender and tenure-track occupations. The results show that UMass and ANU produce female graduates who are more likely to acquire tenure-track positions compared to men. The data do not have relevant information to observe as to why these two universities produce female graduates who are more likely to land tenure-track positions. There are possible unobservable factors that are likely inherent to these two institutions that affect female graduates’ transition to full-time faculty positions. Male graduates from Durham University are more likely to land tenure-track positions, while women land more non-tenure-track academic positions.

**Figure 9:** Distribution of Tenure vs. Non-Tenure Track Occupations by Gender and Institutions

![Distribution Chart](image)

**Does time matter for obtaining academic vs. non-academic jobs?**

Time is another key dimension to assessing the graduates’ labour market situation. The data set is cross-sectional, so we can only rely on the year of graduation as a proxy for time. We, therefore, assume that the earlier cohorts likely have spent more time in the labour market. This experience, in turn, will likely have influenced the probability of attaining different occupations. Figure 10 shows the association between time and the probability of landing tenure-track versus non-tenure-track academic jobs. A greater number of years since graduation led to a higher probability of
obtaining a tenure-track position, while the opposite was true for the non-tenure positions. Based on our initial assumption, it can be reasonably argued that before securing a tenure-track position, the graduate may require some degree of work experience. But it is also possible for the PhD graduates to have pursued postdoctoral positions to gain additional research experience and enhance their competitiveness for tenure-track positions. In such a case, the time between graduation from the PhD program to securing a tenure-track job may reflect additional education in a postdoctoral position. The data, however, have limitations such that it is not possible to test such hypotheses.

**Figure 10:** Time to Tenure vs. Non-Tenure Track Academic Employment

In the previous figure, time is an important factor leading to tenure-track jobs. In Figure 11, we examined whether time is also an important factor that affects securing non-academic jobs. The results showed that time is not an important dimension for landing non-academic jobs, possibly excepting “Management, policy, and leadership” occupations. This is not entirely surprising because management positions may require some years of work experience in the immediate post-graduation period. On the other hand, humanities PhD graduates may not require experience to land other non-academic occupations in the sample. This is an important realization as career
trajectories in non-academic settings do not require the PhD graduates in the humanities fields to gain substantial work experience or postdoctoral positions in their immediate post-graduation period.

**Figure 11: Time to Non-Academic Employment**

![Graph showing time to non-academic employment](image)

**Do graduates move to other regions/countries?**

Lastly, we want to know if the graduates move to other regions/countries after completing their PhD degrees. As presented in Figure 12, we observed that the majority remain within the same region/country to which their institution belongs. There are several potential reasons why PhD graduates might choose to stay within the same region or country after completing their degrees. First, many regions/countries with strong academic institutions also have a robust job market in related fields, offering graduates opportunities for employment without needing to relocate. Second, during their studies, students often build extensive professional networks locally that can be crucial to finding jobs. Moreover, personal, and familial connections, as well as cultural and language familiarity, often play a significant role in the decision to stay in a particular region.

An exception can be found for Asia as a destination region as many humanities PhD graduates from the European and North American institutions end up in that region after graduation. One
can hypothesize that many PhD graduates from European and North American institutions who end up in Asia after graduation might originally be from Asia. Upon completing their education, the Asian-origin graduates may feel a strong pull to return home. There could be a multitude of factors, inter alia, cultural and familial ties, career opportunities, a desire to contribute to the development of their home countries, and economic incentives.

Figure 12: Flow of Graduates from Universities to Regions

Limitations

The data collection was performed using the web scraping technique. Web scraping relies on selecting specific websites and sources. This can produce various kinds of biases in the results. First, our sample may be biased because it is possible that graduates who work in specific employment sectors have a higher online presence. Those in specific employment sectors with
higher online presence, in turn, will be more likely to be selected in the sample. Second, within selected websites, not all data may be scraped uniformly. Moreover, the web scraping technique captures information at a specific point in time. This can lead to temporal bias if the information changes.

**Conclusion**

What do we know about humanities PhD graduates’ labour market outcomes? The common path for many of the graduates is toward the academic sector. Within the academic sector itself, a larger proportion of the PhD graduates secure tenure-track positions. In this, universities play a key role in affecting the transition of graduates to different employment sectors. Time has also shown to be an important dimension in securing academic jobs, with earlier graduating cohorts having a higher probability of attaining tenure-track positions.

The results of this international study of humanities PhD outcomes accord substantially with Canadian national and institutional studies of humanities PhD career outcomes carried out, for example, by TRaCE, by the University of Toronto, and by the University of British Columbia. Perhaps an important take-away from this and other studies is that, while the rate of tenure-track placement might be encouraging, especially to those who have concluded that the academic job market is a wasteland empty of permanent employment, tenure-track employment still represents only approximately one-third of career outcomes. It follows then that a large number of the two-thirds of PhD graduates who do not land tenure-track jobs find themselves serving as underpaid adjunct teachers in the university system. To what degree, then, do we have to begin to rethink humanities doctoral programs in order to orient the programs, the faculty, and the doctoral students themselves toward a far wider horizon of career pathways, inside and outside the academy?

**The People Behind the TRaCE Transborder Project**

The TRaCE Transborder project is the work of many individuals:

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Quantitative Report: Komin Qiyomiddin

Participating Universities and Agencies

Participating Universities: Australian National University, Delta State University, Durham University, McGill University, Queen’s University, The University of Queensland, University of Massachusetts, University of Alberta, University of Ghana, University of Hyderabad, UCLA, and Utrecht University.

Participating Agencies: Council of Graduate Schools; CRIEVAT: Centre de recherche et d'intervention sur l'éducation et la vie au travail, Université Laval; Canadian Association for Graduate Studies; Graduate and Postdoctoral Development Network; Institute of International and Comparative Education, Beijing Normal University.