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From Degree to Precarity: A Qualitative Study of Career Uncertainty among Social Science Students in Lahore

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the career uncertainties, institutional supports, and labor market precarities of graduate students of the final year in social sciences at Lahore, Pakistan. The study follows a qualitative, interpretivist approach, based on the theories of Guy Standing regarding the precariat's, credential inflation and employability frameworks. A purposive sampling approach was adopted by selecting 32 students from both public and private universities for semi-structured face to face interviews, later analyzed by using thematic analysis, reflexive as developed by Braun and Clarke in NVivo. The results identify four salient themes to (1) the identified lack of a theory-practice gap in social science curricula, (2) the psychological pressure due to job insecurity, (3) the institutional–market gap exposing the need to rely on non-institutional channels and (4) the tactical agency manifested by self-directed learning for upskilling. Findings show that graduate career uncertainty is not a psychological phenomenon but a structural one, rooted in the mismatch between the graduates' curricula and the actual career opportunities they can access, internal support services in universities, parents' expectations, and the university's fragmented professional network. This research contributes to critical discussions on graduate employability and institutional trust, as well as youth precarity in developing higher education settings.

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1. Introduction

The contemporary shift from higher education to the job market has changed from a standardized, smooth pathway into an extremely precarious, complex and fragmented process. Until the present moment, the university diploma was a sure foothold, a staircase of socio-economic status that provided safe access entry, structural security and social ascent. But in today's global economy, this back-and-forth story has largely broken down. The nature of work is fundamentally changing around the world in a trend toward unprotected jobs, characterized by contract and ad hoc work, unwelcome services and prolonged dissolution of careers and tracked mobility. This structural disadvantage is worsened in Pakistan in the context as it is witnessing rapid massification of higher education along with growing youth bulge in the post-colonial economy compared with its structural growth in the corporate sector, public bureaucracies and institutionalized job market. So the 21st-century graduate finds herself in a world of constant competition and stark occupational anxiety. Social sciences (Sociology, Economics, Political Science, International Relations, History, Media Studies) graduates find themselves in a different and particular structural vulnerability, compared to graduates from other disciplines. Social science programmes do not have the vocational or professional pathways and streams found in medicine, engineering, accountancy or the software sector: their job prospects, although extensive, are less structured than those of these traditional areas of study, and often less valued. As a result, graduates will enter an organic, volatile labor market that, once more, gives preference to STEM courses and businesses, and yet lacks any identifiable public sector or private-sector recruitment routes for social science courses. This structural disparity creates enormous stress socio¬economic, existential and psychological for the youth in major educational nodes of the country like Lahore, where the largest numbers of public and private universities are located, are earmarked for graduation day. This transitional problem tends to get lost in macroeconomic quantitative surveys and reports from the State, the actual qualitative reality of the situation. The actual qualitative situation is often hidden behind macroeconomic quantitative surveys and State reports. These reports rely on absolute unemployment figures, and often ignore the profound subjective, lived experiences of institutional isolation, severe pressures on parents to make ends meet and the complex tactical variations that students employ to get by in a hostile market individually. Given this lacuna in the current academic literature on the South Asian higher education, this study employs a qualitative-interpretivist approach in order to capture the rich, multi-layered and lived experiences of the final year undergraduate social science students in Lahore. In particular, the three important research questions in this inquiry are as follows:

RQ1: How do final-year social science students in Lahore perceive their imminent transition from university to employment?

RQ2: How do these students describe institutional career support and their trust in university career development services?

RQ3: What specific tactical strategies do students deploy to manage escalating career uncertainty and perceived skill gaps?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Youth Precarity and the Emergence of the Precariat Class

This study is theoretically based on Guy Standing's (2011, 2016) powerful conception of the precariat class, which characterizes an emerging new class in society that suffers from chronic fragility of employment, existential insecurity and a stark absence of institutional safeguards. Acknowledging that there is no incompatible relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, Standing sees an ever-increasing number of people today who are neither part of the bourgeoisie nor part of the proletariat, they are instead what is being called the "new masses," who are essentially removed from any sense of meaningful work, promotion, or stability within the world of the global economy. Standing

represents the seven essential dimensions of security that are systematically undermined for the precariat class: labor-market security (having a good chance of getting a job); employment security (one's right to not be dismissed from work); job security (one's rights to a clear pathway or niche within his/her job); work security (one's right to protection against occupational hazards); skill-reproduction security (right to reproduction and improvement of skills, through proper apprenticeships, training, etc.); income security (one's right to guaranteed income); and representation security (the ability to have a voice as part of a collective through trade union or institutional representation). In an environment like the modern labor market in a developing context a university graduate would be exposed to such a lack of opportunity, and that could mean—at least for a university graduate—a permanent labor market with nothing but short-term contracts, unpaid internships or very exploitative internships, precarious signings or gigs and no long-term benefits, like provident funds, health insurance or retirement schemes (Standing, 2016). Importantly, standing points out, the modern precariat is unprecedented – it is the first generation in human history that descends into the labor market with an education that is much more advanced than the nature of the jobs that are available. As a result, young social science graduates are placed in the "half-adulthood," encircled in a circular career pattern and are unable to achieve financial independence or career dignity (Foutia, 2025, Yildirim & Yildirim, 2025).

2.2. Human Capital Theory vs. Credential Inflation and Overeducation

The theories and concepts of Human Capital Theory, initially contributed by people such as Gary Becker, were a key aspect of education policy and sociological research down the road. This model of higher education was conceptualized as a linear, rational and individual investment in education. This is the model that says if they learn more and get more specialized cognitive qualifications, they will be more productive in their jobs, and they will reap the rewards of having more secure relationships, steady employment, and competitive wages in the macroeconomy upon them doing so. For decades this theory was the ideological basis of the state's education expansion policy in developing nations where the assurance was given that a high gross enrolment ratio in universities equated with a strong national economic development and with large numbers of university graduates working. But this harmonious, linear model is severely undermined by the way work is done today in the Global South.

This process of structural under-sizing of A-level sectors amid exaggerated massification in higher education is leading to widespread symptoms of credentialism and degree inflation, as well as mass overeducation. Thus, the utility of a general degree in social studies, as an indicator of good citizenship and pragmatic skill, has receded in the minds of corporate recruiters, who rely more and more on various and capricious filters when given their massive amounts of university graduates. This led to the modern problem of the day not being just a shortage of human capital, but a large-scale devaluation of the students' formal credentials. They are now increasingly facing very hard competition in becoming employed in poorly paying jobs; to some degree, disemployment in jobs completely different from their education; or to desperate measures by acquiring employment in the unstable, unregulated informal sector.

2.3. The Disciplinary Hierarchy: STEM vs. Social Sciences in Post-Colonial Markets

In the unique context of developing and post-colonial higher education systems, such as that of Pakistan, there is an entrenched and culturally entrenched disciplinary hierarchy that systematically privileges the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) disciplines, in comparison to the humanities and social sciences disciplines. This structural prejudice is so ingrained in state resource allocation, institutional line-blogging, and parental preferences that are hard to overcome. The STEM disciplines are generally perceived as useful, job-creating processes with a clear and mapped out set of occupations (such as software planning companies, medical residences, industrial

manufacturing firms). The social sciences have been on the other hand culturally and institutionally demeaned as 'non-utility' or 'ornaments' of human study.

On the contrary, the social sciences like Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science, and Philosophy, are demeaned as 'ornaments' or 'non-utility' in human study in the culturally and institutionally. There is a heavy discipline pattern which adversely affects the transition of social science students to the labour-market. The traditional system of education in the formal sector and public sector education in urban areas is more geared towards technical and business education, thereby missing the evaluation of the ability and skill of social scientists looking to develop their qualitative, analytical and critical thinking. Social science graduates are sometimes recruited in administrative, marketing or other entry level jobs in a totally unstructured way compared to business graduates and therefore their structural marginalization and precarity is accentuated.

2.4. Institutional Trust and the Marketization of Higher Education

Normative expectation of the student that the university is a responsible custodian of his/her future, in addition to teaching academic skills, can offer, through various connections and supports, effective pathways into work. Due to the deep-fixated mentality of the neoliberalism system, there has been a marked shift in higher education programmes towards the market orientated, profit maximizing approach/behavior throughout the country and the world. While students' enrollment is the primary objective of universities, high standard job placement pipelines and quality career development services give second place, their priority is placing them in luxurious infrastructure and collecting tuition fees aggressively (Keshf & Khanum, 2025).

University trust among the students rapidly declines as universities behave in a commercial fashion. SS students have a very sensitive and insecure job market, thus, there is a need to provide them with very sophisticated and specialized career counselling and placement. Empirical evidence, however, suggests that career centers at universities are, on the whole, administrative centers or marketing displays essentially geared to the administration of high-paying business, computer science and engineering programs. The exclusion of social science students from job fairs and workplace networking events gives a sense of institutional isolation on campuses, making students feel like little more than tuition-paying customers.

2.5. Familial Capital, Intergenerational Obligations, and Psychological Strain

This is not simply another step toward an autonomous 'school-to-work' transition for students, but is clearly produced and shaped, and to a large extent mediated, ‘surveilled and funded’ by the students' social-class background and network of family members in South Asian societies, and, in particular, in the Pakistani socio-cultural matrix. Educational attainment is often portrayed and, indeed, taken to be a family investment, often for families of lower-middle and striving working-class families. A university education is a goal that many families are willing to throw everything at in the hope that they will succeed. They often sell the family's farm land, dip into their lifetime savings on retirement which they planned to invest, and obtain high-interest loans to cover the costs of university education. As such there are enormous intergenerational responsibilities to complete a degree coupled with strong pressure into getting work that pays well now and is considered 'respectable' socially.

This network of family expectations compounds labor market insecurity into an all-consuming experience of deep suffering, inborn psychological confusion, and profound familial shame all equipping the individual with considerable power to change their circumstances. This web of familial expectations places the labour market insecurity on an existential level, pain irrevocable and psychological guilt all-consuming, and familial shame potent as the individual will suffer severely and possess great potential for change. The student comes to personally feel that his or her failure to get a job is his personal, moral defect—his not being

good enough; as if his not having a job is a betrayal of the sacrifices made by his parents. This is where the combination of class need and familial obligation compounds the anxiety, often resulting in anxiety makeups, crippling depressions, panic attacks and far more psychological stress related to courses of study in the last year of college.

2.6. Digital Employability Capital and the Self-Remediation Divide

As the sign value of a formal secondary social science credential has fallen precipitously in recent years, secondary--and tertiary--students are increasingly being put to work in self-remediation. It also encompasses the acquisition of the kind of 'digital employability capital' that researchers call highly specific, technical, software and analytical abilities which are entirely missing from their liberal arts degree program requirements. Earlier, you might have thought it was essential to put some of these skills in your resume as a bonus; now they've become strategic must-haves for day-to-day economic survival, and some would even argue that they're the primary currency trades are conducted: statistical data analysis using SPSS, programming with Python or R, data visualization using PowerBI and Tableau, navigating either foreign or local online freelancing platforms, like Upwork and Fiverr.

This popular shift towards informal and self-directed learning, however, means there is a new sphere of digital divide that has emerged and is deepening. Capability to engage in self-remediation is very dependent upon preexisting socio-economic privileges. The access to high end laptops, high speed internet connectivity and disposable income to buy documents in English, like Coursera or Google certificates, advanced English proficiency and most importantly physical time to be devoted to learning is highly classed. This makes achieving a connection between theory and practice a bit more seamless, for those who are abler to afford taking private upskilling courses, but a much greater challenge for those without, which further exacerbates the precarity of the lower income group in the digital economy.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study utilizes a qualitative research approach with an interpretivist paradigm, because it attempts to capture and interpret the realities of career uncertainty and labour precarity, deeply nuanced, subjective and structural in nature. Interpretivism argues that social reality is not an objective verifiable reality, but is instead actively created by social actors' meanings, interpretations and lived experiences. Theoretically, the study is a poststructural and thematic analysis in which the advanced framework of the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) of Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006, 2022) is applied. RTA is especially well suited for this inquiry because it is philosophically grounded in the work of searching for theimplicit elements of the qualitative text, using an active, subjectivist stance by the researcher.

3.2. Study Site and Participant Stratification

The empirical fieldwork was carried out as a strategic exercise in Lahore and the city has been encircled by the historical public universities as well as prestigious private higher education institutions which join the heavy concentration of such institutions in the country. Thirty-two (N=32) active final year undergraduate students of social science were selected for the study. The presence of a well-rounded and diverse institutional framework was maintained by balancing, evenly distributing, and selecting university institutions based (on public/private basis) on their profile and prestige. The public sector universities were University of the Punjab (PU), Government College University (GCU) and Lahore College for Women University (LCWU). The private sector institutions included: University of Management and Technology (UMT); Minhaj University Lahore (MUL) and Kinnaird College for Women (KC). Specifically, these sites were chosen due to the formation of social science faculties and mixed socio-cultural and demographic nature of their students.

3.3. Sampling Strategy and Inclusion Criteria

To establish a high degree of demographic diversity within participants, on every aspect of gender, specific social science major, institutional sector and socio-economic baseline a rigid purposive sampling strategy was employed. The formal criteria for inclusion were that the participants must be registered as full-time students of the final two semesters of an undergraduate social science degree (such as Applied Psychology, Media Studies, History, Political Science, Economics or Sociology). This was done through face-to-face advertising of recruitment notices on departmental notice boards as well as through social media groups within those schools via announcement. A short qualitative pre-screening was given to pinpoint the phenomenon to be studied by a questionnaire that included questions about perceived career anxiety ensuring the further selection of a sample consisting of meaningful variation with respect to transition-related uncertainty. The final sample's structural stratification matrix is listed in Table 1.

Table 1: *Final sample's structural stratification matrix*

Participant Code	Gender	Major/Discipline	Institutional Sector	Socioeconomic Baseline (Income)
P01–P06	Male	Sociology & Applied Economics	Public Sector	Lower-Middle Class
P07–P14	Female	Political Science & History	Public Sector	Middle Class
P15–P22	Male	Media Studies & Applied Psychology	Private Sector	Upper-Middle Class
P23–P32	Female	Sociology, Philosophy & Dev. Studies	Private Sector	Lower-Middle Class

3.4. Data Collection Protocols

Primary empirical data was obtained by the research team through face-to-face research and in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews. The duration of the interviews was between 45 and 70 minutes and were conducted in an inconspicuous room on campus and in a protected setting to preserve respect for privacy and psychological well-being. Interviews also were conducted in Urdu-English as Pakistan's curricular context poses an intricate network of multilingual needs in Higher Education, where nuances of emotions and structures of frustrations need to be captured without linguistic limitations. A semi-structured, open-ended interview guide was used to elicit descriptions and thoughts on several topics including perceptions of the labor market going forward; interactions and experiences with institutional career centers; family financial dynamics; and current self-directed upskilling practices. Interviews were digitally audio-recorded with explicit permission, and later transcribed verbatim and cross translated to English by the bilingual research team. In this, a specific method for evaluating sample adequacy led the target sample size, that is, information power developed by Malterud et al. (2016), which takes into account the specificity of the study aim, the quality of sample dialogues as well as the strategy of analysis rather than sample size was used.

3.5. Reflexive Thematic Data Analysis

This process of analysis followed the updated six-phase Reflexive Thematic Analysis methodology by Braun and Clarke, using NVivo for qualitative analysis of the transcribed material. The analytical process took a logical and systematic course of: (1) immersion in the text through multiple readings and active conceptual journaling; (2) creation of

systematic and organic open codes related to both apparent semantic content and unobvious incompleteness of the text; (3) refinement of the initial codes into broad candidate themes; (4) critical review and revision of the candidate themes against the entire raw text data to confirm their empirical congruence with the data; (5) conceptualization, definition, and formal naming of the final analytical themes; and (6) production of the final conceptualization of the analytical narrative. The researcher is not a separate and neutral tool, but a subject that operates and produces meaning by reflexivity is a core element of RTA.

3.6. Ethical Safeguards and Positionality

Prior to the fieldwork, complete institutional ethical clearance was attained from the university ethics review board. All participants received sufficient information about the study in their entirety, its voluntary character and the possibility of completely withdrawing from the study; they both verbally and in writing gave informed consent. Every data set had a strict alphanumeric pseudonym (from P01 to P32) to ensure complete anonymity across all datasets. In doing so, researchers created a thorough, critical reflexive journal report, reviewing their own stance as established academics working in the higher education system, on an ongoing basis during the fieldwork experiences. The unevenness of the researcher–student interactions and assumptions were intended to be subsided by making the final-year students the epitome and authority on their own experiences.

4. Findings and Thematic Analysis

The reflexive thematic analysis of the empirical data generated four core, interconnected themes that illuminate the structural, institutional, and deeply psychological realities of final-year social science undergraduates navigating labor-market precarity in Lahore. These themes move from macro-level curricular critiques to micro-level psychological impacts, institutional assessments, and personal adaptations.

Theme 1: The Theory-Practice Gap and Curricular Disenchantment

One prevalent theme that was identified in every one of the thirty-two interviews is the general feeling of frustration over an over-theorized and historical curriculum that have little connection with the technology, analytical and practical needs of the modern workplace. The participants were very expressive about the symbolic cultural capital, intellectual capital and critical thinking that they took as a result of using the classic texts of the social sciences, but at the same time, they signaled a considerable lack of the 'technical capital' which was required in the context of today's world and by today's employers. In every single report, students reported that their departments did a great job of teaching them abstract knowledge about the history and how that knowledge was put into practice in the past, but provided no training in the use of contemporary empirical tools, research software or professional writing conventions used in today's world.

> *"That's what I tell myself, while we are spending entire semesters analyzing Karl Marx, Max Weber and Michel Foucault, which is intellectually stimulating through, but when I open the job postings for research analyst's/development consultants in Lahore, they expect me to be proficient with SPSS, NVivo, PowerBI, Tableau, and SQL. I feel academically enlightened but practically illiterate, and we are training to write 20-page descriptive essays, where do we get to write a concise essay of 2 pages; corporate policy brief, project proposal?"*
>
> **—— Participant 04, Male, Public Sector University**

This deep curricular dis-empowerment creates a unique flavor of academic disillusionment, in which learners start to see their degrees as the glaring disadvantages, instead of the advantage in which they were meant to sit. The focus on historical paradigms which have become rote-learned and not on practice software training or industry-oriented research design, puts students in

strong feelings of insecurity at the time of graduation. Students feel structurally abandoned, by an educational system that embraces the collection of fees and shuns the updating of programs in line with the realities of today's global, digitized economy that is driven by data.

> *"Our professors teach us purely the history of thought and the paradigms of philosophy; when employers do the first screening we are tested on data software skills; my university education has equipped me with an extraordinarily theoretical knowledge base but no actual skills to make a living out of this city."*

—— Participant 19, Female, Private University

This structural mismatch has long-lasting effects that lead to the complete erosion of the students' professional self-efficacy. The reality of being virtually ill-equipped for the competitive corporate and/or development sector spaces is thrown into their face as the students in their final academic year are exposed to the job requirements of modern working environments; the "professional marginalization syndrome" thus sets in before they have even entered the career world.

Theme 2: Escalating Career Anxiety, Familial Pressure, and Precariat Subjectivity

The prospect of a rather extremely challenging and turbulent job market creates a lot of psychological pressure for finishing college students. This career insecurity is not just bound by class mobility and cultural respectability but also by the presence of heavy intergenerational obligations specific to the context of Pakistan. This is an education that is not seen as luxury, not seen as own personal adventure: it is perceived as an investment, a serious family investment. This is especially true for some lower-middle class and middle-income households, where parents must sacrifice much of their budgets to increasingly higher prices for higher education for their children, believing that there is going to be an immediate and significant financial payback when their children graduate.

> *"Every time I think about graduating without any safe and fixed job offer, my chest tightens, it's not about me being out of a job, it's about failing my parents who have actually sold our agricultural land, which is quite a considerable size in our village."*

—— Participant 28, Female, Private University

The direct connection between structural employment shortage and collective family honor brings to a higher level the emotional suffering and psychological trauma of the labor market insecurity, converting it from a normal economic problem into a very large issue of emotional and psychological trauma. When seen in contrast with other vocational STEM newcomers and relatives making vocational STEM paths, the internal turmoil and crisis is compounded, and feelings of being disposable, worthless and afraid of one's existence are acute.

> *"I feel like my cousins are better than me because they can easily find a job as they are software engineers and doctors but I'm like competing with a thousand other people for an unpaid internship and there's no possibility that I'll ever get a decent job."*

—— Participant 12, Male, Public Sector University

The psychological reality reminds us of the creation of a different 'precariat subjectivity', 'mental frame of a chronic state of insecurity, systemic precarity and the feeling that something is falling apart'. The social science students see that the labor market dynamics are structured in a biased way and their field of study is an existential error that poses a threat to their future economic survival and social status.

Theme 3: Institutional Distrust and the Reliance on Informal Guidance Networks

An important and highly charged result of this study is the extensive, systematic undermining of institutional trust of support structures within the university. Widespread praise went to the minority of campus career services offices that actively

promote and advocate for the humanities and social sciences, yet the majority saw centralized career development centers (CDCs) as primarily administrative and marketing tools that thoughtfully ignore the humanities and social sciences and instead focus on the commercial concerns of business, computer science and engineering departmental schools. Social science students are cut off from society, and they must traverse their imminent transitions on their own.

> *"At our university, the career development center was established for marketing, PR and institutional branding, nothing else. They organize a huge job fair recurrent every year where commercial banks and multi-national corporate groups come to recruit business graduates and social science graduates are all on the outskirts of that entire multi-story building. And no career counselor is there who can really understand how to transform a social science/ political science graduate, who has conducted qualitative research from time immemorial, into a modern-day NGO, a development organization, or a Public Policy expert."*

—— Participant 27, Female, Private University

Almost all discipline-specific information in the official placement services is likely to be meager and vague, leaving almost all final year social science students to depend heavily on highly dispersed, unorganized, and informal placement network for career options. This dependency extends to contacting aged students on social media platforms, accessing unconfirmed groups on WhatsApp or using personal family contacts completely. This structural dynamic directly benefits students from more than the middle class social status and negatively affects students from lower social economic status without existing networks.

> *"The fact is; why should the university career center help you so? You either get advice from your wealthy uncle or just go to random WhatsApp groups for lead advice; you have zero professional guidance if you don't have one of these wealthy uncles or have one of these well-connected family friends working in some major NGO or think tank."*

—— Participant 08, Female, Public Sector University

The story of this institutional failure demonstrates ongoing active complicity of all institutions of higher education in the normalization of labor-market precarity. Universities club their social science students while marketing their careers to corporate employers; as a result, the transition between university and the workplace is far from equal and instead relies on previous social capital—more of a favor book—than on pursuits of academic excellence.

Theme 4: Tactical Agency, Self-Remediation, and the Class Upskilling Divide

Tactical agency was very impressive for the final year social science students who face a high level of institutional neglect and strong structural barriers. Many participants did not only respond passively to the widely changing skill requirements of the modern-day digital labor market, but even engaged in proactive modes of adapting to the digital jobs market by themselves. Described as 'self-remediation', this proactive strategy mobilizes and brings together students' 'free resources in digital spaces', 'autonomous study circles' and 'digital global learning platforms' to access the technical capital they miss out on in their formal education.

> *"I discovered mid-way into my 7th semester that my department was not going to train me to be a professional in the modern working world that required digital and analytical skills that my university lacked. So, we decided to take control of our own education and chartered our own digital study circle group of four. pooling free online resources, signing up for Coursera bootcamps for Google*

Data Analytics, and practicing learning Python and SPSS together at night. It was literally a case of having to teach ourselves a new type of university education as our regular one was woefully inadequate and without proper equipment to provide any real skills."

—— Participant 11, Male, Public Sector University

Empirically, however, the findings are telling: that this dependence on self-remediation is no democratic equalizer, but rather an additional, deeply insidious and profound socio-economic strata. One's ability to successfully "skip" the formal curriculum and engage in tactical material and/or structural resource transfer is, of course, strictly tied to the material and structural resources of the student. Consequently, lower middle-class students, who are stuck with greater travel times on public transport, home responsibilities, and the lack of a great investment in cheaper, dollar denominated self-guided online certification courses, are heavily constrained in their ability to take charge of self-remediation.

"I realize that I must learn this data science and learn the software tools so my economics degree is useful, but after commuting on public transit for two full hours each day, and having to take my heavy coursework etc. in class, I have no energy left in me to learn data science and software tools. There are Internet-based courses to do, for a price, but my English isn't up to speed enough to follow along with the international videos; and my commute to class two hours a day on public transit is taking its toll."

—— Participant 03, Male, Public Sector University

This brutal gap is just the clinical outcome of the private, highly unequal remedy of self-remediation from a structural institutional failure. Technical capital can be easily acquired for the university by the affluent social science students, but this ability to sustain the imbalance between university and the labor market is becoming more and more absent among the disadvantaged students.

5. Discussion and Synthesis

The empirical results of the present qualitative study clearly suggest that the career uncertainty is not just an isolated and individual concerns of social science undergraduate students of Lahore, but it is rather a transitional stage of youth's anxiety. Instead, it is well entrenched and structural feature of a system failure that is typically embedded in curriculum-labor market mismatch, hyper-marketized higher education systems, strong collective family expectations and un equal access and opportunity to professional social networks. Grounded in Guy Standing (2011, 2016) theoretic approach, the precariat, this study is able to show that social science degree students already find their employment situation to be precarious, even before they formally graduate or prepare themselves for a job. This striking sense of the precarious nature of their continued work and the inadequate use of short-term contracts and the isolation in the institution becomes a structuring feeling that permeates their full last year of undergraduate studies and renders them vulnerable and alienated. The direct impact of the pervasive marketization of higher education on institutional trust is one of the core findings of this study, which weaves the effect into the intertwined fabric of youth precarity (Keshf & Khanum, 2025).

In the context of aggressive marketing of an employability for future courses by well-known public and private universities to high numbers of students; when these universities' internal career services focus exclusively on marketing opportunities in high-yield courses (often sciences and corporate business), leaving their social sciences to unfulfilled expectations by social distancing, they are temporarily neglecting the social science student. The serious institutional gap would exist for students who are being treated essentially as consumers of tuition fees while being systematically ignored by similar neglect in the discipline-specific transitioning into the labor market. Sonu misled by the flattering accounts of

students engaging in 'self-remediation' cannot be seen as proof of their resilience or entrepreneurial spirit. Rather, it must be traced back to a private and individual "solution" that is an emergency measure creatively designed by institutions of higher education to remedy a systemic structural crisis. Moreover, this study explicitly brings to the fore the social class background as a key mediator and differentiator of the experience of this precarity in the post-colonial context of Pakistan. The tightness of labor the market has imposed for students from wealthy and upper-class families is a structural nuisance that is easily dealt with. They come from families with one of the most critical assets to soften the blow: their own ideology is a revenue-generating one that allows them time off to wait for a good job, take an academic long-term internship, or easily afford elite courses on the web that close theory-to-practice gaps, and that's data science bootcamps.

On the other hand, lower-middle class and working-class students suffer from highly polarized obligations to the labour market and acute demands by their parents to secure an immediate monetary outcome of their education, which results in high emotional distress, high level of anxiety and high degree of social shame (Yildirim & Yildirim, 2025; Foutia, 2025). Conversely, this reality vividly speaks to the fact that the existing structure of higher education systems in Pakistan is not a democratic process that encourages social mobility, but ironically it is also reproducing and reinforces preexisting existing socio-economic class divisions in the digital economy.

6. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Finally, this research provides rich, contextually-specific qualitative accounts of graduate precarity, but there are some structural shortcomings, and these need to be highlighted. First, it was very clear that the findings from the empirical field work are limited to the city center of Lahore, which clearly meant that the immediate generalizability of the findings cannot be extended to the rural as well as the differently resourced higher education institutions of the province of Lahore, Pakistan, in which the labor market dynamics and support mechanisms of these higher education institutions differ substantially. Second, the study participants were only the students of the social science department at the end of the undergraduate programme, and the scores of perceived career anxiety were adopted as a more or less disempowered rough table of screening. As such, the views of the valuable external institutional actors – including university career advisors, faculty, heads of higher education institutions, and corporate recruiting staff – were not incorporated into the research design.

Future social research projects should employ a multi-stakeholder, comparative design that is more comprehensive than this study and integrates competing viewpoints of the academic faculty, corporate human resource managers, and state policy architects in an active manner to build on the empirical and theoretical work of this study. Furthermore, longitudinal qualitative studies in the future could be beneficial in tracing social science graduates over a period of 24 months after graduation to empirically investigate their actual careers in the informal sector and gig jobs. Lastly, there is a need for a strong and body of large-scale mixed research methods that explicitly attempt to uncover the subjective experiences of graduate precarity captivated with complex demographic factors such as gender dynamics, provincial migration backgrounds and specific disciplinary sub-specializations.

7. Conclusion and Policy Implications

To sum up, this interpretivist qualitative study presents the findings that the looming scenario of the transition of higher education students of the social sciences from academia into the labor market in contemporary times in Lahore involves high levels of structural frustration, psychological anxiety and tactical adaptation within strong scales of self-direction but contrasting strata. The precariat situation of these last year students is so overwhelmingly widespread that the need for smart, focused policy measures that go beyond simple institutional treatments and patchy attempts in job fairs in the campus is crying out.

The next five changes, ordered by priority, are explicit proposals for structural policy changes addressing these deep-seated shortcomings and for protecting the professional futures of social science graduates:

1. **Career Counseling Integration:** Discipline-Specific Career Counsellors needs to be immediately integrated within social science departments. These professionals must be equipped with targeted training to effectively navigate between the score-sheets of qualitative analytical skills, socio-political literacy and critical thinking and chart a clear so visible trajectory into an expanding NGO, public policy think tank and corporate research market, instead of bumbling through the commercial business scope-sheet.
2. **Applied Capstone Projects & Portfolio-Driven Curricula:** There is an urgent need to change the assessment regime for social science faculties and making co-created applied capstone projects an integral part of undergraduate curricula. Students collaborate with formal institutional partners such as local NGOs, civil society and public sector research agencies, to undertake their final year on realistic, real-world issues. This arrangement guarantees that the students will have a valid, professional portfolio when they graduate, containing data analytics, technical applied skills and policy writing.
3. **Institutionalizing Technical Software Subsidies and Training:** the class-based upskilling divide can be broken by making software training available in higher education institutions, by providing it to all students free of charge and embedding it in the social science curriculum (SPSS, R, Python, PowerBI). Additionally, universities should take advantage of institutional access and make available subsidized software licenses and/or certification vouchers for lower-income students so that self-remediation becomes an "elite" privilege–not a requiring privilege. Furthermore, universities should consider using institutional access to provide free or subsidized software licenses and/or certification vouchers for lower-income students, so that self-remediation becomes not a require to have privilege, but a require to have privilege with some cost benefit.
4. **Comprehensive, Career-Focused Mental Health Frameworks:** must be valued and respected as something distinct and university based, and not a psychological deficit of the individual graduate facing the rollercoaster of employment. Academies need strong, career-focused mental health provision, including specific stress-management workshops, peer-support groups or confidential lines to a trained clinical psychologist to specifically reduce the psychological trauma of the transition.
5. **Healthy workforce-education linkage committees (HASS):** setting up of HASS in the Human Resources and Social Science directorates must be made mandatory in Higher Education Commission (HEC). The committees should actively involve both corporate, development and state actors to promote the special professional value of a social science graduate and establish proper internship-to-employment linkage based on merit which systematically circumvents informal connections of interest groups.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to research.

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