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## From PhD to Profession: Understanding the experiences and career outcomes of observational astronomy PhD graduates

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Astronomy is one of the fastest-growing areas of research in Australia. In general, enrolment in postgraduate study in Australia has grown by 45% over the last two decades; in contrast, in astronomy, the number of PhD graduates has grown by 250%. As documented in the 2026-2035 decadal plan, the number of PhD graduates far exceeds the availability of Postdoctoral positions. In addition, the current geopolitical instability has meant that many Astronomy PhD graduates are being driven to seek employment in industry and government. In 2025, we conducted a series of 30 interviews with astronomy PhD graduates. Themes in these interviews included motivations towards embarking on a PhD, the PhD experience, the skills developed during a PhD, and, critically, the considerations and choices associated with transitioning from an astronomy career. Participants were selected to reflect a vertical slice of the observational astronomy community, including individuals who completed their PhD between 2003 and 2023, as well as other key demographics, including gender and whether they were a domestic or international student. The insights from these interviews offer a timely reflection on the evolving role of the astronomy PhD and a critical reference to consider how we best prepare researchers for diverse futures beyond academia.

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