

Entrepreneurial Agency as a Driver for Institutional Transformation in Higher Education in Times of Crisis¹

Research Overview

Higher education research is dominated by a crisis narrative. Combining a survey of 800+ Russian students and graduates with 50 follow-up interviews (students, graduates, faculty), and drawing on neo-structuration theory, we show that entrepreneurial agency drives institutional renewal only when project activity is integrated into degree programmes.

(47 words)

Purpose of Study

The erosion of the promise of higher education, declining trust, and weakening economic returns constitute the dominant crisis narratives in current debates. Meyer and colleagues (2025) argue that the university survives because its institutional mission is sacralised in world culture, while only the organisation is attacked. This explains durability but leaves the mechanism of institutional transformation under-theorised. The present study has two purposes: (1) to articulate an alternative theoretical frame — neo-structuration theory (Sorokin, 2023; 2025) — that treats agency not as a residue of structure but as a driver of structural renewal; and (2) to test this frame empirically against the educational and career trajectories of young actors operating across formal, informal, and entrepreneurial sectors, asking specifically how the educational programme itself can become the site through which entrepreneurial agency is cultivated rather than merely permitted.

Research Methods

A mixed-methods design was used, in which qualitative material was collected to validate, deepen, and explain the patterns first observed in the quantitative data. The quantitative strand consisted of an online survey of 800+ students and graduates of Russian universities (aged 18–

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30), capturing the prevalence of agency markers, project participation, and engagement with university and external entrepreneurship infrastructures. The qualitative strand consisted of 50 semi-structured interviews: 40 with young adults across three career formats — self-employed (n=16), entrepreneurs (n=14), and corporate-track employees (n=20) — and 10 expert interviews with faculty at HSE, MIPT, ITMO, and other leading Russian universities involved in entrepreneurship education and the federal Platform for University Technological Entrepreneurship (PUTP). Interviews reconstructed the social and institutional mechanisms behind the survey patterns and tested whether agency was supported by, parallel to, or in tension with the degree programmes in which students were enrolled.

Results and Discussion

Four patterns emerged across the survey and interviews, with the qualitative material confirming and explaining the quantitative findings. First, agency markers — proactive project initiation, autonomous resource search, redefinition of professional roles — appeared across all three career formats but were most concentrated among entrepreneurs and self-employed in both the survey and the interviews, who explicitly described university structures as insufficient or irrelevant for supporting their project activities in the world of work and employment.

Second, the university acts as a buffer that absorbs uncertainty rather than a generative environment: agency emerges in spite of, not because of, formal infrastructure, with several respondents noting that real learning began at the first workplace.

Third, where universities recognised student agency (through entrepreneurship platforms, mentor relationships, recognition of informal projects), students' and graduates' trajectories accelerated and expanded into wider regional and federal initiatives (Skolkovo, Sber, Dobro.rf, PUTP), which in turn linked them to broader entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Fourth — and this is the central policy implication of the study — the elements of the university entrepreneurial ecosystem (student communities, incubators, accelerators, the PUTP platform) generated institutional renewal only when they were organically and natively linked to the degree programme in which students were enrolled. Where these elements operated as a parallel infrastructure, alongside the curriculum rather than within it, they reproduced the buffering pattern observed in finding two: agency emerged around them rather than through them. Where

they were embedded inside the educational programme — through credit-bearing project courses, mentor-of-record arrangements with programme faculty, and explicit alignment between learning outcomes and project trajectories — they functioned as a structural driver of institutional transformation. Reform of higher education on the basis of this evidence therefore requires not the addition of more entrepreneurial infrastructure, but its native integration with the curriculum.

Keywords

neo-structuration; agency; higher education policy; institutional transformation; entrepreneurship education