

How Educational Experience Shapes Agentic Careers: Evidence from Self-Employed, Entrepreneurial, and Corporate-Track Young Adults in Russia¹

Research Overview

Curricular reforms target diverse career formats, yet empirical evidence on which educational experiences predict which trajectories remains thin. From 40 biographical interviews, we map the educational experiences (projects, extracurriculars, mentors, lifelong learning) that are both common to and distinguishing among entrepreneurs, self-employed, and corporate-track young adults.

(46 words)

Purpose of Study

Higher education reforms increasingly position curricula as preparation for multiple labour-market formats — corporate employment, self-employment, entrepreneurship — yet empirical evidence on which curricular and co-curricular experiences predict which trajectories is fragmented. This study asks: (1) Which elements of educational experience (academic performance, project work, faculty interaction, institutional climate, digital environment, extracurriculars, school-level activities, lifelong learning) are most associated with each career format? (2) How do respondents themselves narrate the link between educational experience and current trajectory, and how do they describe the connections between different agentic career trajectories over time? (3) What does the evidence suggest for curriculum design across K–12, higher education and lifelong learning?

Research Methods

Forty biographical semi-structured interviews were conducted with young adults aged 18–30 in three formats: self-employed (n=16), entrepreneurs (n=14), and corporate-track employees (n=10). The interview guide covered 48 dimensions, of which 12 directly addressed educational

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experience: levels of education, university and programme, project work during studies, choice of trajectory, extracurricular involvement at university, project initiation in university, work experience and plans, perceived benefits and downsides of higher education, perceived effects, school-level extracurriculars, school influence on later life, and supplementary activities (volunteering, hobbies). Analysis used a structured comparative matrix across the three career formats.

Results and Discussion

Three contrasts emerged. First, entrepreneurs reported the densest co-curricular and project portfolios during studies, with several describing university projects that became their current businesses; for them, formal courses and informal projects were tightly linked. Second, self-employed respondents most often described educational experience as a parallel resource — useful for systemic thinking and credentialing, but disconnected from current freelance work, which they learned mainly through online courses and peer networks. Third, corporate-track respondents reported the most uneven pattern: some completed formal MBA programmes that they explicitly used in their current role, while others described university as a credentialing gate with limited practical content. Across all three groups, lifelong learning (courses, languages, AI training) was treated as a moral obligation.

At the same time, the findings suggest that curricula should not aim to channel students toward any single format of “agentic” career but should diversify project experiences, mentor relationships, and explicit reflection on multiple career trajectories because this matches the actual working trajectories of students and graduates: the majority of respondents already hold diverse experience across formats, or combine several roles in the present. It follows that the prevailing organising principle — separate institutions for self-employment, corporate entrepreneurship, and traditional entrepreneurship career — should give way to a more integral approach aimed at building broader agentic capacities of students and graduates, while keeping the specific demands of each trajectory in view. Implications also include more permeable boundaries between K–12, higher education, and lifelong learning.

Keywords

curriculum design; career trajectories; entrepreneurship education; lifelong learning; higher education