

Reinventing Academic Careers after Covid-19 (The Entrepreneurial Mindset as a Critical Survival Skill for Post-Pandemic Academics)

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Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated profound and enduring disruptions in global higher education systems, significantly altering academic career trajectories. Hiring freezes, funding constraints, rapid digitalization of teaching, and declining job security compelled academics to reassess traditional career pathways. While existing scholarship has documented institutional and pedagogical transformations during the pandemic, limited attention has been given to how academics themselves adapted at the individual level. This study examines the **entrepreneurial mindset as a critical survival and career-reinvention strategy for post-pandemic academics**. Drawing on theories of entrepreneurial cognition, resilience, and career adaptability, the research investigates how dimensions such as opportunity recognition, adaptability, risk tolerance, metacognition, and innovation enabled academics to pivot toward alternative and hybrid career models. Using a mixed-methods research design involving a survey of 312 academics across five countries and in-depth interviews with 28 post-COVID career-transitioned academics, the study identifies key entrepreneurial competencies associated with career sustainability and psychological well-being. Findings reveal that academics who adopted entrepreneurial approaches demonstrated higher career resilience, income diversification, and professional satisfaction compared to those adhering strictly to traditional academic pathways. The study proposes a conceptual framework positioning entrepreneurial mindset as a core employability skill for academics and offers policy recommendations for higher education institutions to institutionalize entrepreneurship education for faculty development.*

Keywords: Entrepreneurial mindset, academic careers, COVID-19, career adaptability, higher education, resilience

I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic marked one of the most disruptive periods in the history of higher education. Universities across the globe experienced sudden campus closures, rapid transitions to online learning, research interruptions, and severe financial constraints (Crawford et al., 2020). For academics, these disruptions extended beyond pedagogical challenges to threaten career stability, professional identity, and long-term employability. Early-career researchers faced stalled appointments, mid-career faculty encountered funding insecurity, and contract-based academics experienced widespread job losses (Watermeyer et al., 2021). While much of the literature has focused on institutional responses and student outcomes, comparatively little attention has been given to **how academics individually navigated career survival and reinvention in the post-COVID landscape**. Traditional academic career models—linear progression from doctoral training to tenure—proved increasingly fragile under crisis conditions. As a result, many academics turned toward entrepreneurial behaviors such as consulting, digital content creation, interdisciplinary ventures, ed-tech startups, and industry collaboration.

This paper argues that the **entrepreneurial mindset has emerged as a critical survival skill for post-pandemic academics**, enabling them to adapt, innovate, and sustain their careers in volatile academic labor markets. The study



aims to empirically examine how entrepreneurial thinking reshaped academic career strategies after COVID-19 and to identify institutional mechanisms that can foster such mindsets within higher education systems.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 COVID-19 and Academic Career Disruption

The pandemic exacerbated pre-existing precarity in academic employment, particularly for adjunct and early-career academics (Archer, 2020). Hiring freezes, reduced research funding, and increased teaching workloads resulted in professional burnout and identity crises (Guthrie et al., 2021). Studies highlight increased emotional labor, blurred work-life boundaries, and declining job satisfaction among faculty members during and after the pandemic (Watermeyer et al., 2021).

However, existing research largely frames academics as passive recipients of institutional change rather than active agents of career adaptation.

2.2 Entrepreneurial Mindset: Conceptual Foundations

The entrepreneurial mindset refers to a constellation of cognitive and behavioral attributes, including opportunity recognition, innovation, risk tolerance, resilience, and proactive problem-solving (McGrath & MacMillan, 2000). Unlike traditional entrepreneurship focused solely on venture creation, contemporary scholarship conceptualizes entrepreneurial mindset as a **transferable life and career competence** applicable across professional contexts (Rae, 2017).

Entrepreneurial metacognition—the ability to reflect on one’s thinking, adapt strategies, and learn from uncertainty—has been identified as a critical factor in navigating complex environments (Haynie et al., 2010).

2.3 Academics as Entrepreneurial Actors

Recent studies suggest a growing convergence between academic work and entrepreneurial activity, particularly through knowledge commercialization, consulting, and interdisciplinary innovation (Etzkowitz, 2016). During COVID-19, academics increasingly monetized expertise via online courses, digital publications, policy advisory roles, and startups (Henderson et al., 2021). Despite these trends, empirical research explicitly examining **academics’ entrepreneurial adaptation post-COVID** remains limited, revealing a significant gap addressed by the present study.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a **mixed-methods research design** to comprehensively examine the role of the entrepreneurial mindset in shaping post-pandemic academic career trajectories. By integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative insights, the mixed-methods approach enabled both statistical generalization and contextual depth. The quantitative component facilitated the measurement of entrepreneurial mindset dimensions and career adaptability across a diverse academic population, while the qualitative component enriched the analysis by capturing lived experiences, career reinvention narratives, and individual perceptions of institutional support. This methodological triangulation enhanced the validity and robustness of the findings by allowing cross-verification of results from multiple data sources.

3.2 Sample and Participants

The quantitative phase of the study involved **312 academics** drawn from universities across **India, the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, and Singapore**, ensuring international representation and cross-cultural relevance. The sample included **early-career, mid-career, and senior academics** from a wide range of disciplines, reflecting varied professional stages and academic contexts. Participants were recruited through institutional networks and academic forums and voluntarily completed an online survey administered during the post-COVID recovery period. This diverse sampling strategy enabled the examination of entrepreneurial mindset adoption across different academic systems and career stages.



3.3 Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using standardized and validated instruments to ensure reliability and academic rigor. The **Entrepreneurial Mindset Scale**, adapted from Haynie et al. (2010), was employed to assess key entrepreneurial dimensions such as opportunity recognition, adaptability, risk tolerance, innovation, and metacognitive awareness. Career adaptability was measured using the **Career Adapt-Abilities Scale** developed by Savickas and Porfeli (2012), which evaluates individuals' capacity to cope with career-related transitions and uncertainty. In addition to primary survey data, **secondary data** were systematically reviewed from peer-reviewed journals, scholarly articles, and reputable academic magazines that examined post-COVID career transitions, mindset shifts, and institutional support mechanisms within higher education. The inclusion of secondary sources strengthened theoretical grounding and contextual interpretation of empirical findings.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical techniques appropriate for behavioral and social science research. **Descriptive statistics** were used to summarize demographic characteristics and key variable distributions. **Correlation analysis** was conducted to examine relationships between entrepreneurial mindset dimensions and career adaptability outcomes. Furthermore, **multiple regression analysis** was employed to identify the predictive influence of entrepreneurial mindset variables on post-COVID career sustainability and professional satisfaction among academics. These analytical methods enabled a rigorous examination of patterns, associations, and explanatory relationships within the dataset.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Reshaping Professional Identity

The findings reveal that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted traditional academic professional identities, compelling many academics to reconsider long-held notions of scholarly roles and career progression. The conventional identity of the "discipline-bound scholar," centered primarily on teaching, research, and publication within institutional boundaries, increasingly proved insufficient in a volatile post-pandemic environment. This identity transformation enhanced participants' sense of agency and career clarity, enabling them to proactively navigate uncertainty and construct diversified professional pathways beyond traditional academic roles.

4.2 Key Dimensions of Entrepreneurial Mindset

Analysis of the quantitative data identified several dimensions of the entrepreneurial mindset as significant predictors of post-COVID academic career sustainability. These included adaptability, opportunity recognition, entrepreneurial metacognition, risk tolerance, and digital innovation. Academics demonstrating high adaptability were better able to respond to rapid changes in teaching modalities and research environments. Opportunity recognition enabled participants to leverage their expertise through consulting, digital platforms, and interdisciplinary collaborations. Entrepreneurial metacognition supported reflective decision-making under uncertainty, while risk tolerance facilitated engagement in non-traditional career ventures. Digital innovation emerged as particularly critical in enabling academics to monetize knowledge and expand professional reach. Regression analysis confirmed a strong positive relationship between entrepreneurial mindset and career satisfaction ($\beta = .62, p < .001$), underscoring the practical significance of entrepreneurial competencies in post-pandemic academic careers.

4.3 Role of Institutional Support

Institutional support played a pivotal role in shaping academics' entrepreneurial engagement. Academics affiliated with institutions that offered entrepreneurship training programs, innovation incubators, mentorship opportunities, and industry partnerships reported significantly higher levels of entrepreneurial activity and confidence. Such institutional ecosystems not only legitimized entrepreneurial pursuits but also provided resources and networks essential for career experimentation and diversification. Conversely, a lack of institutional support emerged as a substantial barrier, particularly within traditional public universities where rigid evaluation systems and limited exposure to entrepreneurial



education constrained innovation. These findings highlight the need for systemic institutional reform to support academic entrepreneurship as a legitimate and valued career pathway.

4.4 Entrepreneurial vs. Traditional Career Outcomes

Comparative analysis revealed notable differences between academics pursuing entrepreneurial pathways and those adhering strictly to traditional academic career models. Academics who adopted entrepreneurial approaches reported higher levels of income diversification, enhanced career resilience, and increased work autonomy. These individuals were better positioned to withstand employment volatility and funding uncertainty. However, entrepreneurial academics also experienced challenges, including identity tension and limited recognition within conventional academic evaluation frameworks that prioritize publications and grants over entrepreneurial outcomes. This tension underscores the disconnect between evolving academic career realities and existing institutional reward systems.

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study establishes the entrepreneurial mindset as a critical survival skill for academics in the post-COVID era. The findings demonstrate that academics who embraced entrepreneurial thinking were more capable of navigating uncertainty, reconstructing professional identities, and sustaining meaningful and adaptable careers beyond traditional academic boundaries. The research contributes to the literature by positioning entrepreneurial mindset not merely as a business-oriented skill but as a core employability and resilience competency for academic professionals in times of crisis and transformation.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings suggest several implications for higher education policy and practice. First, entrepreneurship education should be systematically integrated into faculty development programs to equip academics with transferable entrepreneurial competencies. Second, academic success metrics must be redefined to acknowledge entrepreneurial achievements, including industry collaboration, knowledge commercialization, and societal impact. Finally, institutions should institutionalize hybrid academic–industry career pathways that allow academics to fluidly navigate between scholarly and entrepreneurial roles without professional penalty.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, and reliance on self-reported data may introduce response bias. Future research should adopt longitudinal methodologies to examine the sustained impact of entrepreneurial mindset development on academic careers over time. Additionally, further studies could explore disciplinary variations in entrepreneurial adaptation and investigate contextual differences across national higher education systems.

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