

# The Courage to Cross Over: A Case Study of Identity Evolution in Academic Entrepreneurship

**Outi-Maaria Palo-oja**

Faculty of Business and Hospitality Management, LAB University of Applied Sciences, Lappeenranta, Finland

[outi-maaria.palo-oja@lab.fi](mailto:outi-maaria.palo-oja@lab.fi)

**Abstract:** This study examines unexpected events and critical incidents that shape identity development in an academic entrepreneur. Using an intensive case study approach, we analyse how these critical incidents influence identity reconstruction, entrepreneurial motivation, and the shift from academic to entrepreneurial contexts. We also study the role of experienced colleagues in fostering the courage to take the first entrepreneurial step. The research data consists of in-depth interviews with the entrepreneur and observations made over six years on their career development. Their company has since secured significant seed funding and a partnership with a global investor. Additional data sources include press releases and media reports, investor pitching materials, and company records from the Orbis database. The data is analysed through a Critical sensemaking (Helms Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010) framework, highlighting identity construction in the social context, where interactions and events shape decision-making. Individual passion and will, environmental factors, and the social dynamics of existing networks characterise personal development from academic researcher to entrepreneur. While the outcome was a successful business, alternative paths remained equally viable. In the early stages, high hopes and unrealistic expectations often drive decisions. However, after establishing a formal company, the entrepreneur faces increased responsibilities, such as ensuring employee salaries and satisfying shareholders. According to our research, only at this stage does the academic identity undergo a true transformation. European innovation policies and university strategies encourage researchers to commercialise their research-based inventions. Although forms of support have been developed for starting a company, external support is often lacking for researchers' support and growth. This study highlights critical stages where forms of support should be developed to meet society's expectations. The path from researcher to entrepreneur is not linear but characterised by interactions of internal and external factors. This study contributes to the literature on entrepreneurial identity by demonstrating through a critical sensemaking approach how social contexts influence the evolution of academic entrepreneurs. Research shows that different forms of support are needed for the researcher-entrepreneur path to meet societal expectations.

**Keywords:** Academic Entrepreneurship, Identity Reconstruction, Intensive Case Study, Critical Sensemaking.

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## 1. Background

Science commercialisation refers to the systemic translation of academic research results and scientific knowledge into tangible innovations that contribute to economic growth and societal benefit (Palo-oja, 2025). Researchers have been encouraged to seek commercial opportunities for their findings in various ways. For this shift, universities have founded different kinds of supporting activities such as technology transfer offices and incubators and accelerators (e.g. Brandtnell & Baraldi, 2022; Masucci et al., 2024). For research groups and individual researchers, commercial expectations have been realised in terms of increasing industry collaboration, new career options, and personal risk taking (Wang et al., 2022; Clarysse, Tartari & Salter, 2011). Also, those who have not been interested in business activities have been forced to react for this third mission of the universities and apply a role as a kind of academic entrepreneurs (Neves & Brito, 2020) who apply funding for their continuous flow of research projects, convince variety of stakeholders with the importance and value of their research, and adjust academic interests to societal requests.

Academic entrepreneurship and academic entrepreneurs, as the business-oriented researchers are called (Nyeko & Sing, 2015), have recently become an increasingly studied phenomenon. Academic entrepreneurship has been seen as a process that does not conform to linear commercialisation trajectories (Mäkinen & Esko, 2023; Giunti & Duberley, 2023; Johannisson, 2023). This shift in identity, ethics, and expectations (Moilanen, 2022) radically shapes how academics approach their work through a new commercially-oriented entrepreneurial identity (Hayter, Fischer, Rasmussen, 2021). These shifts are seldom linear or clear-cut; they are most often instigated by key events in someone's life—disruption or catalytic experiences that inspire individuals to reconsider their academic identities and venture into the entrepreneurial realm (Moilanen, Montonen & Eriksson, 2021; Montonen, Eriksson & Aromaa, 2021).

This recognition that academic entrepreneurship cannot be viewed as the product of an abstract, structuralist, or policy-driven environment alone resonates strongly with scholars such as Moilanen, Montonen, and Eriksson (2021) and Johannisson (2023), who emphasise its socially constructed, negotiated, and embedded nature. The

literature on academic entrepreneurship also highlights the embodied and contextual nature of these identity shifts (Bousfiha, 2020). However, becoming an academic entrepreneur does not usually happen by chance. However, it is a cognitive (Mäkinen & Esko, 2023) and intentional process driven by several individual, organisational, and institutional factors (Neves & Brito, 2020).

Still, academics occupying entrepreneurial roles face identity tensions and role conflicts as they negotiate conventional academic norms such as scholarly autonomy, peer recognition, and disciplinary rigour with the imperatives of market-oriented innovation (Giunti & Duberley, 2023). For many, entrepreneurship is not a natural continuation of their academic work but a distinction requiring much reflection and adaptation.

The recent literature shows how these tensions play out across hybrid roles that bridge academic and entrepreneurial spaces (Montonen, 2025). Some individuals find a way to integrate these identities, while others experience them as disjointed or conflicting (Giunti & Duberley, 2023; Majoor-Kozlinska, Hytti & Stenholm, 2024).

Liminality has proven helpful in describing the in-between spaces that academic entrepreneurs find themselves in—spaces of ambiguity but also possibility (Hayter, Fischer & Rasmussen, 2021; Montonen, Eriksson & Aromaa, 2021). In these liminal moments, identity reconstruction is responsive but also strategic and agentic, shaped by sensemaking processes (see Weick, 1995) and contextual contingencies (Mäkinen & Esko, 2023).

The social dimension is also crucial to the identity transformation process. The role of involved colleagues, mentors, and peer networks cannot be overstated. Informal learning and social support are often more powerful than formal mechanisms such as technology transfer offices (Yetisen, 2021; Gubbins, Harrington & Hines, 2020; Palo-oja, 2023). Observing colleagues who successfully transition into entrepreneurial roles creates vicarious learning opportunities and helps legitimise entrepreneurship as a viable academic path (Shi, Zou & Santos, 2021; Johannisson, 2023). These forms of social support enhance entrepreneurial self-efficacy and encourage academics to pursue new professional directions.

Academic entrepreneurship is a dynamic and situated process characterised by disruption, reflection, and transformation. It is shaped by the interplay of structural forces, personal agency, institutional contexts, and social relationships (Li et al, 2020; Nielsen & Lassen, 2011). This article contributes to the emerging discourse by offering an in-depth exploration of the lived experience of an academic entrepreneur. It focuses on how critical incidents and collegial support catalyse identity reconstruction and entrepreneurial motivation. Viewed through this lens, academic entrepreneurship emerges not as a linear path but as an emergent, reflexive practice grounded in experience, dialogue, and evolving professional landscapes.

## **2. Research Design**

The study is based on rich and versatile data collected over six years. Central to data collection were repeated, in-depth qualitative interviews with the academic entrepreneur, which provided rich descriptions of the entrepreneur's personal experiences, thoughts, and developing identity as they transitioned from an academic to an entrepreneurial orientation. For anonymity reasons, the academic entrepreneur's name, field of study, or company is not disclosed, but he or she is referred to with the neutral pronoun they.

The interviews have been complemented by prolonged observational fieldwork, documenting their career trajectory and the broader context in which their entrepreneurial process developed. Throughout the study, the entrepreneur's startup reached some important milestones that constitute decisive points for review. Perhaps most notably, the company was able to obtain considerable seed money, which is why the company is characterised as a successful university spinoff company in this study. This investment was complemented by the establishment of an important strategic association with an internationally known investor, further raising the profile of the company and broadening the possibilities for operations.

Additional data sources were included to enrich the analysis and to triangulate findings. These additional data include publicly accessible media reports and press releases, contextualizing the company's public discourse and external market positioning. Investor pitch documents gave a direct view of the company's value proposition and maturity path. At the same time, records collected from the Orbis database presented formalised financial and organisational data to bring in a richer background to understand the company's development.

The analytical process is loosely based on the Critical Sensemaking frame (CSM, Helms Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010). The CSM approach offers a nuanced view of how individuals interpret their organisational experiences by integrating agency, discourse, and structure. Building on and critiquing Karl Weick's (1995) original sensemaking

theory, CSM addresses its limitations by incorporating perspectives from Foucault (1979) on discourse and institutional theory on structural constraints (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991). Unlike Weick's focus on individual cognition, CSM foregrounds the role of power and formative (Unger, 1978) or institutional (Mills et al, 2023) contexts in shaping what individuals perceive as plausible or legitimate. It highlights how people navigate and negotiate meaning within historically and discursively shaped environments.

Based on the CSM framework, critical incidents were identified from the interview data. We specifically searched for cues about phases when the researcher made a conscious or unconscious choice, or recognised and seized the opportunity they had identified. This way, we identified four critical incidents through which the researcher had the courage to cross over the invisible line between academia and business. These four incidents or steps were analysed thoroughly based on all data sources we had.

### 3. Findings

The critical events in the path from a student and academic researcher into an academic entrepreneur were summarised into four steps: Coincidence leads to an interesting career; funding gaps threaten the academic future; research focus shifts; and Lessons for business life from the academic world. Next, these phases are described in more detail and coloured with verbatim data extracts.

#### 3.1 Coincidence Leads to an Interesting Career

The secondary school graduate in their twenties planned to study a field that involved close contact with people but was not ready to commit to the demanding entrance exam process. So, they decided to study something else instead and only applied to their favourite field a year later. However, the second choice of study, which was more technical, hooked the graduate student due to its proximity to real-world applications. Surprisingly, the most inspirational applications were attached to their first choice of studies.

The summer job at a local technology company determined the final commitment. This job emphasised the student's passion for a specific field and was a start for constructing a personal network within the business. After this summer job, they chose a specialisation and later the topic for their dissertation that was closely connected to solving practical societal problems.

#### 3.2 Funding Gaps Threaten Academic Future

The summer job and the specialisation choice enabled joining the particular research group that was first lucky to receive significant research funding but later suffered from funding loss. This critical event forced the researcher to consider a career pivot and to enrol in professional training in a third field as a backup.

*But (I) was still left with a burning desire that I did not want to leave this unfinished, the research I had done. Then, the leader of our research group suggested that we apply for business funding for this kind of research. (Interview 2024)*

However, the desire to create social good through research inspired the researcher to consider other options. At the same time, their senior colleague proposed turning research into a product or service via national innovation funding. This was the first step towards the more commercial direction, which, however, faced some delays in positive funding decisions. Commercial interests attracted new members with business backgrounds to the team (Interview 2018, public presentation 2022), encouraging the researcher to see the commercial value of their research. Despite financial issues, the idea of a commercial career remained alive until the research group was more ready for it.

At first, the researcher did not dare to promote the idea commercially. With the colleagues' encouragement and funding for research commercialisation, they finally attempted to found a company (Interview 2018, observations 2018).

*A colleague said, "Are you going to ruin your academic career by going down a path where you might fail?" Nevertheless, let's say more people encouraged you than those of that opinion. (Interview 2024)*

The new entrepreneur participated in several business accelerator programs with their team (Field notes, video material 2018-2019). Business accelerators have helped them become more mature and knowledgeable about the commercial expectations in the field. They learned business principles, networked with their peers, and developed the idea further.

Although the IP process was complex and required significant resources and revisions, they finally protected their idea (patent register, granted 2024). At the same time, they had to agree on ownership with the university.

### 3.3 Research Focus Shifts

According to the entrepreneur, forming a foundation team for the new company was the most challenging part (interview 2018). Potential investors expected full commitment to the company, which made only those who could do so transition from academia to entrepreneurship.

*When a group from a university leaves to run a company full-time, it is not necessarily the same research group that leaves. However, some people left and reorganised entirely. (Interview 2024)*

At first, there was only one full-time employee, but after a year, five, and after two years, 13 people worked for the company (public company registers 2025). The same trend has continued ever since, but the latest statistics are missing from official sources. Only at the time of foundation did the entrepreneur gradually give up their academic career. At first, they worked half and half in the university and company, but after four years, the entrepreneur focused only on their business. (Interview 2024)

They maintained their academic ties but reduced direct involvement to daily practices and steady income streams. One could say they adopted a hybrid role as academic mentor for PhD candidates and founder of a university spinoff.

*The research does not end when you enter the market, but the research is continued, as if organised by the company. Scientific research data needs to be generated all the time, and in a way, you need to find those investors who understand what it means in a company with such a scientific background. (Interview 2024)*

As a spinoff entrepreneur, they are still involved in research. Thus, research stays focused, although personal dedication is now focused on the business. The only thing that changed with the entrepreneurial intentions was the pressure from the university.

*The university hopes for startups and that they will redeem their IPR rights and leave. I don't know how many will quit under pressure from the university, so they will slam their gloves on the counter and not become entrepreneurs at all if it has to be done so quickly. I think they should be given time. (Interview 2024)*

What attracted the entrepreneur first to their second choice of study still inspires them in the field, but this time, they are more focused on the commercial aspect. Those are real-life applications that help people. The entrepreneur calls this societal value that their company provides gives them purpose and sustains energy to overcome setbacks. This way, the failure in the initial career plan led to a successful career and work in close contact with people, as they had planned.

### 3.4 Lessons for Business Life From the Academic World

Personal development has continued since the company's foundation about five years ago. However, the work experience as an academic researcher has prepared the entrepreneur for some difficulties, such as funding issues. The first seed funding round took a long time, and there have been several breaks between funding rounds after that, too.

*Of course, a researcher also sees these breaks on the university side, so I wasn't that scared of them. But of course, there are such challenges that it doesn't feel good that (...) negotiations are underway regarding the next investment round, but it may mean that you won't get a raise for x months before the money is in the account again. (Interview 2024)*

Previous work in academia also allowed for more flexibility in scheduling tasks. However, in business life, entrepreneurs must balance ambitious future expectations and promises they make to investors with their scarce resources and some delays that often happen, especially in high technology.

*Maybe it's been pretty optimistic with hopes of staying on a specific schedule and [promises] when the product will be on the market, when the first customers will pay for it, and other things, that they've been taught it takes time. Resources are not unlimited, and time has to be prioritised. Things will get organised, but they may be delayed a bit; it is, of course, such a challenge. (Interview 2024)*

Still, the entrepreneur is enthusiastic about their innovation, which attracted the global funder to invest in the company and create a partnership (press release 2022). The recent good news, parallel to the last tests with customers, helps the entrepreneur justify their dedication, time, and effort.

*I don't care about financial things. Those are completely secondary things to me. I certainly wouldn't do the amount of work I do today for money, but I've seen the product in practice and how it benefits people. That gives me the motivation to continue. Also, of course, this team around me that comes together every day and works towards our common goal. It is really important. (Interview 2024)*

#### 4. Discussion

Disruptive moments like the postponed application to a dream discipline or failure to get appropriate research funding question the plans and open new possibilities. In a way, these events serve as formative experiences that stem from obstacles, unforeseen advancements in career, or institutional pressures, often becoming defining moments of reconstructing an identity. Critical events may amplify tensions between academic and entrepreneurial careers, but on the other hand, they may also help choose one over the other, which may turn out to be a positive action in the end.

In our case study, the entrepreneur did not exactly feel tension between academia and industry. They only indicated changing priorities in different career steps. First, they were interested in practical solutions but approached them as researchers. After some drawbacks in research funding and a gentle push from their mentor, the focus moved more towards the commercial side. Now, participating in academic work serves more as a hobby or a welcome change from demanding business activities, which is still coloured by science.

The liminal space (Hayter, Fischer & Rasmussen, 2021) between the academic and commercial world may provide the academic entrepreneur more positive feelings and opportunities than tensions or identity crises that some of the literature (e.g., Giunti & Duberley, 2023) has suggested. In our case, the tension was mainly created by external factors such as technology transfer office expectations or investors' expectations for commitment. Both tried to speed up the process of departing from the university and committing fully to the company. However, the social support by peers, new business-oriented colleagues, and senior faculty members, in parallel to lessons learned from academia, helped the entrepreneur to cope with the pressure as expected by Yetisen (2021) and Gubbins, Harrington, and Hines (2020). They formed a solid social equity for the entrepreneur on which they could rely when facing drawbacks.

A confident attitude towards the future, even in the face of financial difficulties, may also be due to the entrepreneur's own personality, which was not studied here. However, it says something about their character that the business was not founded for profit. In our case, the motivation stemmed from personal interest in helping people, not getting financial rewards. This aligns with Yetisen's (2024) study among faculty members, who, however, were not encouraged to depart from academia for entrepreneurial activities.

Factors such as disciplinary background, institutional culture, and regional entrepreneurial ecosystems influence whether hybridity is perceived as harmonious or conflictual (e.g., Majoor-Kozlinska, Hytti & Stenholm, 2024). In our case, the entrepreneur valued the societal benefits and real-life applications their research enabled in academia and business. The entrepreneur had started to network with local companies early in their career, so they were attached to the regional entrepreneurial ecosystem even before spinning out of academia. That way, the entrepreneur matured into a harmonious identity of an academic entrepreneur without any radical tensions or personal crises.

#### 5. Conclusions

This study examined the critical incidents over an academic entrepreneur's career path through a rigorous case study. We discussed how certain planned and unexpected events led to a successful academic spinoff, measured by the number of personnel and capital raised. The case illustrates that the tension between academic and business identities, often described as negative or critical in the previous literature, does not necessarily require specific actions of bridging or selection. An entrepreneurial identity can simultaneously work harmoniously with a researcher's identity, drawing motivation, strength, and learning from both worlds. In the future, it is worth exploring further how we could better support academic entrepreneurs to draw on their previous experiences and combine the best of both worlds. Such research could be approached from the perspective of formative experiences, complementing Unger's (1987) formative context, which is an essential part of critical sensemaking (e.g., Helms Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010) literature.

Although the findings are based on a single case study, they highlight the need for organisational support for individual researchers seeking to commercialise their research. For researchers, it may feel natural to start a business while maintaining their academic positions. The pressure to demonstrate societal impact through spinoff companies may matter less for individual researchers than to universities, which can sometimes push academics too hard toward starting businesses and leave their academic positions.

Nevertheless, university spinoffs typically require a strong research orientation, and for their founders, this research is naturally rooted in their university affiliation. Therefore, academic entrepreneurs would benefit from more flexible mechanisms that enable the gradual transition from academia to the business sector, along with the possibility to utilise their home affiliation's infrastructure, expertise, and networks during this transitional phase.

In the long run, this kind of flexibility would benefit both the university and the academic entrepreneurs, promoting mutual knowledge transfer.

## Ethics Declaration

Ethical approval was not required for this study, as it did not involve sensitive personal data or vulnerable populations. All interview participants gave informed consent prior to participation, and documentary material was obtained from publicly available sources.

## AI Declaration

Artificial intelligence tool Grammarly was used to assist in language editing and to help format references according to the required style. All intellectual contributions, interpretations, and critical analyses are the sole work of the author. The use of AI tools did not influence the research design, data collection, analysis, or conclusions.

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