From Industry Expert to Academic Novice: Understanding Second-Career Teachers' Identity Reconstruction in Higher Education

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Abstract

This study examines career transition experiences of second-career academics entering higher education from non-academic sectors, focusing on identity reconstruction, career adaptability, and institutional integration processes. Using a thematic coding with content analysis of interviews of three business professionals transitioning to academic roles at a case Czech university, this study explores how mid-career professionals navigate the shift from expert practitioner to academic novice. Findings reveal that while transferable competencies facilitate teaching adaptation, research and publishing requirements present significant challenges. Participants experienced status loss despite gaining prestigious academic identity, with financial constraints necessitating concurrent employment that impede full professional identity development. Drawing on Savickas's Career Construction Theory and recent frameworks on teacher professional development, critical gaps in institutional onboarding designed for traditional academic trajectories were identified. The study contributes to understanding how decomposition and recomposition of teaching practices, and targeted coaching support, could better facilitate second-career academics' adaptation. Implications for designing differentiated faculty development programs that recognize prior professional expertise while addressing specific academic skill gaps are discussed.

Keywords: second-career academics; career transition; teacher identity; higher education; career adaptability; faculty development

1. Introduction

Due to aging populations, rapid technical advancements particularly in artificial intelligence, and fundamental shifts in how individuals view and enact their careers, the nature of career paths has dramatically changed. The contemporary work context is characterized as one where changes occur more frequently than before, leading to discontinuities and fragmented careers. Career changes are now the rule rather than the exception, and contemporary careers are increasingly described as turbulent (De Vos et al., 2021; Mussagulova et al., 2023).

Louis's (1980) pioneering conceptualization of career transitions suggests that career transitions are more common at some life stages than others, such as when entering the labour pool. However, some transitions receive disproportionately more attention—the prominent topic of school-to-work transition being a prime example—leaving other transitions under-researched. Even less is known about the factors and circumstances that make career transitions successful

(Mussagulova et al., 2023). Where studies exist, they have mainly focused on typically male career routes without major interruptions, overlooking the career patterns typical for women, which often include breaks for childcare or eldercare responsibilities.

As careers become less linear, the importance of the "one-life-one-career" ideal (Sarason, 1977) continues to decrease (De Vos et al., 2021). The number of career transitions is expected to continue increasing as members of the millennial generation are more likely to make a greater number of job and organizational changes than members of previous generations. Also missing from the literature is guidance on how to prepare individuals for the more dramatic workplace changes brought about by technological developments and demographic shifts. More needs to be known about the role of the environment in designing focused procedures, policies, and novice onboarding processes (which remain under-researched), as well as training and development, building connections, identity shifting, and what is within individual control when it comes to enabling successful career transitions.

2. Literature Review

Unfortunately, the literature on career transitions and the contributing factors of successful career transitions remains fragmented (De Vos et al., 2021; Mussagulova et al., 2023). Until Sullivan and Al Ariss (2021) and Mussagulova et al. (2023), there had not been systematic academic efforts to review the fragmented literature dedicated to this topic. There is neither consensus about a universal typology of career transitions nor about their definition (Mussagulova et al., 2023).

Several commonly used definitions of career transitions exist in the literature, but no single universally accepted definition has emerged. Although scholars have studied specific types of career transitions mostly within the last 15 years (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021), the term "career transition" was introduced into the literature by M. R. Louis, who focused on cataloguing different types of career transitions and developing a model of how individuals cope with them (1980). Louis (1980) defined career transition as "the period during which an individual is either changing roles (taking on a different objective role) or changing orientation to a role already held (altering a subjective state)."

This pioneering conceptualization paralleled the publication of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory. Schlossberg's (1981) definition, retrieved from her model of life transitions, describes the transition phenomenon as an event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. Later authors emphasized the procedural aspect of career transition, defining it as the period during which an individual shifts to a different work setting

or role (Greer & Kirk, 2022), or as "a process that involves mobility from one state to another; often it is leaving a previous role and engaging in a new one" (Hurst, 2010).

Career transitions can be life-changing, uncomfortable, and may become extremely stressful. Nevertheless, topics of stress management or work-life balance during career transition have only been reflected in scientific literature in recent years. Similarly, classic literature devoted to managing transitions (Bridges & Bridges, 2019) has recently been supplemented by a view from the opposite perspective—not managing changes that "happen," but preparing for future career transitions (Marcdante et al., 2020).

According to Mussagulova et al. (2023), publications on career transitions began appearing in the late 1980s, with a visible increase after 2007. This steady rise in publications coincided with the emergence of Savickas's (2005) Career Construction Theory (CCT) and the protean/boundaryless career orientations (PBCO) framework (Briscoe et al., 2006).

Recent research has further illuminated specific aspects of career transitions. Banks et al. (2025) demonstrate that decomposing teaching practices into constituent elements before recomposing them in meaningful sequences enhances early-career teachers' ability to adaptively transfer skills to novel contexts. Similarly, Bührer et al. (2024) found that online coaching designed to support self-regulation and goal pursuit significantly aided early-career teachers in implementing professional development goals. These findings suggest that targeted, structured support mechanisms are crucial for successful academic integration.

2.1. Career Adaptability: A Core Theoretical Framework

Career adaptability as a resource and adaptation as a process are essential concepts in career research, building on a long tradition in vocational psychology. In the context of career adaptation, Savickas (2005, 2013) conceptualized the terms adaptivity and adaptability. Adaptivity denotes personal characteristics of flexibility and the general willingness to meet career-related changes, transitions, shocks, and tasks with appropriate responses. Most studied characteristics include trait levels of proactivity, future orientation, hope and optimism, core self-evaluations and self-esteem, as well as higher scores on the Big Five personality dimensions and cognitive ability (Klehe et al., 2021).

The term career adaptability is used in the literature in two different ways—one narrow, the other wider, containing the meaning of the term when introduced into the literature (Klehe et al., 2021). In its narrow sense, career adaptability denotes the perceived psychosocial resources for coping with predictable and unpredictable, current and anticipated tasks, transitions, and traumas (Savickas, 2005, 2013). Some scholars focus on how individuals plan and adjust to

changing career plans and work responsibilities, asking respondents about their perceived adaptability quite directly (Klehe et al., 2021).

Savickas (2005, 2013) denotes the relevant resources as concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. His followers add a fifth dimension of cooperation (Nota et al., 2012; Nye et al., 2018). Each dimension includes specific resources (attitudes, values, and competencies):

1. Career concern, the most important dimension according to Savickas (2005, 2013), describes a future orientation and competencies related to planning
2. Career control implies that people "own" their career and believe they are responsible for making career decisions, including competencies related to career decision-making
3. Career curiosity encompasses exploratory attitudes and competences
4. Career confidence implies positive expectations in constructing one's career by being able to perform, solve problems, overcome obstacles, and learn new skills
5. Career cooperation, not part of Savickas's original concept, describes the interpersonal aspects of career adaptability: the ability to successfully interact and work with others (Nye et al., 2018)

When introduced as an alternative to the prominent concept of vocational maturity (Super & Knasel, 1981), career adaptability was used as an umbrella term for behaviours that some researchers now denote "adapting behaviours." Although some researchers still use the label "career adaptability" for the whole adaptation process, Savickas (2005, 2013) argues we should separate resources (adaptability) from behaviour (adapting) and outcomes of the adaptation process (adaptation results).

Recent work by Jiang et al. (2024) demonstrates that career adaptability can be transferred between individuals through psychological capital, suggesting the importance of mentorship and collegial support in transitions. As Anwar (2024) shows, career calling mediates the relationship between mentoring and knowledge transfer, indicating that helping second-career academics develop a sense of academic calling might facilitate their identity transition.

2.2. The Second-Career Academic Phenomenon

The transition from "non-academia" (industry, healthcare, etc.) to "academia" represents a unique type of career transition and a growing phenomenon. Effective building of academic teams requires not only integration of young talented graduate students but also successful hiring of practitioners. In the 21st century, many countries face teacher shortages and have problems recruiting the necessary number of qualified teachers. Challenges related to teacher shortages have been mentioned by more than half of European countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018, 2021), including tertiary education.

With the growth and evolution of the higher education sector in recent decades, universities have started using different sources of academic candidates. Academics traditionally followed a relatively clear and linear career path from undergraduate through postgraduate student to junior academic. However, as demand for academics has increased, the number of lecturers coming from other sources has grown (Griffiths & Dickinson, 2023), a tendency that continues (Fellows, 2024) with increasing numbers (Wakely, 2021). Mid-life academic novices face many challenges when managing career transitions, including effective training, learning strategies, onboarding, and acclimatization in a new world.

Although the transition of professionals from other sectors to academic roles is neither new nor rare, it remains relatively under-researched in scientific literature (Wilson et al., 2014). Bandow et al. (2007) highlighted that existing integration processes in higher education were designed for candidates coming through "the traditional linear transition through university, higher-degree research and on into academia," so they may not be appropriate for second-career academics. Significant barriers remain for second-career academics to overcome during their career transition (Wilson et al., 2014). Wakely (2021) suggests it takes up to three years for a second-career academic to complete the transition into their new role.

2.3. Challenges of Academic Integration

There is neither theory nor coherent framework to understand the diverse and intersecting factors involved in transitions between disciplines. This type of career change challenges the traditional and increasingly outdated notion of a linear academic career path. To understand these career transitions, we must seek to understand the facilitating influences and barriers, the professional needs and expectations of practicing academics who have undergone these transitions, and the resources they needed.

Like LaRocco and Bruns (2006), we believe that the transition from business to academia does not imply a break in the links between the two fields. Many competencies are transferable between professions. Qualified practitioners bring valued business, clinical, or technical experience, concrete examples from practice, and up-to-date knowledge (Simendinger et al., 2000). However, when entering academia, they must cope with a profession requiring new knowledge and skills (Smith & Higgs, 2013) for their new career as educators and researchers.

Sometimes they may lack knowledge of the culture and language of academia and may not fully understand the professional responsibilities of a university professor (Fogg, 2002; Grassley & Lambe, 2015). Teaching requires more than just lecturing and helping students gain subject knowledge. Tutors need understanding of how to create syllabi, tests, class assignments, and

implement teaching strategies that accommodate different learning styles. They are expected to participate in curriculum design, evaluate student progress, and determine appropriate learning outcomes (Brown & Sorrell, 2017)—processes that need to be understood and mastered by second-career teachers as quickly as possible.

2.4. *Identity and Cultural Transitions*

Adapting to new tasks and organization in higher education can be challenging for employees from non-academic backgrounds. For them, transitioning to a new career means leaving their comfort zone and crossing boundaries (Wenger, 1998), which involves changes in culture (Simendinger et al., 2000) and identity (Smith & Boyd, 2012). Business and university environments have different cultures, practices, and languages (Trowler & Knight, 2000). Thus, career change can be perceived as stressful (Dash, 2018).

According to Smith and Higgs (2013), the different organizational structure of universities and distributed leadership approach involving less direct supervision can lead to feelings of isolation, lack of support, and communication difficulties. However, it can also bring feelings of enthusiasm and satisfaction derived from nurturing students and supporting their growth (McArthur-Rouse, 2008; Smith & Boyd, 2012; Smith & Higgs, 2013).

The change from being valued experts in a previous career to novices in a new academic role (McArthur-Rouse, 2008) can be seen as a loss or wobbling of professional identity. The known structure and entire "field" are replaced by new ones, and part of social capital is lost. New academics may draw on their expertise and transferable skills, but simultaneously experience feelings of status loss and a sense of being novices again. Being unprepared to work in academia (whether in research, publishing, or teaching) is an experience that cannot be prepared for in advance, but a new professional identity integrating professional and academic knowledge and skills must be built for a successful new career.

The personal challenges of transitioning to academia extend beyond teaching, research, or publishing. Adapting the habitus and constructing a new identity when entering academia is difficult (Smith & Boyd, 2012). If integration into a new role is not successful, newcomers may decide to leave academia (Herman et al., 2021). Even with experience, transferable skills, and needed knowledge, a new job always has a learning curve influenced by different expectations, communication practices, and workplace culture (Kiner & Safin, 2023).

As Shapiro (2025) notes in discussing clinician educators, such transitions require not only skill acquisition but fundamental professional identity reformation. Chen et al. (2024) demonstrate that social capital and shared vision significantly influence training transfer and occupational

commitment, suggesting that professionals from management and industry often bring substantial presentation, training, and communication skills that transfer readily to teaching contexts.

3. Research Question

As Klein et al. (2015) point out, there can be differences between what an organization tries to achieve with induction activities and how new employees experience this process. Due to this fact, it is necessary to have a critical look at onboarding activities not only from a company's perspective but also from the employee's perspective. Although academic research on induction processes and employee integration exists, researchers rarely analyse the onboarding process of second-career academics. Therefore, understanding the integration process of mid-life adults going through career transitions from non-academic to academic professions represents a critical research gap that this paper addresses.

4. Methods

This preliminary investigation adopted an thematic coding approach (Creswell, 2007) to examine the lived experiences of professionals who transitioned from industry to academia. The thematic methodology was specifically chosen for its capacity to capture the depth and nuance of participants' subjective experiences within their environmental contexts. This approach enables researchers to explore how individuals make sense of significant life transitions, particularly the complex process of moving between distinctly different professional worlds. The interpretative dimension allows for analysis that goes beyond surface descriptions to uncover the underlying meanings participants attach to their transition experiences.

4.1. Sample

The study involved three professionals currently employed at the studied university who had successfully navigated the transition from business to academic careers. Participant recruitment employed purposive sampling strategies to identify individuals whose experiences would provide rich insights into the phenomenon under investigation. To ensure participants had sufficient experience to reflect meaningfully on their transitions, specific inclusion criteria were established. Each participant was required to be currently engaged in full-time teaching within tertiary education, having previously worked in a non-academic profession for a minimum of five consecutive years. Additionally, participants' original educational qualifications were not designed for teaching careers, ensuring that their transition represented a genuine career change rather than a return to an intended profession. Finally, all participants had completed at least

one year in their current academic positions, providing adequate time for initial adaptation and reflection on the transition process.

These three participants constitute the entire accessible population meeting these precise criteria at the institution, representing a complete census of this unique demographic rather than a convenience sample. The university is a public institution in the Czech Republic specializing in business and management education, where faculty hiring patterns have historically favored candidates with traditional academic trajectories. The recruitment of professionals with substantial consecutive industry experience (minimum five years) into full-time academic positions represents a relatively recent and limited phenomenon at the institution. During the study period, only three faculty members met all specified criteria: transition from business careers of at least five consecutive years, appointment to full-time academic positions, and current navigation of early-career academic status while adapting to institutional expectations.

The institutional context shapes these individuals' transition experiences significantly. Faculty at this university face research publication expectations aligned with Czech national accreditation requirements and international standards (including AACSB, AMBA and Equis accreditation), yet operate within resource constraints typical of government-founded universities. Workload encompasses substantial teaching responsibilities across multiple degree programs, course development obligations, student supervision duties, and participation in institutional quality assurance processes. Critically, salary structures at Czech public universities often necessitate that early-career faculty maintain external employment to achieve financial sustainability—a constraint that directly impacts the transition experiences explored in this study. This economic reality creates the dual professional engagement that emerged as a central challenge in participants' narratives.

The deliberate focus on this specialized population aligns with the exploratory nature of the research, which seeks to generate initial insights into the experiences of mid-career professionals transitioning from business to academic roles within the specific context of Czech public higher education. Given the specificity of the selection criteria, the institutional hiring patterns, and the limited pool of individuals meeting these requirements, the sample size of three reflects the complete available population rather than an arbitrary limitation.

Table 1 below presents demographic characteristics and professional backgrounds of the three participants.

Table 1. Participants Background

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Education	Field of Study	Corporate Experience	Original Profession	Full-Time Academic Experience
B	Female	55+	Master's degree	Engineering and Management	24 years	Management, finance	11 years
A	Female	45+	Master's degree	Philology	21 years	Management, HR	8 years
C	Male	50+	Master's degree	Adult Education	24 years	HR, Consulting	1 year

While the small sample size constrains the generalizability of findings to broader populations, it is appropriate for exploratory qualitative research aimed at understanding a highly specific phenomenon. Thematic saturation was not anticipated given both the exploratory scope of the study and the constrained participant pool. The findings should therefore be interpreted as preliminary insights that illuminate the experiences of this particular cohort and provide a foundation for future research with larger, more diverse samples.

4.2. Data Collection

Data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews, a method that balances consistency across interviews with flexibility to explore individual experiences in depth. Prior to data collection, the study received ethical approval from the university's research ethics committee. All participants provided written informed consent after receiving detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms replace actual names throughout this study, and identifying details about specific departments, courses, or projects have been removed. Interview recordings and transcripts are stored securely with access restricted to the research team, and all data will be retained according to university research data management policies.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, with sessions conducted either through Microsoft Teams video conferencing or through face-to-face meetings, depending on participant preference and availability. The semi-structured format utilized an interview guide that ensured coverage of key topics while allowing participants to elaborate on aspects most significant to their personal experiences.

The interview protocol explored multiple dimensions of the career transition experience. Conversations began by examining the circumstances that led participants to leave their previous careers and the factors that attracted them to academia. The protocol then guided discussion toward participants' initial experiences entering the university environment,

including their first impressions and early challenges. Participants were encouraged to describe specific barriers and difficulties encountered during their onboarding period, as well as the resources they found helpful or wished had been available. The interviews also explored the adaptive strategies participants developed to manage their transitions and their perspectives on the institutional support received. Each interview concluded with participants offering advice they would give to others considering similar career transitions.

4.3. *Analytical Methodology and Coding*

Interview recordings were professionally transcribed and subsequently analysed using MAXQDA qualitative analysis software, which facilitated systematic coding and theme development. The analytical process followed an iterative, interpretative approach utilizing immersion and crystallization techniques as described by Borkan (2022). This method involves repeated engagement with the data until key patterns and meanings become clear.

Initial analysis began with open coding, where transcripts were examined line by line to identify significant concepts and phrases emerging directly from participants' accounts. This inductive approach ensured that findings remained grounded in participants' actual experiences rather than predetermined theoretical categories. As analysis progressed, related codes were grouped to form broader thematic categories. These categories were refined through constant comparison between different participants' experiences and returning to the original transcripts to ensure accurate representation.

The development of final themes focused on identifying patterns related to transition barriers, factors that enabled successful adaptation, participants' expectations versus realities, and the various adaptive strategies employed. Throughout the analysis, attention was paid to both commonalities across participants' experiences and unique individual variations that might illuminate different aspects of the transition process.

5. Results

The analysis of interview data revealed six interconnected themes that characterize the career transition experiences of second-career academics in the Czech higher education context. These themes illuminate both the resources that facilitate transition and the barriers that impede full integration into academic life. The findings suggest a complex interplay between individual adaptability and institutional constraints, with participants demonstrating remarkable resilience while navigating significant structural challenges. The themes progress from initial transition motivations through the practical realities of academic work to systemic institutional issues, revealing a transition process marked by both unexpected opportunities and unanticipated

difficulties. Table 2 provides an overview of the six themes, including brief descriptions, participant contributions, and illustrative quotations.

Table 2. Overview of Themes and Content Analysis

Theme	Description	Participants	Illustrative Quote
Opportunistic Rather Than Planned Transitions	Career transitions emerged from opportunities rather than deliberate planning, driven by curiosity at professional crossroads.	All (A, B, C)	"I was at a point where I needed to consider my next career step, and the university opportunity appeared at exactly the right moment." (A)
Transferable Competencies and Teaching Confidence	Industry expertise enhanced teaching credibility through practical examples and presentation skills.	All (A, B, C)	"I'm not stressed about presenting, I'm not stressed about speaking in front of people... as a dowry, I definitely brought training for trainers." (B)
Status Loss and Identity Disruption	Transition involved moving from expert to novice status with loss of professional networks and social capital.	Two (B, C)	"Previous achievements, status, contacts disappear... you're no longer a manager or senior expert, but a junior, a novice." (C)
Financial Constraints and Divided Professional Identity	Significant salary reduction necessitated concurrent professional activities, dividing attention and impeding identity development.	All (A, B, C)	"I earned significantly more in the corporate world... the salary in academia really surprised me, and I cannot support my family on this salary." (C)
Research and Publishing as Primary Challenges	While teaching felt comfortable, research and publishing requirements presented fundamental difficulties.	Two (A, B)	"I like teaching, I enjoy it... but I haven't found the point in publishing yet... I understand that it belongs to the profession." (A)
Inadequate Institutional Onboarding	Participants experienced lack of systematic support and orientation to academic systems and expectations.	Two (B, C)	"I was quite surprised that there was no onboarding... that first year was basically pure despair." (B)

5.1. Participant Profiles

Before presenting the cross-case thematic analysis, brief profiles of each participant provide context for understanding how the themes manifest differently across individual experiences.

Participant A is a woman in her mid-40s who transitioned to academia after 21 years in corporate management and human resources roles. With a background in philology, her transition was opportunistic rather than planned, emerging at a career crossroads. She has been in full-time academic employment for eight years. Participant A reports strong confidence in teaching, attributing this to her extensive experience in corporate training and presentations. However, she struggles with research and publishing requirements, viewing them as obligations rather than meaningful contributions. She maintains concurrent professional activities outside academia due to financial necessity, which divides her professional focus and impedes full integration into academic life.

Participant B is a woman over 55 who entered academia after 24 years in corporate management and finance, bringing a background in engineering and management. She has been in full-time academic employment for 11 years, the longest tenure of the three participants. Her transition

narrative emphasizes the dramatic status shift she experienced, characterizing it as moving from "hero to zero." Despite extensive corporate experience in training and development, she describes her first year in academia as "pure despair" due to complete absence of institutional onboarding. Like the other participants, she maintains external professional activities for financial reasons. She expresses particular frustration with publishing requirements, viewing them as incompatible with the practitioner orientation of business professionals.

Participant C is a man in his early 50s who transitioned to academia after 24 years in human resources and consulting, with educational background in adult education. With only one year of full-time academic experience, he represents the most recent transition among the three participants. His narrative particularly emphasizes the financial shock of moving from corporate to academic salaries and the loss of professional status, social capital, and established networks. Despite his adult education background, which might suggest pedagogical preparation, he reports experiencing inadequate institutional support comparable to the other participants. He explicitly notes the dramatic salary difference, stating he cannot support his family on academic wages alone.

5.2. Theme 1: Opportunistic Rather Than Planned Transitions

This theme was common to all three participants (A, B, and C). All participants reported that their transition to academia was not a deliberately planned career move but rather emerged from opportunities presented at professional crossroads. Two participants explicitly mentioned curiosity as a driving factor, aligning with Savickas's (2013) career curiosity dimension of adaptability. As Participant A noted: "I was at a point where I needed to consider my next career step, and the university opportunity appeared at exactly the right moment."

5.3. Theme 2: Transferable Competencies and Teaching Confidence

This theme was common to all three participants (A, B, and C). Participants unanimously agreed that their industry expertise enhanced teaching credibility and student engagement. Practical examples from professional experience were particularly valued:

"The fact that I have practical experience allows me, after I explain something from a theoretical point of view, to bring it to the students with a concrete example from practice" (Participant B).

"Students respond very well to the practical examples and appreciate their inclusion in the classroom; they regularly mention this positively within their feedback" (Participant C).

This finding aligns with recent research on decomposition and recomposition in teacher development (Banks et al., 2025), suggesting that prior professional experience provides a

foundation of "decomposed" skills that can be recomposed in academic contexts. Presentation skills, training design, and communication competencies transferred readily:

"I'm not stressed about presenting, I'm not stressed about speaking in front of people... as a dowry, I definitely brought training for trainers and IT e-skills that I've already done elsewhere" (Participant B).

5.4. Theme 3: Status Loss and Identity Disruption

This theme emerged from two participants (B and C). Despite gaining prestigious academic identity, participants experienced significant status loss. Participant B characterized this as going from "hero to zero," echoing findings from Herman et al. (2021). This identity disruption was compounded by loss of established professional networks and social capital. As Participant C explained: "Previous achievements, status, contacts disappear... you're no longer a manager or senior expert, but a junior, a novice."

5.5. Theme 4: Financial Constraints and Divided Professional Identity

This theme was common to all three participants (A, B, and C). A distinctive finding in the Czech context was the significant salary reduction accompanying the transition to academia, forcing participants to maintain concurrent professional activities:

"The university does not provide such a financial background that one can only do research; one has to do something in addition to that to support oneself" (Participant A).

"I earned significantly more in the corporate world... the salary in academia really surprised me, and I cannot support my family on this salary" (Participant C).

This economic reality potentially impedes full professional identity development by dividing attention between academic and external professional roles, a factor not prominently discussed in existing literature from Western contexts.

5.6. Theme 5: Research and Publishing as Primary Challenges

This theme emerged from two participants (A and B). While teaching represented an area of relative comfort, research and publishing emerged as the primary challenges:

"It's useless to scare teachers that if they don't write papers something terrible will happen... some people are scientists and some people are not, and especially business people won't write scientific papers" (Participant B).

"I like teaching, I enjoy it and I like to see students improve and develop; I see the point in it, but I haven't found the point in publishing yet... I understand that it belongs to the profession" (Participant A).

5.7. *Theme 6: Inadequate Institutional Onboarding*

This theme emerged from two participants (B and C). Participants consistently reported inadequate institutional support and onboarding processes:

"So I was quite surprised that there was no onboarding or any support in terms of how things work here. Someone didn't explain to me how the study system worked. Nobody explained to me how the students have it set up, where I fit in their study curriculum... that first year was basically pure despair" (Participant B).

"When I joined, after my corporate experience, I was expecting the usual mail from HR and IT with links to presentations and manuals... And nothing came. If I want to know something, I have to ask" (Participant C).

The six themes collectively paint a picture of career transitions characterized by both promise and challenge. Second-career academics bring substantial transferable competencies, particularly in teaching and communication, yet face significant barriers in research skill development and institutional integration. The opportunistic nature of their transitions, combined with inadequate institutional support, creates a particularly challenging adaptation period. Financial constraints unique to the Czech academic context force divided professional identities that may ultimately impede full integration into academic life. Below in Fig 1 is Conceptual model illustrating the dynamic processes shaping participants' transition from industry to academia.
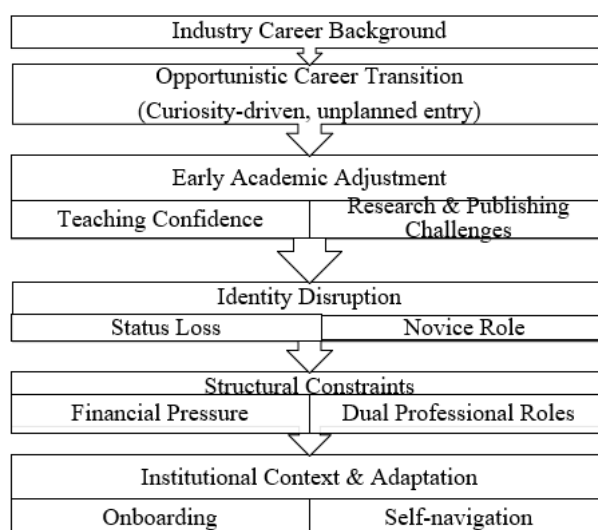

Fig 1. Conceptual model of transition from industry to academia

The model highlights how opportunistic entry, skill transfer, identity disruption, and structural constraints interact within an institutional context marked by limited onboarding support. While participants demonstrate high levels of career adaptability—particularly in curiosity and control dimensions—they must deploy these resources primarily to compensate for systemic deficiencies rather than to enhance their professional development. These findings suggest that successful transitions depend more on individual resilience and informal support networks than on institutional structures designed to facilitate integration.

6. Discussion

The present study adopted an thematic coding approach to explore the transition experiences of second-career academics in depth. While the three-participant sample size limits statistical generalizability, it enabled intensive examination of lived experience and meaning-making processes that larger samples would not permit. The qualitative findings illuminate patterns, tensions, and adaptations that characterize this particular career transition without claiming that these patterns represent fixed frequencies or universal experiences. Rather, the analysis reveals the experiential structure and subjective significance of moving from industry to academia for these particular individuals at this particular institution, providing a foundation for future comparative research across different contexts and larger samples.

Our findings suggest that second-career academics possess significant transferable competencies that could be leveraged more effectively through structured faculty development approaches. Banks et al.'s (2025) framework of decomposition and recomposition offers a promising model for supporting these transitions. Rather than treating second-career academics as complete novices, institutions could adopt a more nuanced approach that begins with decomposing existing professional competencies to identify and articulate the specific skills that transfer from industry to academia, such as presentation skills, project management capabilities, and practical knowledge. This process would then involve clearly delineating areas requiring development, including research methods, academic writing conventions, and publication processes. Finally, institutions could recompose these elements in academic contexts by designing targeted interventions that build on existing strengths while addressing specific gaps. This approach respects the expertise that second-career academics bring while acknowledging the genuine challenges of academic acculturation.

Bührer et al.'s (2024) findings on online coaching for early-career teachers suggest that structured coaching support could significantly benefit second-career academics. Our participants' experiences of isolation and confusion during onboarding indicate a need for

comprehensive support systems. Formal mentorship programs specifically designed for second-career academics could address the unique challenges this population faces, while peer support networks would connect those undergoing similar transitions, reducing isolation and facilitating shared learning. Additionally, goal-oriented coaching focused on research skill development and publication strategies could provide the targeted support needed to navigate academic expectations successfully. As Anwar (2024) demonstrates, mentoring relationships that foster career calling can facilitate tacit knowledge transfer. For second-career academics, developing an academic calling may be crucial for successful identity transition and long-term retention.

The financial constraints faced by participants represent a systemic barrier that institutions must address. The necessity of maintaining external employment not only divides professional focus but may also impede the development of academic identity and collegial relationships. As Chen et al. (2024) show, occupational commitment is influenced by social capital and shared vision—both of which are compromised when academics must divide their time between multiple professional contexts. This fragmentation of professional attention creates a cascade of challenges that can undermine the transition process and limit opportunities for full integration into academic communities.

7. Implications

Based on our findings and recent literature, we propose several institutional interventions:

1. Differentiated onboarding programs: Develop separate tracks for traditional early-career academics and second-career professionals, recognizing their distinct needs and strengths
2. Competency mapping and gap analysis: Systematically assess transferable skills and identify specific development needs for each second-career academic
3. Research apprenticeship models: Pair second-career academics with experienced researchers for intensive, scaffolded support in developing research and publication skills
4. Financial support structures: Consider salary supplements or reduced teaching loads during the initial transition period to enable focused academic development
5. Recognition of professional expertise: Create formal mechanisms for valuing and integrating industry experience into academic roles, potentially through practice-based research tracks or industry liaison positions.

8. Limitations and Future Research Direction

This preliminary study's small sample size of three participants presents an important limitation to the generalizability of findings. However, the three participants represent the whole data set of academic novices transferring to academia after their career of a minimum of five consecutive years in business. While thematic saturation was not expected given the exploratory nature of this research and the limited number of participants, this constraint nonetheless

restricts the extent to which results can be applied to broader populations. The small sample size may not capture the full range of experiences and perspectives that exist within the studied population.

Future research would benefit from several methodological expansions to build upon these initial findings. First, studies should incorporate larger and more diverse samples that represent a wider range of academic disciplines and institutional contexts. This expanded sampling would allow researchers to examine whether the patterns identified in this preliminary work hold across different fields of study and types of academic institutions, from research-intensive universities to teaching-focused colleges.

Additionally, longitudinal research designs would provide valuable insights into how identity development unfolds over time. Rather than capturing a single snapshot, tracking participants across multiple time points would illuminate the dynamic nature of transition experiences and reveal how individuals navigate different stages of their academic journey. Such temporal analysis could identify critical periods and turning points in the identity development process.

Comparative research across different national contexts and academic systems would further enrich our understanding of these phenomena. Academic cultures, institutional structures, and support systems vary considerably across countries, and these differences likely shape transition experiences in meaningful ways. Cross-national comparisons could reveal which aspects of the transition experience are universal and which are culturally or systemically specific.

Finally, future investigations should explicitly examine how demographic factors, particularly gender and age, intersect with and influence transition experiences. These variables may serve as important moderators that shape how individuals navigate academic transitions, access support systems, and construct their professional identities. Understanding these intersectional dynamics would provide a more nuanced and comprehensive picture of the transition process.

9. Conclusion

The transition from industry to academia represents a complex process of professional identity reconstruction that current institutional structures inadequately support. While second-career academics bring valuable practical expertise and transferable teaching competencies, they face significant challenges in research skill development, identity reformation, and economic sustainability. By adopting structured approaches to faculty development that recognize and build upon existing professional competencies while providing targeted support for academic-specific skills, institutions can better facilitate these increasingly common career transitions. As

higher education continues to evolve and seek diverse faculty perspectives, understanding and supporting second-career academics becomes not just a matter of individual career success but of institutional vitality and educational quality.

9.1. *Transferability of Findings*

While this study examines second-career academics at a single Czech university with three participants, the intensive thematic exploration reveals experiential structures and identity dynamics that transcend the immediate research setting, though their specific manifestations will vary across contexts.

The core challenges identified—competency recognition gaps, research skill development needs, identity reconstruction tensions, and economic pressures—likely resonate across higher education systems, particularly in post-socialist Central and Eastern European contexts sharing similar institutional histories and resource constraints. Czech higher education's recent democratization, evolving quality assurance frameworks, and integration into European academic standards create conditions paralleling developments in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and other regional systems undergoing similar transformations.

Beyond regional contexts, the fundamental tension between practical expertise and academic credentialing requirements exists across diverse higher education systems worldwide. Universities increasingly recruit professionals with substantial industry experience, yet support structures remain predominantly designed for traditional academic career paths. The competency decomposition and recomposition framework proposed here offers a conceptual tool applicable across varied settings, though specific implementation requires adaptation to local academic cultures, resource availability, and institutional priorities.

Disciplinary context significantly influences applicability. Business and management fields, where this study was situated, maintain stronger industry connections than many disciplines. Second-career transitions in engineering, nursing, or social work—where professional practice similarly informs academic roles—may exhibit comparable patterns. Conversely, humanities and pure sciences might show different transition dynamics requiring distinct support approaches.

Ethics statement

This article does not involve any original experimental studies with human or animal subjects. Therefore, no ethical approval was required for this work.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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