

University Educational Experience and the Career Trajectories of Students and Graduates: A Comprehensive Analysis

Pavel Sergeevich Sorokin¹ , Veronika Dmitrievna Novikova² 

¹Laboratory for Research on Human Potential and Education, Institute of Education, HSE University, Russia, ²Laboratory for Research on Human Potential and Education, Institute of Education, HSE University, Russia.

How to cite: Sorokin, P. S.; Novikova, V. D. (2026). University Educational Experience and the Career Trajectories of Students and Graduates: A Comprehensive Analysis. In: 12th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'26). Valencia, 15-18 June 2026. <https://doi.org/10.4995/HEAd26.2026.21775>

Abstract

Based on recently proposed neo-structuration theory, this study examines the link between educational experience and employment trajectories of Russian university students and graduates (n=809 from 179 universities), highlighting human agency and institutional support.

Three trajectory clusters were identified: agentic, non-agentic, and mixed. Agentic trajectories are characterized by early work experience, current entrepreneurial/self-employed/corporate entrepreneur status, and plans to maintain it. This cluster shows high stability but also internal mobility between agentic subtypes.

Agentic trajectories correlate with higher income, greater life satisfaction, and proactive educational behaviors fostered by supportive institutional environments.

The conclusion underscores the necessity of cultivating agency through specific pedagogical and institutional practices in higher education to prepare graduates for the demands of a neo-structured labor market.

Keywords: higher education; educational experience; student agency; entrepreneurship; self-employment; employability.

1. Introduction

Amid unpredictable socio-economic shifts, human agency—the capacity to transform and support social structures—is gaining prominence, a phenomenon termed “neo-structuration” [Sorokin, 2025]. This challenges higher education to foster agency, now crucial for individual well-being and labor market adaptation [Sorokin, 2023; Cavazzoni, 2021].

However, the link between educational experience and agentic careers (e.g., self-employment, entrepreneurship, corporate entrepreneurship) remains underexplored [Strebkov, 2015]. This study examines university students' career trajectories through an agency lens, proposing a dynamic typology—agentic, non-agentic, and intermediate—based on temporal markers [Sorokin, 2025; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998].

2. Methodology

We surveyed 809 students and graduates (data collected in October 2024 via online services), classifying them into six employment statuses, based on the theoretical framework of neo-structuration theory (Sorokin 2025, 2023), implying the focus on human agency understood as a capacity for improving/transforming existing or creating new social structures (practices of behavior and communities) and with an emphasis on labor market where related issues are increasingly often discussed yet lacking systematic wholistic analysis (see review of existing literature in Sorokin & Maltseva, 2024), for which neo-structuration theory is offered as a possible solution. Agentic roles included entrepreneurs, intrapreneurs, and self-employed; non-agentic roles covered corporate employees without agentic (corporate entrepreneurship) behavior and individuals without systematic participation in labor market. Using a temporal framework, paying attention to the past experience (earning money before 18) and future plans for either one of the three selected statuses on the horizon of 3 and 10 years [Emirbayer & Mische, 1998], we identified 271 respondents with agentic trajectories (earning money in school + current agentic role + future agentic plans), 81 with non-agentic trajectories (for whom none of the three attributes present), and 457 intermediate ones. We validated findings with 40 in-depth interviews.

The aim of this research is: 1) to empirically develop a classification of university students' and graduates' career trajectories in relation to their educational experience, viewed through the conceptual lens of neo-structuration and agency; 2) to analyze these trajectories' stability and related success; 3) to pinpoint specific pedagogical and organizational conditions within higher education that foster the formation of corresponding 'agentic' career paths.

3. Literature Review

In times of economic crisis and increasing social tensions sociological and educational literature is increasingly focused on the challenges posed by large-scale, objective social transformations which put under question traditional views on structure/agency relations where human agency is seen as a mere addition to the structural (and generally positive) dynamics set by labor market and technological development (see Sorokin 2023, 2025). These shifts create fundamentally new demands on individuals and, consequently, present a significant challenge to education systems, including higher education. This challenge necessitates a reconceptualization of

learning outcomes as well as the pedagogical practices and institutional conditions required to achieve them. One theoretical framework for understanding this new reality is the concept of neo-structuration, posited as a novel stage of societal development when the role of individual proactive action within social and economic spaces becomes paramount [Sorokin, 2023; Sorokin, 2025]. Agency, in the context of this theory, is seen as a key resource—one that underpins not only individual but also collective well-being, particularly within the spheres of work and employment [Sorokin, 2023]. As a manifestation in neo-structuration, research highlights the rise of flexible employment and intrapreneurship, increasing differentiation in terms of labor market outcomes [Winborg, 2023], also noting the fluidity between roles [Huang et al., 2021]. In contrast to the majority of leftist and critical scholarship, neo-structuration theory sees these tendencies not as a sign of emerging new type of structural determination of behavior driven by capitalism or state – but rather as a reflection of objective increase of possibilities for executing productive agency, contributing to both individual and collective well-being. Although education is seen as vital for fostering agency, for example, the experience of running projects during school and university studies [Morozova, 2024; Goshin, 2025], few studies connect educational practices to subsequent agentic career paths.

4. Research findings

4.1. Career Trajectories of University Students and Graduates

We found statistical confirmation for the idea of “agentic” trajectories implying performing initiative behavior on the labor market (though in its different domains) beginning from the adolescence and sustaining it further. Over 75% of respondents who held an agentic status at the time of the survey had experience of earning money while in school. In contrast, this figure was only 50% among those in non-agentic current statuses. The highest prevalence of early earning experience is found among entrepreneurs, at 81%. This finding lends additional weight to arguments supporting the importance of entrepreneurship education programs in schools.

Table 1 presents detailed data on the career trajectories of respondents currently occupying agentic statuses.

Table 1. Employment trajectories of university students and graduates

Current Respondent Status	Total (N)	Earning experience before 18	Worked in the same status as the current one (i.e. an "Entrepreneur") before 18	Plan to Be in an Agentic Status (i.e. any one of the three statuses listed in the table) in 3 Years	Plan to Be in the Status as now in 3 Years	Plan to Be in an Agentic Status in 10 Years	Plan to Be in the same Status as now in 10 Years
Entrepreneurs	75	61 (81%)	12 (16%)	51 (68%)	51 (68%)	60 (80%)	51 (68%)
Self-employed / Freelancers	154	106 (69%)	17 (11%)	118 (77%)	92 (60%)	133 (86%)	132 (86%)
Intrapreneurs (Corporate Entrepreneurs)	207	159 (77%)	95 (46%)	137 (66%)	101 (49%)	197 (95%)	148 (71%)

Analysis of Table 2 reveals that the "agentic trajectory" category represents a real space of perceived, highly probable transitions between the three agentic employment types. This finding lends empirical support to the theory of neo-structuration as applied to the labor market [Sorokin, 2023]. For the actors themselves, their professional status (or type of employment) is not perceived as fixed or permanent – for example, a transition from an intrapreneurship to entrepreneurship is highly possible.

Table 2. Stability of labor trajectories of respondents in agentic trajectories

Current Respondent Status	Primary Income Source in 3 Years					Primary Income Source in 10 Years				
	Entrepreneurs	Self-employed	Employees	Grants/Part-time Work	other	Entrepreneurs	Self-employed	Employees	Grants/Part-time Work	other
Entrepreneurs	67%	19%	7%	2%	6%	80%	11%	7%	0%	2%
Self-employed / Freelancers	25%	57%	16%	1%	1%	46%	38%	16%	1%	0%

Intrapreneurs (Corporate Entrepreneurs)	32%	18%	49%	1%	1%	46%	19%	33%	2%	0%
--	-----	-----	-----	----	----	-----	-----	-----	----	----

4.2. Educational Experience in School and University

The correlation between respondents' educational backgrounds and their subsequent career trajectories merits particular attention; 74% of respondents on an agentic trajectory had participated in running projects during their school years. This compares to 52% of those on an mixed trajectory and only 28% of those on a non-agentic trajectory. This identified correlation is consistent with findings from other empirical studies [Du, 2022; Goshin, 2025], reinforcing the notion that early exposure to project work is linked to the development of proactive career behaviors.

A separate line of analysis focused on the respondents' university experience. For each career trajectory, we constructed a composite index designed to capture different facets of agency within the higher education setting. This index is built on three core dimensions: 1) autonomy in Higher Education Decision-Making (the degree of personal initiative in key choices related to university, including the initial decision to pursue a degree, the selection of the specific institution, and the choice of field of study); 2) engagement with University Structures - the extent to which individuals utilized formal institutional channels and opportunities available during their university studies, including: selecting optional courses; using official university systems to provide feedback on teaching quality or to raise concerns about academic or campus life; proposing new topics for classroom discussion to instructors; participating in student government or other formal representative bodies; and helping to organize informal, student-led events on campus; 3) proactive Engagement in Learning Process (this dimension focuses specifically on agency demonstrated within the academic process itself, including behaviors like initiating debates or suggesting changes to the course content directly to the teacher during the classes).

Respondents on agentic trajectories demonstrated significantly higher engagement with the institutional channels for agency at their university and were more proactive in exercising agency within the classroom setting during their studies. Interestingly, the differences between the three trajectory categories regarding autonomy in the initial decision to pursue higher education are negligible.

Our findings emphasize that behavioral manifestations of agency within the educational process itself show a stronger correlation with subsequent agentic career paths than does the perceived

autonomy of one's initial decision to enter higher education [for the theoretical underpinning of this activity-based approach, see Seryozhnikova, 2015]. It suggests a need to re-examine the prevailing emphasis within the sociology of education on 'choice' as the central driver of individual trajectories. Our data instead lend support to international research indicating that the degree of choice within the educational sphere has a limited connection to objective student outcomes beyond it [Berends, 2015].

4.3. Well-being and Income

Our data indicate that subjective life satisfaction among individuals on agentic trajectories (2.85 on a 4-point scale from "completely dissatisfied" to "completely satisfied") is only marginally higher than for those on intermediate (2.66) or non-agentic (2.63) paths. In contrast, a significant disparity emerges in declared income as an indicator of objective success. The average income reported by respondents on agentic trajectories — along with their corresponding income expectations, measured on a 0-to-1 scale — are markedly higher, particularly among entrepreneurs. This pattern suggests that agency is more strongly associated with objective career-related markers of well-being than with subjective satisfaction, a finding consistent with other research [Boronina, 2024]. Furthermore, substantial differentiation in outcomes exists within the category of agentic trajectories themselves.

4.4. Reconciling Survey Data through In-Depth Interviews

To ensure a comprehensive analysis, the survey results were triangulated with findings from in-depth interviews. These interviews yielded several key insights into how agentic students and graduates perceive their career paths, their educational experience, and — most importantly — the university's role within it:

- a) the secondary role of formal education: while valued, formal university education is not viewed as the primary source of human capital directly applicable to their current (de facto agentic) work. In most cases, the university's role is seen as complementary rather than central.

"The university gave me a lot, but the most important thing isn't the program itself—it's what you do during those 4-5 years. It sets the overall strategy."

- b) A strategic orientation toward continuous re-skilling: there is a fundamental expectation of ongoing learning and requalification as a strategic necessity. The goal is not to acquire a standard portfolio of competencies, but to assemble a unique and evolving "skill mosaic."

"I was simultaneously studying business, pedagogy, and psychology... I needed to assemble my skills like a puzzle."

- c) Multi-source skill assembly: skills are not acquired according to a pre-set, linear plan. Instead, they are actively gathered from diverse, alternative sources in response to new tasks and unpredictable shifts in the labor market.

"I'm paying for my designer to take a course though I did not plan it... Investing in human capital is crucial."

"In 2020, I occasionally needed training in unit economics—to better understand key metrics and how to influence them."

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study contribute to the development of neo-structuration theory [Sorokin, 2023] as applied to the labor market and higher education, underscoring the critical role of agency in shaping resilient and successful career trajectories for university students and graduates.

Our results demonstrate a strong link between agency and educational experience, specifically to the importance of exercising agency within the university environment. The identified correlation between behavioral manifestations of agency during the educational process and subsequent placement into agentic economic trajectories implies the need to develop pedagogical and organizational models that actively foster student agency.

Acknowledgment: This research was supported by a grant from the Russian Science Foundation, project No. 23-78-10182.

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to their colleagues Irina Afanasyeva, Alina Kovaleva, Chulpan Basyrova, Alina Mostovaya, and Elizaveta Zaporozhets for their valuable contributions to the project at various stages.

Acknowledgment

This research was supported by a grant from the Russian Science Foundation, project No. 23-78-10182.

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to their colleagues Irina Afanasyeva, Alina Kovaleva, Chulpan Basyrova, Alina Mostovaya, and Elizaveta Zaporozhets for their valuable contributions to the project at various stages.

References

- Berends, M. (2015). Sociology and school choice: What we know after two decades of charter schools. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41(1), 159–180. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112340>
- Cavazzoni, F., Fiorini, A., & Veronese, G. (2021). How do we assess how agentic we are? A literature review of existing instruments to evaluate and measure individuals' agency. *Social Indicators Research*, 159(3), 1125–1153. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-021-02791-8>
- Du, X., Lundberg, A., Ayari, M. A., Naji, K. K., & Hawari, A. (2022). Examining engineering students' perceptions of learner agency enactment in problem-and project-based learning using Q methodology. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 111(1), 111–136. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jee.20430>
- Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What is agency? *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(4), 962–1023.
- Huang, L. Y., Yang Lin, S. M., & Hsieh, Y. J. (2021). Cultivation of intrapreneurship: A framework and challenges. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, Article 731990. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.731990>
- Winborg, J., & Hägg, G. (2023). The role of work-integrated learning in preparing students for a corporate entrepreneurial career. *Education + Training*, 65(4), 674–696. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-03-2022-0103>
- Boronina, L. N., Kul'minskaia, A. V., Markina, A. A., & Reprintseva, N. E. (2024). Proivlenie agentnosti studenchestva v proektnom obuchenii: keis federal'nogo universiteta [The manifestation of student agency in project-based learning: a case study of a federal university]. *Nauchnyi rezul'tat. Sotsiologiya i upravlenie*, 10(3), 200–216.
- Morozova, E. V. (2024). Obuchenie studentov rossiiskikh vuzov predprinimatel'stvu kak sposob formirovaniia agentnosti [Teaching entrepreneurship to students of Russian universities as a way of forming agency]. *Voprosy obrazovaniia*, 1, 185–213.
- Seriozhnikova, R. K. (2015). Kompetentnostno-deiatel'nostnyi podkhod v professional'no-pedagogicheskom obrazovanii [Competence-activity approach in professional pedagogical education]. *Vysshee obrazovanie v Rossii*, 3, 127–133
- Sorokin, P. S. (2023). Problema «agentnosti» cherez prizmu novoi real'nosti: sostoianie i napravleniia razvitiia [The problem of "agency" through the prism of the new reality: State and directions of development]. *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia*, 3, 103–114.
- Sorokin, P. S. (2025). Agentnost' i narrativnaia kreativnost' kak instrumenty transformatsionnogo perekhoda [Agency and narrative creativity as tools of transformational transition]. *Foresight and STI Governance*, 19(3), 86–97.
- Sorokin P., & Maltseva V. (2024). From Discrete Skills to Holistic Creative Human Potential: An Emerging Approach in Theory and Practice. *Foresight and STI Governance*, 18(1), 6–17. <https://doi.org/10.17323/2500-2597.2024.1.6.17>
- Strebkov, D. O., & Shevchuk, A. V. (2015). Trudovye traektorii samozaniatykh professionalov (freilanserov) [Labor trajectories of self-employed professionals (freelancers)]. *Mir Rossii. Sotsiologiya. Etnologiya*, 24(1), 72–100.