



From Hero to Zero: A Case Study of Industry-To-Academia Career Transitions at a Czech Public University

Marie Hořáková¹, Lucie Depoo^{*2}

Abstract

Career transitions from industry into academia remain comparatively under-researched in Central European higher education. This study explores, as a single-institution case study, how three experienced professionals made sense of moving into full-time academic work at one Czech public university. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with practitioner-academics who each had more than twenty years of corporate experience. Transcripts were analysed using six-phase reflexive thematic analysis with MAXQDA, and interpreted through Career Construction Theory as the single guiding framework. Six interpretive themes were developed: purposeful reorientation over financial reward; status inversion; limited onboarding at the focal institution; economic pressure toward concurrent external work; learning accreditation norms; and reliance on individual adaptability. Because all three participants had successfully integrated and were drawn from one institution, the findings are preliminary and illustrative rather than generalisable, forming the first stage of an ongoing study.

Keywords

Career Transitions, Industry-To-Academia, Practitioner-Academics, Thematic Analysis, Case Study

I. Introduction

Career transitions are a recurring feature of contemporary working life, and the movement from an established industry career into full-time academic employment is a particularly distinctive but under-studied instance (Sullivan and Al Ariss, 2021; Shao et al., 2024). Professionals who cross into academia after long managerial or specialist careers bring accumulated experience that differs markedly from that of conventional academic entrants,

¹ Prague University of Economics and Business, W. Churchill Sq. 4, 130 67 Prague, Czech Republic.
E-mail: marie.horakova@vse.cz.

^{*} Corresponding author

² Prague University of Economics and Business, W. Churchill Sq. 4, 130 67 Prague, Czech Republic.
E-mail: lucie.depoo@vse.cz.

yet must adapt to unfamiliar institutional expectations around teaching, research output, accreditation, and collegial governance.

This article reports a single-institution case study of three such transitions at one Czech public university specialising in business and management education. It examines the experiences of three professionals (Participants A, B, and C) who moved from industry roles – spanning management, finance, HR, and consulting, with between 21 and 24 years of corporate experience – into full-time academic posts. The aim is interpretive and exploratory: to understand how these particular individuals made sense of their transition, not to generalise to Czech higher education as a whole.

The remainder of this section is organised as follows. We first introduce career transitions and the single career-theoretical lens adopted here, Career Construction Theory. We then situate industry-to-academia moves as an under-researched case and briefly describe the institutional setting of the focal university. Finally, we identify the gap the study addresses and state the research questions.

Career transitions and Career Construction Theory

Louis (1980) defined career transitions as periods in which a person changes roles or changes their orientation to a role already held. Subsequent work has broadened this to encompass the procedural, affective, and identity dimensions of professional change, while noting the field's fragmentation and the relative neglect of mid- and late-career transitions (De Vos et al., 2021; Mussagulova et al., 2023; Sullivan and Al Ariss, 2021). To keep the analysis focused, this study adopts a single guiding framework, Savickas's (2005, 2013) Career Construction Theory (CCT), rather than combining multiple career models. CCT understands careers as constructed through individual meaning-making and frames career adaptability as a set of psychosocial resources – career concern, control, curiosity, confidence, and cooperation – for coping with transitions. CCT was selected because its emphasis on agency, identity construction, and adaptability maps directly onto the sense-making and adaptive strategies the study set out to examine; its applicability to a constrained institutional setting is treated as an open question rather than an assumption. Human capital theory offers a complementary distinction between general human capital (education, prior experience) and specific human capital (tacit, industry-specific knowledge) that is useful when interpreting how practitioners' experience is, or is not, recognised in academia (Davidsson and Honig, 2003).

Industry-to-academia transition as an under-researched case

Existing accounts of academic career transitions draw predominantly on Western samples and tend to examine early-career entry rather than mid- or late-career moves from industry (Shao et al., 2024). Such transitions involve not only the transfer of skills but renegotiations of professional identity that can be simultaneously generative and destabilising. Qualitative studies using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis have proven well suited to examining these subjective, identity-laden processes across a range of professional domains,

and several recent contributions provide methodological parallels for the present design (Byrne, 2022; Naeem et al., 2023).

The focal institutional setting

The study's single setting is a Czech public university operating under national accreditation requirements (Národní akreditační úřad; NAÚ) alongside international standards (AACSB, AMBA, EQUIS). Like many institutions, it has begun recruiting experienced practitioners into teaching roles in response to demands for practice-relevant education, creating a small group of practitioner-academics. Two features of this setting are relevant to the participants' accounts and are treated as characteristics of the case rather than of Czech higher education generally: modest public-sector academic salaries relative to industry, and limited formalised onboarding. These issues form part of an ongoing discussion in regional scholarship on labour-market and institutional conditions (Dvouletý et al., 2024; Krejčí and Šebestová, 2025; Vaníčková and Bílek, 2025), to which this case study offers a modest, locally grounded contribution.

Research gap and questions

Within this setting, there is qualitative, interview-based research on how experienced practitioners make sense of entering academia. The study addresses this gap through in-depth interviews with the three eligible practitioner-academics at the focal university. Consistent with the small, single-site sample, the research questions are framed at the level of the case rather than as generalising claims:

- RQ1: How did these practitioner-academics make sense of their transition into full-time academic work at the focal university?
- RQ2: What barriers, facilitators, and adaptive strategies did they describe, and how did features of their institutional setting – remuneration, onboarding, and accreditation demands – shape their experience?

II. Methodology

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative case-study design, well suited to exploring the subjective meanings and lived experiences that accompany significant professional transitions (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). The epistemological stance is interpretivist: social realities are constructed through individual meaning-making and cannot be understood independently of context (Bryman, 2016). The analytical method is Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis (TA).

Reflexivity and positionality

Consistent with an interpretivist stance, the researchers' position is made explicit. The researchers work within Czech higher education and were affiliated with the focal institution, which provided access to participants and contextual familiarity with the setting. This insider position aided rapport and interpretation but carried a risk of over-identification with

participants’ accounts; reflexive memo-writing and an audit trail were used throughout to surface and question interpretive assumptions, in keeping with the confirmability criterion adopted below.

Participants and sampling

Recruitment followed criterion sampling, selecting participants on the basis of direct, lived experience of the phenomenon (Moser and Korstjens, 2018; Patton, 2015). The three participants are the complete set of practitioner-academics meeting the inclusion criteria at the focal university – a census of this small cohort at one institution, not a sample drawn to represent a wider population. Inclusion criteria required that each participant (i) be in full-time tertiary teaching, (ii) have worked in a non-academic profession for at least five consecutive years, (iii) hold original qualifications not designed for a teaching career, and (iv) have completed at least one year in the academic post. All three were in their late forties or fifties at the time of transition, with 21–24 years of industry experience.

Justification of sample size

The adequacy of a three-person qualitative study is judged by information power rather than numerical sufficiency: the sample is highly specific, the interviews were in-depth, and the analysis is case-focused (Malterud et al., 2016). For reflexive TA, data saturation is not treated as a necessary or even coherent criterion (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Hennink and Kaiser, 2022); the aim is depth of interpretation, not coverage. We nonetheless recognise that three accounts from one institution are a limited evidential base. This study is the first stage of a continuing project: a further round of interviews began in 2025 and is ongoing, and broader, multi-institution data collection is planned for subsequent work. The present findings are accordingly offered as preliminary.

Table 1: Background characteristics of participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Field of study	Corporate experience	Academic experience
A	Female	45+	Philology	21 yrs (Management, HR)	8 years
B	Female	55+	Engineering & Management	24 yrs (Management, Finance)	11 years
C	Male	50+	Adult Education	24 yrs (HR, Consulting)	1 year

Source: own research. All participants hold Master’s-level qualifications

Ethics

The study received ethical approval from the university’s research ethics committee. Participants received written information and gave written informed consent, including the right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonymous codes (A, B, C) replace names, identifying details have been removed, and recordings and transcripts are stored securely (Moser and Korstjens, 2018).

Data collection

Data were generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting 45–60 minutes, conducted via Microsoft Teams or in person (Bryman, 2016; Moser and Korstjens, 2018). The interviews were conducted in 2024. The project began in 2023 as part of one of the researcher's doctoral studies, which accounts for earlier references to that year; a first version of this article was submitted in 2025 and has since been under review, explaining the interval between data collection and publication. An interview guide was developed through iterative steps (synthesis of prior knowledge, drafting open questions, informal piloting, revision, and finalisation) and covered the circumstances and motivations for leaving industry, early experiences and challenges, barriers and resources, and institutional expectations around research output and concurrent external work. Interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six phases: familiarisation; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. Analysis was conducted in MAXQDA across the three transcripts and was recursive rather than linear. Coding was inductive and data-driven: meaningful units were coded in participants' own terms, without imposing pre-existing categories. Correspondence between the resulting themes and Career Construction Theory was identified only at the interpretation stage, abductively, rather than used to structure the coding; the framework informs how the themes are read, not how they were generated. Constant comparison across the three transcripts identified shared patterns and individual divergences (Lincoln and Guba, 1985); two weakly supported candidate themes were discarded during review.

Trustworthiness

Quality was assessed against Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was supported by close, repeated engagement with each transcript and verbatim transcription. Transferability is deliberately limited: thick description of the case is provided so that readers can judge relevance to their own settings, but no claim of transfer to Czech higher education generally is made. Dependability was supported by an audit trail in MAXQDA, and confirmability by the reflexive practices described above.

III. Results

Reflexive thematic analysis of the three transcripts developed six interpretive themes that address the research questions. The themes are illustrative of these participants' accounts rather than saturated or generalisable; direct quotations ground each theme in the data, and where direct evidence is thinner this is stated. The themes are interconnected: economic constraints (Theme 4) compound identity disruption (Theme 2), and limited onboarding (Theme 3) increases reliance on individual adaptability (Theme 6).

Theme 1: Purposeful reorientation over financial reward

All three participants framed entering academia as a value-driven choice rather than an economically rational one – a reorientation toward meaningful work at a career stage where contribution had eclipsed financial advancement.

“If a person from the corporate world goes there [to university], he probably goes there because he wants to do it... but he definitely doesn’t go there for the money” (Participant B).

This framing acknowledges the economic sacrifice involved and positions the move as an act of self-direction – what Savickas (2005, 2013) describes as career construction through the adaptability dimension of career control.

Theme 2: Status inversion – from industry authority to academic newcomer

Participants described moving from seniority and recognised expertise into positions where prior achievements carried little formal weight.

“A person who comes from the corporate world and comes to university as a newcomer, it’s actually from ‘hero to zero’” (Participant B).

“Previous achievements, status, contacts disappear... you’re no longer a manager or senior expert, but a junior” (Participant C).

For these participants, the status inversion was among the most challenging aspects of the move, involving the devaluation of tacit, experiential human capital that was not readily recognised through academic credentials (Davidsson and Honig, 2003; Shao et al., 2024).

Theme 3: Limited onboarding at the focal institution

Participants described entering their roles without the structured induction their industry backgrounds had led them to expect.

“I was expecting the usual mail from HR and IT with links to presentations and manuals... And nothing came” (Participant C).

This account reflects the practice these participants encountered at one institution; it is not evidence that Czech universities in general lack onboarding, and is reported here as a feature of the case rather than as a systemic finding. The gap lengthened the period of self-directed adaptation.

Theme 4: Economic pressure and concurrent external work

Participants reported that the focal university’s salary level – modest relative to their prior industry compensation – required them to maintain external professional activity alongside academic work.

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

As with onboarding, this is described as the participants' experience at this institution rather than as a general claim about academic pay. The result was a divided engagement that, in CCT terms, constrained the sustained identity work that career construction assumes (Savickas, 2005, 2013).

Theme 5: Learning accreditation and academic norms

Participants encountered institutional logics – accreditation requirements (NAÚ; AACSB, AMBA, EQUIS), research-output expectations, and collegial governance – with no direct equivalents in industry. This theme rests more on participants' general descriptions than on extended quotation and is therefore advanced more tentatively than the others. Some participants noted that holding Master's-level rather than doctoral qualifications created uncertainty about how their experience would be recognised; whether this reflects the focal institution's particular role structure or wider arrangements cannot be determined from this study.

Theme 6: Individual adaptability as compensation

Despite these constraints, participants deployed personal resources – particularly curiosity and self-direction – to manage the transition.

“I’ve always been curious about new things. That’s what keeps me going” (Participant A).

This invokes the career curiosity dimension of CCT (Savickas, 2005, 2013). Because all three participants had successfully integrated, the analysis can speak only to adaptability among those who completed the transition; it cannot address those who attempted but did not (see Limitations).

IV. Discussion

The findings offer a locally grounded account of how three practitioners made sense of entering one Czech public university, and should be read as case-specific rather than as claims about Czech higher education, the wider region, or practitioner-academics in general. Three observations stand out.

First, the transition was experienced primarily as purposeful reorientation: participants accepted lower pay in pursuit of meaningful contribution (Theme 1). This is intelligible through CCT's emphasis on agency and identity construction (Savickas, 2005, 2013) and is consistent with the wider literature on meaning in mid- and late-career change (De Vos et al., 2021; Mussagulova et al., 2023). An earlier version of this paper interpreted this motivation through a life-stage model developed specifically for women's careers; because the sample is mixed-gender, that framework has been removed as inappropriate, and the motivation is now read through CCT alone.

Second, two features of the focal institution – limited onboarding (Theme 3) and salary levels prompting concurrent external work (Theme 4) – shaped participants' capacity to inhabit their new roles. These are reported as characteristics of the case. They may reflect this institution's particular practices as much as any broader pattern, and would require

formal, cross-institutional investigation before any systemic claim could be made. The tension between industry-specific human capital and academic recognition (Davidsson and Honig, 2003) helps explain why translating experience into academically valued outputs felt effortful.

Third, in the absence of institutional support, participants relied on individual adaptability (Theme 6), particularly the curiosity and control dimensions of CCT. Rather than presenting this as a validated theoretical contribution, we offer “systemic adaptability” only as a tentative, case-bound observation – a shorthand for the gap between high individual adaptability and the limited support these participants encountered at this institution. It is not formally operationalised here and would require development and testing in larger, multi-site studies. Addressing survivor bias. Because all three participants had successfully integrated, their accounts may present the transition more favourably than a fuller picture would. Several steps were taken to limit over-reading: interviews explicitly probed difficulties and moments of doubt; success-inflected retrospective accounts were treated cautiously in interpretation; and all claims are bounded to integrated transitioners. The experiences of those who did not complete a transition lie outside these data and are a priority for the ongoing research.

V. Conclusion

This case study examined how three experienced practitioners made sense of moving into full-time academic work at one Czech public university. Addressing the research questions: participants understood the move (RQ1) as a deliberate, meaning-driven reorientation accepted at financial cost, accompanied by an acute “hero to zero” status inversion. The barriers, facilitators, and institutional features they described (RQ2) were loss of status and networks, limited onboarding, salary levels prompting concurrent external work, and the demands of accreditation norms – managed largely through individual curiosity and self-direction rather than institutional support. Read through Career Construction Theory, the accounts illustrate agency and adaptability operating within a constrained setting. These conclusions are bounded to the case. With three successfully integrated participants at a single institution in one discipline, the study makes no claim about Czech higher education, or practitioner-academics generally. For the focal institution alone, the accounts suggest – tentatively – that clearer induction and transparent expectations around concurrent external work could ease such transitions.

Limitations and future research

The study is limited to one institution, one discipline, and a small, successfully integrated sample, so the findings are preliminary and not generalisable. Retrospective interviewing introduces sense-making bias, and the interval between data collection in 2024 and publication means contextual conditions may have shifted. The sample comprised two women and one man; no gender-differentiated analysis was undertaken. Examining the gendered dimensions of practitioner-academic transition is an explicit aim of the continuing study. Future work – already under way since 2025 – will extend interviews within and beyond the focal institution and incorporate the perspectives of those who did not complete the transition, enabling firmer, comparative conclusions.

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