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THESIS ABSTRACT

Universities are complex institutions operating on three missions – research, teaching and societal engagement – with everyday routines, approvals and scarce time, which often make intrapreneurial behavior hard to realize. This thesis explores how intrapreneurial behavior emerges in universities. The first study, a single case qualitative study of a large Italian public university, develops an empirically grounded process model that explains how intrapreneurial behavior arises from a set of salient antecedent conditions and is shaped by a core cross-mission process we label **Tri-Mission Coupling (TMC)**. The second explores more in depth how the tensions and contradictions shape the intrapreneurial behavior of academics. This is a multi-site qualitative study of three universities in UK and Italy. It shows how pre-decisional sensemaking of contradictions of the academic profession either are transformed to IB or remain silent. Taken together, this dissertation offers a micro-to-organization account of academic intrapreneurship, and contributes with process mechanisms that connect everyday work with organizational change.



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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION OF THE THESIS

Intrapreneurship refers to “entrepreneurial action inside an established organization” – or otherwise a process where employees spot opportunities, initiate and champion ideas, mobilize resources and launch novel activities and routines to create value for the organization, without leaving the organization (Antončič & Hisrich, 2001; Pinchot, 1985; Sharma & Chrisman, 1999). Intrapreneurship is fundamentally a micro-level behavior but very much related to the organization; it focuses on what people do rather than their attitudes alone, and it is related but still distinct from corporate entrepreneurship (Baruah & Ward, 2015; Bosma et al., 2010; Bysted & Jespersen, 2013). Across sectors, intrapreneurship research has converged on recurring antecedents and conditions that make it more likely to happen: individual proactivity and self-efficacy, perceived discretion and autonomy, supportive leadership and climate, time and resources, and simple routes for testing ideas and legitimizing early wins (Antončič & Hisrich, 2001; Baruah & Ward, 2015; Sharma & Chrisman, 1999). The outcomes typically include new or improved products or services, process innovations or internal venture initiatives (Antončič & Hisrich, 2001; Baruah & Ward, 2015).

Universities are a distinctive context for intrapreneurship. Their multi-mission mandate - delivering teaching, advancing research and achieving societal engagement—creates synergies but also frequent tensions (Belitski et al., 2019; Grimaldi et al., 2011; Guerrero et al., 2016; Perkmann et al., 2013, 2021). These conditions can both enable intrapreneurship through resources and professional autonomy, and constrain it through bureaucracy, competing



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evaluation practices and governance dependencies (Johnson et al., 2017; Kivleniece & Quelin, 2012; Klofsten et al., 2019; Miranda et al., 2017). Distinctive features of universities – governance, role multiplicity, high autonomy, uneven recognition systems and fragmented time (Perkmann et al., 2021; Reymert & Thyne, 2023) – mean that intrapreneurial action is both necessary and hard to sustain. Because of these peculiarities, an intrapreneurship lens complements the work on academic entrepreneurship (spin-offs, licensing and knowledge/technology transfer) by emphasizing how academics initiate and implement novel practices inside the university (Flores et al., 2024; Guerrero et al., 2021). Recent studies have theorized on academic intrapreneurship and even the intrapreneurial university concept, highlighting bottom-up innovation under ordinary constraints and calling for process explanations of how intrapreneurial behavior is enacted and how it becomes organizationally visible (Flores et al., 2024; Guerrero et al., 2021). In sum, an intrapreneurship perspective highlights the importance of internal capabilities and behavior by which academics and professional staff navigate the competing logics of teaching, research and societal engagement roles.

In addition, universities face enduring contradictions that academics must navigate during their academic profession rather than resolve. It is the multi-mission demand which creates simultaneous pulls for autonomy and accountability, exploration and exploitation, long term purpose vs short term delivery (March, 1991; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Universities are layered with multiple institutional logics and evaluative practices (publications, teaching quality, impact



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and engagement) that push attention, resources and incentives in different directions, making change dependent to them and uneven across disciplines and career stages (Besharov & Smith, 2014; Perkmann et al., 2021, Reymert & Thune, 2023). We therefore view these contradictions through an intrapreneurship lens and do not theorize on the contradictions themselves - but consider them as the conditions that shape how academics develop their intrapreneurial behavior.

The overall purpose of this dissertation is to contribute to research on academic intrapreneurship. It does so by revealing how academics - the essential intrapreneurs in university - develop intrapreneurial behavior within the university while navigating different missions and contradictions. This dissertation accordingly comprises two main interrelated studies. Before presenting each of them the remainder of this introduction is structured as follows. *First*, the importance of embedding intrapreneurship in a peculiar context, such as academia, is discussed. *Second*, the purpose and scope of the dissertation is presented.

1.1. EMBEDDING INTRAPRENEURSHIP IN ACADEMIA

In the recent decade academic intrapreneurship has been increasingly recognized as a critical factor to universities' internal renewal and their ability to respond effectively to evolving societal, educational, and economic challenges (Audretsch et al., 2021; Flores et al., 2024; Guerrero et al., 2021) and maintaining a competitive advantage (Glinyanova et al., 2021). While it is often associated with corporate entrepreneurship (an organizational level concept), intrapreneurship is an individual level perspective of innovation (Moriani et al., 2014; Rigtering



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and Weitzel, 2013; Sinha and Srivastava, 2013). Unlike traditional entrepreneurial activities focused on external commercialization, academic intrapreneurship emphasizes the internal agency of academic and professional staff who initiate, champion and implement novel practices - often beyond their formal roles (Antončič & Hisrich, 2001; Pinchot, 1985; Sharma & Chrisman, 1999). Despite that universities operate within complex environments marked by significant challenges, including bureaucratic structures, resource limitations, diverse missions (research, teaching, societal engagement), and professional norms that shape academic roles (Dess et al., 1999; Engzell et al., 2023; Kuratko et al., 1990; Kuratko et al., 2005), intrapreneurs in universities continue to advance with their intrapreneurial initiatives (Engzell et al., 2025).

The literature points out two main arguments for the importance of embedding intrapreneurship in universities.

First, intrapreneurship is the engine of entrepreneurship and societal impact. Internal opportunity recognition, piloting of intrapreneurial initiatives generates micro-routines from which broader educational / social outcomes emerge (Guerrero et al., 2016; Villani & Lechner, 2021). *Second*, intrapreneurship builds adaptive capacity in a peculiar university environment rich in contradictions of academic profession (Zahra & George, 2002). On one hand, academic autonomy and normative values provide fertile ground for experimentation and innovation (Macfarlane, 2006; Perkmann et al., 2021). On the other hand, while academics have traditionally navigated the competing logics of teaching and research, this often delays coordination, resource mobilization, and institutional scaling of novel initiatives (Klofsten et al.



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2024). Intrapreneurship calls for recognizing these contradictions as a source of strength rather than a limitation. In practice, intrapreneurship in universities occurs under role multiplicity, with academics juggling responsibilities as teachers, researchers, and innovators without explicit mandates or protected time for entrepreneurial activities (Perkmann et al., 2021). Successfully embedding intrapreneurship therefore requires systems and support infrastructures that enable informal entrepreneurial efforts to gain legitimacy and access resources, bridging disciplinary and organizational boundaries (De Keyser & Vandenbempt, 2023). Organizational enablers such as knowledge transfer offices (KTOs), incubators, and boundary spanners play a critical role not only in supporting ventures but also in driving cultural and institutional transformations conducive to intrapreneurship (Abreu & Grinevich, 2024; Engzell et al., 2024).

Despite growing recognition of academic intrapreneurship and its benefits, we still lack a process account of how intrapreneurial behavior (IB) emerges inside universities (Flores et al., 2024; Valka et al., 2020). Prior research has documented antecedents and outcomes of IB (Hernandez-Perlines et al., 2022; Neessen et al., 2019; Parker et al., 2010) and provides a description of universities' multi-mission contradictions (De Keyser & Vandenbempt, 2023; Flores et al., 2024; Perkmann et al., 2021;), yet we know little about how IB emerges across the three missions within every day work, when the contradictions trigger IB rather than defer it, and how IB becomes visible in the university.



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1.2. PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE DISSERTATION

In this context, this dissertation explains the micro-to-organizational pathway of IB in universities; by developing two main studies, each grounded in the academic intrapreneurship literature. Empirically, the work focuses on public universities in Italy and the UK, where multi-mission mandates are strong. A short summary for each of the studies is provided below, then presented in detail under Chapter 2.

Study 1 — Intrapreneurship Behavior in Academics' Everyday Work: Coupling Research, Teaching, and Societal Engagement

Study 1 theorizes how academic intrapreneurial behavior (IB) develops in universities where academics are expected to deliver on research, teaching, and societal engagement simultaneously. While emerging work on academic intrapreneurship and entrepreneurial universities highlights that academics often recombine tasks, roles, and networks across missions, we still know relatively little about the within-university process through which such recombination becomes proactive, opportunity-seeking action that takes shape as concrete initiatives (e.g., new offerings, practices, collaborations) and is sustained (e.g., Engzell et al., 2024; Flores et al., 2024; Válka et al., 2020). This gap is especially salient in tri-mission settings, where institutional arrangements can simultaneously call for initiative while fragmenting time, constraining autonomy, and raising the cost of experimentation—creating a persistent tension between mission opportunities and mission demands.



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Addressing this gap, Study 1 asks: *How can academics pursue intrapreneurial behavior in their everyday work while navigating the opportunities and constraints posed by the three missions?*

We develop an empirically grounded process model that explains how IB arises from a set of salient antecedent conditions and is shaped by a core cross-mission process we label Tri-Mission Coupling (TMC). Specifically, we identify five antecedents that shape whether and how academics take first steps: motivational identity, local capacity and support, external triggers, bureaucratic constraints, and incentives misalignment. We then theorize TMC as the core process through which academics connect mission activities to enact and sustain IB. TMC consists of three coupling modes: cross-mission reuse (translating and redeploying outputs across missions), cross-mission experimentation (testing initiatives through pilots, transversal arenas, and external collaboration), and cross-mission orchestration (coordinating time, attention, and capacity under tri-mission load through sequencing, parallel engagement, and delegation). Among these, cross-mission reuse makes mission interconnections most visible and direct, as academics move artefacts and learning across teaching, research, and societal engagement.

Empirically, Study 1 is an abductive single-case qualitative study of a large Italian state university, triangulating 26 interviews across roles and disciplines with archival materials (2019–2024) including strategies, regulations, and program documents. The model further explains how repeated coupling translates into intrapreneurial outcomes across the three missions, including new or revised teaching offerings, research solutions and infrastructures, and societal engagement initiatives. Overall, Study 1 contributes to an emerging literature on academic



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intrapreneurship by providing a process lens on how mission interactions shape initiative-taking in professional, multi-goal organizations.

Study 2 — Balancing Contradictions, Creating Change: Understanding Intrapreneurial Behavior in Academia

Study 2 focuses on how universities operate under institutional complexity and require academics to perform the three missions of teaching, research, and societal engagement within a single professional role. These co-present demands generate persistent contradictions in everyday academic work. Yet academics do not respond to these contradictions in the same way. While some initiate and advance novel initiatives inside their universities—mobilizing resources, building coalitions, and developing new activities that create value—others defer, withdraw, or keep ideas local, resulting in inaction or the continuation of core routines. Despite growing interest in academic intrapreneurship, we still know too little about how contradictions of the academic profession shape academics' intrapreneurial behavior (IB) at the micro level.

Addressing this gap, study 2 asks: *How do contradictions of the academic profession shape academics' intrapreneurial behavior?*

To address this question, Study 2 draws on an abductive, multi-site qualitative design across three universities (one in the UK and two in Italy), using semi-structured interviews and internal materials. We develop a two-path process model that explains how academics' perceived contradictions are converted into intrapreneurial action trajectories (or not). Empirically, we identify three recurring contradictions that academics encounter when initiating or pursuing



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intrapreneurial initiatives: (1) identity and affiliation, (2) value and performance, and (3) process and temporality. We show that these contradictions are filtered through four pre-decisional sensemaking orientations that shape what academics perceive as legitimate and feasible before they act: contradiction appraisal, identity stance, agency attribution, and temporal move.

Specific configurations of these orientations generate two recurrent pathways. In a transformative pathway, academics treat contradictions as workable, adopt experiment-first orientation, pilot initiatives, mobilize resources, and subsequently pursue formalization and potential institutionalization. In an inhibitive pathway, contradictions are experienced as threat, coupled with a purist identity stance, externalized control, and deferral, which stalls initiatives or keeps them from scaling.

The study advances academic intrapreneurship research by offering a micro-process account of how contradictions shape IB, theorizing a bridge identity that legitimates intrapreneurship within the academic role set, and clarifying how early intrapreneurial moves can (or cannot) develop into more formalized and institutionalized outcomes.



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Figure 1 below presents the way this thesis is organized.

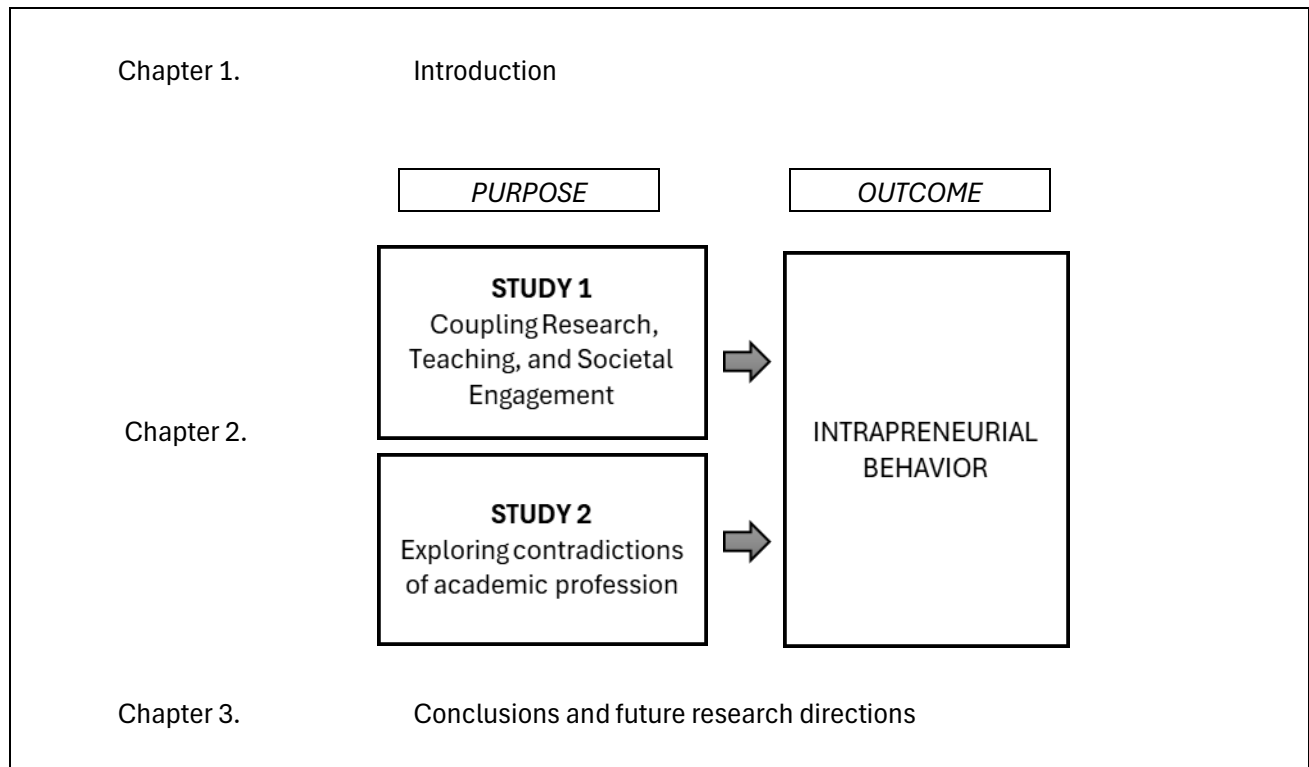


Figure 1 Organization of the Thesis



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CHAPTER 2: TWO STUDIES

This chapter presents the two empirical studies that form the core of this dissertation and collectively explain how IB takes shape and creates value within universities. Study 1 — *“Intrapreneurship Behavior in Academics’ Everyday Work: Coupling Research, Teaching, and Societal Engagement”* develops a process model of how academics develop IB that connect research, teaching, and societal engagement missions and the relationship among them. Study 2 — *“Balancing Contradictions, Creating Change: Understanding Intrapreneurial Behavior in Academia”* builds on study 1, by exploring further one of the cross mission relationship modes (tensions and tradeoffs) - how academics navigate persistent role contradictions and organizational constraints to develop and sustain IB. Together, these studies offer complementary lenses—one tracing the micro-to-organizational process of cross-mission innovation, the other looking at contradictions navigation and enabling conditions—thereby advancing theory and practice on academic intrapreneurship.



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STUDY 1

Intrapreneurship Behavior in Academics' Everyday Work: Coupling Research, Teaching, and Societal Engagement.

Universities increasingly expect academics to deliver research, teaching, and societal engagement, while also acting proactively to create new offerings, practices, and collaborations from within their organizations. Yet the everyday routines and governance arrangements of universities can fragment time, constrain autonomy, and raise the costs of experimentation—making it difficult to sustain intrapreneurial behavior (IB). This study asks: *How can academics pursue IB in their everyday work while navigating the opportunities and constraints posed by the three missions?* Drawing on an abductive single-case qualitative study of a large Italian state university (archival analysis of strategies and regulations, 2019–2024; 26 interviews across roles and disciplines), we develop a process model of academic IB under a tri-mission mandate. We identify five antecedents that shape whether and how academics take first steps (motivational identity, local capacity and support, external triggers, bureaucratic constraints, and incentives misalignment). We further theorize Tri-Mission Coupling (TMC) as the core process through which academics connect mission activities to enact and sustain IB. TMC consists of three coupling modes—cross-mission reuse, cross-mission experimentation, and cross-mission orchestration. Among these, cross-mission reuse makes the interconnection between the three



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missions most visible and direct, as academics translate and redeploy outputs across teaching, research, and societal engagement. The model further explains how repeated coupling translates into intrapreneurial outcomes across the three missions, including new or revised teaching offerings, research solutions and infrastructures, and societal engagement initiatives. Our findings contribute to an emerging literature on academic intrapreneurship and offer a process lens on how mission interactions shape initiative-taking in professional, multi-goal organizations.

Keywords: Academic intrapreneurship; intrapreneurial behavior; teaching–research–engagement; process model



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1. INTRODUCTION

Universities increasingly expect academics to deliver on teaching, research, and an expanding portfolio of societal engagement activities, referred to as the third mission (Belitski et al., 2019; Cunningham et al., 2022; Grimaldi et al., 2011; Guerrero et al., 2016a; Perkmann et al., 2013). Meeting these expectations requires more than routine role performance. It often calls for academics to proactively create and implement new offerings, practices, and collaborations—behaviors commonly associated with intrapreneurs, such as innovativeness, proactiveness, and (bounded) risk-taking (Antončič & Hisrich, 2001; Neessen et al., 2019). We refer to these actions as intrapreneurial behavior (IB): the opportunity-seeking and opportunity-realizing actions through which organizational members initiate, champion, and implement new offerings, processes, and routines inside their organization (Antončič & Hisrich, 2001; Sharma & Chrisman, 1999; Neessen et al., 2019).

More formally, IB can be understood as observable, goal-relevant behavior (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Campbell & Wiernik, 2015). In intrapreneurship research, such behavior involves identifying and pursuing opportunities by renewing existing activities or developing new ones within the organization (Sharma & Chrisman, 1999, p. 18). Neessen et al. (2019) conceptualize IB at the individual level as a set of opportunity-seeking and opportunity-realizing actions marked by innovativeness, proactivity, and risk-taking, through which employees initiate, champion, and implement new offerings and routines. Applied to universities, this lens foregrounds a type of innovation work that is often visible in practice—new curricula, new



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research solutions, new engagement formats, and new internal routines—but remains conceptually underdeveloped in terms of how it is enacted and sustained within academic work.

This question becomes especially salient under a **tri-mission mandate**, where academics simultaneously navigate teaching, research, and societal engagement. In such settings, the very institutional arrangements that encourage initiative—performance expectations, evaluation systems, formalized procedures, and structured calendars—can also erode autonomy, fragment time, and discourage experimentation. Academics work within workload models, evaluation metrics, academic calendars, and funding rules that can simultaneously demand initiative while constraining the discretion required to pursue it. The three missions therefore create a dual landscape. On one hand, they create opportunities for cross-mission interactions that can enable IB (e.g., translating research insights into teaching innovations or engagement initiatives). On the other hand, they produce competing demands and tradeoffs that may shape whether and how academics take initiative in the first place—and whether early initiatives remain episodic or become repeatable. This tension raises our research question: **How can academics pursue proactive, opportunity-seeking action—i.e., intrapreneurial behavior—in their everyday work, while navigating the opportunities and constraints posed by the three missions?**

Despite growing interest in universities' entrepreneurial and innovation roles, we still know relatively little about how IB is promoted and sustained *inside* universities (Valka et al., 2020). Intrapreneurship is well theorized in corporate settings (Audretsch et al., 2021; Corbett et al.,



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2013; Neessen et al., 2019), yet it may unfold differently in public-sector contexts—including higher education—where institutional conditions (e.g., low tolerance for failure, bureaucratic procedures, and specific evaluation regimes) shape behavior (Leyden, 2016). Prior work has begun to articulate academic intrapreneurship and the broader idea of an “intrapreneurial university,” highlighting bottom-up contributions to organizational renewal even with limited managerial involvement (Alpkan et al., 2010; Flores et al., 2024; Guerrero et al., 2021; Kacperczyk, 2012). However, the concept remains under-specified: terminology and lenses are fragmented, and existing work provides limited insight into how academics enact IB within day-to-day academic work—particularly when activities must be coordinated across teaching, research, and societal engagement (Flores et al., 2024; Kearney & Meynhardt, 2016; Nicholson et al., 2016; Perkmann et al., 2021). Addressing this gap matters because it can illuminate how academics can sustainably engage with tri-mission demands, and how universities can create conditions that enable internal innovation, knowledge transfer, and institutional renewal (Bekkers & Freitas, 2008; Díez-Vial & Montoro-Sánchez, 2016; Grimaldi et al., 2011; Guerrero & Urbano, 2012; Guerrero et al., 2016a,b; Miller et al., 2014; Rothaermel et al., 2007).

To address our research question, we conduct an abductive qualitative single-case study of a large Italian state university with a strong record of internal innovation. We combine an archival analysis (2019–2024) of strategies, regulations, and program documents with 26 semi-structured interviews with professors, early-career academics, PhD candidates, and professional/innovation staff across disciplines. This design allows us to capture how initiative work is narrated and



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enacted in a public university context, and how academics interpret opportunities and constraints across the three missions in everyday practice.

Our analysis yields a process model (Figure 2) in which academic IB emerges from salient antecedent conditions and is shaped by a core cross-mission process we label Tri-Mission Coupling (TMC). TMC captures how academics connect and coordinate activities across teaching, research, and societal engagement as they pursue initiative work. On the antecedent side, we identify five recurring conditions that shape whether academics take first steps and how quickly they can mobilize: motivational identity, local capacity and support, external triggers, bureaucratic constraints, and incentives misalignment. As initiatives develop, we theorize three modes of TMC: cross-mission reuse, cross-mission experimentation, and cross-mission orchestration. Cross-mission reuse involves redeploying outputs and learning across missions (through adaptation/repackaging, direct feeding of outputs into other missions, and serendipitous extension). Cross-mission experimentation involves testing initiatives through pilots, cross-disciplinary arenas, and external collaboration. Cross-mission orchestration concerns how academics coordinate time, attention, and capacity under tri-mission load (through sequencing, parallel engagement across roles, and delegation). Finally, we show how repeated coupling translates into intrapreneurial outcomes across the three missions, including new or revised teaching offerings, research solutions and infrastructures, and societal engagement initiatives.

This study makes three contributions. First, we advance understanding of IB in the intrapreneurial university context by specifying what counts as intrapreneurial action in



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academic work and how it emerges under tri-mission demands (Engzell et al. 2025; Flores et al., 2024; Guerrero et al., 2021, Klofsten et al., 2024). Second, we contribute a process account of how the three missions relate in practice by theorizing Tri-Mission Coupling—a set of cross-mission modes through which academics make initiative work feasible and, in some cases, durable. (Laredo, 2007; Perkmann et al., 2013; Etzkowitz et al., 2013). Third, we extend broader intrapreneurship theory (Antončič & Hisrich, 2001; Hornsby et al., 2002) by identifying boundary conditions and visible pathways through which IB is enacted and stabilized in a professional, multi-goal, public-sector setting. Practically, our findings offer guidance for university leaders and policy makers on designing policies and systems that—rather than reinforcing tri-mission tensions—support sustainable innovation in everyday academic work.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Intrapreneurship and Intrapreneurial University

The concept of intrapreneurship, originally rooted in corporate management, refers to entrepreneurial action within an established organization, more specifically initiating, championing, and implementing new offerings, processes, or routines by recombining existing organizational resources (Antončič & Hisrich, 2001; Pinchot, 1985; Sharma & Chrisman, 1999; Wenneker & de Jong, 2008). At the individual level, intrapreneurship is observed in characteristics such as innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking. At the organizational level, it is tied to renewal and performance, with proactivity highlighted as a catalyst that shifts effort



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from reaction to initiation (Covin & Slevin, 1989; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker et al., 2010; Rauch et al., 2009; Wiklund & Shepherd, 2005). Recent literature consolidates intrapreneurship as an employee-level phenomenon, distinct from corporate entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial orientation (Blanka, 2019; Hernández-Perlines et al., 2022).

In universities, academic intrapreneurship means an *internal* agency of academic and professional staff who develop novel practices and habits, often beyond their formally assigned roles. These new practices range from new programs and interdisciplinary platforms to social-innovation projects and, more traditionally, commercialization (spin-offs, licensing). Intrapreneurship research complements prior literature on academic engagement and entrepreneurial universities by shifting attention from outward-facing valorization to the internal capabilities and conditions that make impact possible, including the organizational, individual, and environmental determinants of employees' intrapreneurial behavior identified in survey evidence from European universities (Perkmann et al., 2013; Perkmann et al., 2021; Rothaermel et al., 2007; Válka et al., 2020). A fast-growing research stream discusses academic intrapreneurship and the intrapreneurial university, by emphasizing processual, relational, and institutional features: how initiatives are iteratively developed and anchored at the university; how intrapreneurs navigate multiple coexisting logics; and how university enablers (KTOs, incubators, boundary spanners) act as both venture supports and instruments of institutional change (Abreu & Grinevich, 2024; De Keyser & Vandenbempt, 2023; Engzell et al., 2024; Flores et al., 2024; Klofsten et al., 2024; Nafari et al., 2024; Shekhar et al., 2023;). Together,



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these studies argue that academic intrapreneurship strengthens universities' capacity to translate ideas into new courses, platforms, services, and routines by expanding outcomes to include educational and social value, not just commercial gains.

Despite these advances, we still lack knowledge on *how* IB is enacted and embedded inside universities, that is, how everyday academic work within the three mission arrangements (research, teaching, societal engagement) gives rise to internal initiatives that persist and cumulate into organizational capability (De Keyser & Vandenbempt, 2023; Engzell et al., 2024; Flores et al., 2024; Perkmann et al., 2021).

2.2 The Academic Context: A Peculiar Work Environment

Universities are multi-mission, loosely coupled organizations in which intrapreneurship is shaped by governance complexity, resource-allocation logics, and professional norms (Flores et al., 2024). Academic work spans the role of an academic in research, teaching, and societal engagement activities (Etzkowitz, 2013; Laredo, 2007), each with distinct performance criteria, stakeholders, and time cycles. This role multiplicity creates opportunities for synergy, where outputs in one mission serve as inputs to another (Perkmann et al., 2021), but also tensions, because time, resources, and recognition are unevenly distributed. Intrapreneurial efforts, therefore, happen under role multiplicity: academics act simultaneously as researchers, teachers, innovators, and administrators, often without a formal mandate or dedicated time (Macfarlane, 2006; Perkmann et al., 2021).



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Unlike private firms, where innovation roles are often explicit, academic intrapreneurship emerges within these roles not originally designed for entrepreneurial action, requiring boundary-spanning work to build legitimacy and mobilize resources (De Keyser & Vandenbempt, 2023). Establishing, for example, an interdisciplinary center requires bridging disciplinary communities and securing support, frequently without immediate formal recognition (Engzell et al., 2025). While autonomy, a characteristic of academic work, enables experimentation, the decentralized structure of universities can inhibit coordination and scaling. Absent clear incentives and strategic guidance, intrapreneurial projects rely on informal influence and remain highly context-dependent (Shekhar et al., 2023).

Academic motivations often emphasize educational and societal value over financial outcomes (Nafari et al., 2024), which can sit uneasily with metrics that emphasize commercialization (Engzell et al., 2025). Supporting infrastructures, KTOs, incubators, and entrepreneurship units are unevenly accessible and frequently mediated by local networks rather than standardized programs (Abreu & Grinevich, 2024; Shekhar et al., 2023). As a result, informal champions and ad hoc partnerships often substitute for formalization, which can hinder sustainability and diffusion when initiatives misalign with prevailing priorities (Abreu & Grinevich, 2024). In sum, while the academic environment offers autonomy and normative space that enables intrapreneurship, its structural and cultural features constrain organizational uptake and scalability.



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2.3. Three Missions

Universities are increasingly expected to operate under a tri-mission mandate that combines teaching activities, research and third mission of direct engagement with society and the economy. The third mission or as we will refer to in this paper – societal engagement – has been conceptualized as a distinct (though not entirely new) dimension of university activity that introduces new expectations and tensions alongside the traditional missions of teaching and research (Laredo, 2007). Existing research describes the third mission as the university's economic and social contribution to communities and territories, encompassing a broad set of activities (such as knowledge transfer, outreach, partnerships) in various contexts (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). In innovation-oriented accounts (e.g., Triple Helix and entrepreneurial university perspectives), these expectations are linked to universities' expanding role in regional development and collaboration with industry and government, moving engagement from the periphery toward the core of institutional purpose (Leydesdorf, 2012). Related streams on academic engagement show how academics connect with external organizations through collaborative and applied interactions that sit alongside (and sometimes between) research, teaching, and commercialization (Perkmann et al., 2013).

At the same time, the tri-mission mandate intensifies the everyday organizational complexity of academic work. Research on the transformation of academic work points an increase in the diversification and specialization of tasks alongside new forms of control, which can fragment



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attention and reshape discretion over how work is carried out (Musselin, 2007). Literature implies a double-sided tri-mission environment: the three missions can create opportunities for cross-mission recombination and engagement, yet the same institutional arrangements (workload allocation, calendars, evaluation metrics and administrative regulations) can constrain autonomy, compress discretionary time, and discourage risk taking (Musselin, 2007). While prior work has richly described third-mission expansion and university engagement activities, we still know less about **how academics sustain proactive, opportunity-seeking action in everyday practice** under these competing demands—i.e., how intrapreneurial behavior is enacted *within* tri-mission constraints rather than assumed as an individual disposition. This tension motivates our research question: *How can academics pursue proactive, opportunity-seeking action, that is, intrapreneurial behavior—in their everyday work, while navigating the opportunities and constraints posed by the three missions?*

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Design and Case Selection

We adopt a single-case study design to theorize the development of IB in the university context. An explorative approach is appropriate given IB's contextual and processual nature and the limited cumulative knowledge on its antecedents and mechanisms in higher education (Charmaz, 2006; Edmondson & McManus, 2007). A single-case design allows for a deeper investigation of how academics launch and develop initiatives within existing organizational structures, and how these initiatives are influenced by institutional arrangements and governance mechanisms (Yin,



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2009). The case boundary is the university; the unit of analysis is the intrapreneurial episode (initiative) and its embedding.

We purposefully selected a research-intensive university with formalized entrepreneurship infrastructures where IB should be observable. We have chosen a large, research-intensive Italian state university with a longstanding entrepreneurial reputation and direct investments in innovation, societal engagement, and organizational transformation (Netval, 2023). The case university is the site of extensive entrepreneurship initiatives, including competitive funding, cross-disciplinary centers, and dedicated knowledge-transfer and technology-transfer units that support research-industry collaboration and startup creation (University Website, 2023). Its entrepreneurial culture is further exemplified by a dedicated entrepreneurship hub and an incubator that nurture intrapreneurship and external enterprise formation.

The case of university's decentralized governance and comparatively high academic autonomy led to different ways of how individuals interact with organizational arrangements, a core concern in intrapreneurship theory (Etzkowitz, 2013). As a research-intensive institution, the case university ranks highly in academic outputs, and statistics indicate that its academics are engaged in both teaching and research, aligning with typical profiles of leading European universities. The institution's embeddedness in a complex ecosystem of cross-sector partnerships and service units further enriches the context for studying intrapreneurial processes. Finally, the case university is set within the Italian higher education system, where societal engagement is strongly emphasized by national policies; this context shapes institutional priorities with a strong



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impact agenda (OECD, 2022). Italy's policy frameworks prioritize academic entrepreneurship and knowledge transfer, creating the ground for intrapreneurial behavior amid the demands of research, teaching, and societal engagement.

3.2 Data Sources and Collection

We combine an archival analysis and information from 26 semi-structured interviews with academics and professional/innovation staff across disciplines.

Archival Material. We first conducted a review of archival documents to develop an understanding of institutional structures, policies, and strategic priorities related to intrapreneurship at the case university. The material comprised 5 main official documents issued between 2019 and 2024 by the Rectorate and other central governance bodies of the universities (Senate and Board of Directors), plus one co-issued program notes with an external association. The 5 documents are: (1) Strategic Plan 2019–2021, (2) Strategic Plan 2022–2027, (3) Regulation on University Spinoffs and Startups (2024), (4) Intrapreneurship Program (2020), and (5) Entrepreneurial Projects: Initiatives and Spinoffs (2019). Using directed content analysis, each document was coded for issuing body, actor labels and role descriptions, organizational level (central; meso/departmental; external partner), decision competences, resource and incentive provisions, and cross-unit linkages.

Interviews. Building on the archival analysis- a phase during which the main actors involved with intrapreneurship were identified -we conducted 26 interviews between January and June 2024. These include 20 individual interviews and two small group sessions (three



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participants each). Our theoretical population comprised university members who work across the three missions. Accordingly, we purposively sampled academics (full professors, lecturers, early-career researchers, and PhD candidates) using snowball referrals to widen coverage across disciplines. IB served as a key sampling criterion: beyond formal roles or titles, we prioritized informants who had initiated, championed or materially contributed to cross-mission initiatives (launching or piloting new teaching practices, building partnerships, developing dissemination artefacts, creating internal routines or events etc.). We sought variation in role/seniority, discipline, and degree of involvement with IB. We included PhD candidates because they too experienced, and at times initiate cross-mission initiatives. For example, they combine research with teaching-related duties and societal engagement activities embedded in projects or doctoral programs. We also interviewed one representative from the Knowledge Transfer Office (KTO) to enquire about the organizational conditions (procedures, approvals, templates, evaluation criteria, resourcing pathways) that enable, filter, and institutionalize IB.

The interview protocol covered the following aspects: participants' roles and how these IB related to them; how academics balanced teaching, research, and societal engagement work when approaching IB; concrete experiences initiating or contributing to IB; position where IB happens (departments, centers, networks); skills, milestones, and formative experiences shaping IB; autonomy within constraints; institutional support mechanisms; and macro-level enablers/constraints (funding regimes, national policy, European networks). Recruitment began with informants identified in archival materials and proceeded via cross-faculty referrals until



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thematic saturation. A six-interview pilot led to minor refinements of the protocol. Interviews (30–60 minutes) were conducted in person or online, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, and pseudonymized on transcription. Immediately after each interview, we prepared analytic memos to capture emergent insights and to inform iterative questioning and sampling. A dataset summary is reported in **Table 1**.



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Table 1 Summary of Interviews

Data Summary	Notes
<i>Total Interviews</i>	26:
	– 20 individuals – 2 small group interviews - 3 participants in each group
<i>Participants</i>	– Full Professors (7) – Associate Professors (5) – Assistant Professors (5) – PhD Candidates (6) – Research Staff (2) – Administrative Staff (1)
<i>Departments</i>	– Economics (7) – Management (4) – Political Science (4) – Engineering (4) – Computer Science (2) – Chemistry (1) – Electronics (1) – Finance (1) – Philosophy (1) – Knowledge Transfer Office (KTO) (1)
<i>Data Collection</i>	Jan–Jun 2024 (in-person and online)
<i>Interview Duration</i>	30–60 minutes

Intrapreneurial Behaviour. We purposively sampled academics who were involved in some form of IB. **Table 2** presents illustrative examples of IB, alongside the roles represented in each department. We have further distinguished how each IB might link to the three missions: research, teaching, and societal engagement. For example, in *teaching*, IB exhibited course-level innovation, new grading procedures, and new tools. In *research*, academics in our sample demonstrated IB in seminars to support research and workshops to support funding applications.



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In the context of *societal engagement* activities, IB was displayed in community events and engagement programs. In some instances, IB spanned more than one mission, for example, across research and third mission (“industry-engaged applied research”) and teaching and third mission (“social-impact microfinance track within banking curriculum”). Among our respondents, IB was also exhibited beyond the three missions, for example, in administrative and managerial activities.



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Table 2 Illustrative Examples of Intrapreneurial Behavior by Department

Departments	Roles Represented	Examples	Teaching	Research	Societal Engagement	Others
<i>Economics</i>	Full Professors (4)	• Development of internal job-matching event				X
	Associate Professors (2)	• Course-level teaching innovation	X			
	Assistant Professors (1)	• Integrated information-management platform				X
		• Departmental retreat ("Department Workshop")				X
		• Industry collaboration to fund research & support young researchers			X	
		• Organizational change in faculty management				X
<i>Management</i>		• Standardized grading procedures.	X			
	Associate Professors (1)	• Annual department workshop & community events			X	
	Assistant Professors (1)	• Performance-management system				X
	PhD Candidates (2)	• Research-support seminar		X		
<i>Political Science</i>		• Course-evaluation operations	X			
	PhD Candidates (4)	• Community engagement with schools/municipalities			X	
		• Negotiated introduction of new academic tracks				X
		• Department-wide grant-writing workshops for PhD students		X		
<i>Engineering</i>	Assistant Professors (3)	• Collaborative EU project development		X		
	Research Staff (1)	• University-level public-engagement governance			X	
		• Patented technology & licensing				
		• Interdepartmental PhD program coordination	X			
<i>Computer Science</i>		• Digital tool adoption for teaching	X			
	Full Professors (1)	• Proactive curriculum innovation	X			
	Research Staff (1)	• Industry-engaged applied research		X	X	
		• New course module design	X			
<i>Chemistry</i>	Associate Professors (1)	• Engagement projects			X	
<i>Electronics</i>	Associate Professors (1)	• Lab-based curricular innovation	X			
<i>Finance</i>	Full Professors (1)	• Social-impact microfinance track within banking curriculum	X		X	
<i>Philosophy</i>	Full Professors (1)	• Quality-assurance & equity mechanisms				X
<i>KTO</i>	Administrative staff (1)	• Support activities for academic intrapreneurship				X



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3.3 Data Analysis

We adopted an abductive approach, iterating between emerging evidence and theory while building a qualitative data structure (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gioia et al., 2013; Tavory & Timmermans, 2019).

Archival Analysis. We conducted a directed content analysis of the documents to extract: (1) IB support mechanisms (policy levers, programs, incentives, conversion pathways), (2) instruments and governance arrangements, and (3) documented intrapreneurial activities. Provisions and episodes were coded by mission, and each item was classified as implemented or aspirational based on cross-checks with program artefacts (e.g., calls, web pages, reports). Discrepancies were memoed and used to inform interview probes. The archival analysis yielded an inventory of IB inputs (supports, incentives, and conversion pathways) linked to specific instruments as well as an actor/interface matrix specifying who does what, with which resources, and at which interfaces inside/outside the university (see **Table 3**).

Primary-data Analysis. To achieve the final data structure, we began with open, first-order coding, staying close to informant terms and using constant comparison within and across transcripts and against archival evidence. The unit of analysis was the episode (a bounded action or decision that advanced or impeded an initiative). Next, we clustered first-order codes into second-order theoretical categories through constant comparison and iterative memoing, asking for each code whether it captured (1) an antecedent or (2) a coupling mode linking the three missions or (3) an observable consequence (an outcome). **Figure 2-3-4** detail our coding scheme and the aggregate theoretical dimension, showing the resulting data structure and its mapping from in-vivo to first-order, second order, and aggregate levels. Figure 1 is presented across three pages for readability (figure 2, 3, 4).



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Table 3 Actors Engaged in Intrapreneurial Behavior

Actor	Primary IB Role	Typical Artifacts
<i>Faculty</i>	Initiate/champion IB	Concept notes, syllabi, memorandums of understanding
<i>Program Director</i>	Approve pilots	Revised module specs
<i>KTO</i>	IP, contracts, funds	Licensing drafts, call docs
<i>Engagement</i>	Quality gates & recognition	Fast-track memos, dashboards
<i>Entrepreneurship Hub</i>	Incubation/acceleration	Mentoring logs, cohort lists
<i>External Partners</i>	Co-design/adoption	Memorandums of understanding, partnership briefs



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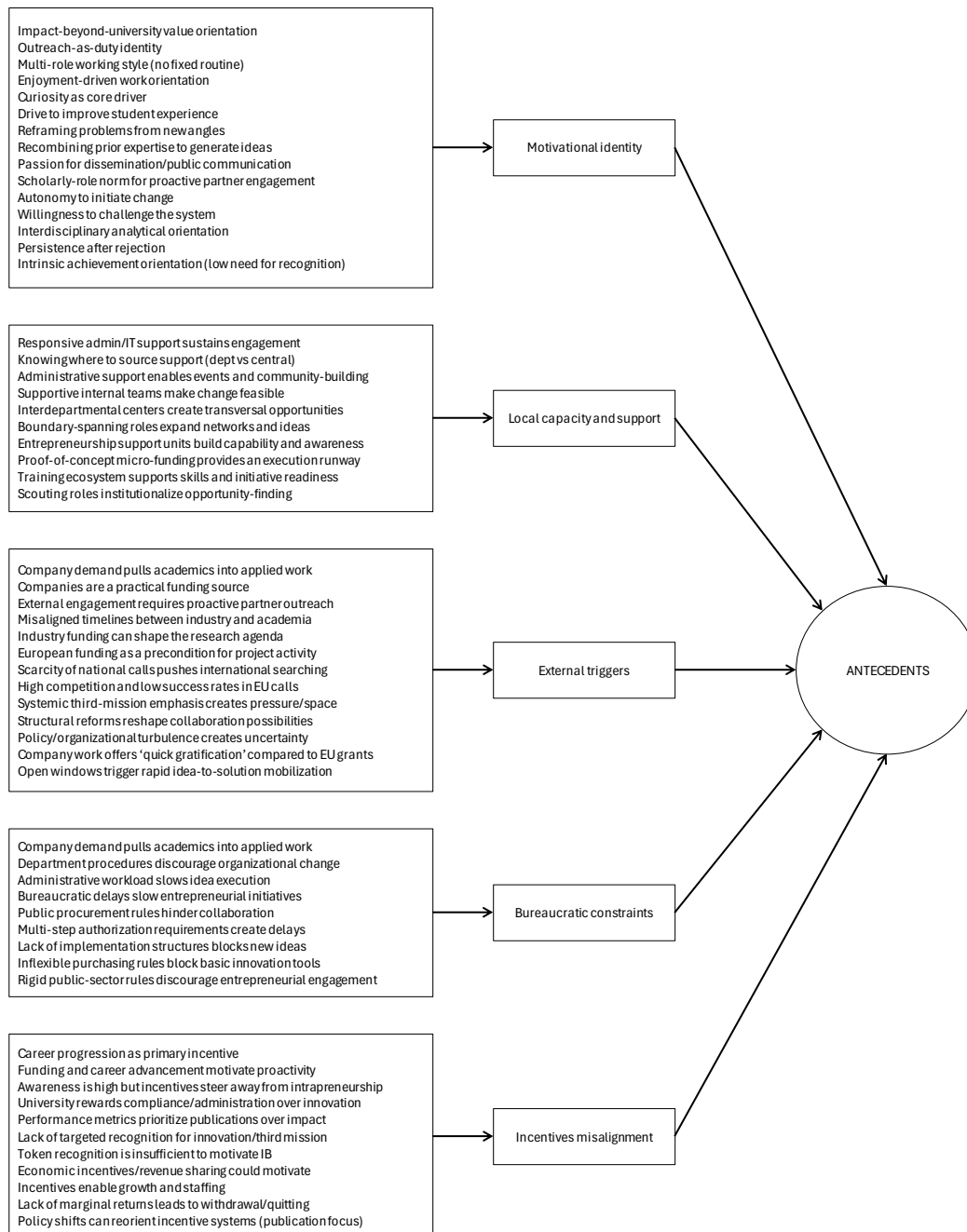


Figure 2 Data Structure (Antecedents)



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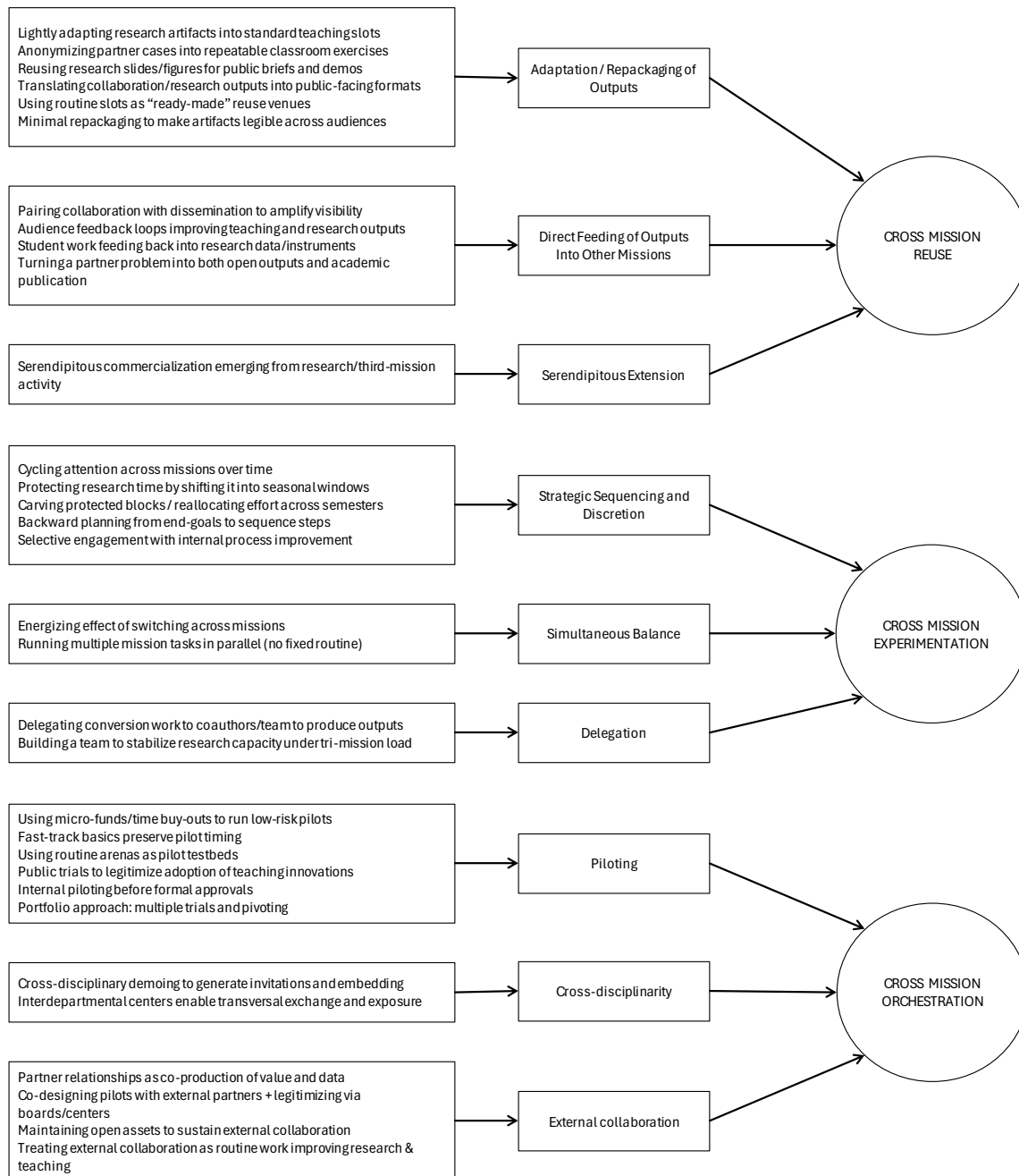


Figure 3 Data Structure (TMC)



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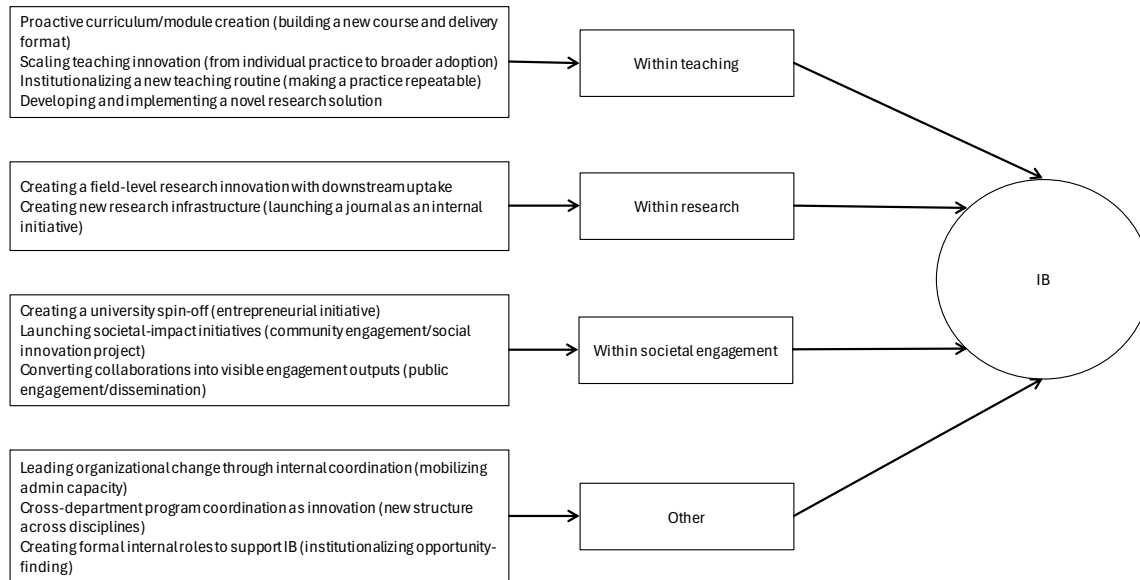


Figure 4 Data Structure (IB)

4. FINDINGS

The presentation of our findings is organized into two sections that describe how IB is exhibited by academics. First, we discuss the *opportunities and constraints* posed by the three missions, as described by our respondents. Second, we examine the antecedents of IB that enabled the first intrapreneurial moves. We then turn to detailing Tri-Mission Coupling (TMC) modes observed in practice and the enabling mechanisms.

4.1 Opportunities and Constraints Posed by the Three Missions

A key premise of this study is that academics need to navigate the opportunities and constraints posed by the three missions. Since these are well established in the literature (Laredo, 2007; Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Perkmann et al., 2013), we do not include them specifically in the model. Nevertheless, we provide evidence that, in our sample, the three missions indeed pose specific hurdles for academics. The most frequently reported difficulties are in finding the time to dedicate to the different missions and in organizing the available time. For example, academics in



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our sample mentioned that *“Departmental service activities diverting time from research and third mission opportunities”*, and that *“Entrepreneurial/innovative initiatives competing for time with research output requirements”*. Time for writing academic papers seems to be a widespread concern, with interviewees mentioning that *“Writing time is the bottleneck”* and *“I love doing research, I am still collecting data during all these years, but the time of writing is the real issue when you are busy.”*

Other participants expressed concern that recognition for activities across the three missions is unequally distributed. While publication in high-ranking academic journals is a key success metric (*“We don’t have the structure to implement new ideas... researchers focus on papers rather than entrepreneurial ideas... metrics prioritize journal rankings over impact”*), this is not always the case. In the words of another interviewee, for example, *“I was doing a lot of things [...], especially with students, creating impact on the society, a social innovation project. So on Friday I published this article in Research Policy and on Saturday there was an interview that came out on the press about me and the things I was doing with students. Everyone was congratulating me about the interview and not about Research Policy”*. Funding is also highlighted as a key area of concern (*“Fifteen days of company work brings the same money as an EU grant—there’s immediate gratification—so attention and effort skew toward paid collaborations even when that crowds out cross-mission experiments.”*).

Another issue raised was managing external collaboration and how meeting their demands might be at odds with pursuing other missions, such as research. For example, *“In engineering, there’s a high demand from companies for applied research... they want quick results and solutions to problems... timelines are not always aligned with academic projects”* and *“Industry partners*



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sometimes influence the research agenda... if they have funding, you tend to adapt your project to their needs”.

Overall, respondents seemed more concerned with the constraints than the opportunities deriving from the three missions.

4.2 Antecedents of IB

Across the interviews, we identified five recurring antecedents that consistently shaped whether and how the intrapreneurial initiatives took form in day-to-day academic work under the tri-mission mandate. Three antecedents were predominantly enabling: *a motivational identity* oriented toward impact, curiosity, autonomy and persistence; *local capacity and support* such as responsive administrative/technical help; transversal spaces and micro-resourcing and *external triggers* that opened concrete opportunity windows, including industry demand, external calls and shifting institutional expectations around societal engagement. The other two antecedents were predominantly constraining: *bureaucratic constraints* (such as multistep authorizations, procurement rigidities and limited implementation structures) as well as *incentives misalignment*. Taken together, these antecedents explain the conditions of possibility for academic intrapreneurship: they define the opportunity set that academics perceive, the discretion and resources they can mobilize and the frictions they must navigate.

Motivational Identity. An individual level antecedent that consistently preceded the formation of intrapreneurial initiatives is what we conceptualize as a motivational identity: a relatively stable sense of “who I am as an academic” that makes proactive, opportunity-seeking action feel role-consistent rather than exceptional. Across the interviews, many participants described a hybrid professional self-understanding in which teaching, research and societal engagement are not



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separate silos, but an integrated way of doing the job; outreach and co-design were framed as inherent responsibilities rather than additional tasks. As one participant put it, *“Variety across roles gives energy, moving with new initiatives between research, teaching, and engagement keeps knowledge alive for students and society.”* Another made the role-normative aspect explicit by positioning outreach as part of what academics ought to do, and by emphasizing translation across audiences: *“Outreach is a core duty... innovation in third mission is not only patents; it’s explaining science in plain language and bringing it back into the classroom.”* Taken together, these accounts suggest that motivational identity works as an enabling condition for intrapreneurial initiatives because it legitimizes cross mission activity (it feels appropriate, not peripheral) and provides coherent internal rationale for action even when everyday work is fragmented across competing tasks.

This identity orientation is also anchored in an impact-beyond-university value frame that reshapes what counts as worthwhile outcomes. As illustrated by the Reggio Emilia example presented above (section 4.1), participants often contrasted academic recognition with the gratification of visible societal contribution—highlighting how third-mission work can feel immediately meaningful even when it is not the most institutionally rewarded. This shows how intrapreneurial action is sustained not only by external prompts, but by an identity-based valuation of impact and contribution – one that can operate even when conventional academic signals (publication) do not provide the most immediate or salient feedback.

Finally, participants often connected this motivational identity to both intrinsic enjoyment and instrumental payoffs, suggesting that identity does not replace incentives but can align with them. For example, informants described being proactive because they enjoy the work and because it



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supports collaborators and career trajectories: “*We decide to do them proactively because we like them, they help us secure funding for our collaborators, and they are important for career advancement*”. Importantly, participants reported that this identity pattern was evident before any formal initiative was institutionalized (e.g., alumni talk, collaborative class projects, public communication activities) and was observed across seniorities and disciplines. In this sense, motivational identity functions as an individual level enabling antecedent: it predisposes academics to notice opportunities, view cross mission initiatives as legitimate, and invest effort early – well before organizational structures, resources and recognition mechanisms are secured.

Local Capacity and Support. A second enabling antecedent is local capacity and support: the immediate infrastructure that helps academics move from an initial idea to a first tangible step without losing momentum to logistics and internal friction. Although these supports are primarily meso-level features embedded in departments and central units, they operate as antecedents through academic perceived and practical access to them in day-to-day work. Participants repeatedly described administrative, technical and IT support as decisive for sustaining external-facing activity and follow-through on nascent initiatives. As one academic put it, “*From an administrative, technical, and IT perspective, I feel fully supported... This strong support is one of the most relevant reasons why I maintain my special relationship with the external world... if I had to deal with administrative troubles... I might have given up*”. Support was often described in concrete operational terms – getting information quickly, unblocking practical issues and enabling events that serve as vehicles for early initiatives: “*When I have problems with admin stuff... I’ve always received the information I need... admin people... are quite good... I sometimes need help with organizing seminars*”. In our analysis, this local capacity functions as a friction-reducing condition:



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it converts intention into execution by preventing small constraints (information, logistics, coordination) from consuming scarce attention and derailing early-stage momentum.

Beyond day-to-day responsiveness, participants also emphasized the importance of navigational support and boundary-spanning roles – knowing where to go and having forums that connect across units, disciplines and mission domains. One informant described how support is sources strategically across the organization: *“depending on what we need, we will ask either to our department or the Central Office”*. These accounts show that local capacity is not only about administrative efficiency; it also shapes the opportunity landscape by expanding access to networks, feedback, and cross-cutting conversations that can seed and legitimize new initiatives.

Participants further pointed to dedicated support mechanisms that provide an “execution runway” for early experiments—particularly entrepreneurship-facing units and small internal resources. For example, informants described capability-building support from the university’s entrepreneurship infrastructure: *“the Knowledge Transfer Office (KTO) team in charge of entrepreneurship is doing many things to raise awareness, train, and educate researchers on entrepreneurship.”* They also noted the value of small, accessible resources that can help translate an idea into a concrete pilot: *“We have internal funding for proof of concept... a bit of money... may have entrepreneurial intentions... or find other companies interested.”* Together, these forms of support—responsive admin/IT, navigational access to offices, boundary-spanning forums, and micro-resourcing through internal schemes—operate as a meso-level enabling environment that makes intrapreneurial initiative formation *practically doable* in a tri-mission context. They do not guarantee intrapreneurship, but they increase the possibilities that early initiatives can be tried, refined, and sustained long enough to enter the coupling and institutionalization processes we describe later.



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External triggers. A third antecedent is what we call external triggers: salient, externally generated signals that give academics a concrete starting point for intrapreneurial action (e.g., a partner need, a funding window, or a shifting institutional expectation). In contrast to motivational identity (individual-level) and local capacity/support (meso-level), external triggers are primarily macro level conditions – rooted in industry demand, funding regimes and system level reforms – yet they are experiences through academics’ day to day choices about where to invest effort and how quickly to mobilize. Across the interviews, participants emphasized that company demand can function as a strong “pull” into applied problem solving and can create time pressure that differs from academic rhythms: *“In engineering, there’s a high demand from companies for applied research... they want quick results and solutions to problems... timelines are not always aligned with academic projects.”* These triggers also shaped how proactively academics sought opportunities rather than waiting for them: *“Other important elements, in my opinion, are the demands from companies. We need to be quite proactive to get involved with companies in projects, as they are a good source of funding to support our activities. It’s easier to approach companies with development ideas instead of waiting for them to seek us out.”* In our interpretation, partner demand and established relationships reduce search costs and ambiguity – providing a clear “problem to solve” and a practical route to initiate action – while simultaneously steering the tempo and direction of initiatives toward outputs that fit external timelines and needs.

Also, participants repeatedly highlighted funding structures and call opportunities as triggers that define what is feasible and when. European calls were described as necessary precondition for many intrapreneurial projects: *“European funding is essential... without it, most of our projects would not happen.”* At the same time, the relative speed and simplicity of company-funded work



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could trigger rapid engagement compared to longer, competitive grant processes: *“We tend to get money from companies, we do things that companies like, we work for 15 days and get the amount of the money that you get for a European project. Immediate gratification, less work.”* External calls and consortia were also narrated as “open windows” that make rapid mobilization possible by providing a ready template and a defined brief: *“External calls and consortium opportunities act as ready templates; when a national consortium opened a door, I proposed an idea, coded the models, and aligned the work to their brief.”* Together, these narratives suggest that external triggers do not simply “encourage” intrapreneurship; they actively structure the initial configuration of first moves—which opportunities academics perceive as actionable, how quickly they can move, and how they translate ideas into fundable, partner-relevant outputs.

Bureaucratic Constraints. Across the interviews, we identified bureaucratic constraints as the administrative and procedural frictions that make it harder to initiate and sustain intrapreneurial moves in a tri-mission setting. Bureaucratic constraints are best understood as a meso-level constraining condition: they are embedded in departmental and university processes (and in public universities often reinforced by broader public sector rules). In the interviews, participants rarely framed bureaucracy as a generic annoyance; instead, they described it as something that **shapes** what they choose to pursue, and where they decide it is “worth” investing initiative. One academic captured this selectivity clearly: *“However, we tend to be less proactive in organizational matters. The department has its own structure and procedures, and unless we are obliged to improve the processes, we tend to let other colleagues handle that to maintain our focus.”* This suggests that bureaucratic constraints do not simply reduce initiative overall; they redirect it—academics stay



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proactive where they can move with discretion (often in projects), but step back from organizational change when internal processes appear slow, rigid, or costly to navigate.

A second pattern concerns the tempo of intrapreneurial action. Participants repeatedly described administrative requirements as breaking momentum at the very stage when early ideas need speed and iteration: *“We are doing a lot of work but then we are facing challenges which are mostly caused by the administrative constraint... the administrative work slows down a little bit the ideas.”* Frictions were especially visible when initiatives depended on timely procurement, partnerships, or approvals—areas where tri-mission work often requires quick coordination across units and external actors. For example, one informant noted: *“Public procurement rules make it hard to collaborate with certain partners... the bureaucracy is intense,”* while another pointed to formal internal hurdles: *“Professors need to submit a business plan... formal authorization from the whole university.”* Several accounts highlighted how even seemingly small barriers can stall experimentation— *“impossible to purchase GPT-4 with research funds... had to buy it personally”*—because early pilots often depend on quick access to tools and small resources. Taken together, these narratives show how bureaucratic constraints raise the practical threshold for acting, reduce responsiveness, and make initiative-taking more dependent on workarounds or unusually supportive conditions—shaping which ideas get tried, how fast they move, and which ones stall before they ever become formal initiatives.

Incentives Misalignment. A fifth antecedent we observed is what we call incentives misalignment: the perceived gap between what the university (and wider policy discourse) asks academics to do—be proactive, innovative, and engaged across missions—and what is rewarded, counted, and recognized. This is best understood as a meso–macro condition: it is built into



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departmental and university evaluation practices (meso) but often reflects broader incentive regimes and policy shifts that prioritize particular outputs (macro). Across interviews, participants were explicit that incentives matter because they shape effort allocation and persistence—especially for early-career actors whose future depends on competitive career trajectories. As one informant put it, *“The most important element is how this could affect the future careers of the people involved. The incentives in terms of career progression are very important... our collaborators tend to work a lot because they want to be competitive for future examinations to secure a tenure-track position.”* Even when academics described intrinsic reasons for being proactive, they also linked initiative-taking to instrumental returns: *“We decide to do them proactively because we like them, they help us secure funding for our collaborators, and they are important for career advancement.”* Together, these narratives suggest that IB is more likely to be pursued—and sustained—when it can be made legible as career-relevant or resource-generating work.

At the same time, many participants described a misalignment where the institutional incentive system pushes away from intrapreneurship even when awareness and rhetoric are high. One participant summarized this bluntly: *“I think the awareness for intrapreneurial engagement is quite high, the big issue there is that the incentive system that is currently is pushing people not in that direction.”* A recurring complaint was that what gets rewarded is often compliance with routine administrative tasks or publication-oriented metrics, not the uncertain work of innovation and engagement: *“In terms of administrative support, the university is very helpful... However,... the university itself is not doing a lot to reward the innovative processes of researchers... I am often rewarded more for being precise in compiling class registries... than for my innovative contributions.”* Participants also noted the lack of recognition targeted to third mission or cross-



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mission initiatives: *“Each of our activities... is summed to the overall merits of university... but there is no singular recognition... we don't have some recognition specifically addressed to us.”* In this context, symbolic rewards were often described as insufficient: *“not internal rewards from the department, only something... best paper awards... but nothing more than that. Not the real reward.”* In our interpretation, this misalignment shapes IB in two ways: it channels proactivity into what is measurable and rewarded (often publications and formal compliance), and it raises the risk of investing in initiatives that create value but are not institutionally visible.

Finally, interviewees described the downstream behavioural consequence of misalignment as withdrawal or selective engagement when marginal returns disappear. As one participant noted: *“You pursue projects if you see rewards... I ended up stopping or quitting because there were no marginal returns or rewards...”* In parallel, some participants pointed to what would make a difference—namely, incentives that translate innovation into tangible returns or reinvestment capacity: *“To encourage innovation... create economic incentives... revenue sharing could motivate increased activity.”* The incentives misalignment functions as a constraining antecedent by shaping which intrapreneurial initiatives are seen as “worth it,” how long academics persist, and whether cross-mission work remains episodic and personally driven or becomes something academics can justify and sustain within their evaluation environment.

4.3 Tri-Mission Coupling - three modes of connecting missions in IB

In the interviews, we observed three recurring modes through which academics connect and coordinate activities across the missions to pursue intrapreneurial behavior (IB): (1) cross-mission reuse, (2) cross-mission orchestration, and (3) cross-mission experimentation. Collectively, we call this process Tri-Mission Coupling (TMC). These modes capture micro-level practices—how



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individuals make IB workable in day-to-day routines—yet they unfold within the structural conditions described earlier (support, triggers, bureaucracy, incentives). Each mode appeared across roles (professors, lecturers, early-career researchers, PhD candidates and, indirectly, support units), and each was associated with simple enabling mechanisms that lowered the cost of “first moves” and helped initiatives travel across teaching, research, and societal engagement.

4.3.1. Cross-mission Reuse

We use cross-mission reuse to describe instances where academics pursue IB by moving outputs, materials, and learning across teaching, research, and societal engagement, rather than treating each mission as requiring a separate (and separately resourced) set of activities. In the interviews, reuse showed up as a pragmatic way of making initiative work “pay twice”: the same artefact—data, code, a project narrative, a partner case, a prototype—can be translated into multiple mission-appropriate outputs. Within this mode, accounts clustered around three recurring strategies: (1) Adaptation/Repackaging of outputs, (2) Direct feeding of outputs into other missions, and (3) Serendipitous extension.

Adaptation and repackaging of outputs. A first reuse strategy is adaptation/repackaging, where academics described taking an existing output and lightly translating it, so it fits another mission without requiring a full redesign. Participants spoke explicitly about moving research artefacts into teaching formats with minimal modification: *“I take a research product—code, dataset, figure—and lightly adapt it into a class lab/case...”* In similar fashion, engagement work was described as becoming a repeatable educational resource once repackaged: *“A partner problem/case becomes a teaching input; we anonymize... drop it into a course exercise every year.”* Adaptation also appeared in how academics described shifting research communication into public-



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facing formats: *“A research talk... [is] translated into a short public brief/demo using the same slides/figures with minimal edits...”* In company collaboration settings, dissemination work was often narrated as a routine extension of project outputs rather than a separate initiative: *“When we collaborate with private companies, we also tend to have public engagement activities or dissemination activities to give visibility to the research results.”* These excerpts show adaptation/repackaging as a core reuse strategy: academics preserve the substance of an output while adjusting its form, framing, or audience so it can travel across missions.

Direct feeding of outputs into other missions. A second reuse strategy involves direct feeding, where outputs do not merely change format but become substantive inputs for another mission—creating feedback loops across missions. Participants described learning and reactions from engagement activity feeding back into teaching and research work: *“Feedback from the outreach audience helps refine the assignment and the research note...”* They also described teaching activity generating research material: *“Classroom prototypes and student outputs feed back into research... assignment generates dataset/instrument....* This “feeding” dynamic was especially visible in partner-driven problem solving where engagement inputs directly yielded research and open outputs. One participant described a partner problem that became a technical solution, then an open artefact and an academic publication: *“One significant issue they faced was the difficulty in automatically detecting problems within the system’s components... I thought of applying... deep learning models... proposed my idea to {company}... coded these models from scratch... created what I would describe as a digital twin of the computing nodes... now capable of automatically detecting when a component is malfunctioning... I decided to make the code public and published it on GitHub... I also created a scientific publication documenting the research.”* This illustrates



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direct feeding as a stronger form of reuse: rather than repackaging the *same* output, academics build chains where activity in one mission (e.g., partner engagement or teaching) produces inputs that materially advance another mission (e.g., a dataset, a research note, a publication, an open repository).

Serendipitous extension. A third reuse strategy is serendipitous extension, where cross-mission activity produces unplanned spillovers—particularly commercialization pathways that are not pursued as a primary goal. Participants drew a clear distinction between deliberate entrepreneurship and dissemination-oriented engagement, while noting that entrepreneurial outcomes can still emerge unexpectedly once outputs circulate beyond the university. As one interviewee explained: *“I’m passionate about dissemination... science communication outside the university... which is a third mission, but it’s not entrepreneur... when you have an idea, it just happens that it might become a patent or... a business... but it’s not something you search actively.”* In this framing, reuse works through exposure: once work is communicated and translated for broader audiences, new opportunities (including patents or business possibilities) may extend the initiative’s trajectory without being the initial intent.

4.3.2. Cross-mission Orchestration

This mode describes how academics actively coordinate time, attention, and capacity across teaching, research, and societal engagement so that intrapreneurial initiatives remain feasible under tri-mission load. Rather than depicting tri-mission work as a stable “balance,” participants described orchestrating their work through deliberate shifts in focus, planning, and redistribution of labor. Interview accounts clustered into three recurring strategies: (1) Strategic sequencing and discretion, (2) Simultaneous balance, and (3) Delegation.



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Strategic sequencing and discretion. A first orchestration strategy involves sequencing effort across time and using discretion to align initiative work with the rhythms of the academic year and competing demands. Several participants described tri-mission work as something that cannot be evenly balanced day-to-day but instead is managed through periods of emphasis and reallocation. As one informant stated, *“In practice, I don't balance anything... Some periods are more focused on third mission activities, while others are dedicated to teaching and research.”* This quote highlights the recurring logic of orchestration: academics do not attempt to do everything at once; they shift attention across missions depending on opportunity windows, deadlines, and teaching cycles. In some other cases, sequencing was described as a concrete way to protect research time under heavy engagement demands. One participant explained that societal engagement intensity (spin-offs and multiple parallel external activities) pushed research into seasonal windows: *“Speaking of third mission, I had a spin-off company and other four companies in parallel... Before, the only time I was able to do research [was] during summer... in August, or during winter... in December.”* Here orchestration takes the form of temporal partitioning: research is concentrated into the periods when teaching and engagement demands are lower, allowing the individual to sustain work across all missions without letting one crowd out the others entirely. Orchestration also appeared as a planning discipline through which academics make complex initiative work manageable. One participant described a goal-first approach to entrepreneurial projects: *“For entrepreneurial activities... you start with the goal and work backward... you need to carefully plan all the steps backward... if any step is missing, you can get lost.”* Rather than portraying initiative work as emergent or ad-hoc, this account emphasizes sequencing as a way to



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keep multi-step efforts on track in an environment where time is fragmented and interruptions are expected.

Finally, participants sometimes described strategic selectivity in where they invested discretionary effort—remaining proactive in project work while stepping back from internal process change unless required: *“However, we tend to be less proactive in organizational matters... unless we are obliged to improve the processes, we tend to let other colleagues handle that to maintain our focus.”* This illustrates orchestration not only as “doing more,” but as choosing where to concentrate initiative so that effort remains aligned with what they can realistically execute under tri-mission constraints.

Simultaneous balance. Alongside sequencing, a second orchestration strategy is simultaneous balance, where academics handle missions in parallel rather than separating them into distinct blocks. Participants described this as a habitual work style, often framed as an enduring trait: *“I don't really have a daily routine in regards to the 3 roles that I have in the university. I am involved in multiple things at the same time...”* This reflects a mode of orchestration where tri-mission demands are not managed by strict separation, but by ongoing switching and concurrent management. Some participants also framed switching across missions as sustaining engagement and relevance: *“Variety across roles gives energy; moving between research, teaching and engagement keeps knowledge alive.”* Taken together, these excerpts show simultaneous balance as a way of keeping multiple mission streams active, with switching treated not only as necessary but sometimes as energizing—supporting continued initiative work amidst competing demands.

Delegation. A third orchestration strategy involves delegation and team-based capacity, where academics redistribute work across coauthors and team members so that tri-mission activity can be



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converted into concrete outputs. One participant described how a research team absorbs interaction and translates it into deliverables: *“Now that I have a research team... co-authors... can take most of the interaction and put it into a concrete output.”* Delegation, in this sense, is not simply administrative outsourcing; it is a way of ensuring follow-through when the individual is pulled across multiple missions. Participants also described team building as a deliberate response to the chronic time conflict between missions. One informant recounted that teaching and third-mission demands had been crowding out research, prompting a deliberate decision to establish a research group: *“Before joining the university, research... [was] eating up most of my time... it was a constant conflict. When I changed university... I decided to fix that, so I established a research team... Right now, we are five people... it needs a dedication of time... if I were to work alone.”* This account shows delegation as a stabilizing mechanism: by creating shared capacity, academics reduce dependence on individual bandwidth and make it more feasible to sustain initiative work alongside teaching and engagement.

4.3.3. Cross-mission Experimentation

This mode describes instances where academics advance IB by testing initiatives through trials, pilots, and demonstrations across mission settings (teaching, research, and engagement), rather than committing upfront to fully specified projects. In the interviews, experimentation was narrated as a way to make initiatives *real enough to evaluate*—to learn quickly, surface constraints, and build credibility before heavier institutionalization. Within this mode, accounts clustered into three recurring strategies: (1) Piloting, (2) Cross-disciplinarity, and (3) External collaboration.

Piloting. A first experimentation strategy is piloting—making an idea tangible through a limited-scope trial that can be executed quickly and observed in practice. Participants described



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how pilots often begin with modest resources that allow an early “slice” of the initiative to be built and tested: *“Small internal pots let us test ideas—if someone has promising tech, we can sometimes secure micro-funds or a short buy-out of research time to do market discovery and build a tangible demo.”* These accounts highlight piloting as a practical, stepwise approach: rather than waiting for full funding or formal recognition, academics run a small trial that produces something demonstrable. Across interviews, pilots were also discussed as time-sensitive—valuable largely because they preserve momentum and allow iteration. One participant pointed to how procedural friction can kill a pilot’s timing, and contrasted this with basic conditions that keep a trial moving: *“Bureaucratic layers and multi-step sign-offs slow things down, so having fast-track basics—direct mailing to students, simplified approvals, and quick software/room access—removes the in-between friction that kills a pilot’s timing.”* In other words, piloting was not framed as an abstract preference for experimentation; it was framed as a way to keep initiative work viable under tight academic calendars and competing obligations. Participants also described piloting as a means of building observability—making adoption decisions depend on what colleagues or program leaders can see working in situ. As one account put it: *“We’re piloting Teaching-for-Learning tools across several undergraduate STEM courses—running short, public trials that programme leads can observe—so adoption decisions are based on what they’ve actually seen.”* Relatedly, some informants emphasized that pilots often occur before formal authorization: *“I pilot internally first—testing the technical, the organizational, and the political sides—before I ask for any formal approval.”* Others described running multiple trials in parallel and selectively continuing those that gain traction: *“I keep a small portfolio of trials running in parallel and only back the few that show traction in our context; if a path stalls, I switch partners or routes.”* Taken together, these excerpts show piloting



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as experimentation through bounded trials that generate learning, visibility, and a basis for subsequent scaling.

Cross-disciplinarity. A second experimentation strategy is cross-disciplinarity, where academics described transversal forums as spaces to test and refine ideas through exposure to different perspectives and domains. Participants explicitly pointed to interdepartmental settings as valuable arenas for cross-fertilization: *“It is really beneficial to participate in interdepartmental centres...”* They also described boundary-spanning roles—such as coordinating doctoral programs—as providing structured opportunities to exchange ideas beyond one’s home unit: *“Additionally, being the coordinator of the PhD program, I interact with the Advisory Board, which is a very interesting place to share ideas and engage in transversal activities.”* In our interpretation, these spaces function as experimentation contexts because they make it possible to “try out” initiative concepts in front of diverse audiences, stress-test assumptions, and refine the initiative’s relevance across mission and disciplinary boundaries.

External collaboration. A third experimentation strategy is external collaboration, in which academics test initiatives through relationships with external partners who provide problems, data, and real-world constraints. Participants framed this as a normal—and legitimate—way of advancing academic work, with mutual value creation as the core logic: *“If you have good relationships with companies and you can gather data that are meaningful you can also give value to companies, and I think you do what a scholar in management should do.”* Several accounts also framed collaboration as directly improving core academic activities: *“Working with companies is normal work—it improves both research and teaching.”* In this strategy, experimentation is not confined to internal pilots; it takes place through co-designed trials with partners, where the initiative is shaped



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through iterative alignment between academic aims and partner needs. One participant summarized this co-design and legitimation pathway succinctly: “*We co-design a new module with companies... pilot... advisory board legitimizes... unlocks support.*” Across these accounts, external collaboration thus appears as a site where initiative ideas are made concrete and testable, often producing evidence and learning that can later support broader embedding within the university.



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4.4 A process model of academic intrapreneurship under a tri-mission mandate

Figure 3 presents our process model of how academic intrapreneurial behavior (IB) develops in universities operating under a tri-mission mandate. The model makes two conceptual moves. First, it treats IB not as a rare “entrepreneurial event,” but as an emergent pattern of everyday action—a set of opportunity-seeking moves that must become legitimate, feasible, and worth sustaining under conditions of competing mission demands. Second, it conceptualizes tri-mission universities not simply as settings of role overload, but as multi-domain work environments in which mission boundaries can become resources: academics can recombine outputs, learning, time structures, and relationships across teaching, research, and societal engagement. We label this core process Tri-Mission Coupling (TMC)—the set of practices through which academics connect and coordinate mission activities so that IB can be enacted and, in some cases, stabilized over time.

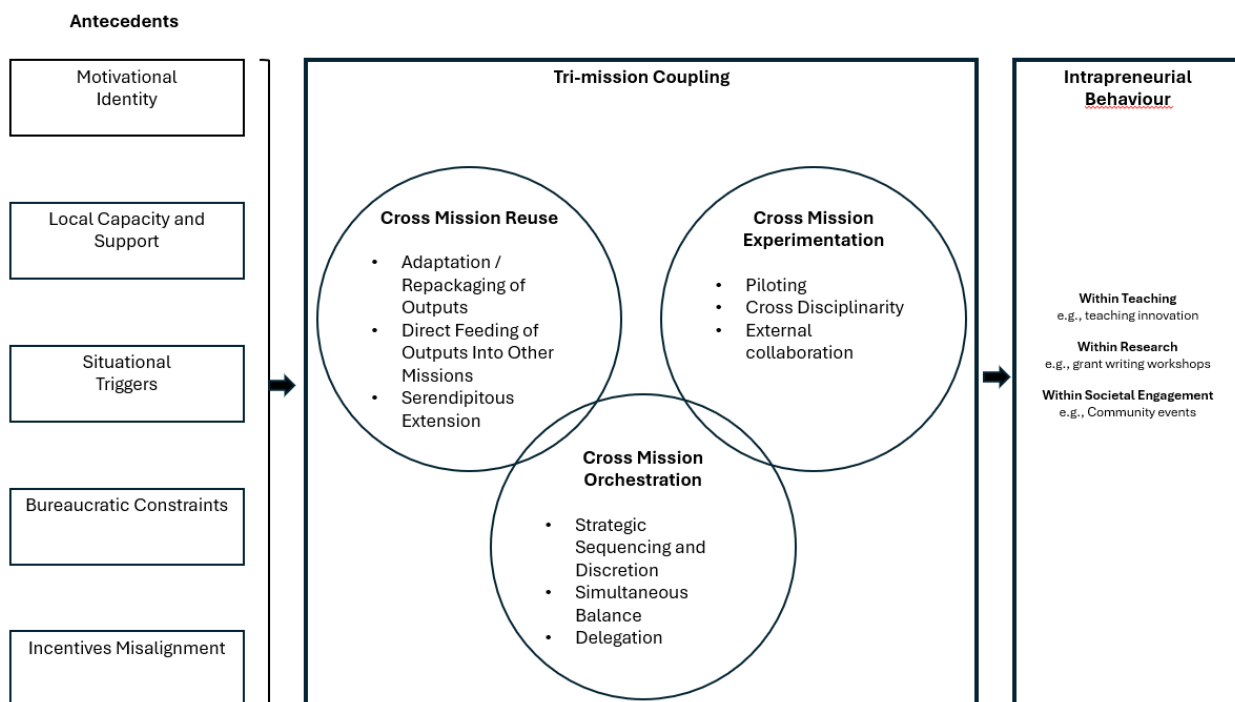


Figure 5 Process Model (Tri-Mission-Coupling)



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Antecedents as starting conditions for intrapreneurial initiatives. On the left side of the model, we identify five recurring antecedents that were present before intrapreneurial initiatives took a recognizable form. Conceptually, these antecedents define the action space within which academics interpret opportunities and decide whether to take a first step. Three antecedents were predominantly enabling. Motivational identity captures how some academics internalize impact, outreach, and initiative-taking as legitimate enactments of the academic role, thereby increasing the likelihood that they treat opportunity pursuit as “appropriate work” rather than peripheral activity. Local capacity and support refer to proximate organizational support—responsive administrative/technical help, internal forums, and minimal resources—that makes early initiative work executable inside ordinary routines. External triggers capture how salient, externally generated signals (partner needs, funding windows, or shifting institutional expectations) transform vague possibilities into concrete starting points and time-bound opportunities. Two antecedents were predominantly constraining. Bureaucratic constraints represent procedural rigidities and limited implementation structures that increase the transaction costs of action and slow the tempo required for early experimentation. Incentives misalignment refers to reward systems that privilege compliance and publication-oriented outputs over cross-mission innovation and engagement, shaping both effort allocation and persistence. Taken together, these antecedents explain the conditions of possibility for IB: they affect whether academics can take a first step, how quickly they can mobilize, and which initiative pathways appear viable—or too costly—within tri-mission environments.

Tri-Mission Coupling as the core process shaping IB. The centre of the model conceptualizes **TMC** as the process through which academics translate these antecedent conditions



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into concrete intrapreneurial action. Rather than assuming that IB is driven directly by individual traits or external pressures, TMC highlights *how* academics do the work of making initiatives feasible in practice—by building cross-mission linkages that generate momentum, reduce duplication, and manage trade-offs among mission demands. We observed three recurring modes of TMC. Cross-mission reuse refers to moving materials, outputs, and learning across missions so that effort in one domain can be redeployed in another—through adaptation/repackaging, direct feeding of outputs into other missions, and serendipitous extension when third-mission or commercial pathways emerge unexpectedly from dissemination or research activity. Cross-mission experimentation refers to testing initiatives through piloting, cross-disciplinarity, and external collaboration, generating “working slices” that can be refined, evaluated, and demonstrated before full institutional commitment. Cross-mission orchestration refers to coordinating time, attention, and capacity under tri-mission load through strategic sequencing and discretion, simultaneous balance, and delegation (including team-based conversion of interaction into outputs). The model depicts these modes as overlapping because they are rarely used in isolation; academics combine them to keep initiative work feasible within everyday academic routines and calendars.

How the modes relate as initiatives develop. Among the three TMC modes, cross-mission reuse is where the interconnection between missions is most visible and direct (Table 4), because it involves moving tangible outputs (materials, artefacts, narratives, or learning) from one mission domain into another. To probe whether reuse clustered around particular mission pairings, we conducted an additional within-sample mapping of reuse “flows” (from mission → to mission; see Figure 3). The mapping shows that reuse occurred in multiple directions across the tri-mission system, but it was not evenly distributed across pairings. In our data, reuse from research to



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teaching was primarily enacted through adaptation/repackaging of outputs (i.e., translating research artefacts into teaching-ready formats). Reuse from research to societal engagement was the most richly patterned: it drew on the full portfolio of reuse strategies—adaptation/repackaging, direct feeding of outputs into other missions, and serendipitous extension—indicating that research outputs frequently travelled outward in ways that were simultaneously communicable, actionable, and occasionally open to unexpected spillovers (e.g., commercialization pathways). At the same time, reverse flows were present but more selective: teaching to research and societal engagement to research largely took the form of direct feeding, suggesting that classroom and engagement work often fed back into research inputs (data, questions, refinements), even when direct teaching to engagement reuse was less visible in our sample. Overall, this directional pattern reinforces the core idea of TMC: mission boundaries are not only sites of tension but also interfaces for conversion, where outputs can be translated and circulated so that intrapreneurial initiatives gain traction across domains and become candidates for later stabilization and institutionalization.

Table 4 Cross Mission Reuse

	To		
	Research	Teaching	Societal engagement
Research	-	<i>Adaptation / Repackaging of Outputs</i>	<i>Adaptation / Repackaging of Outputs + Direct Feeding of Outputs Into Other Missions + Serendipitous Extension</i>
Teaching	Direct Feeding of Outputs Into Other Missions	-	-
Societal engagement	Direct Feeding of Outputs Into Other Missions	<i>Adaptation / Repackaging of Outputs + Direct Feeding of Outputs Into Other Missions</i>	-



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5. DISCUSSION

This study sets out to address how academics pursue proactive, opportunity-seeking action—i.e., intrapreneurial behavior (IB) in their everyday work while navigating the opportunities and constraints posed by the university’s three missions. Drawing on archival materials and 26 interviews in a large Italian state university, we developed a process model (Figure 2) that explains how IB emerges from antecedent conditions and is shaped through a core set of cross-mission practices that enable academics to act under tri-mission demands. Our model shows that IB is conditioned by five antecedents—three predominantly enabling (motivational identity; local capacity and support; external triggers) and two predominantly constraining (bureaucratic constraints; incentives misalignment)—and then develops through Tri-Mission Coupling (TMC), a process that connects and coordinates activities across teaching, research, and societal engagement. We theorize three TMC modes: cross-mission reuse, cross-mission experimentation, and cross-mission orchestration, and we show how their interplay helps explain how initiatives move from early “first moves” to more durable, institutionalized outcomes (e.g., routinized practices, dedicated roles/resources, and demonstrations that enable replication). In what follows, we articulate the implications of these findings for research on academic intrapreneurship, on tri-mission relationships, and for the broader intrapreneurship literature.

5.1 Implications for Research

Our first contribution is to advance a clearer, empirically grounded understanding of what counts as IB in universities and how it develops as part of everyday work. While prior research has richly documented university entrepreneurship and outward-facing activities (e.g., spin-offs, licensing, knowledge transfer, and forms of engagement) and the institutional pressures that surround them



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(e.g., Belitski et al., 2019; Fini et al., 2022; Guerrero et al., 2016a, 2016b; Perkmann et al., 2013), less is known about how intrapreneurial action is enacted inside the university as academics navigate teaching, research, and societal engagement simultaneously. Our model adds specificity by showing that IB in academia is not limited to commercialization-oriented initiatives: it also appears in mission-facing innovations (e.g., new curriculum modules, research solutions, engagement formats) and in administrative and coordination innovations that shape how mission work is organized and sustained (e.g., cross-department program coordination, scouting roles). In this sense, our findings shift attention from a narrow “entrepreneurial outputs” lens to a broader view of IB as observable, goal-relevant initiative-taking that can occur across, and sometimes between, the three missions.

Importantly, our model also clarifies the conditions under which IB becomes more than episodic. The antecedents we identify explain the conditions of possibility for initiative formation: why some academics take first steps and persist (motivational identity), how early action becomes feasible (local capacity/support), how opportunities become concrete and timely (external triggers), and how organizational frictions and evaluation systems shape effort allocation (bureaucracy and incentives misalignment). Taken together, this contribution advances ongoing conversations about the intrapreneurial university (e.g., Flores et al., 2024; Guerrero et al., 2021; Henry & Lahikainen, 2024) by offering a grounded account of IB as everyday initiative work—often small at the outset—whose sustainability depends on how academics connect mission demands and manage constraints.

Our second contribution is to theorize the relationship among the three missions through the lens of Tri-Mission Coupling (TMC). Much of the tri-mission conversation emphasizes competing demands and tensions among teaching, research, and engagement (Laredo, 2007; Compagnucci &



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Spigarelli, 2020; Perkmann et al., 2013). Our findings do not deny those tensions; rather, they explain how academics actively work with and through them by coupling mission activities in practice. TMC offers a process vocabulary for these cross-mission connections: reuse (moving artefacts and learning across missions), experimentation (testing through pilots, cross-disciplinary arenas, and external collaboration), and orchestration (coordinating time, attention, and capacity through sequencing, parallel work, and delegation). This theorization advances tri-mission research by shifting the analytical focus from missions as parallel mandates to missions as interdependent work domains whose interaction can generate both constraints and opportunities for IB. A further implication is that TMC is not merely a list of strategies but a developmental logic for how initiatives evolve. Our data suggest two recurring relationships among the modes that shape initiative development over time: reuse tends to enable experimentation, because repurposed artefacts and narratives reduce the set-up costs of trying something in a new mission setting; and experimentation tends to enable orchestration, because pilots and demonstrations generate traction and visibility that justify reallocating time, recruiting collaborators, and embedding practices into routines. This lens helps explain how IB moves from “a promising idea” to a practice that is sufficiently workable, credible, and legible to persist under tri-mission demands. In short, the contribution of TMC is to show that the tri-mission environment does not only create a landscape of tradeoffs; it also creates cross-mission pathways through which academics can translate opportunities into sustained initiatives.

Our third contribution is to position universities as a revealing setting for intrapreneurship theory more broadly (e.g., Antončič & Hisrich, 2001; Hornsby et al., 2002; Klofsten et al., 2021). Universities share several features with other professional, multi-goal organizations—high



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autonomy in task execution, strong professional identity, and complex performance regimes—yet they also exhibit distinctive constraints (e.g., public-sector procedural rigidities, academic calendars, and evaluation systems that can privilege certain outputs over others). By unpacking the micro-processes of TMC, our study identifies visible pathways through which intrapreneurial action is sustained in a context where work is fragmented across multiple missions. Notably, the three TMC modes mirror core intrapreneurial dynamics documented in corporate settings—recombining resources (reuse), trial-and-error learning (experimentation), and managerial coordination of attention and capacity (orchestration)—but they are expressed through the specific materiality and temporal rhythms of academic work (courses, semesters, calls, peer recognition, and engagement venues). This opens several promising directions for future research. First, future work could examine boundary conditions of TMC: how incentive regimes, bureaucratic rules, and national policy changes amplify or dampen the feasibility of reuse, experimentation, and orchestration. Second, comparative studies across universities and countries could investigate whether the same modes appear under different funding structures, governance forms, and third-mission expectations, and whether the same “mode relationships” hold under alternative institutional conditions. Third, researchers could explore how TMC interacts with organizational roles and intermediaries—e.g., the extent to which support units (KTOs, departmental staff, internal centres) shape coupling trajectories and the institutionalization of IB. Finally, our process model invites operationalization: future work could develop measures of TMC (e.g., degree of cross-mission reuse, intensity of pilot, orchestration capacity) and test how these relate to different IB outcomes (routinization, resourcing, replicability) across contexts. Together, these directions position tri-mission universities as a



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theoretically valuable site for advancing intrapreneurship research on initiative formation, multi-goal coordination, and the institutionalization of innovation under constraint.

5.2 Implications for Policy and Practice

Our findings suggest that supporting academic intrapreneurial behaviour (IB) is not primarily a matter of telling academics to “be more entrepreneurial.” Instead, it requires designing institutional conditions that make Tri-Mission Coupling (TMC) feasible in everyday work. Because TMC describes *how* academics connect teaching, research, and societal engagement to initiate and sustain IB, practical interventions should target the three coupling modes—cross-mission reuse, cross-mission experimentation, and cross-mission orchestration—and remove the frictions that prevent each from occurring. First, to support cross-mission reuse, universities can invest in light “translation infrastructure” that helps academics repurpose artefacts across missions (e.g., templates for class cases, anonymization protocols, short public briefs, and internal repositories for reusable materials such as slides, datasets, or demos). Critically, reuse will remain episodic if it is not valued; promotion and annual review criteria can therefore explicitly recognize recurring cross-mission outputs (e.g., repeatable teaching modules based on research, engagement briefs derived from projects) so that reuse is not treated as peripheral work. Second, to support cross-mission experimentation, universities can implement low-friction pilot pathways: micro-grants or short time buy-outs with simple applications, paired with “fast-track basics” (rapid room/software access, simplified approvals, responsive admin/IT support) that preserve pilot timing. Creating regular demonstration arenas (“witness rooms”)—where early initiatives are shown to program leadership, department heads, and support units such as KTO/TTO—helps convert pilot learning into legitimacy and connects initiatives to follow-on support. Third, to support cross-mission



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orchestration, universities can make cross-mission work schedulable and sustainable by recognizing it in workload models and enabling delegation (e.g., team capacity, coordinators, scouts) so initiatives do not depend on single individuals. Regular cross-unit forums (centers, advisory boards, teaching exchanges) should be visible in academic calendars as places where cross-mission initiatives can be coordinated and embedded. These implications are relevant for university leaders, department heads, policymakers, and innovation support units (e.g., KTO/TTOs, incubators), especially in public systems where procedural rigidities and incentive misalignment can unintentionally discourage initiative-taking.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study is context-bound to European universities, and our findings should be interpreted with appropriate caution. Empirically, we rely on a single-case qualitative design in a large Italian public university. While this design supports theory building, the opportunity structures for academic IB are likely shaped by national governance, funding regimes, and public-sector administrative rules in ways that may differ across higher education systems. Future research should therefore examine the transferability of our model across institutional types (public vs. private; research-intensive vs. teaching-oriented), governance models, and national contexts. Comparative studies across European systems—and beyond Europe—could clarify which antecedents (e.g., incentives misalignment, bureaucratic constraints) and which Tri-Mission Coupling (TMC) modes are more sensitive to institutional and policy environments. Relatedly, our empirical focus was on university members who operate across the three missions; follow-on research could explore whether, and how, IB is enacted by actors whose roles are more mission-constrained (e.g., teaching-



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focused colleagues, professional staff, or research-only positions) and whether different coupling patterns or alternative “mission interfaces” emerge.

Methodologically, our identification of TMC modes relies primarily on retrospective interviews. Such accounts may be subject to recall limitations and social desirability biases, particularly because intrapreneurial initiative-taking is positively valued by many institutions and participants. Although we triangulated perspectives across roles and disciplines and complemented interviews with archival material, the temporal dynamics of initiative development remain partly inferred. Future research could strengthen process claims through longitudinal or micro-longitudinal designs, such as diary studies, event-based process tracing of specific initiatives, shadowing, or repeated interviews over project phases.

A further direction concerns measurement and boundary conditions. Our model identifies TMC as a cross-mission process and highlights enabling and constraining conditions; future work could develop and validate scales for mission-coupling practices (e.g., reuse, experimentation, orchestration) and for the organizational levers that support them (e.g., micro-grants, fast-track administrative support, visible demonstration arenas, recognition in evaluation). These measures would enable larger-N tests of how coupling relates to different forms of IB outcomes (e.g., routinization, resourcing for repetition, and replicability) and how effects vary across incentive regimes and bureaucratic contexts. Finally, further research could expand the ethical reflection by examining power dynamics in academic intrapreneurship—such as who bears the hidden workload of coupling, how credit is allocated across hierarchies, and how institutional incentives shape inclusion/exclusion in opportunity pursuit—thereby strengthening institutional critique alongside practical recommendations.



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STUDY 2

Balancing Contradictions, Creating Change: Understanding Intrapreneurial Behavior in Academia

Universities operate under institutional complexity and require academics to perform the three missions of teaching, research, and societal engagement within a single professional role. These co-present demands generate persistent contradictions, yet we know little about how academics translate such contradictions into intrapreneurial behavior (IB)—employee-initiated initiatives that create new activities and value from within universities—or into inaction. Drawing on an abductive, multi-site qualitative study across three universities (one in the UK and two in Italy), we develop a two-path process model explaining how perceived contradictions are converted into intrapreneurial action trajectories. We identify three recurring contradictions in academic work—identity and affiliation, value and performance, and process and temporality—and show that they are filtered through four pre-decisional sensemaking orientations: contradiction appraisal, identity stance, agency attribution, and temporal move. Specific configurations of these orientations produce either a transformative pathway, in which academics adopt an experiment-first approach that enables piloting, resource mobilization, and eventual formalization of initiatives, or an inhibitive pathway, in which threat appraisals, a purist identity stance, externalized control, and deferral stall or abandon ideas. The study advances academic intrapreneurship research by providing a micro-process account of how contradictions shape IB, highlighting a bridge identity that legitimates intrapreneurship within the academic role set, and clarifying how early actions can (or cannot) scale into institutionalized outcomes.

Keywords: *Intrapreneurial behavior, 'contradictions' perceptions, sensemaking*



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1. INTRODUCTION

Universities today require academics to contribute to educating students through high-quality teaching, to advance knowledge through research, and to generate public and societal value through engagement –the three missions of the university (Belitski et al., 2019; Cunningham et al., 2022; Grimaldi et al., 2011; Perkmann et al., 2013; Guerrero et al., 2016). Each mission is defensible on its own, yet in practice these demands are enacted within a single professional role and often compete for the same time, resources, and evaluation criteria. As a result, contradictions permeate academic work: research privileges originality and long time horizons; teaching requires timely delivery and sustained attention to students’ progression; and societal engagement emphasizes usability and responsiveness to external partners and public stakeholders (Cenamor, 2022; Kodeih & Greenwood, 2014; Smith & Tracey, 2016).

These contradictions are amplified by institutional complexity in universities, where multiple logics and governance demands coexist and where academics must navigate bureaucratic procedures and resource constraints while still being evaluated on mission performance (Greenwood et al., 2011). This context creates an important tension. On the one hand, contradictory demands and bureaucratic constraints can discourage discretionary innovation and reinforce risk aversion. On the other hand, universities increasingly depend on academics initiating new programs, partnerships, and internal innovations that connect missions and generate societal impact. Such initiatives resemble intrapreneurial behavior (IB)—employee-initiated actions that create novel activities and new value within an established organization—yet we know surprisingly little about how academics decide whether and how to pursue IB when professional expectations conflict and legitimacy is contested.



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Prior research on contradictions and paradoxes provides valuable insights into how organizations persist through competing demands (e.g., Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Pradies et al., 2021; Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Building on this tradition, we conceptualize contradictions as co-present, role-level characteristics of the academic profession that are recurrent under institutional complexity and not easily resolved through optimization. While studies of academic intrapreneurship increasingly acknowledge institutional logics and identity struggles as key conditions (e.g., Engzell et al., 2024) and call for greater attention to intrapreneurial behavior in universities (Flores et al., 2024), existing work still offers limited micro-level explanation of **how** academics interpret contradictions and translate them into intrapreneurial action—or into inaction.

Accordingly, we ask: *How do contradictions of the academic profession shape intrapreneurial behavior in academia?* We address this question through an abductive, multi-site qualitative study conducted in one UK university and two Italian universities, drawing on semi-structured interviews and internal documents. Using abductive analysis and a process-oriented approach, we trace how academics make sense of everyday contradictions and how these sensemaking processes shape intrapreneurial action. The UK–Italy design provides meaningful contextual variation in governance and organizational arrangements while keeping the professional core of academic work relatively comparable, enabling us to examine how similar role contradictions are interpreted and acted upon across settings.

Empirically, we identify three recurring contradictions that academics repeatedly encounter in pursuing intrapreneurial initiatives: **(1)** identity and affiliation, balancing being a scholar with being a responsible organizational member; **(2)** value and performance, navigating metric and revenue demands while maintaining commitments to teaching quality and societal contribution; and **(3)**



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process and temporality, needing fast experimentation while complying with formal procedures and long organizational timelines. Academics' sensemaking around these contradictions unfolds through a set of pre-decisional orientations that shape subsequent action, including how contradictions are appraised (challenge versus threat), how identity is positioned (a purist versus a bridge identity that integrates scholarly and intrapreneurial elements), how agency is attributed (external constraints versus internal control), and how time is approached (deferral versus "experiment first"). Different configurations of these orientations give rise to two recurring pathways: *a transformative pathway* in which contradictions are treated as workable and "pilotable," enabling iterative experimentation that later becomes formalized; and *an inhibitive pathway* in which contradictions are interpreted as risky or low payoff, producing deferral and local actions that do not scale.

Theoretically, we develop a contradiction-to-intrapreneurship model of academic work that clarifies how exposure to contradictions shapes sensemaking at the member–organization interface and, in turn, the emergence and trajectory of intrapreneurial behavior in universities. We make three contributions. First, we contribute to academic intrapreneurship and IB research by providing a process account of how contradictions are interpreted and enacted, showing that an "intrapreneurial culture" operates through academics' situated sensemaking and action. Second, we contribute to research on institutional complexity and role contradictions by specifying how contradictions of academic work become actionable (or paralyzing) through distinct sensemaking orientations rather than through structural conditions alone. Third, we advance identity-based accounts of academic change by theorizing a bridge identity that legitimates intrapreneurship as part of the academic role set, enabling some academics to pursue initiatives that can be formalized and institutionalized.



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2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Contradictions in the academic profession

Universities are hybrid and multi-logic organizations characterized by institutional complexity, as they incorporate multiple logics – scientific, educational, market, state and civic – within the same institutional form (Greenwood et al., 2011; Kraatz & Block, 2008; Thornton et al., 2012). In practice, this complexity is reinforced by concurrent pressures: states increasingly tie legitimacy and funding to measurable outputs; universities face market pressures through competition for students, rankings, and revenue streams; and academic communities continue to privilege disciplinary norms and peer-based reputation as sources of professional standing (Cai & Mountford, 2022; Parker, 2011; Ter Bogt & Scapens, 2012).

For individual academics, these institutional demands are enacted through the profession's three missions, each associated with distinct performance criteria, time horizons and audiences (Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003). Teaching emphasizes reliability, timely delivery and progression on relatively short cycles; research prioritizes originality, peer recognition and uncertain, long-term exploration; and societal engagement stresses usability and responsiveness to external partners and public stakeholders (Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003). While synergies are possible (e.g., research informing teaching; engagement generating research questions), the missions often generate competing expectations regarding what counts as high performance, how time and resources should be allocated, and which audiences matter most (Bloch et al., 2022; Perkmann et al., 2021).

We conceptualize these as contradictions of the academic profession: persistent, co-existing role demands that are simultaneously legitimate yet difficult to optimize at once, and that are recurrent under institutional complexity- often intensified by reform agendas and digital transition (Besharov



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& Smith, 2014; Greenwood et al., 2011; Pache & Santos, 2010, 2013; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Although paradox research theorizes similar dynamics (O'Reilly et al., 2023; Putnam et al., 2014; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Schad et al., 2016), our focus remains on contradictions as role-level incompatibilities embedded in the professional expectations of academic work (Weiser & Laamanen, 2022).

From a sensemaking perspective, such contradictions become consequential when academics interpret what they imply for action—particularly under ambiguity about priorities, evaluation criteria, and time horizons (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Importantly, sensemaking is not a one-off cognitive judgment but a process that evolves over time: interruptions or ambiguity trigger attention; actors extract and bracket cues (e.g., conflicting demands, shifting metrics, or incompatible audiences); they construct a plausible account of “what is going on” and “what matters”; and they test and revise that account through action, feedback, and retrospective interpretation (Weick et al., 2005). Because meaning is also socially negotiated, academics seek validation for their accounts (and may engage in sense giving) within relevant audiences such as disciplinary peers, managers, students, and external partners (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Over time, this iterative cycle can stabilize a working interpretation—or amplify contestation—thereby shaping what seems legitimate, feasible, and worth pursuing as an academic.

This process view is particularly suited to analyzing intrapreneurial behavior (IB) in universities because IB typically unfolds under uncertainty and contested legitimacy: pursuing novel initiatives inside established organizations requires interpreting ambiguous signals, mobilizing support across audiences, and adjusting actions as the local environment responds (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).



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In this sense, IB can be understood as an enacted response that both draws on and reshapes interpretations of contradictions: attempts to innovate, build collaborations, or create new initiatives generate new cues (e.g., endorsement, resistance, resource access, evaluation outcomes) that feed back into subsequent sensemaking and redirect the trajectory of action (Weick et al, 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). A sensemaking lens therefore helps explain why similar contradictions can lead some academics to reprioritize and withdraw, while others translate tensions into agentic initiatives that resemble intrapreneurial behavior.

Empirical studies show that academics respond to these contradictions by reorganizing work and shifting priorities (Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003), redesigning tools and practices during reforms (Teelken, 2012; Ter Bogt & Scapens, 2012), and reallocating effort in response to changing metrics (Kallio et al., 2016). Qualitative evidence further suggests that sustained efforts to work through contradictions can crystallize into new local routines (Luscher & Lewis, 2008). Taken together, this literature indicates that contradictions shape academic behavior, but it offers less detail on the interpretive mechanisms through which academics navigate competing demands and decide what actions are legitimate and feasible within the profession—an issue we take up by examining academics' responses to contradictions in relation to IB (Guerrero et al., 2021).

2.2 Academic intrapreneurship dynamics

Intrapreneurship refers to entrepreneurial action within established organizations, enacted by organizational members who initiate and develop new activities, projects or ventures and thereby create value from within existing structures (Pinchot, 1985; Chua et al., 1999; Antončič & Hisrich, 2001; Kuratko & Audretsch, 2013). Because the intrapreneurship literature spans multiple levels of analysis, we follow an employee-centered perspective and focus specifically on intrapreneurial



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behavior (IB) - the individual-level actions through which intrapreneurship is enacted (Neessen et al., 2019). Building on this view, IB can be understood as a configuration of actions/behaviors including innovativeness, proactiveness, risk-taking, opportunity recognition/exploitation, and internal and external networking (Neessen et al., 2019).

Universities increasingly provide a salient context for studying IB because they are established, resource-constrained organizations undergoing strategic shifts toward an “entrepreneurial” orientation that emphasizes societal and economic impact alongside teaching and research (Klofsten et al., 2019; Meek & Gianiodis, 2023). In this setting, academic entrepreneurial activity has been defined as innovative and risky initiatives that extend beyond traditional teaching and/or research and may yield direct or indirect rewards such as reputation, prestige, influence, or societal benefits (Abreu & Grinevich, 2013). Building on this broader conception, academic intrapreneurship highlights the within-university enactment of such initiatives, including bottom-up innovation driven by academics and professional staff as they create and mobilize new ideas, collaborations, and organizational arrangements (Guerrero et al., 2021; Keyser & Vandenbempt, 2023; Engzell et al., 2024).

Extant research has advanced knowledge on the antecedents and outcomes of academic intrapreneurship (e.g., individual, organizational, and environmental drivers) (Guerrero et al., 2015; Hayter et al., 2018) and has called for more process-oriented accounts of how academic intrapreneurship unfolds over time (Fini et al., 2018; Keyser & Vandenbempt, 2023). At the same time, institutional complexity in universities can inhibit innovative behavior when roles conflict and uncertainty is high (Greenwood et al., 2011; Oostervink et al., 2016). Yet academic work can also afford discretion through professional autonomy and (in some contexts) job stability, enabling some



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individuals to reconcile competing demands by extending their role set toward an intrapreneurial identity (Reay & Hinings, 2009; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021).

Building on these foundations, we ask what contradictions of the academic profession imply for intrapreneurial behavior in universities. Recent work emphasizes institutional logics as barriers/enablers and highlights identity struggles of academic intrapreneurs (e.g., navigating what is legitimate across audiences) (Engzell et al., 2024). However, it remains less clear **how** experienced contradictions shape the micro-level mechanisms through which academics decide what is legitimate and feasible to do—and how those interpretations translate into concrete intrapreneurial behaviors (e.g., opportunity pursuit, networking, risk-taking, and innovation) inside the university. We therefore develop a process account of how contradictions shape academics' IB and under what conditions these micro episodes how these micro episodes scale up or not at the organizational level.

3. METHODS

To examine how academic profession contradictions shape the enactment of intrapreneurial behavior (IB) in day-to-day university work, we adopted an abductive, multi-site qualitative design. Abduction suited our aim of explaining surprising empirical patterns by iteratively linking data and theory, allowing emerging insights to redirect sampling, focusing, and framing (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

3.1 Research design

We employed a multiple-case design to enable theoretical replication and strengthen the credibility of our process claims (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2013). Our unit of analysis is the intrapreneurial episode – nested within individuals and embedded in the



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organizational contexts. The intrapreneurial episode means an initiative that begins with the individual and is also rooted in the organization. Studying three universities that share academic contradictions yet differ in governance, size, performance regimes, and context allowed us to observe whether the same mechanisms recur under different conditions. Cross-case comparison enhances internal validity through pattern matching and eliminates idiosyncratic explanations tied to a single setting; it also improves analytical generalization by showing how contradictions and intrapreneurial behaviors play out across contexts (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

3.2 Research setting

To protect confidentiality, we refer to our three focal institutions as UNI-A (UK), UNI-B (Italy-North), and UNI-C (Italy-Center). Each operates within an entrepreneurship and executive-education ecosystem that shapes when contradictions become salient and where intrapreneurial behaviors are likely to surface.

Based on the documents and website observations of the UK university, UNI-A, we find a consistently supportive orientation toward intrapreneurship, as well as an external context that recognizes the impact of knowledge transfer on intrapreneurship. The institution offers (a) extra-curricular enterprise training that develops 'students' problem-solving in real organisations, (b) a regional incubator partnership that provides venture-building know-how and networks, and (c) central research commercialization services with flexible impact funding. This architecture enables staff and students to trial new offerings within existing courses and centres "in-house" ("innovate from within" " " " ") while keeping optional pathways to externalize projects when appropriate.



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At the northern Italian university (UNI-B), we observed a consistently supportive environment toward intrapreneurship. The institution combines (a) curricular and extra-curricular training that engages students and researchers in multidisciplinary problem-solving, (b) internal pathways that help university teams test and formalise new initiatives before considering externalization, and (c) a central interface to industry that brokers collaborative projects and mobilizes intellectual property.

UNI-C combines a university-affiliated business school with a constellation of innovation interfaces. The business school frames its Entrepreneurship Hub around both external venture creation and internal entrepreneurship, making intrapreneurship a named capability in its regional positioning. The wider university ecosystem includes a certified incubator and innovation hub co-governed with industry, which develops start-ups and spin-offs and runs open-innovation challenges with established companies, as well as a makerspace and prototyping lab that offers training and facilities to help them move from idea to first prototype.

3.3 Data collection

Data from each case were collected during the period from October 2024 to June 2025. We assembled a -source archive: Institutional websites (societal engagement and knowledge transfer sections), strategic plans (2020-2027), and university regulations relevant to entrepreneurship hubs, knowledge transfer officers, and incubators. We used these materials to identify institutional mandates, governing processes and milestones, and main actors involved.

However, the most important source of data was collected from 35 semi-structured interviews with academic staff and professional staff from different departments and different levels of seniority (assistant/associate/full professors; KTO/TTO staff; doctoral researchers)



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We used purposive sampling across three sites (UNI-A, UNI-B, UNI-C) to capture intrapreneurial experiences across roles (junior/senior academics; programme leads; research institute members; lab directors; administrators with enabling roles such as R&I, internships/placements, data/IT). Inclusion criteria were: (i) current employment at the focal university; (ii) direct involvement in research, teaching, and societal engagement; and (iii) recent exposure to change efforts (e.g., new programme/module, platform/process redesign, research infrastructure, venture/industry collaboration). In some cases, we then used theoretical snowballing to add participants identified as central to specific initiatives (e.g., secure data access, blockchain network, push-matching platform). We invited candidates by email with an information sheet describing the study aims, confidentiality, and consent; interviews were scheduled at 'participants' convenience (online or on campus). The final sample was balanced for discipline, seniority, and mission mix, comprising 35 interviews. Interviews lasted about 30-45 minutes, and those conducted online were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. All procedures were approved by the host 'institution's ethics process. Interviews were conducted in English. The interview protocol addressed questions related to how participants perceive and balance their duties in teaching, research, and third-mission roles; the motivation behind the development of intrapreneurial micro-initiatives; the protocol covered nine domains—role/workload, networks, initiating new ideas, institutional supports, enablers/barriers, capability development, identity/motivation/values, scaling/impact, and cross-institutional reflections.

We summarize our data sources in Table 5 and provide further details as follows.



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Table 5 Data Sources

<i>Data type</i>	<i>Details</i>	<i>Other information</i>
<i>Archival data</i>	Websites	Societal engagement / Entrepreneurship dedicated sections
	Strategic plans	181 pages Time span 2020-2027
	University regulations	Entrepreneurship hub/ KTO/ Incubators regulations
<i>Interview data</i>	Professors	23 870 minutes
	KTO /TTO staff	5 175 minutes
	PhD Candidates	7 210 minutes

3.4 Data analysis

Guided by an abductive approach and a sensemaking lens, our analysis moved iteratively between data and theory to explain how contradictions in academic work become actionable (or not) in day-to-day intrapreneurship. We began by open coding all interviews and archival material in N-Vivo, and we captured how participants themselves interpreted tensions and developed intrapreneurial initiatives. This first cycle produced 171 first-order codes managed in NVivo, with constant comparison across cases. In parallel, we produced within-case temporal syntheses for each university, aligning episodes to compare how actors noticed and interpreted tensions and enacted micro-moves across each case. Then, we proceeded with axial/selective coding and cross-case pattern matching. We clustered first-order codes into 13 second-order themes and then into four aggregate dimensions. The first aggregate - perceived contradictions in academic work -gathers three theme families that repeatedly appeared as triggers: *identity and affiliation* contradiction, *value and performance* contradiction, and *process and temporality* contradiction. We treated these as salience cues—the "what" those actors noticed and interpreted.



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The second aggregate – Sensemaking Process — a path that converts contradictory perceptions into intrapreneurial moves; and an inhibitive path that construes contradictions as a threat and reproduces routine work. A fourth set of second-order codes specifies pre-decisional paradox-sensemaking differences that help explain why similar tensions lead to the two different paths across. Finally, we consolidated the observable IB enactment dimension and articulated the mechanisms linking contradiction perception to two-layered sensemaking and, lastly, to IB micro-enactment (or status-quo maintenance).

Throughout the data analysis phase, we moved back and forth between data and theory in an abductive way. When the pattern was not clear enough, we reviewed the literature on contradictions, sensemaking, and intrapreneurship to clarify our ideas, then returned to the data to test alternative explanations. The full data structure is provided in Figure 4 below.



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Figure 6 Full Data Structure



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4. FINDINGS

We present our findings into three interrelated themes: (1) academics' perceptions on contradictions in university, (2) implications of individual IB and (3) 'sense-making process as the mechanism that connects the perceptions and 'academics' behavior towards intrapreneurship or just maintaining the status quo in their work. All these themes are presented in detail in the following sub-sections.

4.1 Academics perceptions on contradictions

Across the three cases, academics repeatedly encountered—and actively made sense of—three fundamental contradictions shaping everyday work. First, *identity vs affiliation*: on one side – the informal community and identity bonds that enable an intrapreneurial initiative to coexist with formal structures and on the other side, controls that legitimize yet constrain it. Second, *value vs. performance*: on one side, the calls for teaching quality, entrepreneurship, and public value; on the other, the evaluation systems in universities, which mostly favored publications and grants. Third, *process vs temporality*: need for fast, informal experimentation in change initiatives that face multi-stage approvals and several organizational complexities.

Identity vs. Affiliation: At UNI-A, an **identity-affiliation** contradiction plays out. On one side, academics describe an informal social-network mobilization:

"We have informal social groups—arts/theatre/music and a sports group (flat hierarchy; includes PhDs). I sometimes initiate outings when the weather is good. This builds belonging and cross-rank cohesion; indirectly, they likely help collaboration by humanizing colleagues beyond work roles"

The narrative is clear: social networks within this university create psychological safety and trust that lower the barrier to asking for help or to fuel new ideas—and collaboration often starts before



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any formal structure engages. But others at UNI-A point to the institutional frame that collaboration both enables and cools that energy:

"Support has grown. We now have a dedicated room for workshops (we 'didn't before) and enterprise presence on the website... Big challenge: communication. We 'can't email them directly; we must go via departments, which creates friction. ... 'Impact' is increasingly emphasized, though some academics prefer research for its own sake; time pressures are real."

The ' 's formal procedures (official channels) give projects legitimacy and help, but they also add more steps and waiting time. The extra approvals protect fairness and the ' 's reputation, yet they also slow things down and limit who gets reached or involved, hindering the fast, open space that informal, trust-based networks create. At UNI-A informal belonging is needed to spark collaboration, yet its formal controls slow and filter the same action—so the practices create energy and the mechanisms that provide legitimacy both enable and undermine each other. A similar pattern appears in the Italian cases. At UNI-B, academics stressed that cross-department collaborations and informal familiarity fuel the individual intrapreneurial action, while institutionalization provides the resources but competes with workload and slows implementation:

"Cross department ties often start person-to-person. Interdepartmental centers help; I served on one board (recently stepped down due to time). We also have school-level collaborations across the four engineering departments—this year marks the 100th anniversary of the engineering school, and we submitted three innovation-in-teaching projects spanning all departments."

Taken together, the Italian evidence reinforces the UK story: informal belonging fuels and sustains collaboration, whereas formal organizing legitimizes and scales it—and the same formal



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mechanisms that enable scale also appear as a constraint, making belonging and organizing jointly enabling yet partially challenging.

Value vs. Performance: Participants in the UK and Italy reported experiencing a university system that prioritizes publications, grants, and spin-outs while simultaneously calling for impact and entrepreneurship. They also emphasized that evaluation at the university level concentrates attention on what "counts" As one UNI-A academic put it:

"The system is research- and money-driven; student experience and citizenship get sidelined. Promotions often reward stellar research despite poor teaching/citizenship... the core need is to realign values and incentives"''''." An Italian colleague articulated the same logic from a different angle: *''''''''There are many short courses and seminars... not only for Horizon/NRP proposals but also for spin-out formation and soft skills (e.g., teaching in English, media/comms). The university is increasingly active in seminars related to them. Realistically, many of us can't attend due to time; 'we're also overloaded with announcements, so opportunities get missed. ... The strongest institutional push is for major grant submissions and spinouts,"* while another noted, *"They measure people's success in terms of papers... entrepreneurial ideas... are discussed but 'don't get implemented."*

Together, these accounts indicate that the career scoreboard—papers, big grants, spin-outs—take more time and resources toward research outputs and away from teaching innovation and less on citizenship. However, at the same time, respondents pointed to visible signals and concrete steps around impact. From UNI-C: *"Leadership changes suggest more support is coming. ... Culturally, 'impact' is increasingly emphasized, though some academics prefer research for its own sake; time pressures are real"*.



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The contradiction that appears here is one side universities push academics to maximize research performance and revenue (high-impact publications, big grants, spinouts) and on the other side to enhance teaching innovation and citizenship work. Each pole is legitimate on its own; but together they compete for the same inputs—time, attention, budget, and recognition. That's what academics optimize for because it "counts."

Process vs Temporality: We found that academics in all three sites describe innovation as a two-lane reality: ideas tend to start fast and informally, then must enter formal channels to endure. At UNI-A, one participant captured the initiation phase:

Two layers. First, content: I view blockchain as a technology with significant research implications, so I wanted to explore it more deeply for my own research. ' I'm even meeting a colleague to discuss ideas. Second, community: there was no formal group, so I thought we should start a discussion among different researchers. The spark was a conversation with a colleague in the Enterprise Lab. We decided to experiment informally—no bureaucracy—see what happens, then formalize if it made sense.

On the other side, some participants describe what happens when ideas hit the formal lane. At UNI-C, "administrative constraints (rules, paperwork) reduce flexibility and slow implementation". And at UNI-A, even routine artifacts face "multi-step sign-offs... the in-between steps slow things down". These narratives show a structural contradiction: universities need agility for discovery and responsiveness, but also need bureaucracy for legality, ethics and comparability; however, these controls that protect the university also slow the experiments that renew it.



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4.2 Implications of individual intrapreneurial behavior

Across UNI-A, UNI-B and UNI-C, individual initiatives did not remain isolated. We observed that small ideas tended to grow in a repeatable sequence: first people spotted an opportunity for change and shaped an idea (opportunity scanning & idea generation), then they sell the idea to the decision makers at university level (issue selling & championing), then they build a small working piece with whatever resources that they can (resource creation & mobilization) and finally the university formalizes it so that it lasts (formalization & institutionalization). However, this flow can change or adapt: under time pressure, the "sell" and "build" often overlap, and sometimes the sequence does not work – for example, multi-step approvals slow things so much that a pilot stays a one-time-try or a personal experience instead of becoming a university routine.

Opportunity scanning & idea generation. Academics repeatedly relied on low barrier arenas to generate ideas for change within the university, such as: "*coffee/lab conversations, seminars, long-standing ties*". As a few participants from UNI-A and UNI-B claimed:

"Working within a research institute puts you in a space attuned to opportunities... internal seminars and team meetings where opportunities are flagged... colleagues alert us to overseas collaboration opportunities" / "We often cooperate with external enterprises, which surfaces new ideas and opportunities—sometimes together with colleagues from other areas".

In these spaces, people exchange notes on calls, datasets, and potential partners; and a concrete project idea form (e.g., "*let's build a secure-data routes, let's convene a topic network, let's fix student–employer matching*"). Across the cases, the start of the intrapreneurial action is a specific problematic point that academics identify within the university, along with the names of two or three colleagues who want to try something small together.



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Issue selling & championing. Once an idea has started, academics translate it into what the university "counts" and take it further to departments while holding resources and legitimacy. As one academic from UNI-A described:

"We organize a conference in summer 2025—aiming to make it annual. The first edition is invitation-only with leading scholars in entrepreneurship/strategy to seed reputation. Setting it up was surprisingly easy: we pitched to Unit Research & Innovation (R&I) emphasizing reputational benefits for the university (e.g., attracting fractional professors, visibility). We received a small internal grant for venue hospitality and a keynote, and Unit R&I has been proactive—nudging timelines, offering to create a webpage, and helping with logistics—while we own the academic program."

In the above quote, the idea is pitched as reputation-building (in visibility terms), which attracts small but timely support—a modest grant or logistical help—while academic ownership remains with the scholars (they control the content and speakers). In another case – "*secure data research server installed at university for ongoing projects for academics*"- the same tactic is used, but the outcome is research capability (method/data infrastructure), which justifies institutional action. So, the issue of selling appears to do two things at once: it can convert a local idea into something that "counts" centrally (whether for reputation or capability), and it clarifies roles—who keeps the academic lead and *who* provides enabling services (web, finance, venue).

Resource creation & mobilization. Before getting significant support from the university, academics worked with what they had—building in small steps—but that work. As they mentioned at UNI-A and UNI-B:



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"For research: individual research budgets ... Unit R&I also has pots that can be assembled for school-benefitting activities (as with our conference), and centers hold some funds. Navigating these pockets is where Unit R&I is invaluable—they helped piece together our budget."

"Support came from another Department's administrative structures: Office I&P and the orientation team ... we also have these functions at the department level, which helped operationalize the ideas."

At UNI-A, they ran an informal blockchain group, then used a tiny R&I grant to stage a multi-speaker event—a visible "proof it works." At UNI-B, the I&P office added push email alerts for student–employer matches and priced an alum event so it would pay for itself. These concrete pieces—an event, a lab block, a working push rule—prove that the idea can run and later receive support from the university level.

Formalization & institutionalization. Successful pilots were then embedded with appointed leads, recurring funding, and simple follow-up steps. As participants mentioned:

"We secured a grant for the Department of Excellence (DoE). Within that grant, I allocated significant funds to the development of a platform for the integrated management of departmental information, which is currently under development."

"I also introduced the Department Workshop, an annual team-building event for all administrative staff and faculty... an annual PhD retreat... and weekly standup meetings for PhD students." – recurring.

At UK-A, secure data access moved from a single safe pod to routine office-based access for accredited staff—now used in project delivery. At UNI-C, the DoE grant funded an integrated data



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platform. In each case, the pilot gained a responsible owner, a stable funding line (or self-sustaining model), and simple, written procedures so it runs the same way every time.

4.3 Academics' Sensemaking process – Pre-decisional orientations

Academics attempt to make sense of the contradictions that they experience in the university in different ways, and this also shapes their intrapreneurial behavior. Across the interviews, we observed a set of pre-decisional orientations—habitual ways of interpreting situations before concrete choices are made—that help explain why some academics mobilize contradictions as opportunities for IB, while others treat contradictions as constraints – no further innovative action). Comparing across the three cases, first-order statements clustered into four second-order orientations: Contradiction Appraisal, Identity Stance, Agency Attribution, and Temporal Move. Below, we present each orientation, illustrate both stances with interview evidence, and clarify how they channel IB action.

Pre-decisional orientations of sensemaking

Contradiction Appraisal Orientation. We observed that, *before* deciding what to do, academics first appraise the contradiction they face: some read it as a challenge that justifies for new initiatives and resource-seeking; others read it as a threat that signals misaligned values or procedural risk. This appraisal sets the tone for everything that follows. As once an academic from UNI-A said:

"I work with large datasets. In the past decade, the UK's data-access infrastructure for administrative data improved. The national institutions have made administrative data easier to access and linked registers (e.g., school records with university and labor-market outcomes). Initially, access required travel to another city to work in a secure data lab. In the late 2010s, they introduced "safe pods"—secure terminals installed locally that connect to the national secure



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research server. I led the academic case and, with a data librarian colleague, got a pod installed. Later, access shifted again to allow institutional accreditation and designated offices as access points for accredited researchers. I led the effort to get that agreement in place at the university. Compared to the safe pod (limited hours, advance booking, no external access), office-based secure access is far better for ongoing projects. Now we can bid for and deliver projects that require this access".

The academic interpreted the contradiction "need for access to sensitive data while dealing with strict security issues" as something that could be worked through. He/she started small by leading the case and installing the pod in collaboration with a colleague and later formalized even a better process – the establishment of a particular office at the university. Also, tensions caused by access barriers are framed as problems to solve rather than stop signs. They took ownership ("*led the case,*" "*applied,*" "*moved forward*") and turned barriers (e.g., *secure data access*) into new processes that enabled projects to move forward. In short, they read the contradiction as permission to act.

On the other side, some academics interpret the performance contradictions as a threat and high process cost: One academic claims:

"Recognition matters a lot—and administrative constraints (rules, paperwork) reduce flexibility and slow implementation. The system doesn't strongly empower new ideas or perspective shifts."

At UNI-A, participants describe a research-and-money culture where promotions "*reward stellar research despite poor teaching/citizenship.*" Accompanied with central approvals and multi-step signatures ("*even seminar guidelines took several rounds to get approved*"), the perceived payoff of doing something new is low while the procedural exposure is high—so academics save their efforts



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and wait for “*realign[ed] values and incentives.*” Whereas, at UNI-B, academics point to rules and paperwork that “*reduce flexibility and slow implementation.*” Even when energy exists, formal channels are read as time sinks that do not “strongly empower new ideas or perspective shifts.” The result is deferral: cross-department ideas remain just discussions because pushing them further looks like trading research time for uncertain institutional gains.

Identity stance. Across the three universities, academics’ identity characteristics—how they see “what counts” as legitimate academic role—emerged as a pre-decisional orientation that shapes whether contradictions become new projects. In several academic settings, we saw a “bridge” identity in action (scholar vs. intrapreneur): some academics narrated how a small spark became a legitimate intrapreneurial action. As one UK colleague put it:

“Without a fixed program, I organized informal seminars and invited colleagues across the university to present on the topic; interest grew among faculty. In my teaching, I bring in entrepreneurs; one was a founder of a specific marketplace who visited and spoke. We also hosted someone involved in Public Blockchain. Later, an opportunity arose to apply for modest internal funding through Unit R&I. We organized an event with around a dozen speakers and student attendance—it worked well” Another described how institutional actors teach the pathway and help with the first steps: *“They encourage impact and run workshops... I’ll explain what a ‘good idea’ looks like... Sometimes secure funds to buy out research time for market discovery.”*

These narratives show how some academics see scholar and intrapreneur as part of the same role. We call this a ‘bridge’ identity”. They treat small institutional fixes as scholarly contributions when they enable better research, teaching or societal engagement. As the UK colleague described, they



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started with informal seminars to build interest, brought entrepreneurs into teaching, and then used modest funding to organize a bigger event.

For some other academics, the story runs differently; they define ‘real’ academic work narrowly as research outputs, and we identify this as a “purist” identity. *“They measure people's success in terms of papers... ‘Can we buy new data to develop new papers?’... They discuss entrepreneurial ideas but don't implement them.”* A second voice stated about the consequence: *“The university's incentives are driven by research metrics. Other activities are largely ‘free will’.”* In these settings, engagement and commercialization are talked about among research settings, but still these academics sit at the edge of what counts, so ideas tend to stay peripheral rather than becoming pilots.

Agency attribution. A third pre-decisional orientation concerned where academics locate control: some narrate causes and levers (the practical things they adjust to make something happen) as outside themselves (externalized), while others narrate about a local control (agentic/controllable). Several other academics described taking ownership to change the conditions of work. For example, one academic mentioned:

“We're organizing a conference... Setting it up was surprisingly easy: we pitched to Unit R&I emphasizing reputational benefits... We received a small internal grant... Unit R&I has been proactive—while we own the academic program.” The same characteristic appears in smaller initiatives: *“We decided to start experimenting informally... Later... applied for modest internal funding... organized an event with about a dozen speakers.”* These quotes indicate how academics locate control locally (in “set up,” “organized”). Whereas, some others, who framed the control as sitting with the university system, mentioned: *“Help exists if you know it's there... With the email*



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volume, it's hard to tell what's relevant... support feels inconsistent and inequitable—well-embedded groups get guided early; newcomers must piece things together.” Here, control is considered hidden and uneven; and the academics response was to pull back. When academics feel agentic (control is local), they talk and act like owners, whereas when they feel externalized, they see the levers as hidden in the university.

Temporal move. Across the cases, academics differed on when to move in terms of intrapreneurial action: some adopted an experiment-first stance—*“we decided to start experimenting informally—not through official bureaucracy—see what happens and then move forward if it made sense”*. Others chose to defer, citing tight calendars and overload: *“there isn't much time to initiate new ideas... I considered a spin-out but the workload leaves too little time,”* and *“many of us can't attend... we're overloaded with announcements, so opportunities get missed.”*

Across cases, these timing habits co-occur in patterned ways. While some academics try first and only go through formal channels if it works, some others delay and point out to full calendars, heavy workloads and too many tasks to track, so they leave ideas aside.

Together, these four main orientations of sensemaking of contradictions line up into two main patterns: a transformative path when work feels legitimate and doable; and an inhibitive path when incentives feel misaligned and control is lacking. We elaborate these two patterns and the resulting process model (Figure 5) in the Discussion section.



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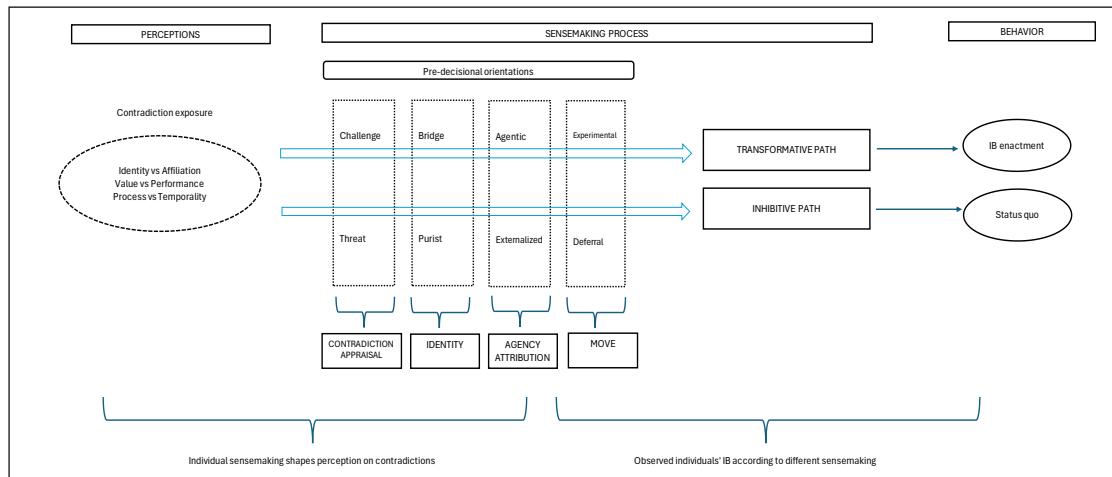


Figure 7 Process Model (Sensemaking of contradictions)

5. DISCUSSIONS

Our findings integrate academics' experiences of contradictions, their pre-decisional orientations, and their subsequent intrapreneurial moves into a two-path process model (Figure 2). The model explains how everyday contradictions in universities translate into intrapreneurial action or into continuation of core routines: the same contradictory role demands are interpreted through patterned orientations—contradiction appraisal, identity stance, agency attribution, and temporal move—which shape whether academics initiate and sustain intrapreneurial behavior (IB). In doing so, we contribute to academic intrapreneurship research by offering a micro-process account of how IB emerges under institutional complexity, and to tensions/contradictions research by specifying the interpretive mechanisms through which persistent role contradictions become actionable rather than merely constraining.

Contradictions as identity-relevant events shaping legitimacy and feasibility. A central implication of our model is that contradictions operate as identity-relevant events in academic work. They prompt academics to engage in interpretive work about who they are in the organization and



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what forms of action are legitimate and defensible as “academic”. When contradictions are appraised as challenges and paired with a bridge identity that integrates scholarly and intrapreneurial elements, IB becomes interpretable as an extension of scholarly work rather than a deviation from it. Academics initiate small-scale experiments, frame value in academically credible terms (e.g., reputation, capability building, research/teaching enhancement), and pursue visible routes to formalization. By contrast, when contradictions are appraised as threats and paired with a purist identity, intrapreneurial ideas are often abandoned not due to a lack of opportunities but because they are interpreted as illegitimate, too exposing, or misaligned with the academic role. Thus, contradictions matter not only because they constrain resources but because they shape pre-action judgments about legitimacy (“is this acceptable for someone like me?”) and feasibility (“can I move this through the organization?”).

From contradiction to (in)action: a recursive conversion mechanism. Our model further specifies a conversion mechanism through which contradictions are translated into divergent action pathways. In the transformative pathway—characterized by challenge appraisal, bridge identity, internalized agency, and an “experiment-first” temporal orientation—academics turn contradictions into pilotable initiatives, combine issue selling with small-scale resource mobilization, and progressively formalize activities inside the university. Early wins and peer endorsement provide cues that reinforce challenge appraisals, normalize the bridge identity, and localize perceived control, making subsequent initiatives more doable and repeatable. In the inhibitive pathway—marked by threat appraisal, purist identity, externalized agency, and deferral—contradictions are interpreted as indivisible risks and low-payoff exposures; control is attributed to procedures and committees; and action is postponed, leaving initiatives isolated or abandoned. Importantly, these



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pathways are recursive: early outcomes feed back into subsequent sensemaking, shaping how academics interpret later contradictions and whether they escalate or dampen intrapreneurial efforts.

5.1 Research Implications

This study contributes to *academic intrapreneurship research* by developing a micro-process explanation of how intrapreneurial behavior (IB) emerges—or fails to emerge—under the contradictions of academic work. Whereas prior work has primarily emphasized antecedents and outcomes of academic intrapreneurship (e.g., individual traits, organizational supports, or environmental conditions), our findings specify the interpretive mechanisms that precede action: academics’ contradiction appraisal (challenge vs. threat), identity stance (bridge vs. purist), agency attribution (internal vs. externalized control), and temporal move (experiment-first vs. deferral). These pre-decisional orientations shape whether academics translate the same contradictory conditions into intrapreneurial moves or into continued routine enactment of existing role demands. In doing so, we advance research that calls for more process-oriented understanding of academic intrapreneurship by showing that IB is not simply enabled or inhibited by institutional conditions; rather, it is enacted through a sequence of meaning-making and action that unfolds over time. This complements work emphasizing that cultivating an internal “intrapreneurial culture” is critical for university change and impact (Glinyanova et al., 2021; Klofsten et al., 2024) by specifying the micro foundations through which culture becomes actionable: shared understandings do not operate “in the abstract,” but through the ways academics interpret contradictions and decide whether action is legitimate and feasible.

Second, we extend identity-based accounts of academic intrapreneurship by operationalizing an identity mechanism that helps explain why some academics can integrate intrapreneurship into



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academic work while others treat it as misaligned or illegitimate. Specifically, we theorize a bridge identity as a subtype of academic professional identity that integrates scholarly and intrapreneurial elements such that intrapreneurial work can be justified as part of “doing academic work,” rather than as a departure from it. This deepens existing arguments that intrapreneurs navigate diverse roles and institutional logics (e.g., Oostervink et al., 2016) by specifying when and how identity integration supports IB in universities.

Third, we contribute to the emerging literature on “intrapreneurial universities” (Flores et al., 2024, Klosften et al., 2024) by clarifying the transformation pathway through which IB can develop and potentially scale. Our model shows how academics convert contradictions into “try-then-scale” sequences: low-stakes experimentation generates early feedback and peer validation, which then supports issue selling, resource mobilization, and eventual formalization and institutionalization. This adds explanatory precision to accounts that describe bottom-up innovation in universities by identifying the mechanism linking early micro-actions to subsequent stabilization.

This study also contributes to *tensions/contradictions research* in institutionalized professions by specifying how role-level contradictions become consequential for behavior through members’ sensemaking (Besharov et al., 2014; Greenwood et al., 2011; Reay & Hinings, 2009). We identify three recurring contradictions that shape IB in university settings—identity and affiliation, value and performance, and process and temporality—and show how academics’ sensemaking of these contradictions routes the same initiative toward action or inaction via patterned pre-decisional orientations.



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5.2 Practical Implications

The findings of our study suggest that universities should acknowledge the co-existence of multiple logics and address the implications of introduction the intrapreneurial role into the university system. From a policy level point of view, more discussion is encouraged in order to balance the roles and rewards across the institution, so that small initiatives have recognized value and a clear route to institutionalization. Also, the working conditions should be developed to better support IB. Universities should legitimize the intrapreneurial work in performance systems. To address the value-performance contradiction, evaluation schemes should consider also the intrapreneurial work rather than publications and external partnerships. Clearer recognition systems would shift academics' identity stance towards bridge identity, making intrapreneurial work count and encouraging IB. Lastly, universities should support sensemaking through shared forums, where academics can discuss these contradictions and explore potential ways to help normalize bridging identities. Management structures could also benefit from this kind of understanding, fostering collective sensemaking among those at risk of disengagement can help members stay engaged. Leaders, managers and administrators need to have more awareness of the institutional complexities at play. Whereas at the industry level, intrapreneurship should be more visible in terms of assessment and support frameworks.

2.2.5.3. Limitations

Our study has limitations that open avenues for further research. First, we generate our findings from qualitative evidence and context bound to a small number of universities in two national systems. As with most theory -building research, our aim is to provide analytical depth rather than statistical generalizability (Eisenhardt, 1989). Patterns in how contradictions are interpreted may



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vary across disciplines, governance models and policy environment. Also, our data consists of interviews and internal materials, while process tracing helps reduce the bias of participants. We did not directly measure the bias of participants. We did not measure pre-decisional orientations on a scale. Lastly, we do articulate a configurational mechanism from contradiction sensemaking to action (non-action), and our design does not establish any causal effects – observing other factors, such as leadership style or power dynamics, could also play a role. Hence, we suggest that future research could examine measurements of the four pre-decisional orientations and link them to behavioral indicators across different contexts within disciplines, as well as in non-academic settings where incentives and norms differ. Longitudinal mixed methods would also be valuable for examining how repeated episodes of IB could accumulate or fail.



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CHAPTER 3 – CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This dissertation contributes with two theoretical models on the development process of intrapreneurial behavior (IB) in universities. Across the two studies, the dissertation advances a central argument: academic intrapreneurship is not simply a function of traits or institutional support; it is a multi-level process in which academics interpret contradictions in their work environment and, when action becomes legitimate and feasible, enact cross-mission practices that connect mission activities into workable initiatives.

The first study develops a process model of **academic intrapreneurial behaviour (IB)** under a tri-mission mandate. The model clarifies how IB is conditioned by five antecedents—three predominantly enabling (motivational identity; local capacity and support; external triggers) and two predominantly constraining (bureaucratic constraints; incentives misalignment)—and how it then unfolds through **Tri-Mission Coupling (TMC)**, a set of cross-mission practices that connect and coordinate teaching, research, and societal engagement. These results have three main implications for research. This study advances a clearer, empirically grounded understanding of **what counts as IB in universities** and how it becomes visible in everyday work. Prior research has extensively documented outward-facing university entrepreneurship (e.g., spin-offs, licensing, and technology transfer) and the institutional pressures that support these outcomes. Our findings broaden this lens by showing that IB in academia is not limited to commercialization-oriented initiatives. It also appears in mission-facing innovation (e.g., teaching modules, research solutions, engagement formats) and in administrative and coordination innovations that shape how mission work is organized and sustained (e.g., program coordination, scouting roles). Conceptually, this reframes academic intrapreneurship as observable, goal-relevant initiative-taking embedded in



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routine academic work rather than as a narrow subset of entrepreneurial outputs. Also, the study contributes a process explanation of how the three missions relate in practice. Whereas tri-mission debates often emphasize tensions and overload, TMC specifies how academics actively work with and through these tensions by coupling mission activities. We theorize three recurring coupling modes: cross-mission reuse (redeploying outputs and learning across missions), cross-mission experimentation (testing initiatives through pilots, transversal arenas, and external collaboration), and cross-mission orchestration (coordinating time, attention, and capacity through sequencing, parallel work, and delegation). This vocabulary shifts the analytical focus from missions as parallel mandates to missions as interdependent work domains that can generate cross-mission pathways for IB. Importantly, the model explains how initiatives move from early “first moves” to more durable outcomes by showing how mission coupling creates the practical continuity needed for initiatives to persist. Finally, study 1 positions universities as a revealing setting for broader intrapreneurship theory. Universities share features with other professional, multi-goal organizations—high autonomy, strong professional identities, and complex performance regimes—yet they also exhibit distinctive constraints (e.g., public-sector procedural rigidities, academic calendars, and evaluation systems that privilege some outputs over others). The TMC modes mirror intrapreneurial dynamics in corporate settings (resource recombination, trial-and-error learning, coordination of attention and capacity), but they operate through the specific materiality and temporal rhythms of academic work (courses, semesters, external calls, and engagement venues). As such, TMC offers a transferable process lens for studying intrapreneurship in other professionalized contexts where innovation must be enacted alongside multiple institutionalized goals.



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Future research can build on these implications in several ways. Comparative studies across universities and countries should test the boundary conditions of TMC: how funding regimes, governance forms, bureaucratic rules, and evaluation systems amplify or dampen reuse, experimentation, and orchestration. Research should also examine whether TMC operates similarly for academics whose roles are more mission-constrained (e.g., teaching-focused staff, professional staff, or research-only roles), and whether alternative coupling pathways emerge. Methodologically, longitudinal and micro-longitudinal designs (e.g., diary studies, process tracing of specific initiatives, repeated interviews) would strengthen temporal claims about how coupling unfolds and when initiatives stall or become institutionalized. Finally, the model invites operationalization: future work could develop measures of mission-coupling practices and enabling levers (e.g., micro-grants, fast-track administrative support, demonstration arenas, recognition in evaluation) and test how these relate to different IB outcomes (routinization, resourcing for repetition, replication) across contexts.

The second study develops a two-path process model explaining how academics' everyday experiences of contradictions translate into **intrapreneurial behaviour (IB)**. The central insight is that the same contradictory role demands do not deterministically enable or inhibit IB. Rather, they become consequential through patterned pre-decisional orientations—contradiction appraisal (challenge vs. threat), identity stance (bridge vs. purist), agency attribution (internalized vs. externalized), and temporal move (experiment-first vs. deferral)—that shape whether academics judge intrapreneurial action as legitimate and feasible and whether they sustain it over time. This model has three main implications for research.



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First, Study 2 advances academic intrapreneurship research by providing a micro-process explanation for why IB emerges—or fails to emerge—under institutional complexity. Prior work has often emphasized antecedents and outcomes of academic intrapreneurship (e.g., traits, organizational supports, environmental pressures). Our findings specify what happens *before* action: academics engage in rapid interpretive work that defines (i) what counts as “acceptable” academic action and (ii) whether action is worth the exposure and effort under competing demands. This contribution is particularly important because it explains heterogeneity within the same institutional setting: academics facing similar constraints can reach different action judgments because they interpret contradictions differently. In doing so, Study 2 complements calls to “build intrapreneurial culture” in universities by showing that culture operates through micro foundations: shared norms and institutional expectations become actionable only insofar as academics interpret contradictions as challenges rather than threats, adopt an identity stance that legitimizes intrapreneurial work as academic work, attribute sufficient agency to themselves or their local environment, and make an experiment-first move rather than deferring.

Second, Study 2 extends identity-based accounts of academic intrapreneurship by theorizing a bridge identity mechanism. Rather than treating identity as a stable “trait,” the findings show how contradictions become identity-relevant events that prompt questions about who one is as a scholar and what forms of action are defensible as “academic.” When contradictions are appraised as challenges and paired with a bridge identity, IB becomes interpretable as an extension of scholarly work rather than a deviation from it. This facilitates small-scale experimentation and credible framing of value (e.g., capability building, teaching/research enhancement). Conversely, when contradictions are appraised as threats and paired with a purist identity, intrapreneurial ideas may be



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abandoned not because opportunities are absent, but because action is interpreted as illegitimate or overly exposing. This finding adds explanatory precision to the literature on academic intrapreneurs navigating multiple logics by specifying when and how identity integration supports action (rather than assuming that identity conflict automatically produces either paralysis or innovation).

Third, the study contributes to tensions/contradictions research in institutionalized professions by specifying an interpretive conversion mechanism that routes contradictions toward action or inaction. We identify three recurring contradictions in academic work—identity vs. affiliation, value vs. performance, and process vs. temporality—and show how they become behaviourally consequential through a configuration of orientations. The model is not only dual path but recursive: early outcomes feed back into later sensemaking, reinforcing the transformative pathway (small wins normalize bridge identities and internalized agency) or amplifying the inhibitive pathway (deferral and negative outcomes reinforce threat appraisal and externalized control). This recursive feature matters because it highlights a dynamic process of escalation or dampening over time, rather than a one-shot decision to innovate.

Future research can extend Study 2 along several directions. First, comparative studies across disciplines, governance models, and national systems could examine how the prevalence of contradictions and the distribution of sensemaking orientations vary with institutional environments, incentive regimes, and professional norms. Second, future work should operationalize and validate measures of the four pre-decisional orientations and examine how they predict observable behavioural indicators (e.g., initiation of pilots, issue selling, persistence, or deferral). Third, longitudinal and micro-longitudinal designs (e.g., diary studies, repeated interviews, event-based process tracing) could test the model's recursive dynamics by capturing



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how early outcomes reshape later appraisals, identities, agency attributions, and temporal moves. Fourth, research could examine additional moderators that were not fully observable in this study—such as leadership styles, team dynamics, power relations, and resource access—that may shift appraisals from threat to challenge or enable bridge identities to be sustained. Finally, extending this model beyond universities to other professional, multi-goal settings (e.g., public agencies) would clarify the portability of the conversion mechanism and the conditions under which contradictions become actionable rather than merely constraining.