

# Academic Growth - Culture of 21st Century Education

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## Abstract:

**Research Question (RQ):** What is academic growth. How is it developed across various higher education (he) organizations?

**Purpose:** The purpose of this research is to explore the multifaceted nature of academic growth in higher education institutions, aiming to understand how various practices are developed in this context.

**Method:** The theoretical framework is grounded in organizational anthropology. The research methodology includes literature review and a virtual ethnography.

**Results:** The study reveals that universities and faculties are increasingly adopting holistic approaches to academic growth. These approaches emphasize not only intellectual development but also personal and professional growth. The influence of organizational culture strategies is evident in shaping these academic practices.

**Organization:** The findings carry significant implications for managers and leaders in higher education. Understanding the role of organizational culture in academic growth, as well as the context in which it develops, can guide the creation of more effective strategies. These strategies can promote academic motivation and success, along with institutional development.

**Society:** This research aims to assist higher education organizations in navigating the complexities of today's educational landscape. By fostering constructive change, it contributes to the broader societal goal of developing well-rounded, competent individuals equipped to address contemporary global challenges.

**Originality:** This study's originality lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining insights from organizational anthropology with organizational studies. It highlights the nuanced interplay between institutional culture and academic development, a relatively underexplored area in current literature.

**Limitations / further research:** The research is limited by its scope and the diversity of institutions and countries studied. Further research could expand to include a broader range of higher education institutions, particularly in varying cultural contexts, as well as ethnographic fieldwork and stakeholders' perspectives, to deepen the understanding of how different organizational cultures impact academic growth.

**Keywords:** Academic growth, Higher education, talent retention; organizational anthropology, organizational culture, skills, virtual ethnography.

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, the concept of academic growth or development has gained significant attention. This shift reflects a transition into an era where the pursuit of lifelong education

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extends beyond institutional confines. It has become a fundamental aspect of daily experience in the Western way of life. Part of humanity finds itself in the midst of a digitalized and VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) era, where traditional skills and methods of learning, working, transacting, being and interacting face significant challenges. As noted by (Lion, 2022), the global zeitgeist is increasingly shifting towards an entrepreneurial paradigm. Covid-19 has not only highlighted the importance of personal development and the concept of being the architect of one's own life and resilience but has also reinforced the notion of following one's own aspirations. This shift underscores the need for continuous skill updates and adaptation to thrive in our ever-evolving ecosystem.

Higher education organizations, as dynamic social constructs, are deeply embedded within a broader socio-historical, economic, and cultural framework (Brenneis et al., 2005). These institutions are navigating fiercely competitive educational and labour markets, both locally and globally, which are fraught with challenges, like retention of students and talent, and a growing trend of educational discontinuation due to a variety of factors (Zengeya et al., 2021). Indeed, one of the major challenges faced by Higher Education Institutions globally is the decrease in student retention and graduation rates (Gaikar, 2020), an issue that has important consequences for both future educational trends and the development of the workforce.

Under this scenario, many higher education organizations are developing strategies and updating their organizational cultures to adapt to and navigate these challenges. One such strategy involves embracing the imperative of academic, educational, professional, and personal growth.

In this context, this article aims to explore this research topic through anthropological lens, striving to answer two key questions: what defines academic growth, and how is it developed across various higher education institutions? The goal is to gain insights into the factors that promote academic growth within these institutions. To achieve this, our research methodology will include an extensive literature review supplemented by virtual ethnography.

## **2 Theoretical framework**

Scientific literature underscores that academic growth, also referred to as academic development, is a multifaceted concept intertwining personal, intellectual, social, emotional, and cultural dimensions. Martin (2015) defines it as the continuous improvement and development of knowledge, skills, and capabilities among students and faculty members. This includes acquiring knowledge and abilities, critical thinking, problem-solving capabilities, research competencies, together with tools that allow personal and professional progress. According to Dweck (in Martin, 2015), the hallmark of human nature is each person's great capacity to adapt, to change, and to grow.

In the realm of education, most studies on academic growth have primarily focused on the field of psycho-educational research. These studies aim to understand how individuals can enhance their academic growth. Achievement goal theory, based on two types of goals: performance

goals and mastery goals, has been particularly relevant to the study of educational growth (Elliot, 2005, in Martin, 2015). Goal-setting theory, as outlined by Locke and Latham (2002, in Martin, 2015) and Senko, Hulleman, and Harackiewicz (2011, in Martin, 2015), offers insights into how growth goals can positively impact educational outcomes. Self-determination theory, as described by Deci and Ryan (2008, 2012 in Martin, 2015), also provides a framework for understanding growth approaches. This theory highlights three basic psychological needs—autonomy, relatedness, and competence—whose satisfaction influences individuals' motivation and achievement, including their goal pursuits. When these needs are met, autonomous motivation emerges (Deci and Ryan, 2008, in Martin, 2015). The self-concordance model, proposed by Sheldon and Elliot (1999, in Martin, 2015), is also pertinent, suggesting that goals aligned with an individual's core values and interests have significant implications for goal striving. Self-concordant goals are integrated with the self, while externally imposed goals, not aligned with personal interests and values, lack motivational strength (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999, in Martin, 2015).

From a sociological viewpoint, particularly informed by Bourdieu's theoretical approach, academic growth is best understood through the concepts of habitus, field and cultural capital. Habitus, as conceptualized by Bourdieu, refers to a set of ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions formed through socialization, and it significantly influences academic development (Bourdieu, 1979, 2007). Bourdieu's idea proposes that an individual's academic trajectory is shaped by their social origins, life experiences, and access to cultural capital - a term encompassing knowledge, skills, and educational assets (Bourdieu, 1979). Furthermore, Bourdieu's notion of field highlights the structured social arenas where individuals and institutions engage, compete, and seek academic prestige and progress (Bourdieu, 1979, 2007). Bourdieu's focus on cultural capital's role in educational attainment offers insight into how access to and utilization of cultural resources within the academic field influence academic growth.

Academic growth in higher education organizations can also be analyzed within the framework of "organizational culture". This concept has been the subject of debate across various disciplines, including organizational psychology, sociology, social psychology, and organizational studies. Schein (1990) has defined it as a system of values and beliefs influenced by organizational structures, technology, and the environment, creating shared norms of thought and action among all organization members.

Anthropologically, organizational culture is a complex system encompassing shared beliefs, ideas, attitudes, behaviours, and tangible artifacts characteristic of a group (de Waal Malefyt, 2024). Culture is viewed as a web of meanings (Geertz, 1991), establishing shared cognition, feelings, actions, and logics. It is dynamic, historical, and contextualized, with meanings procedurally negotiated and disputed (Wright, 1998). Within organizations, culture includes shared knowledge, symbolic representations, and adaptability, forming a rich tapestry of historical meanings that contribute to everyday social realities (Hamada Conolly, 2015, p. 125, in de Waal Malefyt, 2024, p. 96). Indeed, Higher education organizations, as multifaceted

organizations, embody not only an organizational culture, but networks of interwoven subcultures (Waal Malefyt, 2024). These subcultures intersect and coexist within the larger organizational framework.

These cultures are collectively learned and shaped through interaction and negotiation among all members. Its components are learned through group experiences, guiding observable actions or practices (Sanchez Garcia & Gasser, 2006). Successful organizations must continually adapt and innovate, a process that is relational and collective, engaging with people, objects, and materials in the given situation (Hallam and Ingold, 2007, in Waal Malefyt, 2024, p. 106).

Based on this conceptual framework, the objective of the article is to uncover insights that could enhance the promotion of academic growth within higher education. An additional need for a deeper investigation into what academic growth means in the current context of competitive educational and labour markets and the imperative of personal growth is identified, which is central to the current Western entrepreneurial paradigm of “self-construction” and “continuous improvement” (Lion, 2022).

### **3 Method**

The research approaches significantly influence how the study is conducted, how the findings are interpreted through theoretical frameworks, and how the anticipated outcomes of the research are shaped (de Waal Malefyt, 2024). In this study, I have adopted an anthropological perspective for its ability to provide lateral, holistic, and contextualized viewpoints. These are essential for uncovering often-overlooked issues (Tett, 2022).

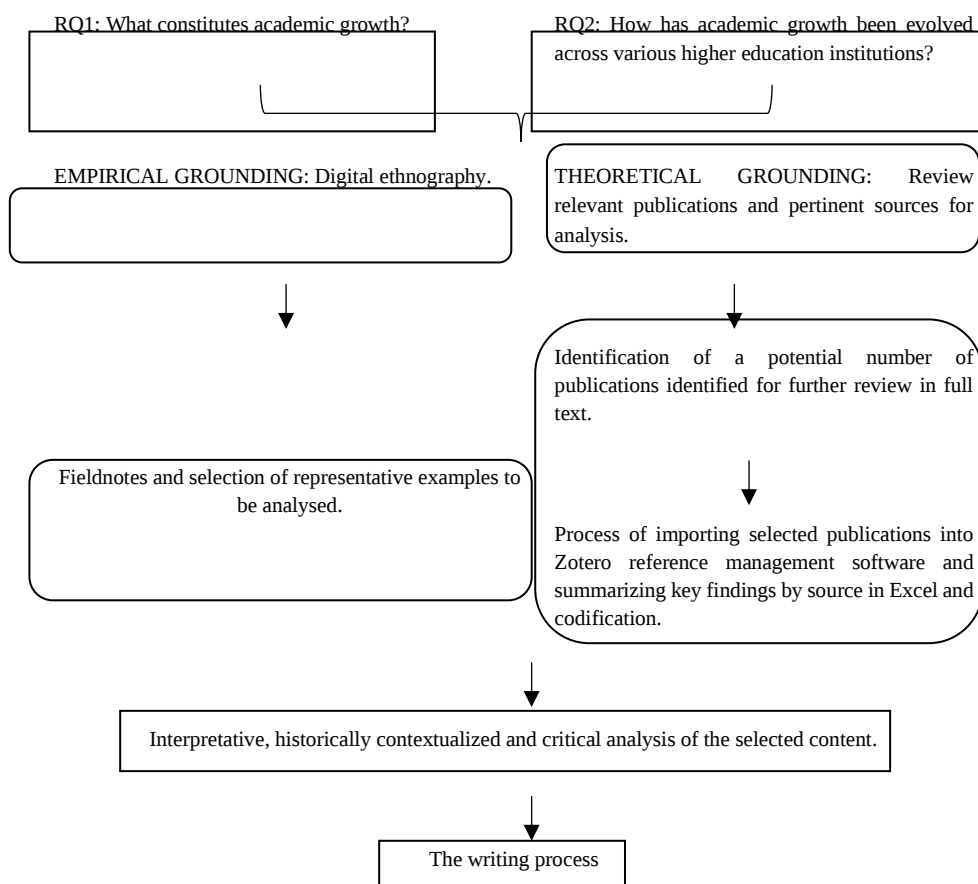


Figure 1. Flowchart of methodology process

In order to capture the complexities and dynamics shaping academic growth in contemporary higher education settings, I have conducted an exploratory research, which includes a dual-method approach of qualitative research. This encompassed a comprehensive literature review complemented by virtual ethnography (Figure 1).

Conducting a literature review is fundamental in academic research. It establishes a theoretical base and context for the study, allowing researchers to identify knowledge gaps, align with current academic discourse, and build on existing theories and findings (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). By reviewing the relevant literature, this study ensures its relevance and positions itself within the broader academic dialogue on the research object. This involved using virtual scientific catalogues and search engines for clear and reliable data construction and interpretation. Trusted databases such as Google Scholar and Scopus were primarily utilized. The keywords used combined with Boolean logic (AND/OR), included phrases such as “academic growth” OR “academic development” AND “higher education” OR “universities”. Criteria included year of publication (2010-2023), language (English), avoidance of duplicates, selection from reputable sources with full publication details and full access to the texts (Table 1). Texts that were considered central to the topic, were included even if the exclusion criteria would normally omit them.

Table 1. Criteria of inclusion / exclusion

| Criterion                       | Inclusion                                                            | Exclusion                                                                   |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Topic of the publication</b> | Discuss the issue of academic growth in higher educational settings. | Do not discuss the issue of academic growth in higher educational settings. |
| <b>Data type</b>                | Academic articles as well as various university blogs worldwide.     | Other data type.                                                            |
| <b>Time period</b>              | Between 2000 and 2023.                                               | Publications outside the time period.                                       |
| <b>Language</b>                 | English.                                                             | Non-English.                                                                |

In my research, I have employed immersive digital ethnography techniques, as outlined by Kozinet (2010). This approach involved analysing a variety of digital materials, including websites of higher education institutions, blogs, and academic papers. Drawing from Geertz's perspective, cultures can be seen as "webs of meaning" in which individuals are enmeshed. Consequently, understanding culture involves less a search for fixed laws and more an effort to develop an interpretative framework that focuses on defining the real meanings of things within a specific culture. This methodological choice was influenced by the ability of these digital mediums to represent and frame reality, as well as their integration into practical contexts. (Hine, 2011).

During the process of constructing data, I have selected the most representative cases, in terms of a diversity of practices and examples. Since the research originates from Slovenia, I have included more Slovenian examples.

The data were cross-checked using a variety of methods (Creswell, 2013). My interpretive approach involved reflexive questioning and critical analysis to minimize subjectivity (Guber, 2008; Hansen, n.d.). Triangulation processes were used to validate our research findings and interpretations, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the subject within its broader historical and social contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2023).

## 4 Results

### 4.1 What is academic growth?

Academic growth represents a topic of considerable interest that has been scrutinized through diverse methodologies and theoretical frameworks. The scope of the topic spans from student academic achievement to the professional development of university staff. It integrates pedagogical, psychological, and socio-demographic dimensions (Vermunt, 2005), offering a comprehensive view of the educational journey. Studies adopt multifarious approaches, probing

into the evolution of academic trajectories, evaluating growth, formulating objectives, and analysing mindsets (Martin, 2015).

Part of the literature focusing on student academic development has studied the relationship between inequality and growth (Vermunt, 2005). Studies have found that socioeconomic status significantly influences academic performance and that academic growth can be affected by various external factors (Madegwa et al., 2019; Pant, 2020). For example, De Torres (2023) highlighted the correlation between learning styles and academic performance, indicating that different learning styles have a moderate and positive correlation with academic performance. Zúñiga-Prado et al. (2023) suggest the need for institutional actions to counteract negative sociodemographic impacts. They stress the importance of including activities to strengthen the learning process, as well as providing support programs to maintain academic performance and reduce the inequality gap. Martin (2015) highlights that paying more attention to academic growth could really help many students do better and feel more motivated. Even if some students don't perform better than their peers, they can still surpass their previous achievements.

A different set of studies, as suggested by Zúñiga-Prado et al. (2023) and Martin (2015), concentrates on the pivotal role of higher education institutions in fostering academic growth. An example of this is the work by Ribeiro et al. (2020), who assert that the enhancement of students' academic self-efficacy can be achieved through the establishment of innovative learning environments, specifically designed to cater to the varied needs and knowledge levels of students. In this context, academic Self-Efficacy is defined as an individual's confidence in their ability to successfully complete academic tasks or achieve specific academic objectives. Additional research delves into the impact of academic self-efficacy on student performance and adaptation, investigating the interplay between students' learning patterns, academic achievements, and their learning style preferences. As highlighted by Ramos Salazar & Hayward (2018) emphasize a link between problem-solving skills, academic self-efficacy, and student motivation. Their findings suggest that problem-solving self-efficacy is an indicator of both student motivation and test performance. Furthermore, both academic and problem-solving self-efficacy are identified as predictors of expected grades (Deci and Ryan, 2012 in Martin, 2015).

While some researchers have found little association between growth mindset and achievement, others have demonstrated that growth mindset interventions can improve academic performance (Bostwick et al., 2017; Miller & Srougi, 2021). The psychological approach to academic achievement has been explored (see: Elliot, 2007; Senko, Hulleman and Harackewicz, 2011 and Sheledon and Elliot, 1999), also by using growth mixture models to examine different patterns of academic achievement trajectories (Nie et al., 2021).

Another part of the literature on academic growth emphasizes the importance of academic development programs and the role of academic developers in facilitating growth and progress among university academics (Åkerlind, 2005; Boud & Brew, 2013; Fraser & Ling, 2014; Geertsema & Chng, 2017; Hlengwa, 2019; Kinchin et al., 2018; Timmermans & Sutherland,

2020). These programs aim to support faculty members in enhancing their teaching and research practices, ultimately contributing to their professional advancement and the overall growth of the academic community (Boud & Brew, 2013; Fraser & Ling, 2013; Hlengwa, 2019; Kinchin et al., 2018). Academic growth is also linked to factors such as academic stress, coping strategies, and self-concept, which can significantly influence academic achievement (Awan et al., 2011; Basith et al., 2021; Bembenutty, 2011; Zahra et al., 2010). The relationship between these factors and academic performance is a subject of ongoing research, highlighting the complexity of understanding the mechanisms underlying academic growth.

The literature underscores as well the complex relationship between academic achievements, identity, and the development of a supportive academic culture. Central to this discourse is the role of academic identity and systemic responses in fostering academic growth and development, as highlighted by Geertsema & Chng (2017), Hlengwa (2019) and Taylor, (2011) explore what means to be an academic in contemporary universities. The challenges of academic and professional identities in higher education, especially amid a diversifying workforce and changing educational landscape, are significant. These changes encompass massification, globalization, widening obligations, and the increase in private financing (Cuthbert, 2010). Ylijoki and Ursin observe as well that academic identities have diversified and polarized due to managerial and structural transformations in higher education. Furthermore, Pop et al. (2016) note that high academic achievement correlates with a strong sense of commitment or identity synthesis, whereas low academic achievement can lead to identity confusion and a reevaluation of commitment.

For their part, Selesho & Naile (2014) emphasize the importance of academic growth and professional development in retaining academic staff at universities. The study by Kiragu et al. (2021) further suggest that university leaders should implement targeted retention strategies for academics in senior lecturer and professor positions and those with longer tenure in the academic field and in their institutions. One way is to invest in academic growth.

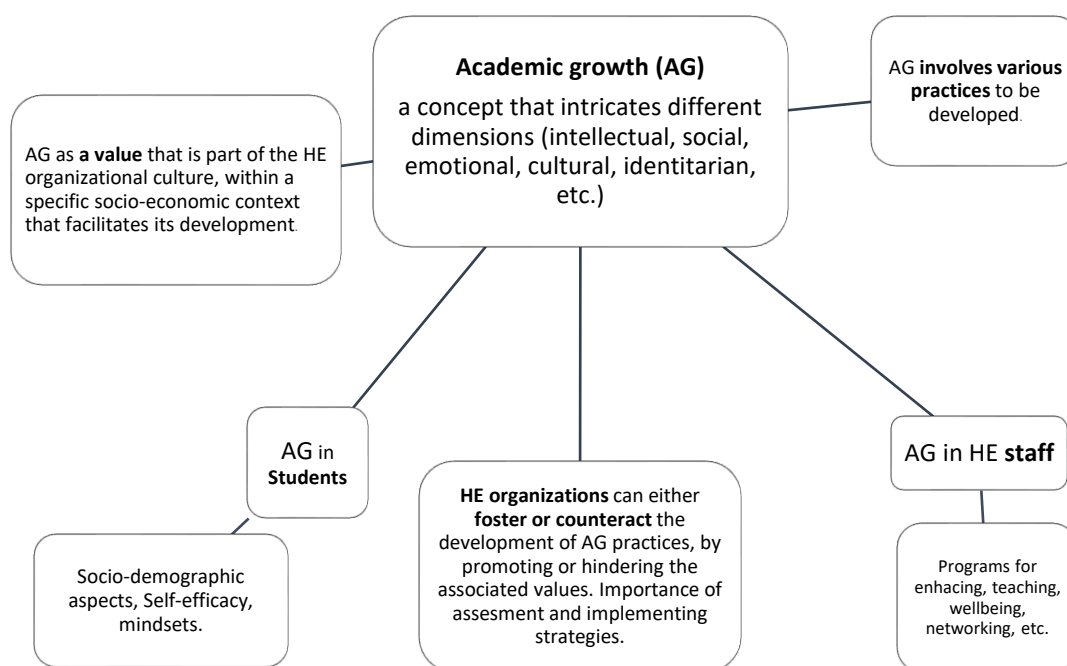


Figure 2. Concept map illustrating the meaning and possible practices of Academic Growth as identified through literature reviews.

In addition, the literature underscores the significance of assessment policies, career competencies, and academic progression in shaping academic growth and development (Barnes et al., 2022; Kickert et al., 2021). Assessment policies play a crucial role in determining academic progress and performance, emphasizing the need for effective evaluation strategies to support students' and faculty members' growth (Kickert et al., 2020). Moreover, career competencies are identified as essential for academic career progression, indicating the importance of strategic development and support for academics at different career stages (Barnes et al., 2022). This highlights the dynamic process of academic growth, which involves continuous learning, adaptation, and skill development to thrive in the academic environment (Barnes et al., 2022; Geertsema & Chng, 2017; Hlengwa, 2019).

#### 4.2 Personal/academic development programs in higher education

The research demonstrated that various universities and faculties provide personal/academic development programs, typically in the form of lifelong learning, which simultaneously serves as an imperative political directive worldwide (f.e.: European Comission, 2020).

The research identified different centres and programs focusing on personal/academic growth. In Table 2, the most relevant and representative results have been systematized.

Table 2. Representative results of centres and programs focusing on personal/academic growth worldwide

| <i>Type of Institution and Country</i> | <i>Initiatives</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <i>Practices/activities</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| University; Denmark                    | It has a lifelong learning policy with an emphasis on employability, personal development, and active citizenship. The university has a <b>Teaching &amp; Learning development and support unit</b> for teachers and research program leaders.     | For academic staff, they offer various services, including <b>Development and training of teachers</b> through courses, workshops, seminars, and counselling, a program for assistant professors to inspire all types of teaching methods, Support for pedagogical tools, Production of videos for teaching and learning purposes. The goal is for <b>students to continue updating their knowledge and skills</b> and to engage in social and organizational innovations that shape the future of sustainable and democratic societies.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| University, Denmark                    | They offer <b>programs and courses for Career and competency development</b> .                                                                                                                                                                     | At this university, <b>competency development encompasses research, teaching, administrative, and leadership skills across all levels and is tailored to current and future job demands</b> . It's not confined to coursework alone. They understand <b>Career development as an ongoing process where employees assess their learning and development, enhancing their competencies and knowledge to achieve academic, personal, or career goals</b> . This includes career clarification for staff in various roles, from temporary researchers to permanent academic positions and technical/administrative roles. <b>Competency development extends beyond formal training to include on-the-job experiences like new tasks, feedback, and collaborative projects</b> . Forms of competency development includes external learning: courses, e-learning, networks, conferences, etc.; and Internal learning: knowledge sharing, peer training, job rotations, coaching, mentorships, etc. |
| University, Hungary                    | In the university works the <b>Centre of Educational Development, Methodology and Organization</b> .                                                                                                                                               | One objective of the <b>Centre for Educational Development, Methodology, and Organization</b> is to enhance education by supporting teachers at the university. They organize <b>training for teachers in educational methodology and e-learning</b> , providing methodological assistance to departments and clinics, coordinating and aiding the development of e-learning materials, and compiling and disseminating the curricula and examination requirements for various subjects.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| University, Ireland                    | The university offers a <b>Learning and Development Program</b> for both staff and students.                                                                                                                                                       | The initiatives provide resources to support personal and career development. <b>Learning and Development</b> also offers a wealth of courses, many of which, such as “ <b>Building Your Resilience</b> ” and “ <b>Time Management</b> ”, address the personal well-being of students and staff. Many courses are available as online workshops. Staff are encouraged to look out for our weekly email updates and to check our schedule of courses.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| University, Singapore                  | They offer a special program for teaching staff, called <b>Teaching and learning academy</b> .                                                                                                                                                     | Among the offerings, teachers have access to a <b>variety of programs including a teaching induction program, a foundational teaching program, a teaching anchoring program, and Tech 4 Teaching</b> . Additionally, there are coaching and mentoring services, a <b>Competency-Based Education Hub</b> , and resources designed to improve access to education, reduce time and cost, and enhance self-efficacy and motivation. Learners can articulate their tacit knowledge and skills, facilitating the recognition of their competencies, which supports skills-based hiring and career advancement.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| University, Slovenia                   | Through their Research and <b>Development Centre</b> , the university offers various programs tailored to improve different skills of their academic staff and students. Some of them are open to the wider public.                                | The centre contributes to <b>comprehensive professional development in multidisciplinary fields through pronounced interdisciplinary work, organizing international workshops, and facilitating expert and student exchanges with leading institutions worldwide, acting as a bridge between academia, research, and industry</b> . It unites and supports researchers from various fields to enhance existing knowledge and develop new solutions. Additionally, it integrates <b>best practice examples</b> , inspires students and young professionals, and provides employment opportunities for young PhDs and postdoctoral researchers. Pedagogically, it strives to incorporate these themes into existing programs at higher education and other educational institutions, further advancing education in this area. They have a portal with a <b>newsletter for “personal and professional development”</b> .                                                                        |
| Faculty, Slovenia                      | They have a <b>personal development program and a Competence Centre</b> , primarily oriented towards students. Nevertheless, teachers have access to several support programs for teaching and coaching. Some courses are available to the public. | The academic growth <b>program for students</b> includes, among other things: <b>How to study effectively; How to study effectively online; Time management; Online exercises to stimulate brain activity; Personal counselling</b> . For <b>teachers</b> , the program includes <b>Development of digital competencies for teachers and online mentors; Coaching; Innovative online education program; Development of student competencies; Teamwork in a virtual environment; Group dynamics and communication in a virtual environment</b> , etc.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Faculty, Slovenia                      | The <b>academic development centre</b> offers activities and programs for improving the academic growth of students and professors. They also have programs open to external visitors.                                                             | The academic development centre offers <b>teaching improvement programs, emerging technologies for teaching and learning, summer schools, thematic workshops, coaching for students, well-being programs, among other initiatives</b> . The Academic Service also provides courses, training sessions and activities for Ph.D.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

|                         |                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| University,<br>Slovenia | The university presents its offerings for growth through <b>Lifelong Learning Programs</b> . Initiatives are aimed at various target groups.     | The wide range of lifelong learning opportunities includes <b>professional development, summer schools, various educational programs, seminars, workshops, courses, scientific conferences, and other activities</b> . |
| University,<br>Uk       | The <b>Department of Continuing Education, Centre for Teaching and Learning</b> offers lifelong learning options for both teachers and students. | Different <b>opportunities are available for enhancing learning, teaching, research, and skills through consultancy services</b> . For lifelong learning, flexible options are offered.                                |
| University,<br>USA      | The university offers the <b>Employee Success Centre</b> , which operates within the Human Resources department.                                 | The Employee Success Centre offers <b>online courses for improving teaching and personal skills, as well as well-being and networking programs for employees</b> .                                                     |

Analysing the data provided considering the research question - how academic growth is conceptualized and developed across different higher education institutions –several key themes and patterns are observed (Figure 2). Firstly, many institutions emphasize lifelong learning with a strong focus on employability, personal development, and active citizenship. This is evident in their diverse range of programs aimed at both students and staff.

Some institutions offer extensive career and competency development programs, encompassing not just academic skills but also personal, administrative, and leadership skills. These programs often extend beyond formal coursework, incorporating on-the-job experiences and a variety of learning formats (e.g., e-learning, workshops, mentorship). Some universities prioritize the enhancement of teaching methodologies. They offer structured programs for teaching staff that include induction, foundational, and advanced level courses, as well as coaching and mentoring services. The focus is on developing digital competencies and innovative teaching methods.

Several institutions focus on the development and dissemination of educational materials and curricula, indicating a commitment to standardized and high-quality academic content. Some universities highlight the importance of personal well-being in academic growth, offering courses like “Building Your Resilience” and “Time Management”. This holistic approach suggests a recognition of the interconnectedness of personal well-being and academic success.

There is a trend towards interdisciplinary work and international collaboration. This approach fosters a broader perspective in academic growth, linking it with global standards and practices. Several institutions offer flexible lifelong learning options, indicating a shift towards accommodating diverse learning needs and schedules.

Finally, the focus on skills-based hiring and career advancement shows a direct alignment of academic programs with professional and industry requirements.



Figure 2. Flowchart of different possible initiatives to support academic growth.

## 5 Discussion

In the 21st century, the economy has evolved to become predominantly knowledge-based, characterized by its global reach, reliance on information and technology, and an increasing focus on societal and environmental concerns (Selesho & Naile, 2014). At the same time, neoliberal tendencies have made a strong impact on societies and economies worldwide, transforming the sense of education (for work) and the ways of working (more flexible, more unstable). The neoliberal approach to education emphasizes the generation of relevant knowledge that aligns with the economic needs of society (Brenneis et al., 2005), fosters personalized learning (f.e. Bozkurt et al., 2021) and responds to overwhelming prevailing work trends in academia (Sisto, 2020). In this context, academic work not only focuses on

researching, producing knowledge, and teaching but also contends with increasing accountability, bureaucracy, and performance-based financing.

Higher education institutions, deeply immersed in this paradigm, serve as central repositories of knowledge. Nevertheless, they face challenges in student retention and graduation rates (Gaikar, 2020). Furthermore, the nature of work and working conditions present challenges in retaining their knowledge workers (Selesho & Naile, 2014). These issues could have significant consequences for future educational trends and the development of the future workforce. One strategy employed by the educational sector at large involves recognizing the importance of investing in academic growth programs for both students and academics, as a practice that reinforces the dynamic organizational culture.

My findings indicate that exploring academic growth in higher education encompasses a range of conceptual approaches, thereby presenting a complex and nuanced picture. In the realm of educational development, studies have underscored the significant impact of pedagogical, psychological, and socio-demographic factors on a student's academic journey (Vermunt, 2005). The findings suggest a complex interplay between these factors, which might be influenced by the diversity of student backgrounds and experiences. Cultural capital is a key determinant of educational outcomes (Bourdieu, 2007), and alongside personal characteristics like self-efficacy, it greatly influences an individual's motivation to pursue or discontinue their studies (Ramos Salazar & Hayward, 2018). The emphasis on academic self-efficacy and its impact on student performance aligns with existing research but also underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of how this self-efficacy interacts with individual learning patterns and styles (Zúñiga-Prado et al., 2023).

In a context of intense questioning about whether a four-year education can provide individuals with the necessary skills for work, offering useful tools to navigate the current scenario can be beneficial. As studies demonstrate, innovative learning environments are crucial for motivating and attracting students (Ribeiro et al., 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2021), thereby contributing to academic development. Innovation in educational technology (Ribeiro et al., 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2021) along with additional programs (such as wellbeing, study skills, stress management, academic coaching, mentorship, etc.), is being implemented in countries like Denmark, Slovenia, the USA, Hungary, and Singapore. These have proven to be effective adaptive organizational strategies for attracting and supporting students throughout their academic journeys. This allows including students who are not solely focused on education for employment and may face barriers in accessing education, especially in countries where education is not free, due to the costs involved.

Another axis of the discussion focuses on balancing the needs and aspirations of their staff with the demands of an increasingly competitive and outcome-oriented educational environment. The importance of understanding and developing strategies to support academics warrants attention, especially in a context marked by staff shortages and the failure of universities to retain quality academics (Selesho & Naile, 2014). Currently, higher education institutions are

not the sole entities where knowledge and its repositories are acknowledged. These institutions have expanded and diversified to meet the demands of contemporary environments (Whitchurch, 2008). Some academics split their work across different institutions or projects, functioning in “third spaces” (Whitchurch, 2008). This involves shifting from a process of working towards stable community membership to a “continuous process of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction” of both professional and personal identities (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010). Having a sense of belonging to a particular project or team, rather than to a specific organizational or professional location, has implications for individuals. The management of identities becomes even more complex in a context of globalization and massification (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). Selesho & Naile (2014) suggest further examining the retention of academic staff, academic mobility, academic leadership, talent management in the academic sphere, and organizational commitment in higher education institutions.

Studies (Boud & Brew, 2013; Fraser & Ling, 2013; Hlengwa, 2019; Kinchin et al., 2018) along with my research, have shown that universities are developing programs aimed at supporting faculty members. Academic growth for academics now implies not only opportunities for learning how to improve their teaching, research, or other job-related practices (such as seeking financial support), but higher education organizations also seek to foster their social responsibility by offering spaces and knowledge to enhance their personal well-being and health. These opportunities, which ultimately contribute to their professional and personal advancement, have a significant impact on job satisfaction, performance, and growth among academic staff (Martin, 2015). The role of leadership in fostering organizational culture innovations in this regard is evident in our findings (Kiragu et al., 2021).

In conclusion, higher education institutions play a vital role in nurturing academic growth, as supported by the research (Zúñiga-Prado et al., 2023; Martin, 2015). These institutions are increasingly aware of the intricate connections between intellectual, personal, and social development. They adapt and transform themselves in response to the dynamic cultural trends that shape both the organizations and the individuals within them (Moussa, 2021, in Waal Malefyt, 2024). This recognition highlights the evolving landscape of higher education, where fostering holistic development is not just a choice but a necessity.

## 6 Conclusion

The recognition of higher education organizations and higher educational managers pivotal role in shaping the culture and practices of academic growth has been on the rise, particularly with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This period has emphasized the importance of adaptability and resilience, prompting institutions to develop strategies to support their students and staff.

In response to the evolving global educational and working landscape, there has been an adaptation of approaches (Lion, 2022). This shift towards skill development and tailored knowledge aligns with broader economic imperatives and necessitates higher education institutions' adaptability to changing contexts and challenges (de Waal Malefyt, 2024).

This research offers an initial analysis of academic growth within higher education organizations, with a specific focus on Slovenia. These institutions transcend mere centres of learning; they are complex communities where values and practices related to academic growth are deeply embedded and institutionalized. This holistic exploration is crucial for understanding the various influences on student learning outcomes and staff professional progression within the academic ecosystem.

The significance of considering external factors in understanding academic growth has been highlighted. The complex interplay of personal, contextual, and social factors in shaping student academic development emphasizes the need for comprehensive approaches. This includes acknowledging the growing influence of external funding and sponsorships on academic research and development.

For managers and leaders in higher education, the findings provide significant insights. Understanding the role of organizational culture in academic growth is essential for developing more effective strategies to promote innovative practices for academic motivation, success, and institutional development. This understanding is crucial for navigating the complexities of today's educational and working landscape and fostering constructive change.

However, the challenge lies in how these innovations are implemented and sustained. This raises questions about how students and academics perceive these strategies and whether they genuinely incorporate feedback and participation from a broad range of stakeholders within the institution. Taking a holistic view, the study raises questions about how well these varied needs are being balanced, especially in the face of increasing commercialization and marketization of higher education.

It's essential to acknowledge the limitations of the research due to its scope and the diversity of institutions studied. We recommend that further research should expand to include a broader range of higher education institutions, particularly in different cultural contexts. Ethnographic fieldwork and incorporating stakeholders' perspectives would deepen the understanding of how various organizational cultures impact academic growth. Longitudinal studies would also provide valuable insights into how strategies for academic growth evolve over time.

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## **Povzetek:**

### **Akadska rast - kultura izobraževanja 21. stoletja**

**Raziskovalno vprašanje (RV):** Kaj opredeljuje akademsko rast? Kako se razvija v različnih visokošolskih ustanovah?

**Namen:** Namen te raziskave je raziskati večplastno naravo akademske rasti v visokošolskih ustanovah in razumeti, kako organizacijska kultura vpliva na to rast.

**Metoda:** Teoretični okvir temelji na organizacijski antropologiji. Naša raziskovalna metodologija bo vključevala obsežen pregled literature in virtualno etnografijo.

**Rezultati:** Študija razkriva, da visokošolske ustanove vse bolj sprejemajo celostne pristope k akademski rasti, poudarjajoč ne samo intelektualni razvoj, temveč tudi osebno in poklicno rast. Vpliv organizacijske kulture je očiten pri oblikovanju akademskih strategij, politik in praks.

**Organizacija:** Ugotovitve imajo pomembne posledice za menedžerje in vodje v visokem šolstvu. Razumevanje vloge organizacijske kulture v akademski rasti lahko usmerja razvoj bolj učinkovitih strategij za spodbujanje akademske motivacije in uspeha ter institucionalnega razvoja.

**Družba:** a raziskava si prizadeva pomagati visokošolskim organizacijam pri krmarjenju skozi zapletenosti današnje izobraževalne krajine. S spodbujanjem konstruktivnih sprememb prispeva k širšemu družbenemu cilju razvijanja celovitih, kompetentnih posameznikov, opremljenih za soočanje s sodobnimi globalnimi izzivi.

**Originalnost:** Izvirnost te študije leži v njenem interdisciplinarnem pristopu, ki združuje vpoglede iz organizacijske antropologije z organizacijskimi študijami. Poudarja niansiran preplet med institucionalno kulturo in akademskim razvojem, področje, ki je v trenutni literaturi razmeroma malo raziskano.

**Omejitve/nadaljnje raziskovanje:** Raziskava je omejena z obsegom in raznolikostjo preučevanih ustanov. Nadaljnje raziskave bi lahko razširile na širši spekter visokošolskih ustanov, zlasti v različnih kulturnih kontekstih, kot tudi etnografsko terensko delo in perspektive deležnikov, da bi poglobili razumevanje, kako različne organizacijske kulture vplivajo na akademsko rast. Poleg tega bi longitudinalne študije lahko ponudile vpoglede v to, kako se strategije akademske rasti razvijajo s časom.

**Ključne besede:** Akadska rast, visokošolsko izobraževanje, zadrževanje talentov, organizacijska antropologija, organizacijska kultura, spretnosti, virtualna etnografija.

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