RESEARCH STUDENT ENTREPRENEURSHIP - BRIDGING CLASSROOM LEARNING AND REAL-WORLD IMPACT (ELU PROJECT)

INTRODUCTION

The ELU project; Researching Student Entrepreneurship – Bridging Classroom Learning and Real-World Impact, conducted at Tallinn University, from February 17 to May 13, 2025, analyzes how study and entrepreneurship intersect among student entrepreneurs. Under collaboration with different learning institutions in Europe and Singapore, this project focuses on how students maneuver both academic requirements and realtime entrepreneurship without levelling hierarchies between the two, with a close attention to the issues, the motivators and the institutional infrastructure that are informing the entrepreneurial journey. Our methodology applied qualitative techniques such as interviews, focus groups and the review of literature leading to a student entrepreneurship discussion gathering and a comprehensive project portfolio. The course moves the knowledge about student entrepreneurship and its effect on higher education forward by combining theoretical views and working empirics.

The course is designed to invite autonomous yet steered student efforts, through two targeted teams to bring different perspectives and skill improvement. The members of Team 1, the Literature Review Group, led by Annabel Alavere (team lead) with contributors Onur Çelik, Ioa Kristina Kivelä, Selim Rahim and Zaida Linda Evelina Laukkanen devoted their work to distilling academic literature to situate Team 2, under the leadership of Mercedes Gailit

together with Nataliia Yakovenko, Yehor Kuzmenko, Celina Živel facilitated and conducted an event on May 7th , 2025, with a focus on Furthermore, Final Report & Logistics Coordinator organised gathering of reports, supervised portfolio administration and controlled documentation during the project. The 12 participants all carried out up to four individual interviews and also took part in a focus group with 6–8 student entrepreneurs, which added up to a complete set of empirical data. Three coordinators were central to the project by leading them, being endorsed in LinkedIn and receiving recommendation letters for their contributions.

The study reveals that student entrepreneurs are motivated from within their desire for autonomy, creativity and social impact with strategies that are compatible with Sarasvathy's effectuation model. Nevertheless, students are overwhelmed by time constraints, psychological problems and lack of institutional support, especially among non-tech and international students. Although universities seem to be shifting into entrepreneurial hubs, the current disparities in accessibility, inclusivity, and inscope pedagogy suggest that a massive cultural and structural renovation is required. The investigations show that informal networks and external ecosystems are often relied on because formal University resources are hindered by cumbersome bureaucracy and lack of visibility.

One of the key elements of this project is its focus on sustainability and this way ensuring that the work will have long term impacts on entrepreneurial education. This research represents the groundwork for partnership with a Singaporean university, with the aim to create a full ecosystem of support for student entrepreneurs in the future. There are promising attempts to gain support from the European Union for allowable expansion of resources and infrastructure. Tallinn University is increasingly embedding entrepreneurship within its core lessons with efforts put in place to create and introduce forward looking entrepreneurship programs. This is with regard to the greater push for educational innovation, which is highlighting entrepreneurship as the leading force in the.

SUMMARY OF THE INTERVIEWS

1. Individual interviews

To gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of student entrepreneurs, a series of interviews were conducted with individuals who have attempted to balance academic studies and building their own ventures. The aim was to explore the challenges they faced, the support systems available to them, and the opportunities that influenced their entrepreneurial journeys. These insights help to identify both the structural and personal factors that shape entrepreneurial activity within academic environments.

1.1. Motivation for pursuing entrepreneurship

Based on the interviews, key motivations for pursuing entrepreneurship include a lifestyle-driven habit, a mindset of self-reliance, and a willingness to take calculated risks. Many students emphasized autonomy, passion for creativity, and the desire to apply theoretical knowledge in real-life contexts. The interviews revealed that while universities offer useful theoretical knowledge and occasional mentorship, their support systems often cater more to traditional startups and less to unique or social ventures. Students also noted that entrepreneurial exposure often began informally, through hackathons, student startup competitions, or side projects, rather than structured university programs.

1.2. Challenges

Time management was a major challenge, with many students struggling to balance studies, business, and personal life, sometimes leading to stress or dropping out temporarily. The challenges discussed also include heavy academic workloads and a lack of mental health support tailored to small business owners. It was also mentioned that sometimes it is difficult to separate free time and work due to the constant demands of entrepreneurship. Students reported that maintaining a healthy routine, including physical well-being and sleep, was often sacrificed during periods of intense work or study. In addition, managing team dynamics, especially when working with friends or other students, proved to be a recurring difficulty, with conflicts or mismatched commitment levels affecting progress.

1.3. Support systems and concerns

Support often came from informal networks, such as friends, co-founders, or partners. Peer communities, both local and international, played a crucial role in sharing knowledge, motivation, and emotional support. Personal motivation, resilience, and the ability to learn from failure were key to progress. Some entrepreneurs accessed external resources like government grants or startup communities, while others remained fully independent. However, even among those who received grants or mentorship, navigating bureaucratic procedures and finding tailored advice remained difficult. In some regions, startup grants were seen as too restrictive or narrowly defined, limiting their usefulness for early-stage or unconventional ideas. Meanwhile, in other ecosystems, proactive governmental support (e.g., in Singapore) significantly helped with startup acceleration. It was said that in some cases, the university provided more support for starting businesses but less support regarding growth and scaling an already established business.

Another major concern is inclusivity. Many students, especially international or non-Estonian participants, find existing programs too localized or culturally exclusive. Networking events are often viewed as unwelcoming or competitive, creating discomfort and discouraging participation. There was also a perception that some sectors (e.g. creative or social entrepreneurship) were less represented or valued compared to technology startups, which received more visibility and resources. Cultural biases or language barriers further impacted the confidence and participation of non-native students, particularly in programs not designed with diverse audiences in mind.

2. Focus group interview

A focus group held on May 7, 2025, with six student entrepreneurs added to these findings as well. Members of the ventures (some of them niche creative products, others social enterprises tackling environmental and cultural challenges) mirrored the focus on passion-driven entrepreneurship embedded in the interviews. Their drivers predominantly involved personal hobbies or social justice considerations, or sheer economic need with some drawn from family history of small businesses. The group mentioned comparable challenges, including the burden of handling deadlines for the institutions apart from increasing demands from the customers, and this was a dampener to the studies. Issues related to mental health were significant; read-ins reported sleep deprivation and stress from overcommitment in a

non tailored psychological support environment. Hiring dedicated team members, particularly for projects with technical orientation, was challenging, and cultural barriers, for example, insufficient institutional support in some areas or language difficulties for international students, did not help as well.

There was mixed university support as found from the focus group. Some institutions have flexible programs through which one can earn credits by engaging in tie up activities, and faculty mentorship is indispensable, be it application for funds or client contacts. However, legitimate structures such as incubators were ineffective and inadequate communication made it impossible for students to know of counseling or international partnerships. Other external ecosystems such as hackathons, trade chambers, and worldwide initiatives provided networking and technical support, but personal initiative determined access primarily. There were issues regarding intellectual property ownership, and some of them wanted to have legal protection of their work, whilst others mentioned a lack of funds for scaling social ventures.

3. Conclusion

Despite these difficulties, entrepreneurship offers flexibility and autonomy, allowing the individual to create a positive work environment and align their work with personal or social values, while focusing for example on ethical production and empowerment. Academic experiences, while not transformative, provided valuable peer interactions and practical insights that supported business development. In some cases, exposure to entrepreneurship also enhanced students' clarity on their own career paths- either reinforcing their commitment to independent work or helping them realize a preference for stable employment. However, formal support systems, particularly around mental well-being and small business realities, were found to be insufficient. On a positive note, financial support from local governments proved beneficial, although awareness of available funding options remained limited in some cases. There remains a strong demand for more practical, inclusive, and long-term entrepreneurial support structures. Ultimately, success in student entrepreneurship depended not only on institutional support, but also on students' adaptability, self-direction, and the resilience to navigate ambiguity, cultural friction, and fluctuating team dynamics.

LITERATURE SUMMARY

1. Summary by Onur Celik - Introduction

This literature summary presents key theoretical frameworks that have guided the LIFE project's exploration of student entrepreneurship in the university context. Drawing on four core readings and student reflections, the summary compares models of entrepreneurial behavior and institutional support, highlighting both opportunities and challenges in fostering student-led business activity within academia.

1.1. The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991)

Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) offers a psychological model to understand how individuals form intentions to act, especially in uncertain or risky situations like entrepreneurship. TPB identifies three key predictors of behavior: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control.

Students found TPB highly relevant for understanding why some individuals choose to pursue entrepreneurship while others hesitate. The concept of perceived behavioral control resonated most, as it reflects the confidence students have in their entrepreneurial abilities despite lacking experience or funding. The theory also aligns with institutional influences university programs, funding opportunities, and startup cultures which shape both norms and attitudes. Students noted that TPB effectively explains decision-making patterns among student entrepreneurs at Tallinn University, emphasizing the need for environments that foster confidence, support, and opportunity.

1.2. Effectuation and Causation in Entrepreneurship (Sarasvathy, 2001)

Sarasvathy's theory distinguishes between causation (planning-oriented) and effectuation (resource-oriented) approaches to entrepreneurship. While causation involves goal-setting followed by planning, effectuation encourages action based on available means, embracing uncertainty, flexibility, and co-creation with others.

This model was widely endorsed by students as a realistic reflection of the student entrepreneurship journey. Given the lack of capital, market access, or industry experience, students often rely on effectual logic—starting with personal skills, networks, and trial-and-error processes. The principles of affordable loss, partnership building, and adaptability resonated especially well. Students found that effectuation mirrors how many student ventures actually evolve—incrementally, relationally, and creatively—rather than through rigid business plans. This theory also helped frame the LIFE project's investigation into how students navigate the entrepreneurship process while still in school.

1.3. The Entrepreneurial University (Etzkowitz, 2013)

Etzkowitz's concept of the entrepreneurial university reimagines the role of universities in society. These institutions not only educate and conduct research but also play an active role in economic development, innovation, and business creation. The model is based on the Triple Helix relationship between universities, government, and industry.

Students observed that Estonian universities—especially TalTech and the University of Tartu—demonstrate many entrepreneurial traits. These include technology transfer offices, research commercialization efforts, and startup-friendly environments. However, critiques emerged around the over-concentration on tech industries, which may marginalize other viable sectors like textiles, services, or creative industries. Students stressed the importance of diversifying entrepreneurial support, advocating for inclusive ecosystems that recognize different types of ventures and business models. The discussion highlighted the need for universities to balance academic values with the demands of economic engagement.

1.4. Critique of the Entrepreneurial University – Finnish Case (Poutanen et al., 2020)

This article provides a critical counterpoint to the entrepreneurial university model by examining the Finnish higher education reforms, particularly the transformation into foundation universities. These reforms reduced public governance, increased managerial autonomy, and introduced private sector influence into university decision-making.

Students noted that while these reforms aimed at improving efficiency and international competitiveness, they also weakened the voice of academic communities. The University of

Aalto was used as an example where business funding incentivized mergers and restructuring, raising concerns about academic freedom and democratic participation. The article prompted reflection on the risks of commercialization, especially the potential loss of student and faculty representation in university governance.

Although one student supported the entrepreneurial model as a long-term benefit, the overall group recognized the need to avoid extremes—highlighting the importance of maintaining balance between innovation, inclusion, and academic integrity.

1.5. Conclusion

Together, these four articles provide a multi-layered view of student entrepreneurship and the evolving role of universities. TPB and Effectuation offer micro-level insights into student decision-making, while the entrepreneurial university and its critique illuminate macro-level institutional shifts. The student reflections underscored a shared belief in the value of entrepreneurship, while also expressing concerns about equity, representation, and sectoral diversity. These perspectives enrich the LIFE project's mission and will guide its continued research into creating inclusive and sustainable entrepreneurship ecosystems in higher education.

2. Secondary Literature Review - Annabel Allavere (summary by Selim Rahim)

This literature review explores how universities influence student entrepreneurship, shifting the focus from mere interest in entrepreneurship to how institutions can actively help students become entrepreneurs. It synthesizes five studies examining factors like university support systems, entrepreneurship education, incubators, university culture, and student motivation.

2.1. Key findings

- **University Environment**: Articles 1 (Zollo et al.) and 2 (Trivedi) show that institutional support, mentorship, and incubation programs positively influence students' entrepreneurial intentions, using the Theory of Planned Behaviour. Article 5

(Guerrero et al.) further confirms that these elements help students develop skills that translate into entrepreneurial careers.

- **Education vs. Motivation**: Article 3 (Farhangmehr et al.) challenges the effectiveness of entrepreneurship education, suggesting it may sometimes demotivate students due to overly rigid, business-plan-centric teaching. In contrast, Article 4 (Murad et al.) argues that education forms the foundation for long-term entrepreneurial development using the SOBC model.
- **Career Impact**: While early articles focus on student intention, Articles 4 and 5 emphasize the importance of long-term career outcomes, showing that sustained university support can lead to actual entrepreneurial careers.

2.2. Conclusion

Universities play a crucial role in shaping student entrepreneurship through support systems and education, though the effectiveness of these efforts can vary. There are gaps in the literature due to cross-sectional designs and limited consideration of external factors. Future research should use longitudinal and mixed methods to better assess how university ecosystems drive real entrepreneurial outcomes.

3. Tertiary Literature Review - Zaida Laukkanen (summary by Selim Rahim)

3.1. Introduction

This section investigates how universities have expanded their role to actively promote entrepreneurship among students, analyzing five studies that explore institutional culture, support systems, and pedagogical approaches. It highlights the increasing expectation for universities to foster innovation and prepare students for uncertain job markets, while also uncovering significant challenges in aligning internal structures with entrepreneurial goals.

3.2. Key findings

3.2.1. Challenges and Gaps

Each study identifies barriers to effective entrepreneurship promotion. Bazan et al. (2019) show support systems often influence students indirectly through emotional and social

channels. Li et al. (2021) find that cultural factors, like fear of failure, dampen entrepreneurial motivation. Bamber and Elezi (2019) argue that universities often teach entrepreneurship within rigid, non-entrepreneurial systems, while Pacheco et al. (2023) find that not all entrepreneurial traits (e.g., proactiveness) lead to success. These issues point to the need for holistic and coherent institutional strategies.

3.2.2. Definitions and Concepts

Entrepreneurial universities are broadly defined as institutions that go beyond knowledge delivery to actively encourage innovation and socio-economic contribution. Pacheco et al. (2023) frame this through traits like innovation and autonomy, while Bazan et al. (2019) emphasize empathy and social impact. Kusio and Fiore (2019) view entrepreneurship as a flexible mindset, and Li et al. (2021) stress how cultural norms reshape its meaning. Bamber and Elezi (2019) highlight a disconnect between entrepreneurial teaching and non-entrepreneurial institutional cultures.

3.2.3. Support Structures

Support systems such as training, networks, and institutional strategies are essential but vary widely in effectiveness. Bazan et al. (2019) and Pacheco et al. (2023) underline the importance of both internal environments and external networks. Li et al. (2021) cite government and platform support as enablers in China. However, Bamber and Elezi (2019) reveal structural rigidity in UK universities that hinders practical entrepreneurship, emphasizing the need for more adaptable institutional ecosystems.

3.2.4. Conclusion

While universities are increasingly engaging with entrepreneurship, many face cultural and structural limitations that dilute their efforts. The research suggests that entrepreneurship must be viewed as a mindset fostered through aligned institutional values, not just curricula. For universities to truly support entrepreneurial development, they must undergo internal transformations that reflect the flexibility, innovation, and risk-taking they aim to instill in students.

4. Quaternary Literature Review - Ida Kivela (Summary by Selim Rahim)

4.1. Summary

This section explores the increasing importance of student entrepreneurship in higher education, as universities evolve into hubs of innovation and economic development. Drawing on five studies, it examines how institutions cultivate entrepreneurial mindsets through education, support structures, and cultural transformation, revealing the complexities of fostering real entrepreneurial outcomes.

4.2. Key findings

4.2.1. What Is an Entrepreneurial University - All five studies explore the concept of the entrepreneurial university, though with varied interpretations. Guerrero et al. (2020) and Opizzi et al. (2024) emphasize the university as an ecosystem combining education, incubators, and institutional culture to shape entrepreneurial careers. Spiteri and Maringe (2014) highlight a gap between universities' ambitions and their outdated pedagogical methods. Masoumi (2023) introduces entrepreneurial identity as a key factor in how students interact with resources, suggesting that self-perception shapes engagement.

4.2.2. More Than Just Courses - The studies agree that support systems must go beyond traditional teaching. Guerrero et al. (2020) and Opizzi et al. (2024) show that incubators and personalized university support can reduce student risk aversion and increase venture creation, especially in uncertain economies. However, Wegner et al. (2020) find that even comprehensive support strategies do not guarantee increased entrepreneurial intention, indicating that the quality of student engagement is critical. Masoumi (2023) adds that students selectively engage with incubators or courses based on whether they identify with them personally.

4.2.3. How Entrepreneurship Is Taught Matters - Pedagogy emerged as a central theme. Spiteri and Maringe (2014) found students prefer hands-on, experiential learning over traditional lectures and exams. Masoumi (2023) critiques linear, outdated teaching methods and calls for approaches that reflect real entrepreneurial practice—such as design thinking and lean startup methods. Guerrero et al. (2020) further support the importance of teaching resilience and adaptability as essential entrepreneurial traits.

4.2.4. What's Still Missing - Several limitations persist. Spiteri and Maringe (2014) point out a lack of instructors with real-world entrepreneurial experience. Wegner et al. (2020) highlight that the presence of programs alone doesn't ensure effectiveness. Masoumi (2023) emphasizes that entrepreneurship education often overlooks student diversity in background and identity. Additionally, both Guerrero et al. (2020) and Opizzi et al. (2024) show that many students are unaware of available resources, reflecting a gap between institutional offerings and student access.

4.3. Conclusion

The studies collectively show that building effective entrepreneurial universities requires more than adding programs—it demands cultural, structural, and pedagogical transformation. Teaching must be practice-oriented, support systems must be flexible, and student diversity must be acknowledged. Institutions need to align their internal cultures with the entrepreneurial values they aim to instill, creating ecosystems that reflect the real challenges and opportunities of entrepreneurial life.

5. Integrated Analysis: Student Entrepreneurship in Academic Contexts

The journey of student entrepreneurs emerges as both deeply personal and structurally complex, shaped by internal motivation, institutional environments, and broader socio-economic contexts. Both empirical insights from interviews and focus groups, as well as theoretical frameworks from the literature, converge on key themes: motivation, support systems, challenges, and institutional roles. Together, they paint a multifaceted picture of what it means to build a business while being embedded in a university setting.

5.1. Entrepreneurial Motivation and Mindsets

Student entrepreneurs consistently cite intrinsic motivations such as autonomy, creativity, passion, and social justice as central to their pursuits. This aligns closely with the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), particularly the idea of perceived behavioral control, students often act despite limited resources, driven by a belief in their capabilities and the value of their ideas. The interviews and focus group confirm that entrepreneurial intention

often grows from lifestyle choices, personal needs, or identity rather than strictly economic goals.

Furthermore, Sarasvathy's effectuation theory offers a fitting framework for understanding how students navigate uncertainty. With limited capital and experience, students rely on existing resources, skills, networks, and low-cost experimentation, to build ventures. The entrepreneurial path resembles a non-linear, adaptive process where means often dictate goals, mirroring the way many student-led initiatives evolve through hackathons, informal side projects, or necessity-driven attempts..

5.2. Support Systems: Informal Strengths and Institutional Gaps

The institutional role in fostering entrepreneurship is marked by a paradox. While literature, such as the entrepreneurial university model and studies by Guerrero et al. and Opizzi et al., suggests universities are becoming key players in innovation ecosystems, student testimony reveals uneven and often inadequate support. Interviews highlighted a reliance on informal networks, peer support, and external ecosystems over university-provided incubators or counseling.

The focus group further confirmed that even when support exists (e.g. course credit for entrepreneurial work, mentorship, access to funding), awareness and accessibility remain serious barriers. This disconnect between support offered and support utilized is echoed in studies like Wegner et al. (2020) and Masoumi (2023), who emphasize the need for culturally responsive, visible, and student-aligned support structures.

Moreover, concerns about inclusivity were prominent. Non-local and international students felt sidelined by language barriers, localized program structures, and culturally exclusive environments. These findings resonate with critiques from tertiary and quaternary literature reviews, where rigid pedagogical practices and a lack of recognition for diverse student identities and sectors (e.g. social, creative entrepreneurship) were found to limit engagement and success.

5.3. Challenges and Entrepreneurial Realities

Student entrepreneurs face significant structural and personal challenges, particularly regarding time management, mental health, and team dynamics. The balancing act between

academic deadlines, business responsibilities, and personal well-being was a recurring stressor. Mental health concerns, including burnout and sleep deprivation, were amplified by the lack of tailored institutional support- a shortfall also observed in Bazan et al. (2019) and Bamber and Elezi (2019), who highlight the need for emotional and psychological infrastructure in entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Moreover, the difficulty of forming and maintaining effective teams, often composed of friends or fellow students, adds another layer of complexity. Literature emphasizes that entrepreneurship is relational and contextual, and that institutional cultures often fail to accommodate the nuanced, fluid realities of student ventures. This is particularly true for non-tech or non-traditional startups, which receive less attention and fewer resources compared to high-growth tech models that dominate entrepreneurial discourse.

5.4. Pedagogy, Awareness, and Structural Transformation

Both student experiences and academic literature strongly argue for pedagogical reform. Traditional business-plan-centric teaching methods are seen as ineffective and sometimes demotivating. Instead, there is a growing demand for experiential, practice-based learning that incorporates design thinking, lean startup methods, and mentorship from real-world entrepreneurs. Literature by Spiteri and Maringe (2014) and Masoumi (2023) reinforces that entrepreneurial education should mirror actual entrepreneurial practice—not theoretical abstraction.

However, even effective educational strategies fall short without structural transformation. Students remain unaware of available incubators, grants, or legal resources for intellectual property protection. Bureaucratic complexity and fragmented communication prevent access to even well-intentioned initiatives. The Finnish case critique (Poutanen et al., 2020) warns against over-commercialization and reduced student representation, a danger that students themselves echoed when describing rigid and impersonal university systems.

5.5. Conclusion: Toward an Inclusive and Resilient Ecosystem

Student entrepreneurship thrives on adaptability, self-motivation, and peer networks, but institutional ecosystems have yet to fully catch up. While there is a clear shift toward entrepreneurial universities, the journey is uneven, marked by sectoral bias, cultural exclusion, and pedagogical inertia. Theoretical models like TPB and effectuation help explain

the motivations and decision-making of student entrepreneurs, while critiques of the entrepreneurial university underscore the importance of democratic inclusion, cultural flexibility, and practical relevance.

For entrepreneurship to become a truly inclusive and transformative pathway within academia, universities must rethink not just their programs but their entire cultural and structural orientation, moving from token support toward embedded, responsive, and diverse ecosystems.

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTIONS

1. Yehor Kuzmenko: *"Being involved in the LIFE project has been extremely valuable for me to acquire practical research skills and to keep me in tune with actual societal practices. One of our challenges was to attract participants from various parts of the world. In the end, only participants from Finland were included making the study's geographical scope narrow. Despite the limitations, the research experience was very rewarding in that I learned practical research skills in interview administration, data analysis and interpreting complex data which will be very important to my future career.*

The flexibility is one of the selling points of the LIFE project – it engages students in the research process, defining their goals and choosing how to achieve them. With that amount of independence, innovative thinking and personal responsibility regarding the direction of the project were encouraged. Although the flexible structure was a great advantage to me, it sometimes left me unclear about the degree of independence I could take, and how much guidance I could ask for. Fortunately, the extensive guidelines incorporated in the LIFE construction, provided essential direction and framework, leading to the research process being conducted in a smooth manner.

On the whole, the participation in the LIFE project has given profound transformation linking academic theory to real practices. The project has broadened my horizons regarding student entrepreneurship and improved my cooperation and the capacity to respond to

challenges. I am grateful to have been part of such an effervescent initiative that is meaningful."

2. Annabel Alavere: *"This project provided me with a valuable opportunity to gain hands-on experience in academic research, work collaboratively with peers from different backgrounds, and develop both my academic and practical skills. One of the key components of my involvement was conducting interviews with three different individuals who offered insightful perspectives on the challenges and opportunities faced by student entrepreneurs. These interviews deepened my understanding of the real-life experiences of students attempting to balance academic responsibilities with entrepreneurial ambitions. Hearing firsthand about issues such as funding difficulties, lack of tailored support, and the role of motivation helped me connect theoretical knowledge with practical realities.*

However, one of the challenges we faced during this part of the project was getting in touch with potential interviewees. While some responded quickly, we had difficulty receiving replies from several contacts we initially reached out to via email. This slowed down the process and required us to follow up multiple times and even consider alternative communication channels or contacts. It was a valuable lesson in persistence and adaptability in qualitative research. During the project we also found that Universities were often reluctant to cooperate with us, because there have already been many studies done on this topic. However, our findings suggest that despite the existing body of research, there are still significant gaps in knowledge.

In addition to the interviews, I had the opportunity to take on a role as the coordinator for the literature review team. This role allowed me to explore and synthesize key concepts and theoretical frameworks related to student entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial universities.

The tasks of the literature review team were relatively one-dimensional, as we were all assigned similar responsibilities that were primarily focused on sourcing and analyzing relevant academic literature. While this ensured consistency in our work, it also meant there was limited variety in individual roles. As the team coordinator, I aimed to support everyone by offering guidance, answering questions, and helping with article searches to ensure each team member could complete their part effectively and confidently.

Overall, this LIFE project helped me grow academically and personally and sparked a deeper interest in the topic of student entrepreneurship. I am grateful for this experience and would highly recommend taking on a LIFE course to other students who are eager to engage in interdisciplinary, real-world projects."

3. Mercedes Gailit: *"When I first started the Life project I was sceptical mainly for the reason that the LIFE project is not directly connected to my field of study and therefore would not be beneficial or even interesting for me. After a short time my opinion drastically changed and being a part of the LIFE project has teached me many valuable new skills, practical and academic. My main contribution to the research study was conducting individual interviews, conducting the focus group interview, leading the event organization team and participating in the making of reports and presentations along the way. In the process I had to develop leading skills and overcome challenges I faced such as being a person who divides tasks, makes decisions and leads an interview.*

The main contribution to the study was conducting individual interviews and the focus group interview. The main challenge wasn't conducting the individual interview, but getting in touch with potential interviewees. Either the potential interviewees did not respond to emails or didn't show for the interview that was set in place. When first contacting the potential interviewees, the response was either absent or the response took too long, this prolonged the research process and for me made me worried about the completion of the LIFE project. For the focus group we successfully gathered all participants and had a successful interview. A common challenge was time management and getting a mutual agreement on a time and a date for an interview. This challenge was manageable and understandable with everybody having different schedules. Being a team lead and that for the first time I tried to keep in mind everyone's preference, dividing the task equally, being confident that everybody has the knowledge they need to go forward(if they miss a meeting etc.) and always being on top of everything. As a team lead I took on more responsibilities thinking that that was my obligation, but in the end was very pleased with my decisions. Nevertheless I had a very impressive and dedicated team who were always ready to help each other.

Overall the LIFE project was a learning experience where I got the chance to improve my time management skills (balancing school, work, the project and daily life) and overcoming

my performance anxiety. The interviews were eye opening with getting individual knowledge and perspectives from other students on daily struggles and the balancing of academics with entrepreneurship."

4. Nataliia Yakovenko: *"My main contributions to the LIFE project were conducting individual interviews and preparing the midterm report. The interviews were especially eye-opening — hearing directly from student entrepreneurs helped me connect abstract theories with real-world struggles, especially around time management and lack of support systems.*
Preparing the midterm report was a good challenge — it pushed me to synthesize a lot of moving parts into a coherent narrative. It also helped me understand the importance of documentation in research, and how to communicate progress effectively.
Overall, the project helped me build both communication and analytical skills. I'm grateful for the hands-on experience — even the parts that were tough ended up teaching me the most."

5. Celina Zivel: *"Participating in the ELU project has been a unique learning opportunity that allowed me to engage directly in the research process while expanding my understanding of the challenges student entrepreneurs face. I was responsible for conducting four in-depth interviews and served as a co-moderator during our focus group session, which gave me practical experience in qualitative research and improved my confidence in co-facilitating group discussions. In addition to the fieldwork, I was actively involved in almost every team and research meeting, contributing to the development and direction of our project from start to finish.*

One of the aspects I valued the most was the chance to collaborate with motivated students from different study areas. Working closely with the team helped me improve my communication and coordination skills, especially when balancing research tasks with event planning responsibilities. It was inspiring to see how our group managed to bring together a variety of perspectives and transform them into a cohesive research outcome.

At the same time, the project demanded a great deal of flexibility. As a part-time student whose academic schedule typically follows a weekend format, adjusting to irregular meeting times and shifting deadlines was not always easy. Nevertheless, navigating this taught me

how to adapt in unpredictable situations and manage my time more effectively in a multidisciplinary environment.

Looking back, the ELU project helped bridge the gap between academic theory and lived experiences. It challenged me to think critically, stay organized, and take ownership of my contributions. It also introduced me to new people and ideas, expanding my view on how universities can support entrepreneurial ambitions. I'm glad I had the chance to take part in such a dynamic and hands-on initiative."

6. Ida Kivelä: *"Being a part of this project has been valuable in learning more about the topic and getting hands- on experience in a real- world project like this. My main contribution to this project was being part of the literature team, where we analyzed relevant academic literature. The main challenge I faced was getting in- touch with the interviewees, and I unfortunately did not get to do an interview because of this challenge. Some people were reluctant to do the interviews because they had already done so many similar ones before. Though I did not get to do the individual interview, I still learned more about the topic from the reviewed literature.*

Overall, the project helped build my research and communication skills. The project also helped me overcome my performance anxiety. I am thankful for this hands- on experience in a project like this."

7. Selim Rahim: *"As a student entrepreneur, with this LIFE project I have learned the know-how to improve my skills in terms of time management and reflection. I was in the literature team for a reason; to learn and to understand. During this project I have presented presentations, interviewed fellow student-entrepreneurs and had the chance to get a peer review on my work. I have done 3 interviews with wonderful people with 3 different backgrounds and expertise. All throughout, the most important part was to understand the obstacles both universities and students face. During the interviews all candidates gave clear answers although not all consented for a video or audio recording due to their digital footprint and rights. That being said, the best part was to collaborate and to understand that being a "lone wolf" isn't always the best option."*

8. Onur Çelik: "*Taking part in the LIFE project was a meaningful and practical experience for me. Coming from a legal and international relations background, I saw how closely it*

connects to real issues around policy, access, and economic development. I was part of the literature review team, where I focused on understanding and interpreting key theories that support the research. I engaged deeply with the texts, and I found it especially interesting to reflect on how these theories apply not just in general, but also within the Estonian university environment. It helped me think critically about how institutions shape or limit opportunities for students who want to start something on their own. I also conducted interviews with student entrepreneurs, which gave me the chance to connect academic ideas with lived experience. Hearing about their journeys, challenges, and creative ways of working with limited resources helped me understand how much pressure student entrepreneurs are under, and what kind of support they need. Some challenges included arranging interview times and navigating communication boundaries, but these were part of the learning process.What stood out to me in this project was the balance between independent research and teamwork.Through this experience, I also improved my time management, gained confidence in presenting ideas, and developed a more practical understanding of research.

In the end, this project helped me grow academically and personally. It gave me new tools for thinking about entrepreneurship, institutional structures, and student agency. I'm glad I joined the LIFE project. It challenged me, but also gave me the space to learn and contribute meaningfully."

9. Zaida Laukkanen: *"This project offered a meaningful opportunity to engage with real-world research. I was primarily involved in the literature review process, where I collaborated with the team to examine and synthesize existing academic work related to our topic. This deep dive into the literature significantly broadened my understanding and analytical skills.*

One obstacle I encountered was securing interviews. Despite repeated attempts, I wasn't able to conduct one, as many individuals declined due to interview fatigue. Although this was a setback, it encouraged me to focus more deeply on the written research, which proved to be incredibly insightful.

Beyond the academic takeaways, this project helped me grow personally. It boosted my confidence in both communication and collaboration, and helped me become more comfortable contributing in group settings. Overall, it was a rewarding experience that combined learning with practical skill-building."

OVERALL CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the lived experiences of student entrepreneurs and the role of universities in either supporting or constraining their entrepreneurial journeys. Combining insights from individual and group interviews with key theoretical frameworks and a broad literature base, the findings reveal that student entrepreneurship is shaped by a complex interplay of personal motivation, institutional structures, and socio-cultural dynamics.

At the core of student entrepreneurship lies a strong sense of intrinsic motivation. Students described their drive to create businesses not merely as economic ventures, but as expressions of autonomy, creativity, and social values. These motivations align closely with Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior, particularly the role of perceived behavioral control, which explains how students move forward with entrepreneurial projects despite limited experience, financial constraints, or institutional barriers. Sarasvathy's theory of effectuation further reinforces this picture by capturing how students tend to work with the resources at hand, forming partnerships, experimenting, and adapting rather than strictly adhering to predefined business plans. These frameworks highlight that student entrepreneurship often evolves from necessity, identity, or passion, rather than from conventional planning or profit-maximization logic.

However, the institutional context within which student entrepreneurs operate presents both opportunities and limitations. While some universities are gradually adopting the model of the entrepreneurial university—integrating research, education, and economic development—the actual support students receive remains uneven and, in many cases, insufficient. Interviews and focus group discussions revealed that students often rely more on peer networks, informal communities, and external ecosystems than on official university programs. Even when support systems exist, such as incubators, grants, or mentorship, they are often difficult to access due to lack of visibility, bureaucratic complexity, or cultural exclusion. This disconnect is particularly acute for international students or those working on social and creative ventures, who frequently feel sidelined by tech-dominated, local-language-dominated ecosystems. The literature reinforces this concern, particularly in critiques of the entrepreneurial university model, which caution against

over-commercialization, the erosion of democratic participation, and the narrowing of acceptable entrepreneurial forms.

The challenges faced by student entrepreneurs are not only structural but deeply personal. Time management, mental health, and team dynamics surfaced as major concerns throughout the research. Students reported burnout, stress, and sleep deprivation, often without access to mental health support designed for the pressures of student-led business activity. These emotional dimensions of entrepreneurship are underexplored in both practice and theory, yet they are central to the student experience. Forming and maintaining teams, especially with friends or fellow students, adds further complexity, and institutional cultures often fail to offer adequate guidance in these relational and leadership aspects.

One of the clearest insights to emerge from this study is the need for pedagogical reform. Traditional lecture-based or business-plan-heavy teaching approaches were frequently described as outdated and demotivating. Students called for more experiential learning, practical mentorship, and the integration of real-world entrepreneurial methods such as design thinking or lean startup practices. Literature on entrepreneurship education supports this shift, but also warns that pedagogy alone is not enough. Without cultural and structural transformation—without making support systems visible, inclusive, and responsive—students will continue to miss out on the full potential of institutional entrepreneurship initiatives.

In reflecting on the research process, the team encountered several challenges, from limited participant availability to navigating sensitive topics like mental health and institutional critique. These experiences underscore the need for adaptive, participatory research methods and highlight the importance of student voice in shaping the future of entrepreneurship in academia.

In conclusion, student entrepreneurship is not merely an extracurricular activity or a linear career option—it is a transformative, identity-driven process that demands flexibility, resilience, and support. While theoretical models like the Theory of Planned Behavior and effectuation offer valuable insights into decision-making, and institutional reforms attempt to build more entrepreneurial universities, there remains a significant gap between ambition and reality. To bridge this, universities must move beyond fragmented initiatives and reorient

their cultures, structures, and pedagogies toward genuinely inclusive and supportive ecosystems. Only then can student entrepreneurship fulfill its potential as a meaningful and sustainable force within higher education.

ACTION PLANS

1. Literature Review Group

Team Members: Annabel Alavere (Team Lead), Onur Çelik, Ida Kristina Kivelä, Selim Rahim, Zaida Linda Evelina Laukkanen

Overview: The Literature Review Group focuses on reviewing academic articles, conducting interviews with student entrepreneurs, and compiling a portfolio and final presentation as part of the LIFE project. The action plan is an internal task to be included in the mid-term report and portfolio.

Tasks and Deadlines:

1. Registration for Mid-Term Feedback Session (Deadline: 09.03)
   ○ Responsible: Annabel Alavere
   ○ Register the team for the mid-term feedback session.
2. Article Review: "The Theory of Planned Behavior" (Deadline: 09.03)
   ○ Responsible: All team members
   ○ Review and discuss the article.
3. Article Review: "Causation and Effectuation: Toward A Theoretical Shift from Economic Inevitability to Entrepreneurial Contingency" (Deadline: 13.03)
   ○ Responsible: All team members
   ○ Review and discuss the article.
4. Article Review: "Anatomy of the Entrepreneurial University" (Deadline: 17.03)
   ○ Responsible: All team members
   ○ Review and discuss the article.
5. Article Review: "From Democracy to Managerialism: Foundation Universities as the Embodiment of Finnish University Policies" (Deadline: 24.03)
   ○ Responsible: All team members
   ○ Review and discuss the article.
6. Mid-Term Report Submission (Deadline: 22.03)
   ○ Responsible: Annabel Alavere
   ○ Submit the mid-term report summarizing progress.
7. Conducting Interviews (01.04–03.05)

- ○ Responsible: All team members
- ○ Conduct interviews with four student entrepreneurs, collect data, and submit for supervisor review.

8. Individual Interview Transcripts and Summary (Deadline: 07.05)
- ○ Responsible: All team members
- ○ Submit individual transcripts and a summary of the interviews.

9. Final Individual Literature Review Submissions (Deadline: 08.05)
- ○ Responsible: All team members
- ○ Submit individual literature reviews.

10. Portfolio: Literature Summary (Deadline: 08.05)
- ○ Responsible: Selim Rahim, Onur Çelik
- ○ Prepare a summary of the literature for the portfolio.

11. Creating the Portfolio (Deadline: 11.05)
- ○ Responsible: All team members
- ○ Compile the portfolio, including all deliverables.

12. Portfolio Submission (Deadline: 11.05)
- ○ Responsible: Yehor Kuzmenko
- ○ Submit the completed portfolio.

13. Final Presentation Preparation & Submission (09.05–11.05)
- ○ Responsible: All team members
- ○ Prepare and submit materials for the final presentation.

14. Final Presentation (Deadline: 14.05)
- ○ Responsible: All team members (participation)
- ○ Deliver the final presentation.

2. Event Organisation Group

Team Members: Nataliia Yakovenko, Yehor Kuzmenko, Celina Živel, Parissara Phumpha, Mercedes Gailit (Team Lead)

Overview: The Event Organisation Group is responsible for organizing events, conducting interviews, and contributing to the project's deliverables, including a mid-term report,

portfolio, and final presentation. Their work supports the project by engaging stakeholders and disseminating research findings through events and communication efforts.

Tasks, Deadlines, and Responsibilities:

1. Registration for Mid-Term Report
    - Deadline: 01.03
    - Responsible: Mercedes Gailit
    - Description: The team lead registers the group for the mid-term report process.
2. Conducting Trial Interview
    - Deadline: 17.03
    - Responsible: All team members (Nataliia Yakovenko, Yehor Kuzmenko, Celina Živel, Parissara Phumpha, Mercedes Gailit)
    - Description: The team conducts a trial interview to prepare for the individual and group interview processes.
3. Portfolio: Action Plan
    - Deadline: 18.03
    - Responsible: Yehor Kuzmenko
    - Description: Yehor Kuzmenko prepares the action plan section for the portfolio, documenting the group's tasks and timeline.
4. Mid-Term Report
    - Deadline: 21.03
    - Responsible: Nataliia Yakovenko, Celina Živel, Yehor Kuzmenko
    - Description: These members compile the mid-term report, detailing the group's progress.
5. Mid-Term Presentation
    - Deadline: 24.03
    - Responsible: Parissara Phumpha (presentation), Mercedes Gailit (preparation and submission)
    - Description: Parissara Phumpha develops the presentation, and Mercedes Gailit handles its preparation and submission.
6. Submission of the Mid-Term Report
    - Deadline: 25.03, 12:00
    - Responsible: Mercedes Gailit

- Description: The team lead submits the mid-term report.

7. Mid-Term Presentation in Feedback Session
   - Deadline: 27.03, 17:00–19:00
   - Responsible: Mercedes Gailit, Yehor Kuzmenko (presenting)
   - Description: These members deliver the mid-term presentation during the feedback session.

8. Individual Interview Period (4+ Interviews per Person)
   - Timeline: 01.04–06.05
   - Responsible: All team members
   - Description: Each member conducts at least four interviews with student entrepreneurs to gather data.

9. Group Interview Preparation (Surveys, Materials)
   - Timeline: 01.04–7.05
   - Responsible: Celina Živel
   - Description: Celina Živel prepares surveys and materials for the group interview event.

10. Group Interview Preparation (Recording)
    - Timeline: 01.04–7.05
    - Responsible: Mercedes Gailit
    - Description: The team lead organizes recording logistics for the group interview event.

11. Group Interview Event
    - Timeline: 7.05
    - Responsible: All team members
    - Description: The team organizes and conducts a group interview event, likely involving multiple stakeholders or entrepreneurs.

12. Group Interview Transcripts and Summary
    - Deadline: 01.05
    - Responsible: Nataliia Yakovenko, Yehor Kuzmenko, Parissara Phumpha
    - Description: These members transcribe the group interview and provide a summary of findings.

13. Individual Interview Transcripts and Summary
    - Deadline: 05.05

- ○ Responsible: All team members
- ○ Description: Each member submits transcripts and summaries of their individual interviews.

14. Portfolio: Report Part
    - ○ Deadline: 09.05
    - ○ Responsible: Nataliia Yakovenko, Celina Živel, Yehor Kuzmenko
    - ○ Description: These members prepare the report section of the portfolio, summarizing the group's activities and findings.

15. Portfolio: Communication to the Stakeholders
    - ○ Deadline: 09.05
    - ○ Responsible: All team members
    - ○ Description: The team documents stakeholder communication efforts (e.g., event promotions, outcomes) for the portfolio.

16. Portfolio Submission
    - ○ Deadline: 11.05
    - ○ Responsible: Mercedes Gailit
    - ○ Description: The team lead submits the completed portfolio.
    - ○ Note: Yehor Kuzmenko is also responsible for portfolio submission in the Literature Review Group's plan, suggesting he may coordinate both submissions or that the groups share a portfolio.

17. Final Presentation Preparation & Submission
    - ○ Timeline: 09.05–11.05
    - ○ Responsible: Yehor Kuzmenko ,Mercedes Gailit
    - ○ (preparation and submission)
    - ○ Description: Parissara Phumpha develops the presentation, and Mercedes Gailit handles its preparation and submission.

18. Final Presentation
    - ○ Deadline: 14.05
    - ○ Responsible: All team members
    - ○ Description: The team delivers the final presentation, likely summarizing their event outcomes and research contributions.

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