

When motivation is not enough: Epistemic ambiguity and international student micro-entrepreneurship

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International students are often discussed from the perspective of integration into employment. However, some students also consider another route: small-scale entrepreneurship during or after their studies. This does not necessarily mean building a growth company immediately. It may start as freelancing, digital services, small informal services, or other low-risk ways of testing whether one’s skills could create value for customers.

This article is based on the Master’s thesis *The Rise of Micro-Entrepreneurial Ambitions Among International Students in Finland: Barriers, Motivators, and the Role of University Ecosystems* (Pazhanikal Kizhakkuveettil, 2026). Previous research has shown that entrepreneurship education can influence students’ entrepreneurial attitudes and intentions, although the effect depends on how learning is designed and connected to practice (Nabi et al., 2017). Although entrepreneurship education and immigrant entrepreneurship have both been studied widely, less is known about how international students in Finnish higher education develop micro-entrepreneurial ambitions and what prevents them from turning these ambitions into early action. This gap is addressed in the thesis which examined how international degree students at SEAMK understand micro-entrepreneurship, what motivates them, what prevents them from acting, and what kind of support they would need from the university ecosystem.

Theoretical background and method

The thesis used the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) as its theoretical framework. According to the theory, behaviour is shaped by intention, and intention is influenced by three factors: attitudes toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Attitudes refer to how students evaluate entrepreneurship. For example, students may see micro-entrepreneurship as a way to gain income, autonomy, practical experience or future career opportunities. Subjective norms refer to social influence: whether family, peers, alumni or diaspora communities make entrepreneurship feel acceptable, risky or realistic. Perceived behavioural control refers to whether students feel they have the knowledge, resources, legal clarity and networks needed to start even small entrepreneurial activities.

This framework was useful because international students' entrepreneurial intentions are not shaped only by personal motivation. They are also shaped by the surrounding environment. In the Finnish higher education context, issues such as residence-permit uncertainty, language, access to networks and knowledge of local markets may influence whether entrepreneurship feels feasible.

The thesis was conducted as a qualitative single-case study at SEAMK. The empirical material consisted of semi-structured interviews with 20 international degree students. The participants represented both bachelor's and master's degree students and had either experience of entrepreneurial activity or exposure to entrepreneurship education at SEAMK.

The interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This means that the analysis focused on identifying meaningful patterns in students' accounts rather than measuring predefined variables. The Theory of Planned Behaviour guided the analysis, but the study also allowed themes to emerge from the data.

Three reasons to consider micro-entrepreneurship

Three motivational patterns were identified. First, some students saw micro-entrepreneurship as a way to gain income, independence and flexibility. For them, entrepreneurship was attractive because it could offer more control over time, workload and career direction than ordinary part-time work.

Second, some students saw entrepreneurship primarily as learning. They were interested in applying what they had learned in their studies, building practical skills and gaining experience that could support their future careers. For these students, entrepreneurship was less a final career choice and more a way to test themselves in practice.

Third, some students saw entrepreneurship as a strategic alternative to employment. This did not mean that entrepreneurship was always their first choice. Rather, it became more relevant because entering the Finnish labour market as an international student can feel uncertain. In this sense, entrepreneurship was partly a response to perceived labour-market difficulty.

The findings show that international students' entrepreneurial ambitions should not be interpreted too narrowly. A student may be motivated by income, learning, autonomy, employability or uncertainty in the labour market. Support services therefore need to recognise different starting points.

The main problem is not lack of motivation

The central finding of the thesis is clear: motivation exists, but the conditions for acting on it are often insufficient. Students were interested in entrepreneurship, but many did not feel able to move from intention to action. The barriers were mainly related to perceived behavioural control: whether students felt they had enough knowledge, resources and permission to act. Three types of barriers were especially important.

The first was legal and institutional uncertainty. Students were unsure how entrepreneurship, residence permits, taxation and self-employment rules applied to them. Thus, the problem was what the thesis terms epistemic ambiguity: there is no formal prohibition, but the students did not know what was allowed, where to check it, or whom to trust for guidance.

The second barrier was resources. Lack of start-up capital, time pressure and financial insecurity made even small-scale experimentation feel risky. In some cases, capital did not work as a normal barrier but as a threshold: without even a small minimum level of resources, action felt impossible.

The third barrier was contextual competence. Students described language, local networks and knowledge of Finnish customers as central challenges. This is not simply an individual language skills issue. Language and networks mediate access to information, customers, trust and market understanding.

Social signals matter

The results also showed that social norms worked in two directions. Family expectations often encouraged stable employment and discouraged risk-taking. This reduced the social legitimacy of entrepreneurship for some students. At the same time, peers, alumni and diaspora communities could make entrepreneurship feel possible. This can be described as signaling rather than instruction. Students were not necessarily persuaded by someone telling them to become entrepreneurs. Instead, seeing someone with a similar background test a business idea made entrepreneurship more realistic. Negative examples also mattered: observing failure could increase caution.

Where students had already taken entrepreneurial steps, these actions were usually small and low-risk. Examples included informal service provision, freelancing, online testing and using existing networks. These actions were often framed as learning rather than as formal business creation. If entrepreneurship is spoken of in terms of start-ups and formal business plans, some international students may see it as too risky or distant. If it is also framed as structured experimentation, learning and opportunity testing, the threshold for participation may become lower.

For universities, visible role models are a crucial part of entrepreneurship support, and the discourse around the topic needs to make small-scale experimentation visible as a legitimate form of entrepreneurial learning.

Together, these factors can affect whether students see entrepreneurship as something that people like them can actually do.

Practical implications for universities

The implication of the results is that more targeted support for international students is needed. First, universities should provide clear, plain-language guidance on self-employment, residence permits, taxation and what international students are allowed to do. This guidance should be easy to find and connected to entrepreneurship and career services.

Second, existing support services should be made more visible. If students do not know where support is or how to use it, it does not increase their confidence.

Third, mentoring should include people who understand international students' specific context. General business advice is useful, but students also need guidance from people who understand legal uncertainty, language barriers, network building and operating in a new country.

Fourth, universities should make micro-entrepreneurship a recognised career-development path. This does not mean encouraging every international student to become an entrepreneur. It means acknowledging that small-scale entrepreneurial experimentation can be a legitimate way to build skills, income, networks and confidence.

Finally, universities should monitor international students' entrepreneurial interests and barriers regularly. Student needs may change as regulations, labour market conditions and international student populations change.

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