



LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT ENTREPRENEURS IN KAZAKHSTAN: INSTITUTIONAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

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ABSTRACT. *The purpose of this study is to investigate the lived experiences of student entrepreneurs in Kazakhstan, with particular attention to how institutional and cultural contexts shape their entrepreneurial identities and actions. This research is a qualitative phenomenological study designed to capture the meanings that students attach to entrepreneurship within their academic and social environments. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with ten student entrepreneurs from two contrasting institutional settings: a private university, De Montfort University Kazakhstan (DMUK), and a public technical university, Satbayev University. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns across the narratives. The findings reveal that DMUK students often pursue entrepreneurship as a form of personal growth, experimentation, and self-expression, while Satbayev students frame entrepreneurship in terms of social impact and community benefit. Across both groups, barriers such as cultural resistance, limited funding opportunities, and regulatory challenges were consistently emphasized. However, evidence also points to a gradual shift in peer attitudes, with entrepreneurship gaining recognition as a viable and respected career path among young people. This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of entrepreneurial identity formation in emerging economies and provides context-rich insights into how higher education institutions influence entrepreneurial motivations. Its practical significance lies in informing policies and initiatives aimed at supporting youth-led innovation in Kazakhstan. Recommendations include the development of mentorship networks, the integration of entrepreneurship across disciplines, simplification of funding mechanisms, and the promotion of successful role models to strengthen entrepreneurial ecosystems.*

KEYWORDS: student entrepreneurship, Kazakhstan, entrepreneurial identity, higher education, cultural context.

INTRODUCTION

As Kazakhstan positions itself to become a diversified, innovation-driven economy, entrepreneurship has been identified as a critical driver of sustainable development. The government's initiatives, such as the "Kazakhstan 2050 Strategy" and "Business Roadmap 2025," reflect this focus (Sakenova, 2025). Student entrepreneurship, in particular, plays a strategic role by nurturing young talents to create jobs rather than only seeking them (Aubakirova et al., 2023).

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However, promoting student entrepreneurship in Kazakhstan involves overcoming deeply rooted cultural attitudes that prioritize stability and traditional career paths, as well as addressing systemic barriers in higher education and business environments. While the importance of entrepreneurship is acknowledged, support systems, mentorship, and risk-tolerant narratives remain underdeveloped (Sitenko et al., 2024; Tamenova & Sekerbayeva, 2022).

This phenomenological study investigates the lived experiences of 10 student entrepreneurs, i.e., five from De Montfort University Kazakhstan (DMUK) and five from Satbayev University in Almaty, to understand both the barriers they face and the opportunities they perceive. Institutional comparisons aim to reveal how private versus public university environments influence entrepreneurial trajectories (GEM, 2025).

This study deliberately focuses on De Montfort University Kazakhstan (DMUK) and Satbayev University to capture contrasting entrepreneurial environments within Kazakhstan's higher education landscape. DMUK, as the first British university in Kazakhstan, attracts many students from higher-income families with strong business backgrounds and an openness to entrepreneurial thinking. These students often arrive with a "business mindset" nurtured by family support and international exposure. In contrast, Satbayev University, a leading public technical institution, represents a different dynamic: it serves a broader demographic, emphasizes technological innovation, and operates its own incubator to support student ventures. As a public sector university with a long-standing technical focus, Satbayev University offers students practical, engineering-oriented pathways into entrepreneurship but within a more formal and resource-constrained setting. By examining these two distinct contexts, this study provides a richer, more nuanced understanding of how institutional environments and student backgrounds interact to shape entrepreneurial journeys in Kazakhstan.

The following are the research questions:

1. What are the key challenges faced by student entrepreneurs in Kazakhstan's higher education context?
2. What opportunities do they perceive for developing entrepreneurial ventures?
3. How do institutional environments (private vs. technical universities) influence entrepreneurial identity and outcomes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Entrepreneurship education has become a critical driver in shaping students' entrepreneurial intentions and mindsets across various cultural and institutional contexts. Research suggests that tailored educational programs and supportive institutional climates can significantly enhance students' self-efficacy and willingness to start new ventures (Walter et al., 2013). In particular, the structure and focus of university departments play an important role in either encouraging or discouraging entrepreneurial career paths among students (Nabi et al., 2010). Furthermore, the presence of role models within university environments has been shown to strengthen students' perceived behavioral control and entrepreneurial attitudes, thus fostering a more proactive approach toward venture creation (Fellnhofer, 2017).

Beyond curriculum and departmental influences, the overall entrepreneurial climate at higher education institutions can shape students' confidence and perceived feasibility of starting a business. Bergmann et al. (2018) emphasize that a strong entrepreneurial climate, including mentorship opportunities and practical support systems, can create a sense of belonging and inspire students to pursue entrepreneurial activities. Similarly, university-based incubation and support structures have been found to positively impact students' entrepreneurial orientation and ability to transform ideas into viable ventures (Sitenko et al., 2024). These findings underscore the importance of embedding entrepreneurship into broader institutional strategies rather than treating it as a standalone curricular element.

However, entrepreneurship, particularly Student Entrepreneurship in Kazakhstan, remains an emerging sector, often overshadowed by traditional career preferences despite national programs like "Business Roadmap 2025" and various startup grants. Historically dominated by family-run businesses and small trading enterprises (Aitzhanova et al., 2021), Kazakhstan's high Uncertainty Avoidance score reflects a cultural preference for stability and risk aversion (Hofstede Insights, n.d.). This mindset discourages entrepreneurial initiatives among youth, who often favor secure public or corporate jobs (Sitenko et al., 2024).

Universities play a pivotal role in challenging this cultural narrative by embedding practical, hands-on entrepreneurship training into their curricula (Byun et al., 2018; Klofsten & Lundmark, 2016). Private institutions like DMUK emphasize applied learning and industry connections, while public universities such as Satbayev are gradually integrating entrepreneurship into their more theory-focused programs (Aubakirova et al., 2023). However, studies highlight that despite policy efforts, student ventures remain largely necessity-driven rather than opportunity-driven, reflecting deep-rooted skepticism and perceived social risks (GEM, 2022; Tamenova & Sekerbayeva, 2022). Nevertheless, the growing interest among young people suggests potential for change if institutional and societal support systems continue to evolve (Nabi et al., 2017; Fayolle & Gailly, 2015).

Studies on Student Entrepreneurship in Kazakhstan

Universities are key agents in transforming students' entrepreneurial intentions into real actions. The Global University Entrepreneurial Spirit Students' Survey (GUESSS) underscores that exposure to entrepreneurship education positively correlates with students' startup intentions and self-efficacy (Tamenova, 2021). Private universities such as De Montfort University Kazakhstan (DMUK) have integrated entrepreneurship into their curricula through mentorship programs and pitch competitions, although they still lack a formal incubator program to support ventures beyond the classroom. Nonetheless, these approaches align well with global best practices in experiential entrepreneurship education (Byun et al., 2018; Klofsten & Lundmark, 2016). In contrast, public universities like Satbayev University continue to emphasize theoretical learning and traditional academic development, focusing heavily on research and established disciplines. While recent reforms have introduced incubators, entrepreneurship modules, and startup weekends, the overall institutional mindset remains relatively conservative (Aubakirova et al., 2023). As a result, students in these environments

often view entrepreneurship more as a means of social contribution and community development rather than purely as a commercial pursuit.

Research indicates that Kazakhstani are generally less inclined to accept failure as part of the entrepreneurial process compared to their Western counterparts. The stigma around business failure often discourages young people from pursuing startups or experimenting with innovative ideas (Tamenova & Sekerbayeva, 2022). This fear is compounded by family and societal expectations, which prefer clear, stable career trajectories.

Access to finance remains a primary obstacle. Many students depend on family savings or small personal loans because venture capital markets and angel investor networks are still underdeveloped in Kazakhstan (Aitzhanova et al., 2021). Government grants like those offered under the “Zhas Project” are perceived as complex and bureaucratic, limiting accessibility for first-time entrepreneurs (Sakenova, 2025).

Despite these challenges, there are encouraging signs. There is a growing trend among Kazakh youth to engage in e-commerce, digital services, and social enterprises, indicating a shift towards more innovative and value-driven business models (GEM, 2022). Social media and global exposure have played critical roles in shaping this mindset, offering new platforms for marketing, networking, and community building.

Collectively, the literature suggests that while Kazakhstan’s student entrepreneurship ecosystem faces systemic and cultural barriers, there is a significant foundation on which to build. To unlock this potential, it is essential to strengthen practical entrepreneurial education, normalize risk-taking, and simplify access to financial and institutional resources (Passavanti et al., 2023).

Despite growing interest in entrepreneurship education in Kazakhstan, most existing studies focus on broad ecosystem-level factors, such as government policies, macroeconomic conditions, and overall startup infrastructure. There is limited research specifically examining the nuanced, lived experiences of student entrepreneurs within different university contexts. While some works discuss entrepreneurship intentions among Kazakhstani, they rarely delve into how personal motivations, institutional environments, and cultural expectations interact to shape actual entrepreneurial behavior. In particular, comparisons between private institutions that emphasize applied learning and technical universities focused on technological innovation are almost entirely absent.

Furthermore, most current research relies on quantitative surveys, which often overlook the complex social and psychological dimensions of entrepreneurship, such as identity formation, family influence, and emotional resilience. This lack of qualitative, in-depth analysis creates a significant gap in understanding how young entrepreneurs navigate systemic barriers and cultural narratives in Kazakhstan. Addressing this gap is crucial for designing tailored educational programs and policy interventions that resonate with students’ real experiences and needs. By exploring these underexamined aspects, this study aims to provide richer insights that can support more effective entrepreneurship development in transitional economies.

In addition to prior discussions on entrepreneurship education, this study's theoretical framing is informed by contemporary perspectives on entrepreneurial identity and institutional change. Rae and Carswell (2013) conceptualize entrepreneurial identity as a dynamic and socially constructed process, continually shaped through learning, interaction, and context. Shepherd and Patzelt (2011) extend this understanding by emphasizing how entrepreneurs operate within evolving institutional environments, responding adaptively to regulatory, cultural, and cognitive shifts. Together, these perspectives provide an interpretive lens for examining how Kazakhstan's students make sense of their entrepreneurial experiences within distinctive institutional settings. This alignment between individual sense-making and institutional context forms the conceptual backbone of the present research.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A phenomenological research design was chosen for this study to deeply explore the lived experiences of student entrepreneurs in Kazakhstan. Specifically, this study adopts an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) orientation. This approach emphasizes the researcher's interpretive role in engaging with participants accounts to uncover the meanings embedded in their experiences. The analysis, therefore, goes beyond description to explore how student entrepreneurs construct and negotiate their entrepreneurial identities within the institutional and cultural contexts of Kazakhstan.

Phenomenology is especially suitable for understanding how individuals construct meaning from their experiences and navigate complex social and institutional environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach aligns with the study's objective to capture not just events but also emotions, perceptions, and contextual nuances.

Phenomenology prioritizes depth over breadth, allowing rich, detailed insights into participants' subjective realities. Given the cultural and institutional complexities surrounding entrepreneurship in Kazakhstan, this design provides a means to uncover both explicit challenges (e.g., bureaucracy, funding) and implicit ones (e.g., social stigma, family expectations). A quantitative survey or purely descriptive study would not have sufficiently captured these deeper layers of meaning.

Participants and Sampling

Ten student entrepreneurs were purposively sampled, with five participants each from De Montfort University Kazakhstan (DMUK) and Satbayev University. DMUK represents a private, practice-oriented model, while Satbayev University offers a more traditional, theory-focused public university context. Participants were selected based on their active involvement in launching or running ventures during their studies, ensuring they could provide first-hand reflections on real entrepreneurial experiences. The sample included students aged between 20 and 24 years, with a balanced gender distribution (six male and four female participants), reflecting the growing diversity in student entrepreneurship. Their fields of study ranged from business management, marketing, and international relations at DMUK to engineering, information technology, and applied sciences at Satbayev University. The initial participants from DMUK were selected using purposive criteria focused on active student entrepreneurs. After these

interviews, a snowball sampling approach was used: several DMUK students referred peers from Satbayev University who were engaged in entrepreneurial activities. This informal referral network helped identify additional relevant participants who might have been otherwise difficult to reach, particularly from the public and technical university context. Snowball sampling allowed for richer insights into student entrepreneurial networks and experiences across institutional boundaries.

Institutional Context

The table below presents a comparative overview of De Montfort University Kazakhstan (DMUK) and Satbayev University in Almaty, highlighting their differing strategic approaches to entrepreneurship education.

Table 1. Comparative overview of DMUK and Satbayev University (entrepreneurship orientation)

Attribute	De Montfort University Kazakhstan (DMUK)	Satbayev University
Ownership / type	Private, British branch campus	Public, national technical university
Strategic emphasis	International, creativity-driven business/management education	STEM innovation, applied engineering, tech transfer
Typical student profile (as reflected in manuscript)	More exposure to business backgrounds; higher openness to entrepreneurial thinking	Broader demographic with strong technical focus
Curriculum approach	Practice-oriented, applied learning, workshops, mock pitch activities in classes	Strong theoretical grounding; growing but uneven practical exposure
Entrepreneurship integration	Embedded in taught modules; mentorship/guest talks; no formal incubator yet	University incubator present; formal tech-innovation pathway
Follow-through support	Events valuable but short-cycle; limited structured post-event mentoring	Incubator provides more structured early-stage support
Industry links	Visiting entrepreneurs, class projects, external talks	Partnerships aligned to engineering/technology domains
Funding / access	Emphasis on private/angel interest but traction-first expectations	Exposure to state/uni grant schemes; processes perceived as bureaucratic
Typical student orientation (per findings)	Personal growth, experimentation, self-expression	Social contribution, community benefit, ethical impact
Key constraints noted by students	Limited sustained mentoring after class activities	Practical “how-to” gaps (registration, pitching), admin complexity

Source: Author's compilation based on Stam (2015)

Notes: This table summarizes key contrasts as described in the manuscript and drawn from interview insights. It is intended to illustrate how the two institutional settings, DMUK and Satbayev University, differ in their strategic orientations, pedagogical focus, and support structures for student entrepreneurship. The comparison is interpretive and based on qualitative data rather than institutional policy documents.

In short, Table 1 above provides a concise juxtaposition of institutional orientations and student experiences, clarifying how each context channels entrepreneurial identity and practice in distinct ways. These two institutions were selected as part of a qualitative

research design aimed at exploring how different pedagogical environments and institutional missions influence students' entrepreneurial mindset. DMUK, a British university branch campus, emphasizes international and creativity-driven business education (British Council Kazakhstan, 2023). In contrast, Satbayev University, Kazakhstan's leading technical university, integrates entrepreneurship through applied STEM-based innovation and state-driven technology transfer policies.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted over two months in early 2025, with each session lasting approximately 60–75 minutes. An interview guide included open-ended questions on topics such as motivations for entrepreneurship, perceived institutional support, societal reactions, personal and financial challenges, and future aspirations. This flexible format allowed the interviewer to probe further into unexpected themes or stories that emerged during the conversation.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and, where necessary, translated into English to maintain accuracy. Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was carried out inductively: initial codes were generated from close reading of transcripts, which were then grouped into higher-level themes through iterative analysis. The constant comparison method was used to ensure consistency and identify subtle differences between the two university contexts.

Table 2. Summary of Key Themes and Analytical Dimensions

Main Theme	Sub-Themes / Patterns	Analytical Interpretation
1. Institutional Contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability of entrepreneurship education • Mentorship and incubation support • University culture (private vs. public) 	<p>Institutional environments shape the kinds of opportunities and support structures available to student entrepreneurs. DMUK's flexible, creative climate fosters experimentation, whereas Satbayev's formal structure encourages practical but cautious engagement.</p>
2. Cultural Identity and Social Perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family expectations • Societal attitudes toward entrepreneurship • Perceived risk and legitimacy 	<p>Students' entrepreneurial intentions are filtered through strong cultural narratives of stability and respectability. Entrepreneurship is often negotiated as both personal aspiration and cultural deviation.</p>
3. Entrepreneurial Learning and Personal Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning by doing • Resilience through failure • Balancing study and business 	<p>Entrepreneurial activity functions as a form of experiential learning, building self-efficacy, autonomy, and adaptive identity formation. Students see entrepreneurship as a means of self-discovery and capability building.</p>

Source: Author's compilation based on Braun & Clarke (2006)

Validation and Credibility Measures

To enhance credibility, member checking was conducted by sharing summarized findings with participants for confirmation and feedback. Triangulation was achieved by comparing data across different participants and institutions. Additionally, peer debriefing with colleagues familiar with qualitative research methods helped refine interpretations and mitigate potential researcher biases. A detailed audit trail was maintained to document analytical decisions, adding transparency to the study process.

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

Ethical approval was not required for this study, as per institutional guidelines on non-clinical educational research involving adult students. The study involved voluntary participation of university students in interviews focused on learning experiences, with informed consent obtained from all participants. Data were anonymized, and no identifying information was collected. The research was conducted in accordance with international ethical standards, including the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines (2018).

Limitations of the approach

While this qualitative approach offers rich and context-specific insights, it inherently limits the generalizability of the findings beyond these particular cases. By focusing on only two universities, the study may not fully capture the wider regional and institutional diversity that exists across Kazakhstan. Additionally, the relatively small sample size means some unique experiences might have been overlooked. Future research could build on these findings by including more diverse institutions, adopting longitudinal designs to follow students over time, or combining qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a broader and deeper understanding of student entrepreneurship.

FINDINGS

The analysis revealed several key themes that describe the experiences of student entrepreneurs in Kazakhstan: motivations and identity formation, institutional support differences, societal and cultural pressures, financial and regulatory obstacles, and evolving peer perceptions. Each theme is presented below with direct quotations from participants to ensure their voices are central.

Students from both universities spoke passionately about their desire for independence and self-definition. DMUK students frequently described their entrepreneurial pursuits as a way to “escape the system”. One student shared, *“At DMUK, they encourage us to question everything. I started my marketing consultancy not because I was sure it would work, but because I wanted to take control of my learning.”*

Another DMUK participant said, *“Working on my startup feels like designing my own curriculum. Every mistake is a lesson that no textbook could teach me.”* For Satbayev students, motivations often stemmed from a sense of social responsibility. A student who launched a community recycling initiative stated, *“We need to show that business can solve social problems. My goal isn’t just profit, but it’s about the impact I create. I earnestly want to help people see sustainability differently.”*

Students at DMUK spoke highly of workshops, mock pitch competitions in classes, and visiting entrepreneur lectures. A DMUK participant reflected, *“mock pitch competitions felt like the first time my ideas were truly heard. You present to the class, who act as actual investors, get immediate feedback, and realize what matters in the real world.”* However, some felt these programs lacked sustained follow-up support: “After mock pitch competitions in classes, there is no structured way to continue. You win or lose, and that’s it. I wish there were mentorships that lasted beyond those events.”

In contrast, Satbayev students valued the theoretical grounding but felt disconnected from real business practice. One student noted, *“We learn frameworks and theories, but no one teaches us how to actually register a business or pitch to investors. We have to figure that out ourselves.”* Several described forming informal peer networks as a workaround, such as creating Telegram groups for sharing tips. These findings support prior research indicating that institutional context shapes engagement with entrepreneurship.

A near-universal theme was tension with family and broader cultural norms. Many described families’ preference for secure, stable jobs, especially in government or large state-owned enterprises. A Satbayev University student explained: *“My mother still thinks I’m going through a phase. She asks me when I’ll get serious about a real career.”* Similarly, a DMUK student revealed: *“My relatives openly say that business is only for those who fail academically. There’s this idea that real success means an office job with a big company.”*

Access to funding and bureaucratic challenges formed one of the most significant barriers. DMUK students highlighted problems with formal financing options: *“I pitched to a local investor, and he liked the idea but wanted me to prove revenue first. It’s a catch-22: you need money to get customers but need customers to get money.”*

Meanwhile, Satbayev University students described complicated grant applications and unclear criteria. One student said, *“I applied for a student entrepreneurship grant, but no one explained the criteria properly. After months of paperwork, I was told I didn’t qualify because my business was too experimental.”* Despite strong cultural headwinds, most students noted a positive shift among their peers. A DMUK student observed: *“In my first year, no one talked about startups. Now, many of us are either working on side projects or at least thinking about it.”*

A Satbayev University student echoed: *“Before, entrepreneurship was seen as risky and irresponsible. Now it’s starting to look brave and even admirable.”* This cultural change, while still nascent, provides an important foundation for future policy and institutional efforts. While some DMUK students described pivoting their business ideas multiple times before achieving moderate traction. One student said, *“I started with an app idea, switched to a marketing service, and finally landed on customized merchandise. Every pivot taught me something new about what people actually want.”* Others described struggling with imposter syndrome: *“Sometimes, I feel like I don’t belong in entrepreneurship circles, especially when comparing myself to big success stories online.”*

Satbayev University students shared stories of using academic skills in practical contexts. One participant noted: *“My research training helped me design better surveys for customer feedback. It’s amazing how those academic skills can be transferred to business.”* These deeper reflections illustrate the importance of flexibility and adaptability as critical entrepreneurial skills. Constant pivoting should be normalized as a sign of iterative learning rather than failure. Furthermore, the feeling of imposter syndrome among students suggests a need for stronger psychological support and mentorship to reinforce self-belief.

Finally, integrating academic rigor with practical application can bridge perceived gaps between theoretical education and business realities. Encouraging students to use research, analytical, and critical thinking skills within entrepreneurial projects can lead to stronger, evidence-based business decisions.

The following are the key themes that emerged from the interviews across both Universities.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that student entrepreneurship in Kazakhstan is not merely a reaction to economic opportunity but a process of meaning-making shaped by institutional and cultural forces. Interpreting these results through the lens of entrepreneurial identity, it becomes evident that students actively construct their sense of “being an entrepreneur” within the expectations and constraints of their university environments. DMUK’s context nurtures more individualistic and creativity-driven identities, while Satbayev’s framework fosters collective and socially oriented motivations. These variations reflect broader institutional logics and highlight how entrepreneurship education is mediated by values, norms, and learning cultures rather than simply course content.

The results contribute to theory by advancing our understanding of entrepreneurial identity formation within transitional economies. Unlike studies in Western contexts that highlight opportunity-driven motivations, this study reveals a strong interplay between social values, family expectations, and institutional frameworks in shaping entrepreneurial intentions. This theoretical contribution highlights the need to consider cultural narratives and localized institutional dynamics when designing entrepreneurship education in emerging markets.

In terms of policy implications, simplifying funding mechanisms and reducing bureaucratic barriers are crucial for empowering young entrepreneurs. Establishing long-term mentorship networks and showcasing young role models can help shift societal perceptions of entrepreneurship from a risky alternative to a respected career path. Additionally, integrating entrepreneurship education across disciplines and providing experiential learning opportunities can foster more inclusive and sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems.

While the study focuses on Kazakhstan, its insights are relevant to other emerging and transitional economies facing similar cultural and institutional challenges. Future research should build on these findings by adopting longitudinal and comparative approaches across different regions to deepen understanding and improve generalizability.

Overall, the findings underscore that entrepreneurship education and policy in emerging economies must go beyond technical skills to address cultural resistance, psychological resilience, and institutional support structures. This holistic perspective can significantly enhance the development of young entrepreneurs and contribute to national innovation and economic diversification goals.

These findings reveal that student entrepreneurship in Kazakhstan is not merely an economic decision but a deeply personal journey shaped by motivations, institutional environments, cultural norms, and systemic barriers. DMUK students see

entrepreneurship as experimental learning that blends ambition with market realities, while Satbayev students emphasize ethical and community-centered missions. This duality shows that entrepreneurial intention is driven as much by social values as by economic opportunity.

The institutional context plays a pivotal role: DMUK fosters confidence through practical exposure but lacks sustained mentorship, while Satbayev offers strong ethical grounding but insufficient hands-on preparation. A hybrid model combining theory with long-term support, including joint incubators and shared mentorship, could address these gaps. Cultural resistance, often shaped by family narratives favoring stability, leads students to view entrepreneurship as temporary rather than permanent. Showcasing young entrepreneurs as role models and reframing failure as growth could help shift these perceptions.

Financial constraints and bureaucratic hurdles further hinder progress; students need success evidence to secure funding, but require funding to achieve success. Simplified grants, youth-focused microfinance, and clearer regulations are critical, and lessons from programs like Startup India and Start-Up Chile offer policy inspiration. Encouragingly, peer openness indicates a generational shift toward viewing entrepreneurship as respectable and aspirational. Universities can amplify this momentum by supporting student-led clubs, peer mentoring, and campus festivals that normalize innovation. Finally, competitions and workshops must be complemented by sustained mentoring, legal support, and financial coaching to guide ventures from ideation to scaling and exit, requiring coordinated efforts from universities and government agencies.

An important nuance that emerged from the interviews is the difference in support levels based on students' family backgrounds. Those from entrepreneurial or business-owning families often benefit from informal mentorship, seed funding, and emotional backing, which one might call a "safety net". Several DMUK students, for instance, shared that their parents, who run small businesses, not only encouraged them to take entrepreneurial risks but also provided capital to get started. In contrast, students from non-business backgrounds reported more pressure to pursue stable jobs, with little to no financial cushion for entrepreneurial experimentation. One DMUK participant noted, "My friend's father gave him money to try his startup idea twice, but my family keeps telling me to just find a 'normal job' after graduation." This aligns with broader global findings that family support and social capital often determine who gets to pursue entrepreneurship more confidently (Passavanti et al., 2023). While Satbayev University offers a technology-focused incubator that provides practical assistance for early-stage ventures, DMUK, despite its emphasis on applied learning, still lacks a formal incubator. This gap limits students' ability to build momentum after pitch events and workshops. A dedicated incubator at DMUK could help democratize entrepreneurial opportunity and allow students from all backgrounds to thrive.

CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the deeply personal and complex journeys of student entrepreneurs in Kazakhstan. It reveals that entrepreneurship is more than a business activity rather it is an act of self-discovery, resilience, and cultural negotiation. DMUK students often see their ventures as creative laboratories for personal growth, while

Satbayev students connect their efforts to broader social impact and community service. These insights highlight the necessity for universities to offer supportive environments that not only teach technical skills but also nurture confidence, adaptability, and ethical values.

On a human level, the stories shared by these young entrepreneurs reflect courage, curiosity, and a willingness to challenge cultural norms. By listening to their voices, educators and policymakers can design more empathetic and inclusive strategies that recognize the emotional and social dimensions of entrepreneurship.

Ultimately, supporting student entrepreneurs means building ecosystems where failure is embraced as a learning experience, diverse backgrounds are celebrated, and young people feel empowered to shape their futures. As Kazakhstan and similar emerging economies continue to evolve, these human-centered approaches will be crucial for cultivating a generation of entrepreneurs ready to drive meaningful change.

This study has explored the nuanced experiences of student entrepreneurs in Kazakhstan, revealing how motivations, cultural narratives, and institutional contexts shape their journeys. While DMUK students tend to view entrepreneurship as a means for personal growth and skill development, Satbayev students emphasize social impact and ethical considerations. Despite financial challenges and societal skepticism, there is a noticeable cultural shift among young people who increasingly see entrepreneurship as a legitimate and respected path. These findings underscore the complex interplay among individual aspirations, family expectations, and broader policy environments, offering valuable guidance for universities and policymakers to create more supportive, tailored interventions.

This study both confirms and expands on prior research into student entrepreneurship in transitional economies. It affirms Tamenova and Sekerbayeva's (2022) observation that fear of failure and family expectations remain major psychological barriers. Furthermore, these insights align with Tariq's (2019) study on student entrepreneurs in Pakistan, which emphasized the importance of practical competencies and institutional support in shaping entrepreneurial motivations. However, this study also reveals a subtle but growing cultural shift among peers, who increasingly view entrepreneurship as an admirable and viable career path rather than a risky alternative. This emerging openness suggests a new dynamic not fully captured in previous studies, offering a more optimistic foundation for future policy and educational strategies.

Ultimately, student entrepreneurship in Kazakhstan emerges not merely as an economic activity but as a form of self-expression and cultural negotiation. The contrasting experiences of DMUK and Satbayev students highlight that entrepreneurship education cannot be approached with a one-size-fits-all model. While DMUK excels in practical skill-building, it could integrate stronger community-oriented and ethical perspectives, whereas Satbayev University socially conscious students would benefit from more experiential, hands-on opportunities. By nurturing this emerging entrepreneurial spirit that is rooted in resilience, creativity, and social impact, Kazakhstan has a unique opportunity to

cultivate a new generation of entrepreneurs poised to transform industries and tackle pressing societal challenges.

Recommendations

Universities should play a transformative role in cultivating student entrepreneurship by establishing long-term mentorship networks that include alumni and industry experts, as well as developing dedicated incubator programs. While Satbayev University has already launched a technological incubator, DMUK still lacks such a resource; creating one could significantly enhance student ventures beyond the classroom. Integrating entrepreneurship across all disciplines, not just in business courses, will empower students from technical, creative, and social science backgrounds to see entrepreneurial pathways in their fields. Shared entrepreneurship spaces and cross-disciplinary hubs can further encourage collaboration and innovation, while dedicated entrepreneurship centers can inspire cultural change, lead research, and support student-led initiatives that foster a vibrant entrepreneurial community on campus.

Universities should strengthen support for student entrepreneurship by creating mentorship networks, incubators, and cross-disciplinary hubs that connect business, technology, and creative fields. Integrating entrepreneurship into diverse curricula and establishing dedicated centers can foster collaboration, innovation, and a stronger entrepreneurial culture. At the policy level, simplifying business registration, offering digital support systems, and providing student-focused grants or low-interest loans can reduce barriers to start-up creation. Highlighting successful youth entrepreneurs in public media can also help shift social perceptions and make entrepreneurship a more respected career path.

Moreover, collaboration between universities, government, and private partners should be formalized through regular Student Entrepreneurship Councils or Innovation Forums, aligning student initiatives with national priorities and funding opportunities. Universities can further enhance impact by embedding policy literacy into entrepreneurship education to prepare students for regulatory and financial realities.

Finally, local governments and municipalities can host student entrepreneurship fairs and challenge grants to increase visibility and provide early-stage support. Collectively, these actions can create an enabling environment that inspires students to innovate, take initiative, and contribute to Kazakhstan's entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Lastly, students themselves have a crucial role: they should engage actively in peer networks, embrace failure as a learning tool, and start with small, low-risk experiments to build resilience and confidence. By leveraging available institutional and policy support and advocating for further improvements, students can collectively shape an ecosystem that truly nurtures entrepreneurial ambition and impact.

Limitations and Future Research

While this phenomenological study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The focus on two universities in Almaty, i.e., one private (DMUK) and one public (Satbayev University) that limits the generalizability of the findings to all student entrepreneurs in Kazakhstan or the wider Central Asian region. Students from other regions, such as Astana, Shymkent, or rural areas, may

face different institutional and cultural challenges that shape their entrepreneurial experiences. The small, self-selected sample may also introduce bias, as participants were likely those already engaged or interested in entrepreneurship. Furthermore, self-reported interview data carries a risk of social desirability bias, with participants potentially overstating successes or minimizing difficulties.

Future research should broaden the sample to include more diverse universities, disciplines, and regional contexts. A longitudinal approach would help track how students' entrepreneurial identities evolve after graduation and which institutional factors most influence venture sustainability. Mixed-method designs combining qualitative depth with quantitative validation could also strengthen generalizability. Comparative studies across Central Asia could uncover regional differences, while deeper exploration of psychological dimensions such as imposter syndrome, fear of failure, and resilience would enrich understanding of the personal side of entrepreneurship education.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

JT: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing, supervision; AK: conceptualization, formal analysis, writing – review & editing, visualization.

ETHICAL APPROVAL AND INFORMED CONSENT

Ethical approval was not required for this study, as per De Montfort University Kazakhstan and Satbayev University guidelines on non-clinical educational research involving adult students. The study involved voluntary participation of university students in interviews focused on learning experiences, with informed consent obtained from all participants. Data were anonymized, and no identifying information was collected. The research was conducted in accordance with international ethical standards, including the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines (2018), and complies with the Journal of Central Asian Studies' ethics policy based on COPE and Elsevier's PERK principles.

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