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## **Academic leaders' perspectives on entrepreneurship at Finnish universities: a comparative case study**

### **Abstract**

This case study focuses on academic leaders' perspectives regarding entrepreneurship at two Finnish universities. It illustrates how university rectors and deans representing a multiplicity of academic traditions make sense of divergent ideas and expectations about what kind of entrepreneurship is sought and implemented in their university. Academic leaders' understandings are important because they influence how entrepreneurial activities are approached and adopted as part of university strategies and policies. The entrepreneurial university concept undergirds the theoretical frame of the study. Through 15 interviews with academic leaders (rectors and deans) at two multi-faculty universities in Finland, we conduct a narrative analysis of meanings attached to entrepreneurship in the context universities' societal impact. The findings highlight how entrepreneurship is presented simultaneously as necessary for all but limited to some disciplines and individuals. Furthermore, adopting a future-oriented perspective allows entrepreneurship to be depicted as important for the younger generations, though not requiring actions by decision makers presently.

**Keywords:** Entrepreneurship; academic entrepreneurship; academic leaders; societal impact; universities; Finland

### **Introduction**

To strengthen their role in society, universities are launching new policies and practices with an entrepreneurial focus. Accordingly, many universities encourage faculty and students to become more entrepreneurially oriented. This development towards 'entrepreneurial universities' (Etzkowitz, 2014; Hytti, 2021) is affecting higher education institutions in Finland and globally. Consequently, entrepreneurship at universities has become an important subject of practical interest and a key topic of academic research (Feola et al., 2021; Guerrero et al., 2016; Eriksson et al., 2021a).

University leaders' ability to nurture entrepreneurial culture (Heaton et al., 2020) is a key issue for entrepreneurial universities. Top and middle-level leaders with academic backgrounds (e.g., rectors and deans) are centrally placed when their organizations develop

new strategies, create new organizational structures and decide to implement or expand entrepreneurship teaching, curricula and other support (Klofsten et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2018).

Entrepreneurial universities face multiple related prospects and problems concerning not only the strategies they follow, but also the various interpretations made by those who lead universities (Hirvonen et al., 2021). The various understandings of what entrepreneurship means and how it can be implemented in local academic contexts can make it difficult to engage in meaningful discussions about universities' current and future impact on society (Berglund et al., 2021, Verduijn & Sabelis, 2021). Thus, we suggest that analysis of academic leaders' (rectors and deans) perspectives on and understandings of entrepreneurship within their organizations is needed.

Academic leaders representing different disciplines and academic traditions may have divergent ideas and expectations concerning what entrepreneurship means and how it is or should be implemented in the university context. Leaders' understanding will influence how entrepreneurship is embedded in university strategies and policies. Focusing on academic leaders' interpretations at two Finnish universities, we address the following research questions: How do academic leaders understand entrepreneurship? How do they justify the need for entrepreneurship at their universities? What strategies, policies and activities regarding entrepreneurship do they view as important, harmful or risky and why?

Without a thorough self-understanding of the possible meanings of entrepreneurship, academic leaders lack the insight necessary to critically assess how to approach and implement it in the universities they lead. Without the contextual understanding that our study provides, entrepreneurship is at risk of becoming a pervasive, functionalist ideology that can mean anything to anyone and can be easily challenged (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012).

This comparative case study contributes to the literature on entrepreneurship at universities by highlighting how societal context informs academic leaders' narratives. With societal impact in higher demand at universities, entrepreneurship offers key discursive resources to advance this via different avenues that include improving student employability, providing solutions to daunting challenges and transforming universities so that they are more agile and economically efficient. However, a short-term focus may put universities at risk and therefore, the literature has called for critical thinking and reflexivity (Kyrö, 2015).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Expanding Entrepreneurship in the University Context**

Universities are expected to strengthen their role in society (Domínguez-Gómez et al., 2021), and many have reformulated their strategies and policies to promote entrepreneurial activities as part of their wider societal impact (Montonen et al., 2021b). Universities have invited multiple groups (e.g., students, faculty and staff) to engage with various forms of entrepreneurship, all of which have different identities, experiences and aspirations (Hayter et al., 2021; Eriksson et al., 2021a). By doing this, they have entered a space in which not only experimentation and creativity, but also contestation and uncertainty, can be experienced (Whitchurch, 2015).

In Finland and globally, entrepreneurship education and training (e.g., courses, workshops, events, mentoring and coaching) are increasingly being offered to students and faculty (Hytti et al., 2020; Peura & Hytti, 2023), i.e., entrepreneurship no longer exists in an isolated position, as earlier criticized (e.g., Kirby, 2004). At many universities, entrepreneurial activities have become campus-wide, targeting all university disciplines and actors (Heinonen & Hytti, 2008; 2010). Becoming an entrepreneur is driven by multiple motivations and goals (Galati et al., 2020), such as skills development for better employability (Räty et al., 2020), career projects that seek more flexibility (Moilanen et al., 2021b; Montonen et al., 2021a) or better status and income (Jain et al., 2009), and reputation-building in science (Lam, 2011).

A key tenet of universities' societal impact is the 'commercialization of knowledge' or 'technology transfer' from university to industry via patenting, licensing, university spin-off creation and research contracts that generate additional revenue for universities (Heaton et al., 2020; Moilanen et al. 2021a). As part of the wider emphasis on entrepreneurship, universities have extended academic entrepreneurship outside of hard sciences, making space for broader and more inclusive definitions (Abreu & Grinevich, 2013; Barth & Schlegelmilch 2020) that encompass not only researchers, but also teachers, students and administrators as key actors in academic entrepreneurship. This highlights how entrepreneurship education and training is offered to individuals and groups with different disciplinary backgrounds, career stages, genders and ages to allow them to engage in academic entrepreneurship (Komulainen et al., 2009; Korhonen et al., 2012; Hytti & Heinonen, 2013). Taken together, these developments reflect the transition towards an entrepreneurial university (Hytti, 2021).

Prior to the 2020s research on entrepreneurship at universities – particularly academic entrepreneurship – has mostly focused on interactions between scientists and universities (Guerrero et al., 2016). Research has been conducted on the perspectives of technology transfer officers and directors (Padilla-Meléndez & del-Aguila-Obra, 2022), teachers and teacher students (Seikkula-Leino et al., 2012; Joensuu-Salo et al., 2021), and students (Liñán et al., 2011; Lahikainen et al., 2021, Rätty et al., 2020). Part of this research has aimed to generate a holistic understanding of and/or comparisons between universities in relation to entrepreneurship. These studies have not distinguished between leaders, faculty, staff and students, but mostly have focused on the university perspective as a collective.

### **Academic Leaders' Perspectives on Entrepreneurship**

Existing research has demonstrated universities' transition from an organizational perspective, producing insights on entrepreneurial universities' orientation, functions and activities (Feola et al. 2021). It has demonstrated how entrepreneurial universities formulate new development strategies and create new organizational structures to support entrepreneurship (Cerver Romero et al. 2021; Klofsten et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2018).

The ongoing transition towards entrepreneurial universities has been challenging academic work routines, beliefs and values, creating tensions within the university realm, e.g., among academic researchers (Hayter et al., 2021; O'Kane et al., 2022; Balven et al., 2018). Academic leaders are key actors in the development of new strategies, structures and entrepreneurial curricula (Klofsten et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2018).

However, even if extant research understands university leaders' role in initiating and implementing this transition to nurture a culture that supports entrepreneurship within the university (Heaton et al., 2020), the literature still lacks academic leaders' understandings.

The narrative approach adopted in this study (Riessman, 2008) highlights how we should not view university leadership as a managerial top-down project that takes a one-size-fits-all approach (Philpott et al., 2011). Arguably, academic leaders' various understandings, values and goals influence how entrepreneurship is implemented in the university context. For example, if deans at humanities faculties view entrepreneurship merely as technology transfer, their capacity to recognize the need for entrepreneurship education in their faculty would be limited.

Related to changes in and around universities, Byrne et al., (2014) have pointed out already a decade ago that axiological discussions (Do we want to? Should we? How should we do it?) are mostly missing from entrepreneurship policy debates and entrepreneurship education (Kyrö, 2015; Toledano & Gonzalez-Sanz, 2024). We suggest that this may create a risk of entrepreneurship becoming something that can mean anything to anyone, easily transforming it into a contested concept, such as leaderism, for instance (O'Reilly & Reed, 2010).

Overcoming this challenge calls for a reflexive research approach that focuses not only on the 'why' question, but also investigates what is happening, what kind of ideas exist about entrepreneurship at universities, what universities are offering either routinely or accidentally and how these choices are inviting some people and excluding others from entrepreneurship (Hytti, 2018). Consequently, we view it as highly important to study how academic leaders make sense of entrepreneurship at universities.

## **Methodology**

### **Data**

This comparative case study conducted 15 interviews in 2017–18 with rectors and deans at two Finnish, multi-faculty research universities: University A and University B (anonymized). The universities were selected for the study because they have similar structures in terms of multiple faculties, but different entrepreneurship strategies. At the time of data collection, University B had adopted an explicit entrepreneurship strategy. While University A's strategy did not focus explicitly on entrepreneurship, it was not immune to the entrepreneurial transition imperative influencing all universities (Klofsten et al., 2019). Both universities are located outside the capital area of Finland (Helsinki) and employ an average of 1,500–1,800 active staff and faculty (Table 1).

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*University A* comprises two campuses, 13 fields of study and more than 100 major subjects in four faculties (health sciences; natural sciences and forestry; social sciences and business studies; and humanities). In 2015, University A launched a new strategy for 2015–2020, in

which its interdisciplinary research areas were built around ‘global challenges’. In 2017, University A crafted an impact programme covering both research and teaching. At the time of the interviews, the university was discussing new strategic issues concerning impact – such as open innovation, open science and open data – and building innovation ecosystems around its major research areas.

*University B* comprises three campuses and seven faculties (medicine; natural sciences; social sciences; humanities; education; economics; and law). In 2015, it launched a new entrepreneurship strategy for 2016–2020 and stated an ambition to become an ‘entrepreneurial university’. It dedicated some resources and hired entrepreneurship managers who had the responsibility of developing and implementing activities on various fronts (entrepreneurship education for both students and staff, new business development and cooperation with business, commercialization of research and innovations). Faculties were asked to report biannually on their activities vis-à-vis current strategy and action plans, thus, the deans had to think about how the entrepreneurship strategy had been implemented within their faculty.

The data were gathered using thematic interviews with the rectors, vice rectors and other top-level leaders, as well as most of the deans at both universities (Table 2). The interviews started with an invitation to talk about one’s career and related experiences with entrepreneurship. Thereafter, the interviewees were asked: What have you done to promote entrepreneurship? What goals and ambitions concerning entrepreneurship do you view as important? What do you view as risky and undesirable about entrepreneurship? They were asked further about what their university had done to promote entrepreneurship, what their university should do next and what were the best- and worst-case scenarios for entrepreneurship at their universities. The importance of entrepreneurship at universities at the national level was also discussed briefly. The interviews were transcribed verbatim.

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## **Data analysis**

The goal of the narrative method used in our study was to identify the multiple meanings assigned to entrepreneurship in the university context (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2015, Riessman, 2008). By examining the language used by interviewees, we identified variations in definitions, metaphors, examples, as well as arguments and underlying assumptions. Analyzing these nuances helped uncover diverse interpretations and social constructs surrounding entrepreneurship at universities. We also drew attention to what was omitted, as this often conveys meaning; discussing something negative can imply the positive. For instance, when interviewees suggest that entrepreneurship should naturally integrate into universities in the future, they imply that it is currently not a common or central practice. In our findings, we provide quotes from the interviews to illustrate collective meanings. To protect the anonymity of interviewees in a small country with only 14 universities, we did not assign any codes to the interviewees in these quotes.

### **Findings**

#### **University A**

University A's strategy focused on finding solutions to four specific grand challenges: aging, lifestyles and health; learning in a digital society; cultural encounters, mobilities and borders; and environmental change and sufficiency of natural resources. The university rector actively promoted a comprehensive strategic emphasis on societal impact of teaching and research through open science, open data and open publishing. These developments form the micro-context for the interviewees' narratives at university A.

#### ***Entrepreneurship and academic entrepreneurship***

At University A, the core meanings attached to entrepreneurship were the skills needed for self-employment, but also for 'running companies' more broadly, as the following quote illustrates.

We should really support and provide training for running companies. It would be important to have this kind of training at the university. Really, to be able to get the basic information about entrepreneurship quite fast... In a way, get the big picture about what entrepreneurship is.

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The purpose of entrepreneurship training was viewed by the interviewed leaders as offering general ‘management skills’ and ‘work-life skills’, which would prepare students and PhDs to work outside of academia. These aspects of entrepreneurship were considered relevant for students and PhDs across all faculties. However, the problem the leaders emphasized was to offer these skills in a way that ‘would not disturb the provision of scientific content in degree programmes’:

We have been very good at teaching academic content issues... What was given less attention is that which current working life requires, the ability to work in larger networks and communicate... in this entrepreneurship world, these abilities will be emphasized. How do we take care of these abilities in a way that we do not need to diminish our strength, that is strong competence in substance issues.

For degree programmes, the leaders considered entrepreneurial skills as valuable ‘add-ons to discipline-based knowledge’, and it was argued that some degree programmes faced ‘challenges in making room for such an extra study area’. Therefore, new ways of integrating entrepreneurship into various degree programmes were in high demand.

In academic entrepreneurship by faculty, ‘establishing research-based spin-off companies’ was experienced by the leaders as ‘more valued than before’ because of the emerging idea of ‘science and innovation openness’ and increasing university encouragement of these and related ‘company collaborations by faculty working in hard sciences’:

Back then it was clear that there was a very critical eye towards the extent to which a professor could act as a businessman... people are still critical, but this is also thought about more openly and you are also encouraged...

However, academic entrepreneurship was not considered suitable for everybody or every discipline, and clear rules and roles between work at the university and at a spin-off company were highlighted as important. Furthermore, as one of the interviewees noted ‘if you aimed for the top in scientific research, you needed to devote all your time to that’. This reminder excluded the option of running a company and simultaneously working at the university.

***Entrepreneurship and societal impact: open innovation; open science and open data***

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Key entrepreneurial activities, such as networking and relationship building, were brought up by the leaders to connect University A to the local economy and business. In this context, entrepreneurship was outlined as ‘one element through which the university’s societal impact could be strengthened’:

As a university, we see it as a key issue to develop our Impact Strategy, which is the center point of our activities at the moment... And there this entrepreneurship perspective comes along very strongly when we try to support and develop the local economy and business around our campuses.

While entrepreneurship as a way to generate more societal impact was supported, visions of strengthening it were treated with reservations. There was also direct questioning of the idea of increasing openness to society as part of the university’s strategy.

You should have an open mind, to be able to think about these issues in new ways... The world is changing really fast, but you have to maintain a critical attitude. This is what I want to emphasize here.

The usefulness of the outcomes of openness, such as sharing data with collaborating companies, was questioned by noting that ‘you should not be naïve’ about such endeavours. Instead, these kinds of new developments should be discussed with ‘many people and from many perspectives’ before any making any decisions. Additionally, proper metrics and funding mechanisms should be in place prior to implementation.

I am sometimes quite annoyed by this situation. That we are required to do those things [cooperate with companies, perform applied research], and I say to us all that if we will start to do these things in this way [without proper discussion, metrics and funding mechanisms], we can nail our doors shut quite soon.

University A leaders viewed Finnish public universities’ funding model as extremely challenging in the context of the demands for increased impact. The government provides part of the funding (based on university outcomes), but interviewees questioned external research funders’ growing influence in determining what should be studied and how it should be studied to increase societal impact. Consequently, the conditions regarding external funding were criticized as ‘a dead end’ for Finnish universities.

This illustrates how, at University A, entrepreneurship was discussed in the wider context of the Finnish university sector, with the university strategy refocused towards making a societal impact through open innovation, open science and open data. The strategy work culminated in the search for new action models through which the strategic elements of openness could be implemented. In these models, the meanings assigned to entrepreneurship included ‘worklife skills’, ‘skills for running companies’ ‘stakeholder relationships’, ‘company collaboration’ and ‘innovation ecosystems’, through which contributions to societal impact could be made.

Two processes of moving forward with an impact-based strategy were identified by the leaders. The first process was based on the traditional model of ‘critical discussions’ within the academic community and the stakeholders addressing ‘what was really wanted’ and how to achieve this. The second process was based on the newer model of rapid engagement in cooperation and quickly starting to experiment with the stakeholders on a few specific issues to see what works and what does not:

Like I said, the traditional model has had great relevance, and it will have it in the future, and it can also be made more efficient. But if we can get a new model alongside the traditional one, they can feed each other then. And they do not need to be separate processes until the end of the world.

The first process reflected a more traditional approach to implementing change in academic organizations, with a novel twist on openness and extending the discussion outside the university. The second process reflected a newer approach that was more entrepreneurial. While the two approaches currently were viewed as separate, they were envisioned as being complementary in the future.

### **Case University B**

University B had an entrepreneurship strategy for the years 2016–2020, with an action plan and dedicated personnel, resources and activities. The university rector openly supported these, forming the micro-context for the interviewees’ narratives.

#### ***Employability and professions***

At University B, employability was found to be important when discussing entrepreneurship and an entrepreneurial university. Firstly, students need to understand working and business

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life, and secondly, they need expertise and knowledge to ensure employability, which is important for university funding. The interviewees noted that they were ‘genuinely concerned’ about what happens to the people they educate and noted that transferable skills provided by entrepreneurship were key:

Seriously, it is not just a nice thought. We really want to educate people, see who gets a job and track them and we are interested if people get jobs that correlated with their education.

According to the leaders at this multidisciplinary university, entrepreneurship connotes a wide interpretation of being about ‘business logic’, ‘understanding numbers’, ‘personal branding or marketing’, ‘project management’, ‘teamwork’ and ‘negotiation skills’ – not just about discovering opportunities or setting up firms. Entrepreneurship skills were viewed as transferable skills that may take different forms. They were also viewed as survival skills that enable navigating future work-life challenges:

It [entrepreneurship] is in fact a very multifaceted phenomenon and can be found in all fields. And I believe it will be more important in the future because the so-called traditional paid labour will probably decrease.

University graduates were divided by the interviewees into generalists and those who represent discipline-based professions (e.g., lawyers, physicians, accountants). Professions were viewed as having solid employment prospects. However, interviewees did not necessarily recognize entrepreneurial aspects in the professions despite them having high self-employment rates. Therefore, entrepreneurship was mostly assigned to generalist graduates experiencing difficulties finding work, with the idea that entrepreneurship provides these students with a basic understanding of how organizations work and how society functions. From the university perspective, entrepreneurship was also viewed as a potential employment opportunity for the increasing numbers of PhD graduates:

We should put more effort into it [entrepreneurship], because us – or any other university – do not have the opportunity to employ all doctors.

### ***Processes of distancing and drawing closer***

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None of the interviewees opposed the idea of entrepreneurship, but subtle forms of resistance surfaced by distancing the responsibility for such activities elsewhere. According to the leaders, entrepreneurship education should be offered to 'all', but they also concluded that it was not accepted by all, yet. More time is needed to advance from now to the future – 'the time is not ripe yet'. The older generations in the faculty are a lost cause, and 'the hope rests upon the shoulders of the younger generation', who will be responsible for the change needed to make entrepreneurship more broadly acceptable at the university.

Consequently, it was argued that 'openness', 'international mobility' and 'exposure to new ideas' is needed for change. Raising awareness and other activities were viewed as important for bringing the different worlds closer together. 'Entrepreneurship should be a natural part of a university's activities', conveying the idea that entrepreneurship remains somewhat marginal at the university. Interviewees expressed a need to 'encourage', 'hint', 'use soft approaches' and particularly 'not force' anybody as 'surely, there will be opposition'. Furthermore, positive experiences would enable students to accept entrepreneurship as a sensible activity, but a broader group of people would be informed 'through the grapevine' about entrepreneurial activities.

Interviewees considered entrepreneurship as important at the university in general, but not necessarily important for all disciplines and for all actors. They emphasized that the approaches to promoting entrepreneurship should be 'realistic' and that one should be wary of producing 'overly optimistic' ideas of entrepreneurship. It was also emphasized that 'people cannot be forced into the same mould'. In the future, entrepreneurship should not be viewed as the last option for finding a job to emphasize that this kind of idea still prevails.

### ***Strengthening the university brand or responding to grand societal challenges***

By focusing on students, the leaders placed other internal stakeholders in a marginal position unless they were involved with innovations and science-based businesses in fields with long-standing experiences with commercialization of academic research and in university-industry collaborations that make significant regional and national contributions. However, 'behavioural and social sciences can add value to business development', leaving the door open to engaging in multi-disciplinary work in the future.

Innovations were viewed important from a societal perspective to address ‘significant challenges’ that require multidisciplinary approaches that emphasize entrepreneurship as a solution. Universities are important change agents in society through their research, education and third tasks. However, these societally relevant activities should also be rewarded for impacting the university significantly: ‘University impact must be seen in the national economy’. Entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial strategy are tools that strengthen the university’s societal role and brand. They are also important in helping the university transform itself to become more efficient: ‘Entrepreneurship brings into our activities forms that make our activities more efficient’.

### **Cross-case Analysis**

Entrepreneurship has myriad meanings in the narratives of academic leaders in various positions at two Finnish universities. These meanings are linked to each interviewee’s disciplinary background and work experience, and are influenced by the universities’ current strategies, practices and change processes.

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Universities are increasingly asked to contribute to society, and these expectations form the context for the leaders’ narratives. The interviewees emphasized that societal impact is created through high-quality research and teaching, but entrepreneurship – laden with practical connotations – is a helpful tool for showcasing their contributions, forming collaborative networks and engaging in rapid experimentation. University-based innovations and spin-off companies are also important when discussing academic entrepreneurship at universities, but not for all disciplines or academics focusing on scientific excellence. They remain an activity limited to certain disciplines or certain kinds of individuals. Instead, broader-level processes – either by highlighting ‘significant social challenges’ that need entrepreneurial solutions or emphasizing openness as a process – are relevant to universities more broadly.

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Entrepreneurship strategies were new and only emerging at our case universities, and the interviews aimed to help search for and assign meaning to entrepreneurship. Interdisciplinary collaboration as necessary for innovations was presented as opening the door for social sciences in entrepreneurship. At University A, interviewees were making sense of how to choose the model of action (critical and reflexive vs. entrepreneurial experimentation), while both were in use simultaneously. The newer model seemed to challenge traditional thinking by inviting the university to become more agile and flexible, which also became evident with University B.

Furthermore, the leaders seemed unanimous in believing that future working life and society will call for new kinds of skills regardless of field or discipline. Consequently, entrepreneurship skills (or a variety of work-life skills, project management and business management skills in a broader interpretation) were viewed as necessary transferable skills. These skills are needed for the students to enter working life and secure employment now and increasingly in the future. Traditional academic abilities – such as critical thinking and analytical skills – are necessary, but not sufficient for students preparing for highly turbulent and unpredictable working life in the future.

The overall tone towards entrepreneurship was positive (particularly in terms of making a greater impact on society), but with some reservations. Entrepreneurship was not viewed as something inherently important for the current universities, but rather something reserved for younger generations. The potentially darker side of entrepreneurship was acknowledged to necessitate critical thinking. While open science and innovation are routes to increase impact, the university should not be naïve about them, and entrepreneurship as a career option should not be presented as suitable for all. Remaining critical towards the overly positive view of entrepreneurship (as hype) was considered necessary. The paradox between what is expected from the university (impact) and what kind of outcomes and activities are rewarded (publications, degrees) was identified. Thus, the two case universities have considered adopting a long-term vision of how universities contribute to society and create impact.

### **Discussion**

Entrepreneurship is growing in importance at many universities. Previous research has focused on these universities' orientations, functions and activities from an organizational perspective (Feola et al. 2021; Hytti, 2021) and has examined academic researchers and their

entrepreneurial ambitions and potential tensions between entrepreneurial and academic values (Galati et al. 2020; Mäkinen & Esko, 2023; Montonen et al. 2021a). Universities' academic leaders play a pivotal role in the transition towards an entrepreneurial university, but few studies have examined their views about entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial universities. In this paper, we interviewed an important, but under-researched, group of actors at universities, namely top and middle-level academic leaders, asking them questions about how they interpret and understand entrepreneurship, how they justify the need for entrepreneurship and which strategies, policies and activities concerning entrepreneurship they deem important, harmful or risky and why.

Our findings must be understood and interpreted contextually. The interviewees have not been talking about entrepreneurship in a vacuum, but rather against a shared *societal impact* narrative. High-quality research and teaching are viewed as necessary conditions for the university's Third Mission and the ability to make an impact (Montonen et al. 2021b). However, academic leaders can also use entrepreneurship strategically as an important discursive resource to transform the idea of impact into more concrete and tangible activities and outcomes that are better understood and seen by stakeholders (Niska & Vesala, 2021). Building a conceptual relationship between the term entrepreneurship and the pragmatic and the practical allows universities to claim a more prominent position of societal relevance.

The future is uncertain, emphasizing the need for transferable entrepreneurial skills that will prepare students for working life. Academic abilities – such as critical thinking and analytical skills – are needed, but the leaders propose these are not sufficient in the current situation in society. Equating entrepreneurship with broad aspects of 'business', 'running companies' or 'work-life skills' highlights how entrepreneurship is gaining different meanings in the interdisciplinary university context (Heinonen & Hytti, 2008). More broadly, academic leaders understand entrepreneurship as contributing to impact as it enables combatting and solving societal challenges, such as via open science, open data and open innovation. In the literature, entrepreneurship has also been outlined as a process that may help transform universities into more agile, experimental and economically efficient organizations. Thus, entrepreneurship has been suggested as a vehicle for progress (Paasio, 2022), but it may put the university at risk by centralizing and prioritizing entrepreneurship and short-term impact over long-term impact and goals. Excessive collaboration and naïve openness are also criticized by leaders as they may harm the university and individual researchers.

This paper contributes to the literature on entrepreneurship at universities by demonstrating how academic leaders actively participate in making sense about entrepreneurship at the university level. Our interviews were arenas for leaders to seek and assign meaning to entrepreneurship at universities, requiring interviewees to comprehend situations and issues that were novel, ambiguous, confusing or generally disruptive (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Aromaa et al., 2019; Montonen et al. 2019). Overall, the data did not represent a coherent and crystallized understanding of what entrepreneurship means for the interviewees and their faculty or university. The interviewees openly stated that they lacked knowledge and understanding on the topic.

In the narratives, many ideas were introduced, coexisted and were woven together without clearly demarcating the various stories' beginnings or ends. Through their various ideas, the leaders presented entrepreneurship as something important for everybody at their university (for securing graduates' employability) and as something to be restricted to only a small, even elitist group (i.e., researchers focusing on commercialization) (Paasio, 2022). Academic entrepreneurship was not viewed only in the context of commercialization of knowledge or technology transfer, but also through the need to extend entrepreneurial activities outside of hard sciences to campus-wide entrepreneurship (Heaton et al., 2020). Furthermore, the interviewees introduced placeholder ideas, i.e., something that remains generic for now while a more formulated understanding perhaps is developed in the future. Placing entrepreneurship as a phenomenon happening more in the future enabled emphasizing its importance, but in ways that do not necessitate any action at universities right now. The entrepreneurship concept's malleability enabled navigating between the various understandings to focus on ideas most suited to a given situation.

Given this malleability it is probably not necessary or even possible to arrive at any clear and easily defined conceptualization of what entrepreneurship is in a multidisciplinary university context (Eriksson et al., 2021b). Rather, we should embrace the fluid and emerging interpretations (Paasio, 2022), and in our research we try to make sense of them to advance our knowledge base further. Future research is needed to investigate to what extent the university management is influential in shaping and giving sense to others through their recommendations, assumptions, and statements regarding entrepreneurship at the university.

## **Conclusions**

Universities are transitioning into entrepreneurial universities. Prior research has focused on entrepreneurial universities' functions and activities, and has investigated academic researchers' roles, ambitions and tensions within them. In this paper, we focused on top and middle-level academic leaders' perspectives and interpretations of entrepreneurship at two Finnish universities. By drawing from 15 interviews with rectors and deans at two multi-faculty universities, we have engaged in a narrative analysis of meanings around entrepreneurship. The findings highlight how entrepreneurship is presented simultaneously as necessary for all, but also limited to some disciplines and individuals. Focusing on the future allows entrepreneurship to be depicted as important for younger generations, thereby not necessitating action right now, but later.

Our study contributes to the literature on entrepreneurship at universities by highlighting how societal context informs leaders' narratives. As universities face increasing demands to make societal impacts, entrepreneurship offers important discursive resources with which to showcase impact via different routes, including improving student employability, providing solutions to societal challenges, and transforming the university to become more agile and economically efficient. However, a short-term focus may put the university at risk, thereby calling for critical thinking and reflexivity.

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Table 1. University profiles

University A	The university was established in 2010 following a merger of two previously independent universities. The university is a mid-sized multidisciplinary university (with approx. 11.000 B.Sc. and M.Sc. students and 800 PhD students and about 1500 faculty/staff). In 2017–2018, the university was placed among 300–400 best universities based on THE and CWUR rankings.
University B	The university was established in 2010 following a merger of two previously independent universities. The university is a mid-size multidisciplinary university (with 12.000 B.Sc. and M.Sc. students and 1000 PhD students and about 1800 faculty/staff members). In 2017–2018, the university was placed among 300–400 best universities based on THE and CWUR rankings.

Table 2. Interviews in University A and University B

Interviewees	University	Length of the interview	
		Minutes	Pages
Rector	A	67	13
Vice-rector	A	47	8
Dean, the Faculty of Science and Forestry	A	74	13
Dean, the Faculty of Health Sciences	A	66	11
Dean, the Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies	A	76	15
Rector	B	53	9
Vice-rector	B	39	9
Vice-rector	B	40	9
Director	B	58	11
Dean, the Faculty of Economics	B	74	16
Dean, the Faculty of Social Sciences	B	60	15
Dean, the Faculty of Medicine	B	53	11
Dean, the Faculty of Law	B	75	12
Dean, the Faculty of Humanities	B	57	12
Dean, the Faculty of Education	B	74	15

Table 3: Cross-case analysis

Categories	University A	University B
Meanings of entrepreneurship	Knowledge and skills needed when establishing a company or working as self-employed	A multifaceted phenomenon that can be found and applied in all fields through entrepreneurial attitude
	General management skills and a variety of “work life skills”	A form of transversal skills that help students to navigate in the future work-life and understand work, business and the society

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	Entrepreneurship skills as valued add-ons to professional and discipline-based knowledge	Cultivating efficiency within the university and its units
Meanings of academic entrepreneurship	Establishing university-based companies	Innovations and establishing science-based businesses, also through multi-disciplinary co-operation
	Not considered suitable for everybody or for every discipline	Is unavoidable in selected fields that give birth to university spin-offs with high growth potential
	Ambition towards academic excellence and aspiring entrepreneurship are mutually exclusive	Limited focus on selected fields with long-lasting experience in commercialization and in university-industry collaboration
Universities' impact on society	Connect the university to the local economy and business	Respond to societal grand challenges with a multi-disciplinary approach and regain the authority of scientific research
	As networking and relationship building... increasingly important for the whole university	Ensure all graduates are employed and able to use their expertise and knowledge in the society
	As one element through which the impact of the university could be strengthened	Through corporate taxes paid by large companies based on university innovations
Reservations and risks	Pressure of becoming more impactful was interpreted as a risk	Entrepreneurship is not yet accepted by all in the university community (students, faculty/staff)
	Academics should cherish critical thinking... and resist the pressure of... becoming too active	Old traditions and stereotypical understandings of career paths stagnate the university
	One should not be naïve with increased co-operation	Entrepreneurship should not be given disproportionately too much attention to something the students might feel "aversion" against
	Current state of affairs was criticized as a dead end for the university	The outside world should present entrepreneurship in a realistic way without producing "overly optimistic" ideas of it
Navigating the future	Increased impact through open innovation, open science and open data	Entrepreneurship should be a natural part of university's activities
	Strengthening stakeholder relations, company collaboration and innovation ecosystems	Need to increase openness, international mobility and exposing oneself to new ideas
	Discussion within the academic community and with the	Younger generation at the university is expected to carry the burden of change

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	stakeholders concerning what is really wanted	
	Rapid engagement in practical forms of new types of co-operation with the stakeholder	