

Why Do Entrepreneurially Trained Graduates Choose Employment? A Phenomenological Inquiry in Aceh Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study investigates why entrepreneurially trained graduates choose employment rather than founding ventures in the Aceh higher-education context. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), we conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 alumni who completed entrepreneurship courses/competitions/incubation yet currently work as employees. Analysis generated five superordinate themes: (1) temporary competitive euphoria—competitions boost confidence, networks, and credentials but fade without aftercare; (2) stability rationality and risk aversion—employment is framed as pragmatic adaptation to income needs, market uncertainty, and family obligations; (3) campus-to-market ecosystem gaps—a “missing middle” between pitch events and real operations (financing, compliance, distribution); (4) hybrid career identity and skill transfer—entrepreneurial skills persist via intrapreneurship and low-risk side projects; and (5) temporal opportunity and momentum loss—post-graduation delays narrow windows and disperse teams. We conclude that employment is not an antithesis to entrepreneurship but a meaningful, risk-managing pathway within constrained ecosystems. Practical implications include building a curriculum-to-venture pipeline, staged evidence-gated funding, 6–12-month transition fellowships, one-door compliance/production clinics, anchor-demand partnerships, and formal intrapreneurship tracks. The study reframes the intention–behavior gap as employment-oriented adaptation and suggests longitudinal, multi-site research to test and refine this pathway.

Keywords: Entrepreneurially Trained Graduates, Entrepreneurship, Employment, Entrepreneurial Education, Aceh Higher Education.

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship education in higher education is promoted as a driver of economic growth, innovation, and job creation. Universities actively design curricula, incubation programs, and business competitions to foster students' entrepreneurial skills and intentions (Lv et al., 2021). Quantitative evidence and systematic syntheses indicate that entrepreneurship education is generally positively associated—though not consistently—with students' entrepreneurial intentions, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurial attitudes (Martínez-Gregorio et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022). Recent meta-analyses also confirm that intervention design, experience intensity, and learning context moderate the strength of the effect of entrepreneurship education on intentions, resulting in variable results across studies (Martínez-Gregorio et al., 2021). However, at the behavioral level, many graduates exposed to entrepreneurship programs choose to enter the formal job market rather than establish a business, indicating a gap between entrepreneurial intentions and actions (Neneh & Dzomonda, 2024).

Recent literature on the intention-behavior gap highlights boundary conditions, including commitment, perceived risk, and structural factors, that can weaken the translation of intentions into actual entrepreneurial actions (Neneh & Dzomonda, 2024). Recent studies of university students also identified initial barriers to starting entrepreneurial activities during studies that persist after graduation, including a preference for income stability from permanent employment (Renz et al., 2025).

The Indonesian context exhibits similar dynamics: student entrepreneurship development is influenced by self-confidence, subjective norms, and risk perceptions, while the supporting ecosystem is unevenly distributed, so post-program outcomes do not always lead to business establishment (Handayati et al., 2021). Research on Indonesian university students also shows that institutional support and personal factors (such as self-efficacy and proactive personality) contribute to entrepreneurial intentions, but do not necessarily guarantee business establishment behavior after graduation (Lestari et al., 2022).

At the same time, several studies emphasize that entrepreneurship is now positioned not only as establishing a new business but also as a competency to improve employability and well-being, resulting in a trade-off between work and business career choices among young graduates (Kakouris et al., 2023). Methodologically, a knowledge gap arises because the majority of studies capture the relationship between education and intentions quantitatively. At the same time, the meaning of the lived experiences of graduates who choose to work despite having entrepreneurship training is relatively underexplored (Abbes, 2024).

A phenomenological approach in educational research provides a lens for examining lived experiences and the meanings participants attach to career decisions, making it suitable for answering the question of "what" the choice of work means for graduates trained in entrepreneurship (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). Recent methodological reviews in phenomenology also emphasize the practice of bracketing, textural and structural descriptions, and the formulation of the essence of experience as key steps to generating rich and credible understanding (Oluka, 2025; Shorey & Ng, 2022).

Building on this gap, this study aims to (1) explore the personal experiences of graduates who have participated in entrepreneurship education and competitions at universities in Aceh, (2) understand the meanings they attach to their post-graduation career choices, and (3) interpret the subjective and contextual factors that shape the decision to choose employment over entrepreneurship (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022).

By placing lived experience at the center of the analysis, this study is expected to provide a conceptual contribution to explaining how and why entrepreneurial intentions formed during college do not always lead to business establishment behavior after graduation (Neneh & Dzomonda, 2024). The intended practical contribution includes recommendations for designing curriculum-to-business transition support—from access to financing and networking to post-graduation mentoring—to enhance the impact of educational interventions on entrepreneurial career choices (Abbes, 2024).

Theoretically, phenomenological findings from the Aceh context will enrich the discourse on the intention-behavior gap by adding the dimension of graduates' subjective meanings and local socio-cultural factors that influence the marginal utility between working and starting a business (Huang et al., 2023; Neneh & Dzomonda, 2024). This study also contributes to the literature on youth entrepreneurship in developing countries by demonstrating how the configuration of campus, family, and labor market ecosystems can influence the career preferences of graduates who have been previously exposed to entrepreneurship education (Abbes, 2024).

Furthermore, this study considers cross-contextual findings that entrepreneurial graduates and employed graduates have different profiles of job satisfaction and commitment, making understanding the motives and meanings of work choices relevant for career readiness policy (Yuan et al., 2020). The decision to research this topic is based on the academic and practical observation that intensification of campus

entrepreneurship programs often results in increased intentions, but not consistently results in business start-up behavior, particularly when commitment and personal economic risk factors play a role (Martínez-Gregorio et al., 2021; Neneh & Dzomonda, 2024). Recent literature also suggests that initial barriers to entrepreneurial pursuits during study can persist after graduation, such as limited access to resources, market uncertainty, and a preference for income stability, which are worth examining through the personal experiences of graduates (Renz et al., 2025). Furthermore, the shift in the meaning of entrepreneurship as a competency for employability has led some graduates to view formal employment as a rational, adaptive strategy to the opportunities and risks they face (Kakouris et al., 2023).

To ensure readability and transparency of reporting, this article is structured according to the IMRAD structure standard to scientific publications, with the Introduction explaining the background and contributions, the Methods explaining the phenomenological design and analysis procedures, the Results presenting essential themes of the experience, and the Discussion linking the findings to the literature and policy implications (Shiely et al., 2024).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of graduates who have participated in entrepreneurship education/competitions but have chosen to work, with an emphasis on idiographic nature (depth per case) and a double hermeneutic process (participants interpreting their experiences and researchers interpreting those interpretations) (Darley et al., 2025; Rajasinghe et al., 2024; Yevtushok & Petronzi, 2025).

The study was conducted in the context of a higher education institution in Aceh; participants were recruited through incubator/student affairs units and alums networks using purposive criterion sampling (supported by snowballing when necessary) to capture information-rich cases—a common practice in contemporary IPA (Darley et al., 2025; Rajasinghe et al., 2024). A target sample of 10–15 alumni (plus 2–3 key informants such as incubator managers/supervisors) was selected to maintain idiographic depth while enabling meaningful cross-case analysis, as recommended by current IPA practices (Darley et al., 2025; Starr & Smith, 2025).

Inclusion criteria: (a) alums graduated within the last 1–5 years; (b) participated in ≥ 1 campus entrepreneurship intervention (project-based course, idea/business development competition, incubation/grant); (c) currently employed (employee/contract/intensive freelance) and not an active founder/co-founder; (d) willing to be interviewed for 45–75 minutes and recorded. Exclusion criteria: (a) never participated in an entrepreneurship program/competition; (b) currently running a business as a founder/co-founder; (c) declined recording/ethical approval. The rationale for selecting these criteria was to ensure exposure to entrepreneurship interventions and the suitability of the phenomenon of post-graduation work choices for phenomenological analysis (Rajasinghe et al., 2024).

The study received ethics committee approval; participation was voluntary, confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms, and data were stored in an encrypted format in accordance with institutional policy. Reporting followed JARS–Qual (APA) and adhered to transparent qualitative reporting practices (and considered the COREQ as a checklist for interview/focus group reporting) (Levitt et al., 2018; Sinha et al., 2024; Starr & Smith, 2025).

Primary data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews (45–75 minutes, conducted offline in a quiet room or online via Zoom/Meet), which focused on the experience of participating in the program/competition, post-graduation transition dynamics, economic, socio-cultural, and the meaning of work choices. This approach

aligns with current IPA practices that emphasize narrative depth and researcher reflexivity (Darley et al., 2025; Rajasinghe et al., 2024).

The analysis followed the iterative stages of IPA: (1) repeated readings for immersion per case; (2) initial noting (descriptive–linguistic–conceptual); (3) developing emergent themes per case; (4) mapping intra-case linkages; (5) iterating to the following case while maintaining idiographic alignment; (6) cross-case analysis to identify convergence/divergence of meaning; (7) developing a thematic narrative along with representative quotes and researcher interpretations (double hermeneutic). This analytical process reflects contemporary IPA practices and was conducted using software (Darley et al., 2025; Rajasinghe et al., 2024; Yevtushok & Petronzi, 2025).

RESULTS

IPA analysis of 12 participants (graduates in the last 1–5 years from various study programs) yielded five interrelated superordinate themes: (1) temporary competitive euphoria, (2) stability rationality and risk aversion, (3) campus–market transition ecosystem gap, (4) hybrid career identity and skills transfer, and (5) temporality of opportunity and loss of momentum. Furthermore, cross-contextual themes emerged related to the influence of family and local social norms that normalize established employment choices.

Table 1. Summary of Theme, Core Meaning, and Essential Meaning (IPA)

Theme	Theme Meaning	Essential Meaning
Theme 1 — Temporary competitive euphoria	Competitions provide a psychological boost, networking opportunities, and credentials; however, these effects are not sustained after graduation due to a lack of aftercare.	Competition functions as an identity accelerator, not a business accelerator without a post-competition bridge.
Theme 2 — Stability rationality and risk aversion	Employment choices are interpreted as pragmatic adaptations to financial demands, market uncertainty, and family responsibilities.	Occupational choice is a risk management strategy understood both economically and ethically and culturally.
Theme 3 — The campus-market transition ecosystem gap	There is a "missing middle" between competition and actual business practices.	Ecosystems generate high intentions but low implementation capabilities without post-graduation structural support.
Theme 4 — Hybrid career identities and skills transfer	Graduates nurture their "entrepreneurial self" identity within their work (intrapreneurship).	Entrepreneurial identity is not lost, but rather negotiated within the work-side hustle configuration.
Theme 5 — Temporality of opportunity and loss of momentum	Timing is crucial; the gap after graduation erodes the team's collective energy and narrows opportunities.	Post-graduation momentum is a fragile asset; procrastination often leads to abandonment.

Table 2. Subtheme Details and Illustrative Quotes

Themes	Subthemes	Description	Illustrative Quotes
Theme 1 — Temporary competitive euphoria	1.1 Performative vs. Transformative	“Smart in presentation” and “sharp in pitching,” but with minimal operational support (production, legality, distribution).	P07: “On stage, we were on fire, but after that, we were confused about where to start.”
	1.2 External Validation	Medals/champions become assets on CVs for job applications, not stepping stones to starting a business.	P11: “Winning the competition actually made HR interested—I took that first.”
Theme 2 — Stability rationality and risk aversion	2.1 Salary as an Anchor	A fixed salary provides cash flow certainty early in a career.	P03: “The 6 million rupiah/month contract was a lifeline—without it, it was difficult to survive in the beginning.”
	2.2 Perceived Risk	Fear of debt, burn rate, and inventory causes participants to delay starting a business.	P02: “If we failed, who would bear the burden? I was the eldest child.”
	2.3 Family Moral Rationality	Family encouragement to “get a stable job first” is considered a moral responsibility.	P08: “My parents said being a civil servant is a form of devotion—you can start working later after you're stable.”
Theme 3 — The campus-market transition ecosystem gap	3.1 Handover Void	There is no handover mechanism from competitions/classes to market partners, financing, or legal clinics.	P01: “After demo day... we went our separate ways.”
	3.2 Access to Symbolic Capital > Financial Capital	There is a mentor network and public exposure, but minimal working capital, purchase orders, and distribution channels.	—
	3.3 Regulatory & Quality Barriers	Confusion over licensing, HACCP/halal, and quality standards → high compliance costs in the initial stages.	—
Theme 4 — Hybrid career identities and skills transfer	4.1 Entrepreneurial Affordances in the Office	Problem-solving, pitching, and customer discovery skills are transferable to employee roles.	P05: “I used the customer interview framework for product improvement.”
	4.2 Low-Risk Side Projects	Maintaining a digital side business	—

		(reseller/services) as a viable option when momentum arises.	
	4.3 Intentional Delays	“Work first, start later”—intentions are postponed without certainty of a window of opportunity reopening.	—
Theme 5 — Temporality of opportunity and loss of momentum	5.1 Narrowing Window of Opportunity	Without an initial contract/pilot, ideas lose relevance or are preempted by competitors.	—
	5.2 Team Dispersion	Team members are dispersed (work/other positions) → coordination costs increase.	P12: “Once two people got jobs out of town, the sprint rhythm broke down.”

IPA analysis of twelve participants revealed five key interconnected themes. First, participants described a temporary competitive euphoria: competitions and project classes boosted self-confidence, networks, and an “entrepreneurial self” identity, but the effects quickly subsided due to the lack of a transparent post-event bridge to the market or funding. Second, a rationality of stability and risk aversion emerged: the choice to work was interpreted as a pragmatic adaptation to the need for a steady income early in the career, the risk of business failure, and family responsibilities—rather than a rejection of entrepreneurship. Third, participants perceived a gap in the campus-market transition ecosystem, characterized by a lack of handover from competitions/classes to business partners, access to financing, legality/quality standards, and distribution channels; as a result, high intentions did not translate into venture action. Fourth, a hybrid career identity emerged: many graduates transferred entrepreneurial skills (problem-solving, pitching, customer discovery) to employee roles (intrapreneurship), while maintaining low-risk side projects as future options. Fifth, the temporality of opportunity plays a role: loss of momentum after graduation—due to team dispersion, the absence of paid pilots, and a narrowing window of opportunity—led to the postponement or termination of venture-building efforts.

Cross-case patterns show variation by program setting and intensity of exposure: graduates with more than six months of incubation experience tended to maintain side projects longer, while participants from the social-humanities group placed greater emphasis on skills transfer to formal employment. Family influences and local norms about “stable employment” consistently reinforced the preference for stability, particularly among participants who were financially burdened by the household. Two deviant cases indicate the possibility of a tiered pathway—working first to accumulate capital/networks, then making a soft landing into a venture within 12–18 months—when external mentors, follow-up grants, and sustained team commitment are available. The synthesis of findings is summarized in the Employment-Oriented Adaptation Pathway model: campus interventions foster entrepreneurial intentions and identities, but employment decisions emerge as meaningful adaptations mediated by financial, cultural, regulatory, and time factors; entrepreneurial identities are maintained through intrapreneurship or side projects, with the possibility of delayed venturing.

DISCUSSION

The findings highlight the existence of an intention-behavior gap: campus interventions increase entrepreneurial intentions and identity, but the translation into venturing action depends on boundary factors such as commitment and internal locus of control, leading many graduates to choose to work early in their careers rationally (Neneh & Dzomonda, 2024). Within this framework, dynamic entrepreneurship education—which fosters adaptive capabilities and practice-based experiences—has been shown to bridge the attitude → intention → behavior pathway, necessitating curriculum design to integrate learning experiences that directly link to market action (Ngo et al., 2024).

Furthermore, recent evidence suggests that campus courses, competitions, and policies also impact graduates' employability, which helps explain why some perceive work as a pragmatic adaptation strategy without stifling their entrepreneurial identity (Huang et al., 2025). This aligns with systematic reviews that entrepreneurship and employability are intertwined, so evaluating the impact of education should not be limited to starting a business immediately after graduation, but also to job acquisition with intrapreneurial nuances and side project options (Fossatti et al., 2023).

The Indonesian context exhibits a similar pattern: entrepreneurship education increases entrepreneurial orientation/intention, but the outcome is heavily influenced by personal and cultural factors, as well as institutional support, which helps explain the preference for income stability in the post-graduation phase (Hutasuhut et al., 2024). In the digital ecosystem, intrinsic/extrinsic motivation and self-efficacy play a role in shaping entrepreneurial intentions. However, career choices remain on the work-business spectrum depending on market opportunities and resource access, underscoring the need for intervention design that is sensitive to local contexts (Ridwan et al., 2025). Furthermore, student entrepreneurship policies and regional entrepreneurial spirit also influence entrepreneurial decisions, so synchronized campus/regional strategies have the potential to minimize post-graduation momentum loss (Huang et al., 2024).

Theoretical Implications

First, the study results reframe the intention–behavior gap as a meaningful adaptation process—working does not represent a failure of intention, but rather a rational response to initial risk, which is consistent with evidence that commitment and locus of control moderate the transition to behavior (Neneh & Dzomonda, 2024). Second, the findings add a temporal dimension (window of opportunity and loss of momentum after graduation) to the education–intention–action model, in line with the view that the dynamic capabilities of learning experiences need to be nurtured for attitudes/intentions to translate into action (Ngo et al., 2024). Third, we propose expanding the outcome indicator for entrepreneurship education from "starting a business immediately" to a hybrid trajectory (intrapreneurship, side projects, delayed venturing) that is also valuable for the labor market and regional development (Fossatti et al., 2023).

Practical Implications & Campus Policy Recommendations

Colleges and incubators are advised to build an explicit curriculum-to-venture pipeline (customer discovery → MVP → paid pilot → initial contract) as evidence shows that bridging learning to behavior increases the likelihood of entrepreneurial action (Ngo et al., 2024). Evidence-based, graduated funding (tiered microgrants with performance gates) and 6–12-month transitional fellowships for top teams can "buy time" to prevent loss of momentum as graduates enter the job market, while maintaining commitment to actual behavior (Neneh & Dzomonda, 2024; Ngo et al., 2024).

One-stop clinics (legality/quality standards/packaging, co-packers, access to distribution channels) and demand anchor partnerships (retail/B2B) will minimize regulatory barriers and increase the likelihood of paid pilots, which aligns with findings that quality intervention design strengthens the education-behavior relationship (Ngo et al., 2024).

Finally, given the evidence that employability is an important outcome of interventions (courses, competitions, policies), universities should formalize hybrid career paths (intrapreneurship projects with industry and side project support) to maintain an entrepreneurial identity while meeting the financial stability needs of graduates (Fossatti et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study demonstrates that the choice of employment among graduates exposed to entrepreneurship education/competition is not antithetical to entrepreneurship, but rather a pragmatic adaptation to the need for financial stability, family norms, ecosystem readiness, and time factors that influence the loss of momentum post-graduation. The findings crystallize in the Employment-Oriented Adaptation Pathway: campus interventions foster entrepreneurial intentions and identities, but employment decisions emerge when financial, cultural, and regulatory mediation is inadequate; entrepreneurial identities are then nurtured through intrapreneurship or side projects, with the option of delayed venturing.

The research questions are answered through four main points: (1) the personal experiences of program participants are characterized by temporary competitive euphoria, (2) the meaning of "work" is understood as a rational risk management strategy with ethical-cultural implications, (3) decision-making factors include income stability, family support/expectations, compliance gaps and market access, and the temporality of opportunities, and (4) entrepreneurial identities are not lost but are negotiated within hybrid career trajectories. Thus, the primary contribution of this study is reframing the intention-behavior gap as a meaningful adaptation process and affirming the role of time/ecosystem in maintaining or fading intention.

Practically, the findings can be directly applied through: (a) an explicit curriculum-to-venture pipeline (customer discovery → MVP → paid pilot → initial contract), (b) evidence-based, phased funding with evidence gates to maintain implementation rhythm, (c) a 6–12-month transition fellowship to allow graduates time to safely execute market validation, (d) a one-stop clinic (legality/quality standards/production/distribution channels) linked to manufacturing partners and retail/B2B demand anchors, and (e) a formal hybrid career path with industry to accommodate intrapreneurship, complete with family-inclusive sessions to align family expectations with the venturing stages.

Implications for the scientific community include the need to integrate dimensions of temporality and socio-cultural mediation into the education-intention-action model, as well as expanding performance indicators from "immediate business creation" to hybrid trajectories (intrapreneurship, side projects, delayed venturing). This study also provides a framework that can be further tested in other contexts as a basis for developing entrepreneurship theory and policy in higher education.

Limitations of the study include the Aceh context, the small sample size typical of IPA, the possibility of selection/recall bias, and the absence of employer perspectives and longitudinal data; therefore, generalizations are analytical rather than statistical. Next steps include a mixed-methods longitudinal study 12–24 months post-graduation, cross-campus/regional comparisons, and quantitative testing of the Employment-Oriented Adaptation Pathway model, and evaluating the impact of intervention packages (pipelines, phased funding, fellowships, one-door clinics, anchor demand).

In summary, this study concludes that the reason why entrepreneurship-trained graduates choose to work lies in the logic of adapting to risks and available resources. With the right ecosystem design, the trajectory can be redirected towards sustainable entrepreneurial action without negating the need for stability in the early stages of a career.

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