Linnæus University

Navigating Immigrant Women Entrepreneurship in Sweden

A Qualitative Study of South Asian Women International Students Who Transitioned to Entrepreneurship

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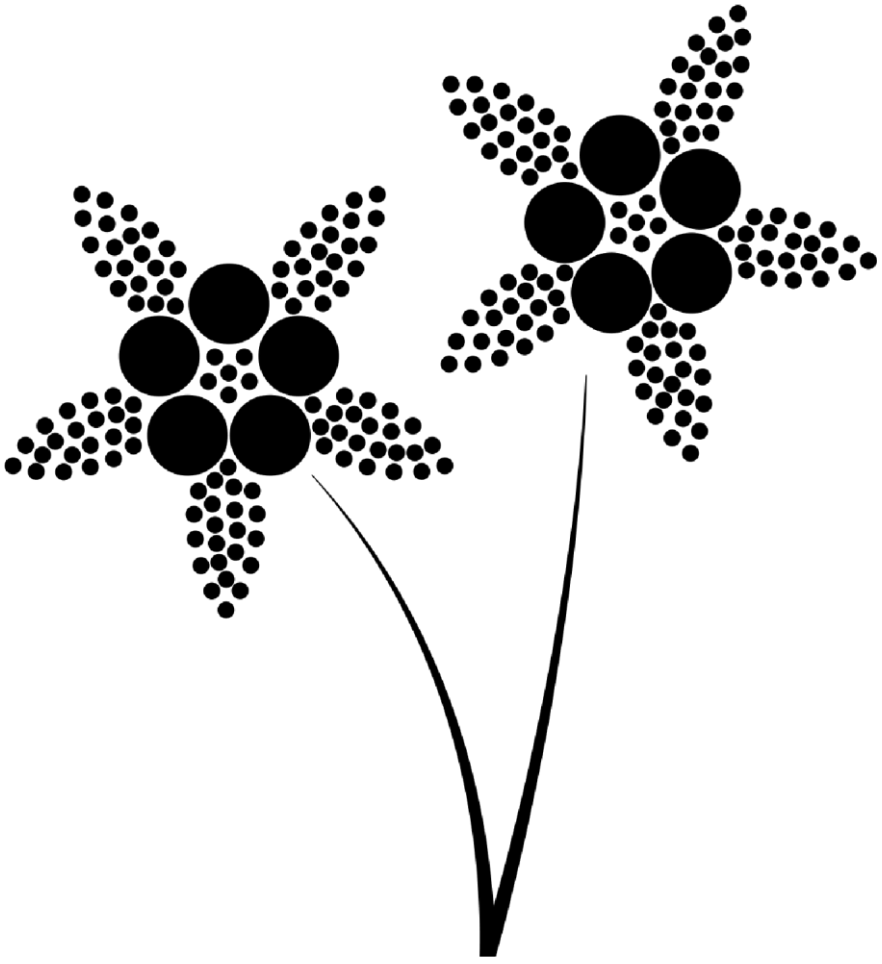

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Abstract

This study examines how South Asian women international students experience the transition from higher education into entrepreneurship in Sweden. The aim is to understand this transition with particular attention to the motivations, institutional and labour-market challenges, social networks, and gendered experiences that shape their entrepreneurial journeys. The study further examines how migration status, institutional conditions and social embeddedness interact in shaping these experiences. An interpretivist qualitative approach was used with 12 South Asian women international students and graduates who became entrepreneurs in Sweden. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data. The findings show that entrepreneurship was shaped by the interaction of labour-market barriers, migration and residence uncertainty, institutional navigation, social networks, family and community expectations, gendered experiences and identity negotiation. Participants were motivated by both recognised opportunities and practical career considerations. Participants highlighted challenges in relation to language, work experience in Sweden, business administration, tax matters, requirements for residence and access to professional networks, but also noted that the Swedish universities, municipalities, advisory organisations, migrant communities, peers, family and transnational relationships were helpful resources. Gender was not a central feature in most narratives, but rather manifested in various other ways, such as through family responsibilities, cultural expectations, mobility, respectability and the negotiation of entrepreneurial identity. The study fills the gap and offers a contextualised account of the interaction between institutional context, social embeddedness, migration status and gender in the entrepreneurial experiences of the first-generation South Asian women in Sweden who first arrived to pursue higher education in the country.

Keywords: Immigrant entrepreneurship, South Asian women, International students, Mixed embeddedness

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Table of Contents

Abstract 1

Acknowledgement 2

1. Introduction 1

1.1 Background of the Study 1

1.2 Problem Discussion 3

1.3 Purpose and Potential Impact of the Study 5

1.4 Theoretical Frameworks 6

1.4.1 Institutional Theory 6

1.4.2 Mixed Embeddedness Theory 6

1.4.3 Feminist Intersectional Lens 7

1.4.4 Integration of Theoretical Framework 7

1.5 Research Questions 8

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks 9

2.1 Making the Bridge Between Generic Topics and the Subject of the Study 9

2.1.2 Immigrant Entrepreneurship 10

2.1.3 Women Entrepreneurship 11

2.1.4 International Students and Entrepreneurial Pathways 12

2.2 The Context 13

2.2.1 Migration, International Students, and the Pathway to Entrepreneurship 13

2.2.2 Gender and the Context of Women's Entrepreneurship 14

2.2.3 National Context of Sweden 15

2.3 Research Gap 16

3 Methodology 18

3.1 Research Strategy 18

3.2 Research Design 19

Framework 21
3.3 Semi-Structured Interviews 22
3.3.1 Sample Selection 23
3.3.2 Interview Process 24
Table No. 2: A Brief Introduction of the Participants (Pseudonyms Used for Anonymity) 26
3.4 Data Analysis 26
3.5 Research Quality 29
3.5.1 Trustworthiness 29
3.5.2 Credibility 29
3.5.3 Transferability 30
3.5.4 Dependability 30
3.5.5 Confirmability 30
3.5.6 Reflexivity 31
3.5.7 Ethical Considerations 31
3.6 Limitations 31
4 Presentation of Empirical Data 33
4.1 Overview of the Participants 33
4.1.1 Ananya 33
4.1.2 Priya 33
4.1.3 Kavita 34
4.1.4 Meera 34
4.1.5 Nadeesha 35
4.1.6 Ishara 35
4.1.7 Lakshmi 36
4.1.8 Ayesha 36
4.1.9 Samira 36
4.1.10 Farzana 37
4.1.11 Riya 37

4.1.12 Sana 37
4.2 Sample Limitations 38
4.3 Entrepreneurial Ventures and Market positioning 38
4.4 Entrepreneurial Motivations 41
4.4.1 Labour Market Barriers 43
4.4.2 Desire for Independence 44
4.4.3 Opportunity Recognition 45
4.4.4 Combining Opportunity and Necessity 47
4.5 Challenges in Entrepreneurship 48
4.5.1 Financial Challenges 48
4.5.2 Institutional and Administrative Challenges 49
4.5.3 Cultural and Language Barriers 51
4.5.4 Gender-Related Challenges 52
4.6 Institutional Experiences in Sweden 53
4.6.1 Support Systems and Resources 55
4.6.2 Difficulties Navigating the System 56
4.7 Personal Experiences and Identity 58
4.7.1 Empowerment and Independence 60
4.7.2 Experiences of Discrimination or Exclusion 61
5 DISCUSSION 64
5.1 Introduction 64
5.2 Entrepreneurial Motivations and Labour Market Adaptation 64
5.3 Institutional Infrastructure and Entrepreneurial Challenges 67
5.4 Mixed Embeddedness and Social Networks 69
5.5 Feminist Intersectionality and Identity Negotiation 70
5.6 Theoretical Discussion 74
6 Conclusion 78

6.1 Findings 78
6.2 Recommendations to Policymakers 80
6.3 Theoretical Findings 81
6.4 Entrepreneurial and Practical Implications of the Research 82
6.5 Methodological Reflection 84
References 88
Appendix 1 101
Semi-Structured Interview Guide 101
Part 1: Introduction 102
Part 2: Background Context 102
Part 3: Entrepreneurial Motivation 102
Part 4: Transition Experience 102
Part 5: Reflection on Experience 103

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Entrepreneurship has been widely recognised as a process that is socially and economically embedded, rather than a purely individual activity that is contextually, institutionally and relationally contingent (Welter, 2011; Granovetter, 1985). Although the traditional approaches define entrepreneurship as the ability to recognise opportunities and venture creation, recent scholarly work focuses on the role of social structures, networks, and places in entrepreneurship (Gartner, 2012; McKeever, Jack, and Anderson, 2015). In this way, entrepreneurship is not only a means of obtaining a certain number of resources, identity, and a place in society, but also a channel through which people can negotiate access to these.

This position is particularly relevant where access to traditional jobs is limited, e.g. lack of access to labour market, lack of exposure of qualifications, lack of professional networks. Under these conditions, entrepreneurship may not be a simple and straightforward decision based on opportunity, but rather a ‘structurally conditioned response to exclusion' (Welter, 2011; Gaddefors and Anderson, 2017). However, if entrepreneurship is presented as a means to enable all, it would be simplistic to overlook the unequal factors which influence entrepreneurship.

Another thing that complicates this dynamic is migration. International student mobility is a particular type of migration that has largely educational character and is increasingly economic oriented (Tran, 2015). However, international students are temporarily and conditionally placed in institutions, thereby influencing their opportunity to access labour markets and entrepreneurial activities, compared with other migrant groups. The uncertainty of their legal status, which relies on temporary residence permits, has a negative impact on their career prospects afterwards. Rather than considering this position as institutionally significant, it is better to consider this position as theoretically significant (Zahra, 2007).

The dynamics are especially acute in the Swedish context. Sweden is often described as an innovation-based and gender-equal economy that is backed by a robust institutional framework and entrepreneurship ecosystem (Swedish Institute, 2023). The central role in this system belongs to universities, which are the sites of knowledge production and

entrepreneurial stimulation through incubators, networks, and support infrastructure (Trippl, Sinozic, and Lawton Smith, 2015). Nevertheless, studies also show that structural inequalities actually persist even in official equality, especially in the case of foreign-born people who still experience the disadvantages of the labour market and also have limited access to the economic opportunities (Tillmar, 2006; Roos, 2019). This points to one of the main contradictions in the relationship between the institutional ideals and the realities in Sweden.

In this sense, entrepreneurship among international graduates can be viewed as both adaptive and constrained (Abreu and Grinevich, 2025). Individual agency interacts with structural barriers, such as limited networks, regulatory complexity, and unfamiliar institutional environments (Wigren-Kristofersen et al., 2019). This is in line with the concept of embeddedness, wherein the entrepreneurial activity is conditioned by both the social relations and institutional frameworks (Granovetter, 1985).

Another dimension of complexity is gender whereby the study of feminist entrepreneurship challenges the idea of neutrality in entrepreneurial activities, highlighting gender disparities in opportunities and outcomes arising from gendered norms, expectations and power dynamics (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). Barriers for women entrepreneurs could include access to finance, limited networks, and normative expectations regarding women's roles and behaviours. These restrictions are not only summative in-migrant contexts, but also functions in a way that interacts with the issues surrounding migration, leading to qualitatively different experiences (Calas, Smircich and Bourne, 2009).

In Sweden, although there is a high gender equality discourse, in reality, entrepreneurship is gendered. Research indicates that institutional frameworks have the capacity to reproduce inequalities by favouring some types of entrepreneurships over others (Tillmar et al., 2022; Roos and Pettersson, 2024). To migrant women, this is further complicated by factors of cultural positioning, legitimacy and accessibility to resources, implying that entrepreneurship is not an open opportunity space, but in fact lies in a stratified structure of inclusion and exclusion.

The current study thus targets the South Asian women international students specifically and is an under-explored subgroup. Instead of considering international students as a homogenous

group, this approach recognises that the experience of entrepreneurship is shaped by overlapping dimensions of gender, migration status, and socio-cultural context. South Asian students are a huge and increasingly large population of Sweden, which can be broadly described through high educational mobility and transnational connections (Abdin, 2025). But they may be steered in their entrepreneurial journeys by culturally entrenched gender roles, family pressures, and institutional navigation issues.

The study does not seek to generalise to all international students or women entrepreneurs. In line with its qualitative and interpretive orientation, it develops a contextual understanding of how participants experienced entrepreneurship within particular institutional and social circumstances (Steyaert, 2007). The term women refers to participants' socially situated experiences and is used consistently in relation to the feminist intersectional perspective.

1.2 Problem Discussion

Entrepreneurship is often touted as a means of accessing economic, social and cultural integration, and innovation. This is supported by robust institutional frameworks that foster entrepreneurship, innovation in higher education, and gender equality policies in Sweden (OECD, 2021; Lundqvist and Williams Middleton, 2010). The importance for universities to foster entrepreneurial thinking and to teach students the skills, networks and resources they need to create a venture is growing. Yet, even with these empowering institutional discourses, entrepreneurial opportunities are not equal and are especially limited for migrant women and those with temporary migration status. The existing literature indicates that entrepreneurship for migrant women may differ from dominant entrepreneurship groups as entrepreneurship opportunities are constrained by their migration status, gendered expectations, cultural positioning and access to social and institutional resources (Gaweł and Toikko, 2024; Webster and aandrikman, 2017).

In the Swedish context, research has shown that migrants entrepreneurs often use informal networks, community relations and transnational practices to start a business and achieve legitimacy (Webster, 2017; Yeröz, 2019). Such studies question the one-sided understandings of entrepreneurship as an exclusively individual or opportunity-based activity, and show that the entrepreneurial processes are remarkably linked to social, cultural and institutional

structures. Meanwhile, there is also evidence that entrepreneurship can be a tool for empowerment and agency of migrant women. Entrepreneurship can offer chances for economic participation, independence, and self-development, especially if access to the labour market is limited (Gaweł and Toikko, 2024).

Alkhaled and Berglund (2018) also claims that migrant women frequently develop alternative care based, solidarity and collective adaptation entrepreneurial practices, and not just marketoriented practices. This implies that entrepreneurship of migrant women is not necessarily induced by economic necessity but should also be considered in the social and relational aspects. However, despite this extensive literature there are still gaps. Previous studies in the field of migrant women entrepreneurship in Sweden have concentrated on well-established migrant groups, rural entrepreneurship or general immigrant entrepreneurship (Webster and Haandrikman, 2017; Yeröz, 2019). In contrast, less attention has been paid to international students who at a later stage become entrepreneurs after their higher education in Sweden. This is an important gap since international students are in a particular institutional position of temporary legal status, educational migration, and uncertain labour market integration. Thus, their experiences as entrepreneurs are likely to be different from other migrant entrepreneurs.

Furthermore, a large number of publications focus on migration, gender, education and entrepreneurship as separate areas and processes. Although the concept of women entrepreneurship or migrant entrepreneurship are discussed in the studies separately, the few studies that discuss the relation between them are found in the experiences of women international students in the path to entrepreneurship in Sweden. This results in a partial grasp of the relationship between institutional systems, education, migration status and gender relations, and how they influence entrepreneurial trajectories. This is an important issue in the Swedish context. Promoting itself as a country of innovation, entrepreneurship and gender equality, Universities in Sweden actively encourage entrepreneurship (OECD, 2021).

However, there is evidence that structural inequalities and concerns about legitimacy, trust and belonging can still be significant for migrant women entrepreneurs in Sweden (Yeröz, 2019; Webster and Haandrikman, 2017). This generates a significant tension between formal notions of entrepreneurial inclusion and lived experiences of individuals who engage in

migration and entrepreneurship simultaneously. The present study is thus limited to the South Asian women who were first international students in Sweden and later entrepreneurs. The research problem is not just about entrepreneurial aspirations, but how entrepreneurial motivations, labour-market experiences, migration and residence conditions, institutional navigation, social networks, family and community expectations, and gendered experiences and identity negotiation interact during the transition from higher education to entrepreneurship. This problem is a focused problem that serves as the basis for the study aim and the three research questions.

1.3 Purpose and Potential Impact of the Study

The study explores the experiences of South Asian women who arrived in Sweden as international students and then became entrepreneurs. Immigrant entrepreneurship, women's entrepreneurship and international student mobility have been studied separately in the existing literature. This study is a collection of them in a well-defined context: the transition from higher education to entrepreneurship among South Asian women in Sweden. The aim is not to capture all Swedish migrant entrepreneurship, but to gain an understanding of the experiences of this group of entrepreneurs.

The aim of this study is to understand how South Asian women international students experience the transition from higher education into entrepreneurship in Sweden, with particular attention to the motivations, institutional and labour-market challenges, social networks, and gendered experiences that shape their entrepreneurial journeys. The study also explores the interplay between migration status and institutional conditions and social embeddedness in shaping these experiences. This purpose is reflected in the research questions, the presentation of the empirical results, the discussion and the conclusion. It therefore includes the major issues that were actually examined in the thesis, but not so much that the study goes beyond the evidence gathered from the participants.

The study can be of academic and practical interest due to the contextualised evidence it offers on a group that is situated at the crossroads of higher education, migration, gender and entrepreneurship. The findings offer insight for universities, policymakers and entrepreneurship-support organisations regarding the type of support and challenges reported

by the participants, such as access to the labour market, uncertainty about residence, business administration, institutional information, networking and social support.

The study also demonstrates that entrepreneurship may be an opportunity and constraint. The opportunities in the market, independence and ambitions for the future were described, as were barriers to the labour market, institutional complexity, migration uncertainty and expectations of family and community. New networks were also discussed. The implication of the study is thus not so much in the entrepreneurship as a pathway to economic success or empowerment, but in the understanding of these interconnected experiences.

1.4 Theoretical Frameworks

The study uses institutional infrastructure, mixed embeddedness and feminist intersectionality as complementary analytical lenses. This section introduces their roles and integration; Chapter 2 critically reviews the literature, its tensions and the contextual gap that supports their selection.

1.4.1 Institutional Theory

The institutional infrastructure perspective focuses the broader institutional framework on the formal and informal arrangements through which entrepreneurial participation becomes possible or difficult. Relevant dimensions include migration and residence arrangements, labour-market access, business administration and support organisations, alongside norms of legitimacy (North, 1990; Scott, 2014; Welter, 2011). In this study, the lens guides attention to how participants experience and navigate these arrangements; it does not assume that formal provision guarantees accessible support.

1.4.2 Mixed Embeddedness Theory

Mixed embeddedness connects entrepreneurs' resources and social relationships with wider institutional and market opportunity structures (Kloosterman, Van der Leun and Rath, 1999; Kloosterman, 2010). It guides analysis of how university contacts, family, migrant communities, professional networks and transnational relationships intersect with the conditions of entrepreneurship. Networks are treated as relationships that may enable or

constrain action and may change during the transition, rather than as fixed resources (Bisignano and El-Anis, 2019; Korsgaard et al., 2022).

1.4.3 Feminist Intersectional Lens

Feminist intersectionality directs attention to how gender is experienced together with migration status, ethnicity, family responsibilities and institutional positioning (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Lassalle and Shaw, 2021; Yeröz, 2019). It helps examine differences within the participant group and the negotiation of independence, identity and legitimacy. The lens does not require explicit gender discrimination to appear in every account, and neither the presence nor absence of such discrimination is assumed before interpreting participants' experiences.

1.4.4 Integration of Theoretical Framework

The perspectives are integrated around the research questions. Institutional infrastructure directs attention to formal arrangements and institutional navigation; mixed embeddedness connects these conditions to networks, resources and entrepreneurial opportunities; feminist intersectionality examines how these processes are experienced through overlapping social positions. These are overlapping analytical emphases, not separate explanations assigned mechanically to individual themes. Gender and power may operate within institutions and networks as well as within personal accounts (Welter, 2011; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Kloosterman, 2010).

The framework sensitises the study to motivations, labour-market and migration challenges, social support and gendered experiences without determining the themes in advance. As explained in Chapter 3, initial coding stayed close to participants' accounts, while subsequent interpretation moved iteratively between empirical patterns and the three perspectives. Chapter 4 presents those accounts, Chapter 5 considers their theoretical meaning and tensions, and Chapter 6 answers the research questions within the limits of the sample.

1.5 Research Questions

The research questions translate the study aim into three focused areas: entrepreneurial motivations, challenges during the transition from higher education into entrepreneurship, and the influence of Swedish institutional structures. Across these questions, migration status, social networks and gendered experiences are examined as interacting conditions rather than as separate topics. The study addresses the following questions:

1. 1. What motivations influence South Asian women international students to start businesses during their transition from higher education into entrepreneurship in Sweden?
2. 2. What challenges do South Asian women international students encounter during their transition from higher education into entrepreneurship in Sweden?
3. 3. How do Swedish institutional structures and social conditions influence the entrepreneurial experiences of South Asian women international students?

Together, these questions keep the study aligned with its stated aim. The first question addresses motivations and the relationship between opportunity and labour-market conditions. The second addresses institutional, administrative, migration, cultural, language, network and gender-related challenges experienced during the entrepreneurial transition. The third examines how institutional structures, support systems and social embeddedness shape participants' entrepreneurial experiences. These same areas organise the empirical findings in Chapter 4, are interpreted through the theoretical framework in Chapter 5, and are answered directly in Chapter 6.

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks

This chapter critically reviews the literature that informs the study rather than repeating the introductory definitions of the three theoretical lenses presented in Section 1.4. Section 1.4 establishes what theoretical framework is used and explains how institutional infrastructure, mixed embeddedness and feminist intersectionality are combined as an analytical framework. Chapter 2 has a different purpose: it evaluates what existing research says about entrepreneurship, immigrant entrepreneurship, women's entrepreneurship and international student mobility, identifies areas of agreement and tension, and shows how the literature leads to the specific research problem addressed in this study.

Accordingly, the chapter narrows broad institutional theory toward institutional infrastructure and examines how formal systems, migration arrangements and support structures shape entrepreneurial conditions. It also reviews the development and relevance of mixed embeddedness for understanding the relationship between opportunity structures, resources and social networks, while feminist intersectionality is used to examine how gender interacts with migration, culture, family expectations and institutional positioning. The purpose is therefore not to redefine the theories already introduced in Section 1.4, but to establish their relevance through a critical engagement with prior research and the Swedish context (Kloosterman, 2010; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Yeröz, 2019).

The review then brings these strands of literature together to assess what is already known and what remains less well examined in relation to South Asian women who first came to Sweden as international students and later became entrepreneurs. In this way, Chapter 2 provides the literature-based justification for the analytical framework and research gap, whereas Section 1.4 provides the concise theoretical architecture used to guide the study.

2.1 Making the Bridge Between Generic Topics and the Subject of the Study

2.1.1 Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is no longer perceived as the creation of new ventures, but as a process that is contextually embedded and socially constructed, that is shaped by institutional

environments, networks, and lived experiences (Welter, 2011; Gartner, 2012). Whereas classical viewpoints focus on the recognition of opportunities and innovation, recent studies have shown that the entrepreneurial activity is dependent on the structural conditions and access to resources instead of the individual agency (McKeever, Jack and Anderson, 2015).

The change is important in order to distinguish between opportunity-driven and necessity-driven entrepreneurship, which occurs in situations where there is limited access to the labour market (Løwe Nielsen et al., 2022). However, this dichotomy has been challenged as being too simplistic in explaining the motivations of entrepreneurs as in reality people are constrained and are also taking advantage of opportunities at the same time (Steyaert, 2007).

Entrepreneurship can also be a response to structural adjustment in migration settings, particularly when people lack knowledge of skills and qualifications, have limited networks, and are excluded from institutional structures (Gaddefors and Anderson, 2017). This underscores the need to move beyond the economic outcome-oriented perspective and conceptualize entrepreneurship as a process that takes place in social, institutional and spatial environments (Wigren-Kristofersen et al., 2019).

Despite this, much of the literature continues to focus on performance results rather than lived experiences, which limits the ability to appreciate the ways in which entrepreneurship is created in the context of overlapping social, cultural, and institutional dynamics such as gender, migration, and institutional positioning. This limitation is necessary to comprehend entrepreneurship in more complicated settings, e.g., the one addressed in this paper.

2.1.2 Immigrant Entrepreneurship

The phenomenon of immigrant entrepreneurship has been the most popular issue since it is considered a source of economic integration; however, it is increasingly understood as a structurally predetermined process, which is conditioned by the institutional and social environment, rather than by personal choice (Barth and Zalkat, 2020).

The main concept in this understanding is that entrepreneurial activity is embedded within networks, institutional structures and socio-economic structures (Granovetter, 1985). The opportunities of immigrant entrepreneurs are not made in a vacuum; the access to resources,

regulatory, and social relations within the host country shape their opportunities (WigrenKristofersen et al., 2019).

The development from embeddedness to mixed embeddedness clarifies why a network-only explanation is insufficient. Granovetter (1985) places economic action within social relationships, whereas Kloosterman, Van der Leun and Rath (1999) and Kloosterman (2010) also foreground opportunity structures and institutional conditions. Read together, these perspectives suggest that supportive contacts cannot be assumed to overcome regulatory or market constraints. More process-oriented work, including Korsgaard et al. (2022), also directs attention to changing relationships. For this study, the analytical question is therefore how participants mobilise and renegotiate networks during educational and entrepreneurial transitions, rather than whether networks are beneficial in general.

In the Swedish context, a study has shown that although institutional frameworks support innovation and entrepreneurship, the opportunities are not evenly distributed, which is especially true with the foreign-born population (Balawi and Ayoub, 2022). Institutional familiarity, trust, and networks are important factors that can influence the outcome of entrepreneurship in many cases, to the disadvantage of those lacking established local networks and relations.

Moreover, recent research advances the idea that immigrant entrepreneurship cannot be regarded solely as a reaction to labour-market exclusion, but rather as the dynamic interaction of constraints and opportunities, both influenced by structural conditions and individual agency (Barth and Zalkat, 2020). Nonetheless, the current literature is inclined to consider the traditional migration pathways, i.e., the labour or family migration, with little focus on the education-based migration, to which this study adds contextualised empirical evidence.

2.1.3 Women Entrepreneurship

Studies of women's entrepreneurship have shifted from descriptive narratives to a critical analysis of gender structures and power dynamics in the context of entrepreneurship (Ahl, 2006). Feminist approaches question the gender-neutrality assumption of entrepreneurship and show that the availability of opportunities, resources, and legitimacy is shaped by the socially constructed norms and expectations (Ahl and Marlow, 2012).

Structural constraints such as access to finance, access to professional networks, and gender stereotypes are often faced by women entrepreneurs as they enter the entrepreneurship sector and as they perform (Calas, Smircich, and Bourne, 2009). Notably, these restrictions are not universal but vary depending on context and social standpoint.

In Sweden, although the policy commitment to gender equality is strong, researchers have found that entrepreneurship is so gendered in practice that the institutional structures that sustain it reproduce inequalities instead of eradicating them (Tillmar et al., 2022). Not only is access to resources affected by gender norms, but so are the perceptions of legitimacy and entrepreneurial identity (Roos and Pettersson, 2024).

For migrant women, these issues are further complicated by intersecting factors, such as cultural positioning, migration status, and institutional barriers (Yeröz, 2019). This produces stratified forms of disadvantage, of gender interacting with other structural possibilities to shape entrepreneurial experiences in complex ways (Roos, 2019). Despite the rise in attention towards intersectionality in recent literature, the literature on the intersection of specific migration pathways, including that by international student mobility, and gender to shape entrepreneurial trajectories, remains scarce. This study addresses part of this contextual gap through the accounts of twelve South Asian women with international-student backgrounds in Sweden.

A tension within this literature concerns how to acknowledge gendered inequalities without presenting women primarily through disadvantage. Ahl (2006) and Ahl and Marlow (2012) question the assumptions through which women's entrepreneurship is represented, while an intersectional approach directs attention to differences connected with migration and social positioning (Lassalle and Shaw, 2021; Yeröz, 2019). These perspectives justify exploring family expectations, legitimacy and agency together. They also require openness to accounts in which residence uncertainty or institutional unfamiliarity is more explicit than gender discrimination, rather than treating such accounts as failures to fit the framework.

2.1.4 International Students and Entrepreneurial Pathways

International students constitute a unique form of migration, defined by temporary legal status, education-based mobility, and, subsequently, access to labour markets and

entrepreneurial opportunities. They are institutionally defined and time-constrained, unlike other migrant groups, which influence their post-study transitions (Welter, 2011).

Universities are very important in this process, as they are considered entrepreneurial ecosystems that provide knowledge, networks, and resources that can trigger entrepreneurial intentions (McKeever, Jack, and Anderson, 2015). Yet, access to such opportunities is uneven and is often mediated by institutional frameworks and social status.

In Sweden, universities play a central role in the innovation system, although international students often face structural obstacles to entering the labour market, such as regulatory constraints, a lack of networks, and unfamiliarity with institutions (Brundenius, Göransson and Ågren, 2011). Such obstacles can make entrepreneurship a second option for engaging in the economy.

Although there has been increased interest towards student entrepreneurship, current research has zeroed in on the entrepreneurial intentions as opposed to actual transition into business ownership, which limits the comprehension of how students go about the process of shifting between education and entrepreneurship (Steyaert, 2007).

Additionally, international students can be easily perceived as a homogenous group, without paying much attention to the fact that gender, cultural background, and migration status influence the entrepreneurial experience in different ways. This absence of differentiation supports the necessity of a context-specific and intersectional analysis, especially as it applies to South Asian women students in Sweden (Abdin, 2025).

2.2 The Context

2.2.1 Migration, International Students, and the Pathway to Entrepreneurship

People have always been moving from one place to another in search of better education, jobs, and living conditions. This has been observed in international student migration, in which individuals move from one place to another for educational reasons, especially higher education, and to improve their career prospects (Nilsson and Ripmeester, 2016).

International students are a peculiar migration group, and their main intention for migration is education, not employment. However, when they study abroad, they are exposed to new employment markets, networks, and start up ecosystems, which may influence their career decisions (Davey, Plewa and Struwig, 2011). The universities also play a vital role in providing international students with opportunities to engage in start-up markets, which may encourage them to consider entrepreneurship as a career option (Ferreira, Loiola and Gondim, 2017).

However, international students encounter many difficulties when seeking to engage in the labour market, including language barriers, limited local labour market experience, limited professional networks, and visa regulations (Duan, Kotey and Sandhu, 2023). Thus, entrepreneurship may serve as a means for them to engage economically and pursue professional freedom. This implies that entrepreneurship among international students may also be driven by the labour market, as seen in entrepreneurship research. However, little research has examined how international students become entrepreneurs, and most has focused on student entrepreneurship intention.

2.2.2 Gender and the Context of Women's Entrepreneurship

In the context of migration and starting one's own business, gender has implications for opportunities and experiences. The role of women entrepreneurs in developing the economy and making people feel part of it cannot be overstated, but there are big hurdles built into the system and existing institutions that prevent women from becoming entrepreneurs (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). These hurdles include having too little access to money, too few professional networks, and gender stereotypes about what role women should play in society (Gabarret and D'Andria, 2021). The hurdles that migrant women face in starting and maintaining their own businesses are compounded by the challenges of migration, such as gender inequality, adapting to a new culture, learning a new language, and limited access to laws and support that would be readily available in their native country.

On the other hand, starting one's own business can be empowering. It can help women gain financial freedom, gain more control over their work lives, and contribute more to the economy (Abbasian and Bildt, 2009). Entrepreneurship, therefore, has both negative hurdles

and positive empowerment, which are important concepts in understanding the experience of migrant women. Most research has treated women entrepreneurs as a single group, with limited examination of how different migration patterns shape their experiences. One group that has been relatively under investigated is international women students who go on to become entrepreneurs. Their experience may be unique from other migrant women.

2.2.3 National Context of Sweden

Sweden is an interesting country to explore the connection between migration, gender, and starting a business because it is known for its high level of social welfare, gender equality, and an economy that thrives on innovation. It is also a preferred destination for international students because of its high-quality education and schools (Nilsson and Ripmeester, 2016). At the same time, Sweden is a country with a high level of migration, and this diversity and multiculturalism are a part of its society. Even though Sweden is a country that promotes gender equality, immigrants face inequality in the Swedish job market, such as a higher unemployment rate and a lack of opportunities to get a job compared to those born in Sweden. This situation may prompt immigrants to become entrepreneurs.

The Swedish setting permits examination of the relationship between formal commitments to inclusion and the institutional experiences of migrant entrepreneurs. Research on Nepali women in the United Kingdom offers a relevant comparison concerning intersecting social positions, but does not establish conditions in Sweden (Maharjan, Nazir and Roomi, 2025). Swedish research on migrant women and entrepreneurial legitimacy is more directly relevant to this context (Yeröz, 2019). Universities are also important because their educational, network and regional roles may shape entrepreneurial pathways, although these roles do not establish that every international student can access equivalent support (Trippl, Sinozic and Lawton Smith, 2015).

The distinction between broad institutional theory and institutional infrastructure is useful here. North (1990) and Scott (2014) provide concepts for understanding rules, norms and legitimacy, whereas an infrastructure focus makes it possible to examine how these arrangements are encountered through support organisations, administrative processes and migration-related institutions. Research on universities' regional roles (Trippl, Sinozic and

Lawton Smith, 2015) foregrounds their capacity to support entrepreneurship; work on immigrant entrepreneurship and the liability of newness (Barth and Zalkat, 2020) draws attention to the difficulties of entering an unfamiliar environment. The tension is between the availability of support and the ability to access and use it. This provides a reason to examine participants' institutional experiences without assuming that either support or exclusion characterises Sweden uniformly.

2.2.4 Why Focus on International Women Students Turned Entrepreneurs?

In the case of entrepreneurship, the focus is usually on general groups or on specific migrant groups, and those who migrate because of education are usually left out. The studies done on women and doing business usually focus on the gender issues and the migration paths, and usually overlook the part where they fit in. Studying the international Women students who are entrepreneurs provides an opportunity to examine the relationship between the two issues.

The women international students are in a unique position because they are the ones who have the opportunity to combine the migration paths, gender, and doing business while in the university. The women international students are affected by the things they learn at university, the challenges they face when entering the job market, and the things they learn. This group also provides an opportunity to examine the role of entrepreneurship as an escape from other challenges and as a pathway to empowerment.

The women international students also offer an opportunity to move beyond migration paths and examine the role of temporary migration in leading to permanent participation. Studying women international students provides an opportunity to develop an in-depth understanding of entrepreneurship and its relationship to other issues. This aligns with the development of the conceptual framework, as mentioned earlier.

2.3 Research Gap

Entrepreneurship, migrant entrepreneurship, women's entrepreneurship and international student mobility have received a considerable amount of scholarly focus; however, the nexus of these areas has not been sufficiently studied. Studies have so far tended to look at immigrant entrepreneurs as a single group, or on several segments of the immigrant

population that are already established, and whose migration histories are predominantly driven by labour or family ties (Webster and Haandrikman, 2017; Yeröz, 2019). Likewise, the existing research on women entrepreneurship has focused on gender issues and gender barriers and opportunities, while the interplay between migration status, educational mobility and institutional positioning has not been fully explored when studying entrepreneurship experiences (Calás et al., 2009).

In addition, the research conducted on international students has mainly been concentrated on intentions to start a business, employability or on entry into the labour market, and not on the transition into business after graduating as such. Therefore, there has been a lesser focus on the international student who takes up entrepreneurship as a post-study career path, especially in host countries with strict and complicated migration policies and labour markets. This is important because international students are held in a unique institutional position characterized by their temporary legal status, educational migration, and often less clear futures for permanent settlement.

In the Swedish context, the literature has pointed out the strengths of the entrepreneurial ecosystem as well as the structural inequalities that exist for migrant entrepreneurs. Little information exists, however, about the institutional conditions experienced by women international students from South Asia who become entrepreneurs. Past research has not often considered institutional influences, social embeddedness and the intersectional gendered experience in the same framework.

Taken together, the reviewed literature indicates that the interaction between migration status, higher-education experience, gender, social embeddedness and institutional conditions has received less focused attention in relation to South Asian women international students who become entrepreneurs in Sweden. The present study does not claim that institutional barriers, migrant networks, gendered expectations or entrepreneurial adaptation are new phenomena. Instead, it contributes contextualised empirical knowledge by examining how these already recognised processes operate together within this specific group and setting. The study therefore complements existing research on migrant and women's entrepreneurship by bringing educational migration, institutional conditions, social embeddedness and gendered experience into the same empirical analysis.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Strategy

The study draws on Women foreign students from the South Asian countries who have become entrepreneurs in Sweden. International students are not a uniform population, but rather a sub- group of which the entrepreneurial experiences are influenced by gender, migration status, institutional environment and socio-cultural context. The specific emphasis is on a topic that has not been well developed in the entrepreneurship literature, that is, the overlapping experiences.

The current study uses a qualitative approach to research because the researchers were interested in understanding the meaning of the participants' experiences and interpretation of their entrepreneurial journey, rather than measuring specific variables or causal relationships. Qualitative research is well suited for studying processes that are embedded in a social context like migration, entrepreneurship, and identity construction in particular institutional contexts (Bell, Harley and Bryman, 2022).

Adopting the interpretivist paradigm, this research is guided by the assumption that reality is socially constructed and that it is interpreted in the way in which people interact and live through it (Maruatona, 2013). The focus on this perspective is important because the process of changing from international student to entrepreneur is not only economically motivated, it

is also a process that is influenced by perceptions of opportunity, institutional experiences, barriers to the labour market, and social expectations. Thus, in such a context where entrepreneurship is perceived by participants in the socio-economic context of the country, an interpretivist approach is appropriate to gain deeper insights into how the participants interpret entrepreneurship in the context of the socio-economic environment in the country in question i.e., Sweden (Prasad, 2018).

The study followed an abductive and iterative research logic rather than a purely inductive or deductive approach. The empirical material remained the starting point: initial coding was primarily grounded in participants' accounts and the researchers did not begin with a fixed set

of codes mechanically derived from theory. However, the theoretical perspectives were present from the research design stage and acted as sensitising lenses for deciding which dimensions of the entrepreneurial experience required attention. As the analysis developed, the researchers moved repeatedly between the interview material and the concepts of institutional infrastructure, mixed embeddedness and feminist intersectionality. Theory was therefore used to interpret, compare and refine emerging patterns, while the empirical material also shaped how the theoretical concepts were understood in this particular context. This back-and-forth movement between data and theory is consistent with abductive reasoning because explanation was developed through an iterative dialogue between empirical observations and existing conceptual perspectives rather than through a single linear sequence from data to theory (Bell, Harley and Bryman, 2022).

The data collection method chosen was semi-structured interview as it has a consistency and flexibility. Although the interview guide was designed to ensure consistency with the research questions, the participants also had the opportunity to address experiences that were important in their entrepreneurial lives (Galletta, 2013). It is a commonly used approach in business and management studies to examine complex processes like entrepreneurial transitions and decision making (Bell, Harley and Bryman, 2022).

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, based upon the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis helped to identify and interpret similarities and differences among the experiences of the participants while maintaining the context and individual differences. This analytical approach is in line with the interpretivist qualitative paradigm of the study which facilitates systematic but flexible analysis of the empirical data. The research strategy is overall coherent of the research philosophy, the theoretical framework, the data collection, and the analysis.

3.2 Research Design

The study design was based on a qualitative interview study and was informed by both the research questions and the theoretical framework. The design was selected because the study examines the transition from higher education into entrepreneurship as a lived and socially situated process. The objective was not to measure how many international students become entrepreneurs, but to understand how South Asian women international students experience

entrepreneurial motivation, labour-market conditions, institutional navigation, migration and residence uncertainty, social networks and gendered expectations. Institutional infrastructure, mixed embeddedness and feminist intersectionality therefore informed the broad analytical concerns of the design, while the interpretivist approach ensured that participants' own meanings and accounts remained central rather than being reduced to predetermined theoretical categories.

Semi-structured interviews helped the study strike a balance between consistency and flexibility (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). Coherence is brought about in that all the participants are posed questions that relate to the same core themes. There is a sense of flexibility since participants can present issues that are important to them in their individual entrepreneurial experiences. This matters since premature imposition of rigid categories might recreate the same issue as the literature has pointed out: the imposition of rigid categories on international students or women entrepreneurs.

The interview guide was primarily developed from the research questions and the study aim. However, the literature and theoretical framework also informed the areas explored in the interviews. The theories were not converted into fixed questions designed to confirm predetermined propositions. Instead, they acted as sensitising perspectives that helped the researchers recognise areas that were relevant to the research problem. Questions concerning institutional and labour-market challenges were informed by the institutional infrastructure perspective; questions about networks, support, resources and opportunity structures reflected mixed embeddedness; and questions concerning gender, migration status, cultural expectations, family responsibilities and identity were informed by feminist intersectionality. This design allowed theoretical relevance to be built into data collection without preventing participants from introducing experiences or meanings that did not fit neatly within the three perspectives.

The operationalisation table thus enhances the research purpose methodological logic of the research by demonstrating how each interview theme relates to the research purpose. This is critical since methodology cannot merely tell how it was done, but it needs to explain why the design selected was suitable. The table presented below indicates coherence between the research questions, theoretical framework, interview design, and analysis.

Table 1: Interview Themes and Their Connection to the Research Focus and Theoretical Framework

Interview theme	Purpose of the questions	Link to research focus	Supporting literature
Background context	To understand country of origin, education in Sweden, business type and migration pathway.	Establishes the context of education-based migration and entrepreneurial transition.	Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2023); Bell, Harley and Bryman (2022)
Entrepreneurial motivation	To explore opportunity, necessity, independence and labour-market barriers.	Connects motivation to constraints, agency and entrepreneurial decision-making.	Løwe Nielsen et al. (2022); Welter (2011); Steyaert (2007)
Institutional navigation	To examine regulations, permits, registration, taxation and support systems.	Connects to institutional conditions shaping entrepreneurial possibility.	Welter (2011); Zahra (2007); Tillmar et al. (2022)
Networks and embeddedness	To explore universities, migrant communities, family, peers, customers and local business contacts.	Connects to resources, information, trust and support.	Granovetter (1985); Roos (2019); Wigren-Kristofersen et al. (2019)
Gender and migration-related experiences	To examine gender, migration status, cultural expectations and social positioning.	Connects to feminist intersectional analysis.	Ahl (2006); Ahl and Marlow (2012); Calás, Smircich and Bourne (2009); Roos and Pettersson (2024)
Challenges and coping strategies	To identify finance, language, legitimacy, institutional unfamiliarity and adaptation strategies.	Links structural constraints with individual and collective responses.	Tillmar (2006); Alkhaled and Berglund (2018); Gaddefors and Anderson (2017)
Reflection and identity	To explore self-understanding, independence, belonging and future aspirations.	Connects entrepreneurship to meaning, agency and identity formation.	Steyaert (2007); Alkhaled and Berglund (2018); Calás, Smircich and Bourne (2009)
Methodological fit	To support interpretive qualitative inquiry and thematic analysis.	Links data collection to research philosophy and analysis strategy.	Prasad (2018); Braun and Clarke (2006); Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2023)

The interview guide was organised into four broad sections. The background was captured in the first section, which included the country of origin, field of study, Swedish university, and type of business of the participants. The second part covered entrepreneurial motivation, when they first thought about entrepreneurship, whether the employment barriers played a role in the decision, and how the university experiences influenced their thinking. The third part discussed the transition process, such as practical challenges that were involved, which included finance, registration, taxation, permits, language, networks, and institutional

support. The fourth part encouraged reflection on identity, empowerment, future goals, and advice to other international Women students who may be thinking about becoming entrepreneurs.

This design is a stronger methodologically since it does not provide general justification by using unrelated method articles. In its place, it uses the literature of research design based on core business research methods, interpretive qualitative literature based on philosophy, and established thematic analysis literature based on data analysis. This enhances the accuracy of citation, and this is to ensure that the approach is in tandem with Business Administration and Entrepreneurship research.

3.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

A semi-structured interview is chosen as the major method of data collection to examine the motivation of participants, their decision-making process, and obstacles encountered in their transition process as international students to entrepreneurs. This technique is especially suitable in the qualitative, interpretivist research since the researcher may capture not only the experiences but also the sense attached by the participants to the experiences (Bell, Harley and Bryman, 2022). Unlike structured methods, semi-structured interviews are flexible but focused on the main research themes, allowing for obtaining a more in-depth perspective on such complex social processes.

The interview guide was primarily developed from the research questions and study objectives, while the literature and theoretical framework informed the breadth and wording of the areas explored. It was divided into four interconnected sections. The first collected background information concerning country of origin, education, experience in Sweden and business activity. The second explored entrepreneurial motivations, including opportunity recognition, practical career considerations, labour-market experiences and the possible influence of university education. The third examined the entrepreneurial process through institutional, administrative, financial, cultural, language, migration, network and gender-related experiences. The final section encouraged reflection on identity, personal growth, support, future aspirations and advice to other international women students. Institutional infrastructure, mixed embeddedness and feminist intersectionality therefore influenced what

the researchers were alert to during interviewing, but participants were able to explain these issues in their own terms and to introduce matters that had not been anticipated in advance.

3.3.1 Sample Selection

The research method used in this study was qualitative research to gain insight into the experiences of the South Asian women international students who became entrepreneurs in Sweden. The sample comprised 12 respondents from South Asian nations who had come to Sweden to pursue education and then started up business ventures. This sub-group was chosen as it offers a golden window to explore entrepreneurial experiences and how they are influenced by the interactions between gender, migration status, institutional environments, and socio-cultural norms. International students are not considered as a single entity, but are examined from a particular migration and gender perspective in order to gain a more contextualised understanding of entrepreneurial experiences.

Theoretically and methodologically justified: selection of South Asian women participants. The South Asian region is an important origin for international student mobility and students from the region may also hold deep transnational connections, while having to negotiate culturally embedded gender norms that shape gendered economic participation and entrepreneurial engagement (Nilsson and Ripmeester, 2016). According to the existing literature, the migration journey, gender expectations and local socio-cultural contexts are found to interact with each other in influencing the entrepreneurial journey of migrant women. By studying this sub-group, in-depth analysis of entrepreneurship in a specific institutional and cultural context is possible, instead of reaching for a statistical generalisation (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023).

The participants were purposively sampled, with relevance to the aim of the research, which in this instance was the South Asian women international students who had taken part in entrepreneurial activities in Sweden (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). One interesting fact regarding the sample is that 8 of the 12 had the affiliation of Linnaeus University, whereas the other 4 participants had affiliation with Halmstad University, Skövde University, Umeå University and Luleå University, respectively. This distribution was not a deliberate selection criterion but it is a distribution which was found during the process of recruiting

participants. Participants were sampled based on their matching with the study criteria and not their institutional affiliation.

Linnaeus University is a relevant setting for this study as it has a significant number of international students and has a climate that allows international students to experience aspects of entrepreneurship, labour market integration and migration transitions. While it may be difficult to transfer the results to all international student entrepreneurs in Sweden, due to the concentration of participants from one university, qualitative research is about depth of understanding, not representativeness (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To overcome this, the analysis is limited to finding common meaning, patterns and experiences among the participants instead of making generalisable statements about all international students or all universities in Sweden. Although the education systems and business sectors differed, all participants had a comparable pathway of having left their native country for education and started up business activities in Sweden, making them suitable study participants for the research goals of the present study.

3.3.2 Interview Process

A methodology of semi-structured interviews was adopted in this research to collect detailed information about the experience of entrepreneurship of the respondents. The qualitative sample size for the study was twelve interviews, a size that is suitable for interpretive research that aims to give depth and contextual understanding rather than generalise statistically (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). The interviews were conducted virtually, enabling participation across geographical locations. Online interviews are a recognised option for qualitative research when geographical access is difficult (Bell, Harley and Bryman, 2022).

The entire interview was conducted in English as the interviewees had a post-secondary education in Sweden and a good command of the language. However, the researchers were sensitized to the awareness that language can shape the expression of experiences. This led to a special consideration of the interview and transcription phases to avoid the meaning being interpreted carelessly and not condensed or distorted. It is in line with the principle of

interpretivist research which suggests that the intended meaning of the participants should be preserved (Prasad, 2018).

With informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Transcription was assisted by AI and verified by human eyes to ensure efficiency and accuracy. To ensure a rigorous process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), the transcripts were reviewed multiple times to identify patterns, meaning and nuance in the accounts given by the participants. There were considerations of ethics that were taken seriously. Pseudonyms of the respondents and omitting or changing identifying information were used in order to maintain confidentiality. This guaranteed that participants were allowed to freely share personal and possibly sensitive experiences regarding migration, gender and entrepreneurship in a safe and morally upright research setting.

Table No. 2: A Brief Introduction of the Participants (Pseudonyms Used for Anonymity)

Name	Country	Age	Education	University	Completed	Business	Registered	Marital status
Ananya	India	45	MBA	Linnaeus University	2024	Education Consultancy	2025	Married
Priya	India	36	MSc Economics & Business Admin	Halmstad University	2023	Grocery Store	2025	Married
Kavita	India	44	MSc Process Control & Supply Chain	Linnaeus University	2023	Spice & Tea Business	2023	Married
Meera	India	45	MSc Biomedicine	University of Skövde	2023	Food Truck & Delivery	2025	Married
Nadeesha	Sri Lanka	32	MSc Entrepreneurship	Linnaeus University	2024	Cultural Events	2025	Single
Ishara	Sri Lanka	33	Bachelor Int. Business	Umeå University	2025	Catering & Delivery	2023	Married
Lakshmi	India	47	MSc Supply Chain	Linnaeus University	2022	Grocery Store	2022	Married
Ayesha	Bangladesh	37	MSc Entrepreneurship	Linnaeus University	2024	Student NGO	2024	Married
Samira	Sri Lanka	37	MSc Int. Business	Luleå University	2024	Financial Consultancy	2024	Married
Farzana	Bangladesh	44	MBA	Linnaeus University	2024	Restaurant	2024	Married
Riya	India	34	MSc Social Media & Web Tech	Linnaeus University	2024	Web Tech Business	2025	Married
Sana	Pakistan	38	MSc Supply Chain	Linnaeus University	2022	Grocery Store	2022	Married

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was appropriate because it provides a flexible method for identifying and interpreting patterned meaning across qualitative accounts while retaining attention to context and difference. In this study, thematic analysis was combined with an abductive and iterative analytical logic. The analysis did not treat theory as a set of hypotheses to be tested, nor did it treat the data as theoretically neutral. Instead, empirical material and theoretical perspectives informed one another throughout the analytical process. This approach was consistent with the interpretivist orientation of the study because the purpose was to develop a contextually

grounded interpretation of participants' entrepreneurial experiences rather than to test causal relationships.

The first stage of analysis was predominantly data-led. The researchers familiarised themselves with the material by reading and rereading the interview transcripts, recording initial impressions and noting recurrent experiences and differences between participants. Initial coding stayed close to participants' accounts so that concepts from the theoretical framework were not mechanically imposed on the data. At the same time, the researchers acknowledged that complete theoretical neutrality was neither claimed nor possible because the research questions, literature review and theoretical framework had already shaped the broader focus of the study. The analysis therefore moved from relatively inductive initial coding into a more explicitly abductive process in which emerging codes and themes were examined in relation to institutional infrastructure, mixed embeddedness and feminist intersectionality.

During initial coding, labels were developed from the empirical material and in relation to the research questions rather than from a predetermined theoretical codebook. Examples included labour-market barriers, reasons for entrepreneurship, university influence, administrative and migration difficulties, social support, networks, gendered expectations and identity change. The codes were then compared and grouped into broader categories and provisional themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). At this stage, the researchers began to move more deliberately between the data and theory. For example, accounts of regulation, taxation, residence requirements and institutional support were compared with the institutional infrastructure perspective; accounts of networks, community relationships and access to resources were considered through mixed embeddedness; and accounts concerning gender, migration, family expectations and identity were examined through feminist intersectionality. The theoretical perspectives therefore assisted interpretation and comparison, but they did not determine in advance which themes had to appear.

Theme development was not a one way process. Provisional themes were continually revisited with the coded extracts and full transcripts, compared between participants, and rethought in light of the research questions and theoretical framework. In some cases, themes were combined, re-named, or adjusted in order to better reflect the empirical data when the

original interpretation was not well supported. The researchers also went back to theory when a pattern needed to be explained in more detail, and then went back to the transcripts to evaluate whether the theoretical interpretation was true to the participants' accounts. This movement between empirical material and theory enabled the analysis to progress from description to interpretation. Formal systems and institutional navigation were contextualized by institutional infrastructure, opportunity structures, networks and resources were understood through mixed embeddedness, and the interaction between opportunity structures, networks and resources was examined through feminist intersectionality, which focused on the interaction between gender and migration, culture, and family expectations and institutional positioning. The analysis was done manually to ensure that there was a close engagement with the transcripts and that this movement between codes, themes, data and theory was made transparent.

The iterative process was important because theoretical concepts can guide the attention to some interpretations while others are less apparent. The researchers thus wondered whether emerging explanations were supported by the participants' accounts, and not simply that the three theoretical perspectives would automatically account for all findings. This was especially relevant for gender, where the theoretical framework enabled gendered power relations to be analytically visible, while the empirical material did not warrant the assumption that all difficulties were instances of direct gender discrimination. The final themes as a result were therefore not only empirical, but also theoretically driven, such as motivations for entrepreneurship, barriers in the labour market, institutional and migration barriers, social embeddedness, support systems, gendered experiences and identity negotiation. This approach reinforced interpretation rather than supplanting participants' voices and automatically identifying the empirical themes.

3.5 Research Quality

3.5.1 Trustworthiness

Reliability is the validity, caution, and credibility of qualitative research. It involves an understandable, transparent and meaningful approach (Stahl and King 2020). In qualitative research, trustworthiness is validated through its credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). In this study trustworthiness was ensured by a careful and systematic process. Twelve semi-structured interviews with people who have first-hand experience of the topic under study were conducted. The data obtained was extensive and in-depth. Once the interviews were finished, they read them over many times, getting a deeper understanding of them, and ensuring they fully understood them. In this study, thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes systematically and methodically. The study was also consistent with the research questions, data collection and theories, which maintained the methodological consistency. The abductive and iterative approach combined data-led initial coding with theoretically informed interpretation, keeping participants' accounts central while allowing the framework to inform explanation.

3.5.2 Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the study's findings reflect participants' experiences and lived realities (Abidin et al., 2024). This is similar to internal validity in quantitative research and ensures the findings of the study are based on the actual understanding and perceptions of the researchers. In the study, the credibility of the findings was enhanced by the researchers' extensive time with the data and the interviews with participants. This was possible due to in-depth interviews with fully engaged participants and the fact that the study participants were 12 and diverse in terms of background, educational level, and business nature. This helped to expand the understanding of the study's findings and the nature of the phenomenon being studied. (According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, (2023), the more time spent with the study's findings and the participants' interviews, the more credible the findings of the study are likely to be. This is because the study's findings are likely to be more meaningful and credible to the readers of the study due to the use of the actual experiences of the participants in the study.

3.5.3 Transferability

Transferability concerns whether a sufficiently detailed account of the research context enables readers to judge relevance to another setting (Drisko, 2024). The participants' countries of origin, educational backgrounds, business activities and recruitment context help establish those boundaries. However, eight of the twelve participants were connected to Linnaeus University, and the remaining four represented four other universities. Differences within this small sample do not establish coverage of Swedish universities. The use of established theories supports interpretation, but does not itself demonstrate transferability; that judgement depends on contextual similarities and further evidence.

3.5.4 Dependability

Dependability is the consistency and reliability of the research process over time (Janis, 2022). It emphasises the importance of a clear and documented research process to allow for evaluation by others (Bell, Harley and Bryman, 2022). In this study, dependability was maintained through a clear and systematic approach to the research and analysis process. The authors followed a clear and systematic approach to the research, including developing research questions, identifying the participants, collecting the data through interviews, and analysing the data through a thematic approach. The interview guide, based on previous studies, also assisted in maintaining dependability through a consistent approach while still allowing for the sharing of experiences through the interview process. The use of an abductive and iterative approach also assisted in maintaining dependability through a repeated approach to the analysis, allowing for a better understanding and improved interpretations. The use of a thematic approach to analysis was also assisted through a systematic approach to coding, grouping, and developing themes, a repeated approach that assisted in ensuring that the findings are directly related to the data and are consistent with the experiences shared through the interview process.

3.5.5 Confirmability

Confirmability concerns whether readers can trace interpretations to the empirical material and understand the researchers' interpretive role (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). It

does not imply that an interpretivist analysis is free from theoretical influence. In this study, participant quotations, repeated engagement with transcripts and reflexive consideration of interpretations were used to support the relationship between evidence and explanation. Institutional infrastructure, mixed embeddedness and feminist intersectionality informed interpretation, while claims still needed to remain grounded in participants' accounts rather than being assumed from the framework.

3.5.6 Reflexivity

The researcher's role, and access to networks should be mentioned as a factor affecting the sampling strategy. The content of the participants associated with Linnaeus University reflects accessibility and recruitment of participants. While virtual interviews did successfully enable candidates who are not within the geographical reach, the sample remains reflective of preexisting academic and social networks. This has been pointed out as a drawback; however, as a methodological approach this can be seen as a way of studying a well-defined sub group in depth.

3.5.7 Ethical Considerations

The ethical principles were followed in this research. For example, the research was voluntary and the participants were informed of the purpose of the research. This way all participants knew and could withdraw from the research at will. Additionally, participants' privacy was ensured by replacing actual names with fake names and omitting identifying information. It was essential, particularly given the conversations about women's sensitive topics, including migration, career and entrepreneurship. The researchers also ensured that participants were not harmed in any way by this research. For instance, they conducted this research in a manner that respects participants' human right (Bryman et al., 2019).

3.6 Limitations

This study provides an in-depth interpretation of twelve participants' accounts within a specific social and institutional context. The sample supports qualitative depth rather than statistical representation (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The findings should not be interpreted as

representative of all international students, all South Asian women or all migrant entrepreneurs in Sweden.

The sample included South Asian women who had entered entrepreneurship after coming to Sweden for higher education. It therefore does not capture the perspectives of those who considered entrepreneurship but did not start, discontinued their ventures, or left Sweden before recruitment. This creates a potential selection or survivorship limitation: experiences of persistence may be more visible than experiences that prevented entrepreneurial entry or continuation. Having started a venture should not itself be treated as evidence of sustained commercial success.

Eight of the twelve participants were connected to Linnaeus University; the other four were connected to Halmstad, Skövde, Umeå and Luleå universities. Recruitment was purposive but also shaped by access to academic and social networks, creating a convenience element (Bell, Harley and Bryman, 2022). Some accounts of university support, information and networks may therefore reflect that particular institutional environment. Virtual interviewing widened geographical access but did not remove this concentration. The study cannot separate university-specific experiences from wider institutional patterns, and its findings are not representative of all Swedish universities or all migrant entrepreneurs in Sweden. Participant availability, time constraints and differences in communication may also have affected the range and detail of accounts.

Participants described their entrepreneurial journeys retrospectively, so their accounts may have been shaped by their current positions and subsequent experiences. Later achievements may have encouraged more positive interpretations of earlier difficulties or accounts centred on resilience and independence. This may also have influenced the limited reporting of explicit gender discrimination. These are possible influences rather than demonstrated biases in individual interviews. The findings establish that explicit discrimination was not prominent in the retrospective accounts collected; they do not establish its absence. Longitudinal research, including people whose ventures did not continue, would help examine these limitations.

4 Presentation of Empirical Data

4.1 Overview of the Participants

In Section 4.3.2, a summary was given in tabular form. Here, the participants' stories will be described in detail. First, their personal journeys will be described, followed by a discussion of their entrepreneurial activities. This will help us understand how each participant transformed from an international student to an entrepreneur in Sweden.

4.1.1 Ananya

Ananya, an Indian, decided to move to Sweden and pursue her Master's in Business Administration from Linnaeus University, which she completed in 2024. Ananya's entrepreneurial journey was largely influenced by her own experience as an international student. During her time as a student, she realised that there was a lack of personalised guidance for students interested in studying abroad, especially with regard to the visa process, the process of choosing the right university, and getting accustomed to the new location. She decided to open an international education consultancy, which she registered in 2025. Ananya's business is self-sustaining and provides personalised guidance as opposed to the generic guidance found online. Ananya is facing challenges in gaining credibility and trust, especially in the competitive market where generic guidance is freely available. However, Ananya is convinced that her own experience as an international student provides her with an edge over other players in the market. Ananya's entrepreneurial journey is an example of how personal challenges can translate into entrepreneurial opportunities.

4.1.2 Priya

Priya, an Indian, completed her MSc in Economics and Business Administration at Halmstad University in 2023. After completing her degree, she decided to stay in Sweden and started an Indian grocery store in 2025. She decided to open the store because she saw an opportunity and a need. She saw an opportunity because she realised that there was a need in the market,

and she saw the need because she was unable to find employment that matched her qualifications. Priya is the sole entrepreneur in the business, and she is responsible for everything, from getting the goods to communicating with the customers. She found it difficult initially to grasp the behaviour of the Swedish market, especially when setting the prices and the type of goods to sell. She also found it difficult to handle the rules and regulations when starting the business. However, she is optimistic that through the entrepreneurial route, she is likely to attain financial independence. The case is an example of the challenges and opportunities that migrant entrepreneurs face.

4.1.3 Kavita

Kavita is originally from Sri Lanka. She completed her Master's in Process Control and Supply Chain Management at Linnaeus University in 2023. After completing her studies, she decided to start an online-based business selling spices and tea. She also registered her business in the same year. Kavita got the idea to start the business due to her culture and the fact that genuine Sri Lankan products are scarce in Sweden. She recognized an opportunity to provide products to immigrant communities and Swedish people with an interest in international cuisine. Kavita operates the business on her own using the internet. She is facing some difficulties in managing logistics and coordinating with suppliers. She also feels pressure to compete with larger businesses. Creating a recognisable brand is another issue she is dealing with. Nevertheless, she believes that the business is an important part of her cultural identity and also allows her to integrate into Swedish society. This is an important aspect of migrant women and their use of culture as an important resource.

4.1.4 Meera

The subject, Meera, who hails from India, completed her MSc in Biomedicine at the University of Skövde in 2023. Despite her academic background in science, she went on to start her own food truck and online food delivery service business, which she registered in 2025. Her reason for this was that there weren't enough opportunities in her academic field and she enjoys cooking. From Meera's case, it is possible for an individual to transition from an academic, highly specialized environment to a more general and easier-to-access business environment. She is her own boss in her business. The biggest problem she faces in her

business is dealing with food safety regulations and licenses. She also faces the problem of keeping costs down and maintaining quality. Despite all this, she believes that it is a great feeling to be your own boss and be financially independent. Her case is an example of the larger problem of underemployment faced by highly educated migrants.

4.1.5 Nadeesha

On the other hand, Nadeesha from Sri Lanka graduated with a Master's degree in Entrepreneurship, Sustainability, and Social Change in 2024 from Linnaeus University. She started her own business in 2025, specialising in the organisation of cultural and music events. The entrepreneurial journey is closely related to the academic course and the social goal of assisting the community. The goal is to provide an opportunity for the interaction of cultures, especially among immigrants in Sweden. She is the only employee, and she is responsible for the entire process, from planning and promoting the events to coordinating them. There are challenges, but she considers the entrepreneurial journey an opportunity to make money and contribute to the social well-being of the community. The entrepreneurial journey is not only profitable but also socially responsible.

4.1.6 Ishara

Ishara was a student of International Business at Umeå University in Sweden and completed her graduate studies in 2025. She established her own catering and online food delivery business in 2025. Her motivation to establish her business was to support her financially while she is still at university. Running a business and taking care of family at the same time is a difficult task. She is the only person in her business and is responsible for everything, including cooking and communicating with the customers. She is motivated by the fact that she needs the money and the opportunity exists to serve the people. This aspiration to become an entrepreneur can begin even before the completion of school, especially among international students who need the finance to support themselves.

4.1.7 Lakshmi

Lakshmi, an Indian, completed her Master's degree in Supply Chain Management from Linnaeus University in 2022. Lakshmi opened her Asian grocery store in 2022. The target group of her store comprises immigrants, as well as other people living nearby who enjoy Asian food. Lakshmi operates her store entirely alone. The major difficulty she faces is how to be competitive in a market where similar stores exist. Lakshmi's story demonstrates what it takes to sustain a business, not just initiate one. Lakshmi's story indicates flexibility is a crucial factor in becoming an entrepreneur. Lakshmi's story demonstrates that migrant entrepreneurs should be prepared to continuously modify their strategy to remain competitive in a challenging marketplace.

4.1.8 Ayesha

Ayesha is from Bangladesh. She completed her Master's degree in Entrepreneurship, Sustainability, and Social Change from Linnaeus University in 2024. She founded a non-profit student organization to help international students. Her main focus is social, not financial. She is on her own, but she does a lot with other people and uses volunteers. She faces major challenges in getting funding and keeping the members interested. The case of Ayesha is an example of social entrepreneurship as a solution to the problem in schools and colleges. She is helping the students, and she did not have this kind of support when she was a student, which is an example of how personal issues can lead to social business ideas.

4.1.9 Samira

Samira, from Sri Lanka, completed her Master's in International Business at Luleå University of Technology in 2024. The same year, she started her accounting and financial advisory consulting business. The business matches her education and skills. Samira works alone, targeting small businesses and individuals. The big challenge facing her is how to gain trust and credibility, which is crucial in this line of work. The other challenge was studying Sweden's laws and taxes, which was a big task. Despite all these challenges, Samira has no doubt that her business will be her career path in the future. The case shows how highly

skilled migrants use their knowledge to generate opportunities in knowledge-intensive sectors.

4.1.10 Farzana

Farzana, from Bangladesh, did her MBA at Linnaeus University in 2024. The same year, she started her restaurant business. The choice was motivated by her love for cooking and her desire for financial independence, having had problems in the job market. The restaurant has many aspects, including employees, supplies, and serving customers. According to Farzana, her restaurant has big physical and financial demands. Despite all this, she enjoys making a space where people come together through food. The case shows how entrepreneurship in this sector, especially for migrant women, has many opportunities, including easier entry into the sector, which demands a lot of hard work and commitment.

4.1.11 Riya

Riya, who comes from India, completed her MSc in social media and Web Technology at Linnaeus University in 2024. In 2025, she started her own business, which is about web development and immersive technology. Her entrepreneurial journey stems from her skills, which are in the field of technology, and her passion for technology, particularly in the digital world. She works alone, helping people in the digital world, creating websites, etc. The biggest challenge she faces is acquiring clients in the ever-changing digital world. To Riya, being an entrepreneur is an opportunity to utilize her skills creatively, working on various projects. Her story indicates the significance of digital entrepreneurship, which is becoming very crucial, particularly to highly skilled migrants.

4.1.12 Sana

Sana, who is from Pakistan, completed her Master's in Supply Chain Management at Linnaeus University in 2022. She opened a grocery store the same year. Sana's store is like other retail stores, but it is uniquely her own. She owns the store and is responsible for all aspects of the business. Sana's challenge is maintaining a consistent customer base and controlling costs. She is also challenged by competition in the industry. Sana views

entrepreneurship as a viable and stable source of livelihood in Sweden. Sana's life is a good example of migrant entrepreneurs who access the easy-to-enter industries despite the challenges they face.

4.2 Sample Limitations

The analytical scope of this study is South Asian women who came to Sweden as international students and subsequently entered entrepreneurship. The twelve participants were from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Their accounts inform the aim and research questions concerning entrepreneurial motivations, challenges, institutional conditions, social networks and gendered experiences. The findings are therefore interpreted within this subgroup and should not be presented as an account of international student entrepreneurs in Sweden generally.

Purposive recruitment identified participants with relevant entrepreneurial experience, but access through existing networks also introduced a convenience element. Eight of the twelve participants were connected to Linnaeus University. Although institutional concentration was not an intended selection criterion, it may still have shaped whose experiences were included and which forms of support were most visible. It cannot be dismissed as unrelated to sampling bias merely because it arose during recruitment.

The level of concentration of participants in one institution may restrict the generalisability of the results to all international student entrepreneurs in Sweden but the aim of this qualitative study is to grasp the lived experiences in a given context, not to generalise the results statistically. The results should therefore be seen as specific understandings that help to develop analytical knowledge, and not as general representations. More studies are needed to explore if similar patterns could be found in other institutional and cultural contexts involving other participants from diverse Swedish university settings and with diverse backgrounds in their country of origin..

4.3 Entrepreneurial Ventures and Market positioning

The results indicated that the participants' lived experiences were the main drivers of the formation of customer profiles rather than through formal market research. Numerous

entrepreneurs saw opportunities in problems that they faced in their migration and settlement experiences. As such, entrepreneurship manifested itself as a process of transforming individual difficulties as business opportunities.

Ananya's account illustrates this dynamic:

> "*Since I personally went through the process of applying, relocating, and adapting to life here, I felt that my experience could be valuable for others. At the same time, there is also a small necessity-driven element, because as an immigrant, it can take time to integrate into the local job market. Entrepreneurship allowed me to take initiative and create something for myself instead of relying entirely on employment opportunities."* (Ananya)

Ananya didn't just spot a market opportunity, she turned her migration experience into something she could use as knowledge to become an entrepreneur. Her experience business has proven that experiential knowledge can be a business resource. Customers are not just buying information on education and migration processes; they are buying advice from the person who has walked through the process. Shared experiences seem to be an additional source of entrepreneurial legitimacy in migrant-owned businesses, rather than professional qualifications.

The meaning of this finding is related to the changing nature of the customer. Although originally brought about by a need of the migrants, it eventually evolved into a multicultural consumer base. This runs counter to the common static view of ethnic entrepreneurship which suggests that ethnic businesses stay in ethnic markets. Rather, ethnic embeddedness seems to serve as a threshold to move beyond and tap additional opportunities.

But not everyone's customer profile was grouped by ethnicity. However, a counter-intuitive trend was observed with the highly skilled participants, who had made their business ventures based on their professional expertise and not on cultural familiarity. Samira's accounting consultancy and Riya's technology business illustrate this shift.

Samira stated:

> "*On one hand, I saw a clear opportunity to provide accounting and bookkeeping services to small businesses that need reliable financial support. On the other hand, the challenges of entering the labour market as an international professional also influenced my decision to create my own opportunity."* (Samira)

Samira's customers are not cultural, but service-oriented, unlike food and retail entrepreneurs. This discovery challenges dominant discourses on migrant entrepreneurship. The literature generally takes for granted that migrant entrepreneurs are confined to ethnic niches because of their limited access to the labour market. However, Samira's case suggests that labour market exclusion can also spur highly educated migrants to go it alone with their professional skills. Thus, migration barriers are not necessarily associated with ethnic market dependence. There's another critical difference that needs to be made about the intent of customer engagement. However, some participants did not define entrepreneurship mainly in terms of business. Rather, their enterprises aimed at social, emotional or institutional needs.

The results indicate three different but connected customer orientations. In the first place, some business owners were able to grow their businesses around culturally specific needs and then slowly move towards more general markets. Others, secondly, turned personal journeys of migration into services for people in a comparable situation. Third, highly skilled entrepreneurs were the most dependent on professional skills and most entered into mainstream markets, with little reliance on ethnic networks.

The participants' customer profiles suggest different ways of combining professional expertise, migration experience and cultural connections. Some served culturally specific markets, while others described broader professional or local customer groups. This variation is consistent with mixed embeddedness, which connects resources with opportunity structures (Kloosterman, 2010). It provides contextual evidence of different market orientations within this sample, without establishing that changing markets or dynamic embeddedness are newly identified phenomena.

4.4 Entrepreneurial Motivations

An entrepreneurial motivation turned out to be a complex process which was influenced by educational experiences, labour market uncertainties, migration uncertainties and personal aspirations. The phenomenon of entrepreneurship was not attributed to one single motivation, but rather the process of the entrepreneurs' experiences as international students in Sweden. Importantly, these results contradict the traditional dualism between opportunity entrepreneurs and necessity entrepreneurs, as opportunity and necessity motivations often occurred together.. Nadeesha described how entrepreneurship became conceivable during her university studies:

> "*During my Master's studies in Sweden, I began thinking more seriously about entrepreneurship. Especially during my third semester internship, where I explored business development ideas, I started to reflect on how I could build a business based on my own strengths and interests."* (Nadeesha)

The focus of Nadeesha was on personal strengths and interests, whereas Ayesha was focused on unmet social needs. This comparison illustrates that universities had different impacts on entrepreneurship. Some participants used entrepreneurship as a means of self-development, while others used it as a means of solving community issues. These finding challenges narrow the interpretations of entrepreneurial motivation that are purely economic in nature, as opportunity recognition was sometimes considered to be based on social and institutional experiences. Thus, the motivation of entrepreneurs seems to be closely related to participants lived experiences of being international students, as opposed to market calculations.

> "*The university environment played a very important role in shaping my decision to start a business... That experience pushed me to reflect on real challenges faced by international students, particularly mental health and loneliness."* (Ayesha)

Ayesha was more interested in unmet social needs while Nadeesha was more interested in personal strengths and interests. This comparison shows that entrepreneurship was affected in different ways by universities. Entrepreneurship provided some participants with a means to self-development, while for others, it was a means to solving community problems. These

finding challenges narrow the scope of what is considered to be narrowly economic interpretations of entrepreneurial motivation, as opportunity recognition was frequently linked to social and institutional experiences.

Consequently, entrepreneurial motivation appears closely linked to participants lived experiences as international students rather than abstract market calculations.

A tension emerges when Lakshmi later describes the same entrepreneurial journey:

> "*I identified a clear opportunity in the market because there was a lack of Indian grocery stores in the region... On the other hand, it was also necessity-driven, as finding suitable employment was challenging due to language requirements and limited job opportunities in the area."* (Lakshmi)

This quote is especially notable as it refutes one of the more universal assumptions in entrepreneurship research: are entrepreneurs' opportunity or necessity driven? The motivation of Lakshmi shows that these things are not opposed to each other. Labour market barriers made people aware of the unmet market needs, whereas the availability of those needs gave entrepreneurship as an answer to employment problems. Necessity and opportunity were not merely two distinct stages in the entrepreneurial process, but also interacted with each other during the process.

This wasn't the only case where Lakshmi was found. The barriers to migration, the language requirements, and institutional restrictions were commonly interdependent, and often merged with market opportunities, individual aspirations, and community needs across the interviews. Entrepreneurship was not seen as a choice, or a purely voluntary choice, by the participants. Rather, entrepreneurial motivation was formed through an ongoing process of negotiating opportunities and constraints that took place in the Swedish environment.

The results indicate that entrepreneurial motivation of the South Asian female international students is a dynamic process of adaptation when taken together. Participants were encouraged to see entrepreneurship as a viable option, labour market obstacles made self-employment more appealing, and personal experiences helped them identify business market and social opportunities. The results consequently call into question the dichotomy in

entrepreneurial motivation and suggest that entrepreneurial motivation is a result of the interaction of structural constraints, individual agency and opportunity recognition (Duan, Kotey & Sandhu, 2023).

4.4.1 Labour Market Barriers

Labour market barriers emerged as a significant influence on entrepreneurial decision-making. Participants frequently described difficulties accessing employment despite possessing relevant qualifications, highlighting the importance of language requirements, local experience, and professional networks within the Swedish labour market.

Ananya explained:

> "*Employers often prefer candidates with local work experience, Swedish language skills, or established networks, which international students may not immediately have after graduation. Although I had professional experience from Dubai, it was still a different context, and I felt that adapting to the Swedish labour market could take time."* (Ananya)

This quote illustrates an important paradox of graduate migration. Participants had qualifications and professional experience, but this was not considered as capital in the Swedish labour market. The problem was not one of lack of capability, but was one of limited transferability of experience across institutional contexts. Entrepreneurship became a solution to this mismatch between qualifications and expectations of the labour market.

Priya described a similar challenge:

> "*Many positions required extensive local work experience, Swedish language proficiency, or established professional networks, which can take time for international graduates to develop. While these challenges did not discourage me, they prompted me to consider alternative career paths."* (Priya)

Ananya talked about the challenges of adaptation, whereas Priya talked about the barriers to the labour market as a driver to look at other opportunities. A comparison of these accounts indicates that barriers did not always result in withdrawal or discouragement. Rather, they invited the participants to rethink their economic possibilities to participate in Sweden. This finding corroborates the research that has pointed towards labour market challenges faced by international graduates (Duan, Kotey and Sandhu, 2023), and also indicates that entrepreneurship was more likely to be a proactive adaptation strategy than a reactive one.

Ayesha's experience introduces a further dimension:

> "*When I realised that it was difficult to get a PhD position in a short time, I did not want to sit idle while waiting. So, I thought about doing something productive."* (Ayesha)

Ayesha spoke about academic progression uncertainty as opposed to barriers to employment, as did Ananya and Priya. Beyond the labour market exclusion, this suggests entrepreneurship was driven by delayed access to desired career pathways. Entrepreneurship thus acted as a way of retaining agency in an institutional context of uncertainty.

4.4.2 Desire for Independence

In addition to labour market constraints, participants often cited entrepreneurship as a route to more autonomy, flexibility and personal fulfilment. Freedom was not just about money, but also about lifestyle, creativity and freedom in the job market.

Ananya reflected:

> "*Entrepreneurship allows me to design my work around my values and lifestyle. For example, one of the reasons I moved to Sweden was to live a more balanced and mindful life."* (Ananya)

This quotation suggests that entrepreneurship was closely linked to participants' broader life aspirations. Rather than adapting to organisational structures, Ananya sought the freedom to

organise work according to her own priorities. Independence therefore represented a form of lifestyle control rather than simply economic self-sufficiency.

Similarly, Samira stated:

> "*Every challenge encourages you to develop new skills and think creatively. Over time, this process builds a strong sense of independence and self-belief."* (Samira)

While Ananya emphasised work-life balance, Samira highlighted personal development and confidence-building. Comparing these perspectives reveals that independence was experienced both externally and internally. For some participants it involved control over working conditions, whereas for others it involved psychological empowerment and self-efficacy. This suggests that entrepreneurial independence is multidimensional and cannot be reduced to financial autonomy alone.

Nadeesha reinforced this theme:

> "*I realised that entrepreneurship would allow me to combine my artistic talents, cultural background, and business knowledge into something meaningful."* (Nadeesha)

Unlike the previous participants, Nadeesha associated independence with creative expression. This introduces an important tension within entrepreneurship literature. Entrepreneurship was not merely a means of escaping employment constraints; it also provided opportunities for identity expression and cultural contribution. Independence therefore functioned as both an economic and personal aspiration.

4.4.3 Opportunity Recognition

Participants frequently described identifying opportunities through their experiences as migrants and international students. Their position between multiple cultural contexts appeared to provide unique insights into unmet needs within Swedish society.

Nadeesha explained:

> "*Living in a new culture made me reflect on my own cultural identity. Sometimes I experienced feelings of cultural distance, which made me realise how important cultural connection and community can be."* (Nadeesha)

This quotation suggests that opportunity recognition emerged from personal experiences of adaptation and belonging. Rather than identifying purely commercial gaps, participants often recognised social and cultural needs that reflected their own migration experiences. Entrepreneurial opportunities therefore emerged from lived experience rather than conventional market analysis. Ananya similarly linked opportunity recognition to personal experience:

> "*Since I personally went through the process of applying, relocating, and adapting to life here, I felt that my experience could be valuable for others."* (Ananya)

While Nadeesha identified opportunities through cultural distance, Ananya identified opportunities through institutional navigation. Comparing these accounts demonstrates that opportunities were socially constructed through participants' unique positionality as migrants. Their experiences enabled them to recognise problems that were often invisible to others.

Lakshmi's experience provides a more market-oriented perspective:

> "*I identified a clear opportunity in the market because there was a lack of Indian grocery stores in the region."* (Lakshmi)

Unlike Ananya and Nadeesha, Lakshmi focused on a tangible market gap. This contrast highlights the diversity of opportunity recognition processes. Some opportunities emerged from social and emotional experiences, whereas others emerged from observable consumer needs. Together, these findings suggest that opportunity recognition was shaped by both personal experiences and market conditions.

4.4.4 Combining Opportunity and Necessity

Perhaps the most important finding is that participants rarely distinguished between necessitydriven and opportunity-driven entrepreneurship. Instead, both motivations frequently operated simultaneously.

Ananya stated:

> "*I would say it is a combination of both, but mostly opportunity-driven."* (Ananya)

This quotation directly challenges binary classifications within entrepreneurship literature. Opportunity and necessity were not viewed as competing explanations but as interconnected influences shaping entrepreneurial decisions.

Priya similarly explained:

> "*By starting an Indian grocery store, I was able to combine these two aspects—addressing a real market need while also creating my own professional opportunity."* (Priya)

Like Ananya, Priya recognised both opportunity and necessity within her entrepreneurial journey. However, her account demonstrates how market opportunities can emerge directly from structural constraints. The inability to access desired employment increased the attractiveness of business creation, while unmet market needs provided a practical pathway forward.

Nadeesha further reinforced this complexity:

> "*In my case, entrepreneurship became both a way to pursue my creative vision and a practical strategy for building a professional future within the constraints of immigration regulations."* (Nadeesha)

This quote sets in a crucial tension where entrepreneurship was at once and at the same time aspiration and adaptation, freedom and constraint, creativity and necessity. Hence, the entrepreneurial motivations of South Asian women international students can't be explained

by push-pull models. Rather, the motivations came up as a result of the interplay between migration experiences, labour market barriers, opportunity recognition and personal aspirations, in line with the argument made by Duan, Kotey and Sandhu (2023) that entrepreneurial motivations are multi-dimensional.

4.5 Challenges in Entrepreneurship

The challenges faced by participants were not simply practical difficulties associated with starting a business. More significantly, they reveal how entrepreneurship for South Asian women international students in Sweden is shaped by unequal access to institutional knowledge, financial credibility, language-based legitimacy, and migration security. The findings therefore show that entrepreneurial difficulty is not only produced by the market but also by the institutional and social conditions through which migrant entrepreneurs must become recognised as credible business actors.

4.5.1 Financial Challenges

Financial challenges were not limited to the absence of money. Rather, they were connected to the problem of being financially legible within Swedish systems. Farzana's experience illustrates this clearly:

> "*Getting funding was very difficult because I didn't have a credit history. Since I was new in Sweden, I had no financial record that banks or institutions could assess, which made it hard to gain their trust. Without proof of previous borrowing or repayment behaviour, I found it challenging to access loans or external funding, even at the early stage of starting my business."* (Farzana)

However, the more serious problem here is that Farzana did not have any capital, and her history prior to the Swedish system was not evident. This illustrates the interruptions of the transferability of credibility caused by migration. She might have possessed business acumen and skills, ambition, but these were not enough if it was not a locally recognised financial record. On a theoretical level, two factors determine access to finance: economic resources, as well as institutional recognition. Migrant entrepreneurs must, therefore, demonstrate trustworthiness within systems that may not recognize their experiences.

Nadeesha's experience adds a different layer to this problem:

> "*Since my business is based on cultural performances and artistic programs, it does not always fit easily into traditional funding categories or grant systems. Cultural entrepreneurship often depends on building audiences and networks gradually, which requires time, visibility, and community engagement."* (Nadeesha)

This takes the focus from financial exclusion away from the limits of funding categories themselves. The problems of funding Nadeesha's business were not due to the fact that it was low in value but rather because its value was incremental, relational, and cultural rather than immediate according to business metrics. This engenders a conflict between entrepreneurial creativity and institutional assessment. Incentives for entrepreneurship can be touted as being available, but they can be oriented toward conventional commercial structures. Culturallyoriented and socially related initiatives can thus suffer, as their worth builds up over time as trust is established, visibility gained, and communities created.

The accounts together demonstrate that financial issues were also issues of legitimacy. Participants had to ensure their products and businesses were comprehensible to institutions that evaluated risk based on local records, traditional categories, and forecasted revenue streams. This takes the discussion beyond "lack of funding" and demonstrates the institutional construction of the "credibility" of financial exclusion.

4.5.2 Institutional and Administrative Challenges

Institutional and administrative challenges reveal one of the strongest contradictions in participants' entrepreneurial experiences. Sweden may provide a supportive and highly regulated business environment, but that same regulation can become a barrier for entrepreneurs who lack local institutional knowledge. Nadeesha's experience with immigration requirements illustrates this contradiction:

> "*One of the most significant practical challenges I have faced relates to immigration regulations and the process of applying for a business residence permit as a non-EU entrepreneur in Sweden. In order to apply for a business visa, applicants are required*

> *to present a detailed business plan and financial projections that demonstrate the viability and sustainability of the business."* (Nadeesha)

This is no quote about paperwork! It shows the paradox of institutional systems demanding migrant entrepreneurs to 'prove' their stability before stability is realistically attainable. New businesses are inherently uncertain, and migrant entrepreneurs are supposed to demonstrate certainty to ensure their legal rights. It involves them in a double challenge: to develop a business and to generate proof that the business will be successful. In theory, this makes the study of entrepreneurship, which extols uncertainty and risk-taking, more complicated, since, for migrant entrepreneurs, uncertainty is commercial, as well as legal and existential.

Nadeesha's further reflection makes this contradiction clearer:

> "*In reality, most new businesses require time to build a customer base and generate stable revenue. However, during the visa application process, entrepreneurs often need to present strong financial projections that indicate a relatively high level of expected profit and sustainability from the beginning."* (Nadeesha)

The key here is that the school requires the business logic of a mature business at an early stage. This indicates that standards used to assess migrant entrepreneurship are not necessarily entrepreneurial reality. This leads to a structural disadvantage because the ones with more capital, networks and institutional knowledge are better able to meet these expectations, whereas the newer migrant entrepreneurs are more uncertain.

Lakshmi's case shows how administrative unfamiliarity can become financially damaging:

> "*I rented a property and invested money to transform it from office spaces into a grocery store. However, after the renovations had already begun, I received news from the construction department that the location was not approved for operating a grocery store."* (Lakshmi)

This is analytically important because its institutional knowledge functions as a form of capital. The financial loss did not arise from weak demand or poor entrepreneurial motivation, but from not fully knowing how local regulatory systems operate. This challenges individualistic interpretations of business failure. For migrant entrepreneurs, mistakes may

result less from poor capability and more from uneven access to institutional knowledge. Therefore, administrative systems do not merely regulate entrepreneurship; they actively shape who can participate safely and sustainably.

4.5.3 Cultural and Language Barriers

Language barriers were not only communication problems. They shaped participants' access to trust, legitimacy, and local networks. Nadeesha explained:

> "*Language is definitely an important factor. While English can be used in many professional contexts, Swedish is very important when interacting with customers and building local relationships."* (Nadeesha)

The deeper meaning of this quote is that English may allow basic participation, but Swedish enables fuller belonging. Language therefore operates as a boundary between functional communication and social legitimacy. This matters theoretically because market access is not purely economic; it is also cultural and relational. Customers and institutions may respond differently when entrepreneurs communicate in the dominant local language because language signals familiarity, commitment, and credibility.

Ayesha's experience demonstrates this connection more directly:

> "*I realised that if I wanted to run a business in Sweden and interact with many people, I needed to learn Swedish… when I described my business in Swedish-to-Swedish people, they seemed to respond more positively… I received several projects from Växjö*
> *Kommun only after I started communicating with them in Swedish."* (Ayesha)

This quote reveals that language proficiency became a gateway to opportunity. The important point is not merely that Ayesha improved her Swedish, but that institutional actors responded differently once she did. This suggests that language can convert an outsider into a more credible actor. However, this also creates a contradiction within inclusive entrepreneurship environments: opportunities may be formally open, but practically mediated by linguistic and cultural familiarity.

Lakshmi's experience adds a more critical dimension:

> "*Many realtors did not respond positively to our inquiries when we communicated in English. It sometimes felt like there might have been a lack of trust toward foreigners."* (Lakshmi)

Here, language intersects with perceived foreignness. The issue is not only misunderstanding but possible distrust. This shows how cultural barriers may operate subtly through hesitation, non-response, or reduced cooperation rather than explicit discrimination. Theoretically, this supports a more nuanced understanding of exclusion: participants may not always face direct rejection, but they encounter weaker trust and slower access to resources.

4.5.4 Gender-Related Challenges

Gender-related challenges were more complex than expected. Participants did not consistently describe direct gender discrimination, which creates an important tension with some women's entrepreneurship literature. Nadeesha stated:

> "*Personally, I have not experienced strong gender discrimination in the business environment so far."* (Nadeesha)

This does not mean gender was irrelevant. Rather, it suggests that gender did not appear as the most visible barrier in this context. Migration status, institutional complexity, language, and financial credibility were often more immediate obstacles. These finding challenges explanations that place gender at the centre of all women entrepreneurs' difficulties. In this study, gender operated more subtly and intersectionally, often through practical responsibilities, mobility, confidence, and dependence on support networks.

Ishara similarly explained:

> "*I never had to face such a gender-related challenge. The reason both men and women were equally helped to purchase products."* (Ishara)

This quote is important because it shows that gendered barriers varied by business type and customer interaction. In retail contexts, participants may have experienced business

transactions as relatively neutral. However, this does not eliminate gendered pressures outside the transaction itself, such as balancing business responsibilities with family duties or relying on informal support.

Ayesha's account shifts the discussion from discrimination to identity transformation:

> "*I think becoming an entrepreneur has changed both my personal and professional identity."* (Ayesha)

The significance here is that entrepreneurship reshaped how participants understood themselves, not only how others treated them. Rather than framing women entrepreneurs only through disadvantage, the findings show entrepreneurship as a site of agency, recognition, and self-redefinition. This is theoretically important because it challenges deficit-based accounts of migrant women's entrepreneurship. The participants were not only constrained subjects; they were also active agents who used entrepreneurship to negotiate identity, belonging, and independence.

4.6 Institutional Experiences in Sweden

Participants' experiences with Swedish institutions reveal a fundamental tension between institutional support and institutional complexity. While Sweden provides a relatively welldeveloped entrepreneurial support infrastructure, participants consistently described access to that support as requiring considerable effort, institutional learning, and adaptation. The findings therefore suggest that the key challenge was not the absence of support but the ability to identify, interpret, and utilise available institutional resources effectively.

Priya described receiving support from multiple sources:

> "*Support came from several sources, including information from government agencies, university networks, and informal advice from professionals and friends. Online resources and digital platforms also played an important role in understanding how to operate a business in Sweden."* (Priya)

The significance of this account lies in the fragmented nature of support. Rather than following a clear pathway, Priya assembled information from different institutional and social actors. This suggests that entrepreneurial support was not experienced as a coordinated system but as a collection of resources that entrepreneurs were expected to navigate independently. Consequently, success depended not only on the availability of support but also on participants' ability to locate and combine different forms of knowledge.

A similar pattern emerges in Kavita's experience:

> "*I reached out to NyföretagCentrum, where I received valuable guidance on starting my business in Sweden. Through their support, I was connected with mentors who provided practical advice and encouragement. At the same time, I continued my Swedish studies to improve my language skills and better integrate into the local community."* (Kavita)

Unlike Priya, who emphasised multiple information sources, Kavita highlights the importance of institutional intermediaries. The value of NyföretagCentrum was not simply informational; it acted as a bridge between the entrepreneur and the wider entrepreneurial ecosystem. This distinction is important because it suggests that institutional support becomes more effective when translated through personal relationships and mentorship. Theoretically, this challenges the assumption that information alone is sufficient for entrepreneurial success. Instead, institutional resources appear most valuable when they help entrepreneurs build confidence, legitimacy, and social connections.

However, institutional engagement was not experienced solely as supportive. Ishara's account introduces a contrasting perspective:

> "*To do that, I had to learn how to start a business in practice. I did a lot of research about how to register a business in Sweden. When you register a business, you have to follow many formalities. You have to fill out many forms, and those forms contain many questions that must match the official categories and rules for doing business."* (Ishara)

The real problem here is not simply that there are rules but that a whole new institutional language is required to be learned. Entrepreneurs were expected not to be knowledgeable about the administrative classification, procedure and regulatory requirements. This indicates that institutions are at the same time enabling and inhibiting entrepreneurial activity. They provide resources and legitimacy, but also rules to follow in the approach to entrepreneurship and themselves. The results indicate that the opportunity to be institutionally competent is a factor affecting entrepreneurship in Sweden, along with the opportunity to be institutionally recognised, as well as the opportunity to be institutionally available.

4.6.1 Support Systems and Resources

Participants consistently emphasised the importance of institutional resources, but these resources contributed more than practical assistance. They helped participants develop entrepreneurial identities, confidence, and legitimacy. This suggests that support systems functioned not merely as sources of information but as mechanisms that shaped how participants understood themselves as entrepreneurs.

Ananya explained:

> "*The course exposed me to many ideas about creating businesses that are not only profitable but also meaningful and socially impactful. Before that, my mindset was mostly oriented toward corporate employment. But during my studies in Sweden, I began reflecting more on my personal values and the kind of life I wanted to build."* (Ananya)

The quote reveals that the education, which was undertaken in the university, had an effect on the participants other than acquiring skills. It gave Ananya a fresh perspective on her career aspirations and a new vision of entrepreneurship as a good alternative to work. The main analytical finding is that institutional support was found to facilitate the process of identity transformation. Imagination of entrepreneurship was achieved when education was accepted as a pathway. Institutions are not only about resources but are also about aspirations to become an entrepreneur and the perception of entrepreneurial opportunities.

Nadeesha's experience reinforces this interpretation:

> "*Organisations like NyföretagarCentrum helped me understand financial planning and prepare the necessary business budgets. In addition, regional support programs in Västerbotten provide coaching and guidance for new entrepreneurs. My university education also played an important role by giving me the theoretical knowledge and confidence to explore entrepreneurship."* (Nadeesha)

Compared with Ananya, Nadeesha focuses more explicitly on confidence and practical capability. Together, these accounts suggest that support systems operate at both cognitive and practical levels. They provide technical knowledge while simultaneously increasing entrepreneurs' confidence in their ability to act. This is theoretically significant because entrepreneurial behaviour is often associated with individual characteristics such as confidence and self-efficacy. The findings suggest that these qualities are not entirely individual but can be developed through institutional engagement.

Networking emerged as another important form of institutional support. Kavita explained:

> "*I used my supply chain expertise from day one, building reliability into my operations. I also started building my network by attending relevant events, such as breakfast meetings organised by the municipality (kommun), which helped me connect with local business owners and understand the regional ecosystem."* (Kavita)

Comparing these accounts reveals that networking opportunities did more than facilitate social interaction. They enabled entrepreneurs to gain legitimacy, access opportunities, and become visible within local business communities. However, an important contradiction emerges. Although networking opportunities were available, participants still needed language skills, confidence, and institutional awareness to benefit from them. Access to support therefore depended not only on institutional provision but also on entrepreneurs' ability to engage with the conditions under which support was offered.

4.6.2 Difficulties Navigating the System

Despite the availability of support, participants consistently described difficulties navigating institutional systems. The central challenge was not simply administrative complexity but the mismatch between entrepreneurial realities and institutional expectations. Participants

frequently experienced institutional procedures as demanding forms of proof, certainty, and compliance that did not always align with the realities of establishing a new venture.

Nadeesha explained:

> "*In order to apply for a business visa, applicants are required to present a detailed business plan and financial projections that demonstrate the viability and sustainability of the business… entrepreneurs often need to present strong financial projections that indicate a relatively high level of expected profit and sustainability from the beginning."* (Nadeesha)

This quotation reveals a significant contradiction. Entrepreneurship is inherently uncertain, particularly during the early stages of business development. Yet institutional systems require entrepreneurs to demonstrate certainty regarding future outcomes. The challenge therefore extends beyond bureaucracy itself. Entrepreneurs must translate uncertain entrepreneurial ambitions into the language of predictability demanded by institutions. This creates a structural tension between entrepreneurial experimentation and institutional accountability.

Ayesha's experience illustrates the practical consequences of this tension:

> "*I started the business and applied for a business visa, but since I had not yet started selling products, the migration authorities contacted me within one month and said that my business did not look realistic. I found that very difficult to understand because it is almost impossible for a business to become realistic within one or two months."* (Ayesha)

The significance of this account lies in the clash between entrepreneurial time and institutional time. Businesses typically require time to test ideas, develop customers, and generate revenue. However, institutional evaluations often occur much earlier. This suggests that migrant entrepreneurs are assessed according to expectations that may not reflect the realities of entrepreneurial development. As a result, institutional systems may unintentionally disadvantage early-stage entrepreneurs who have not yet had sufficient time to demonstrate viability.

Ayesha further explained:

> "*When you register a business, you have to follow many formalities. You have to fill out many forms, and those forms contain many questions that must match the official categories and rules for doing business."* (Ayesha)

The quotation also highlights that administrative complexity is also related to the process of categorisation and institutional translation. Now the challenge for the entrepreneurs is to learn how to use their ideas in existing regulatory frameworks. The challenge is thus more than just procedural, it is interpretive. The participants had to gain insight into definitions, assessments and typologies of entrepreneurial activity in the institutions. If so, it is clear that institutional, as well as entrepreneurial skill, is a factor in entrepreneurial success. Entrepreneurs have to know how to make their business ventures intelligible and legitimate to formal system.

The results show support and complexity in institutional experiences in Sweden. Resources, mentoring, education and networking were available at the institutions; however, these were difficult to access and required a great deal of effort to adapt. The central theme is that institutional support is not necessarily empowering. It is based on the entrepreneur's negotiation capabilities in complex systems, the capability to learn and gain knowledge from the institutions and to create legitimacy in new regulatory settings.

4.7 Personal Experiences and Identity

Participants described entrepreneurship as extending far beyond business ownership and income generation. Their accounts suggest that entrepreneurship functioned as a process of identity reconstruction through which they renegotiated their roles as students, migrants, professionals, and women. Rather than viewing entrepreneurship solely as an economic activity, participants frequently reflected on how it altered their confidence, responsibilities, social positioning, and future aspirations. The findings therefore indicate that entrepreneurship was not only a means of economic participation but also a mechanism through which participants redefined who they were and how they understood their place within Swedish society.

Lakshmi described this transformation clearly:

> "*Becoming an entrepreneur has significantly changed both my personal and professional identity. Professionally, I shifted from being a student focused on learning theories and concepts to someone responsible for applying that knowledge in real business situations… Personally, entrepreneurship has made me more confident and independent."* (Lakshmi)

This quotation expresses well one of the key shifts from learning to responsibility. The impact of Lakshmi's story is not just the confidence she gained but the entrepreneurship taking her out of a sheltered 'school' environment and into an environment where decisions made could have a direct impact. Therefore, it was not a matter of self-perception, but rather accountability and action that needed to be done to achieve identity transformation. This suggests that entrepreneurial identity is an "anthropological construction". The entrepreneurship was not something that participants chose to do, but it was an entrepreneurial activity that took place in a gradual and step by step way and in the way of dealing with uncertainty. Ayesha's account introduces a different dimension of identity transformation:

> "*Now I have my own business, and I am running it legally in Sweden… that identity makes you feel that I am an entrepreneur."* (Ayesha)

While Lakshmi talks about developing herself, Ayesha stresses on getting recognised. The term running it legally in Sweden implies that running it is not just about the internal identity but also one that is institutionally confirmed. This sets up an interesting contradiction. Only when these are recognised by the institutions, the customer and society in general, the identity of the participants can be regarded as entrepreneurs. Thus, the results suggest that entrepreneurial identity is a social construct and not an individual. Entrepreneurship is the "business of" others thinking of you as an entrepreneur.

These stories can be contrasted and there is a range of degrees of identity change. However, in some cases, the perception of the participants changed because of entrepreneurship and in other cases, the perception of the institutions and communities changed. Theoretically, this is important as it shows that entrepreneurial identity is shaped when it is recognised by

entrepreneurs themselves and by others. Entrepreneurship becomes a ritual of social negotiation in order to have legitimacy, belonging and professional status in new social space.

4.7.1 Empowerment and Independence

Participants frequently described entrepreneurship as empowering. However, a deeper examination of their accounts suggests that empowerment was neither immediate nor unconditional. Instead, it emerged through sustained engagement with challenges, uncertainty, and responsibility. Empowerment therefore appeared to be the outcome of navigating constraints rather than escaping them.

Nadeesha explained:

> "*Becoming an entrepreneur has strengthened my sense of responsibility and independence. It requires continuous learning, adaptability, and resilience. I also feel that entrepreneurship allows me to express both my professional skills and my cultural identity in a meaningful way."* (Nadeesha)

At first glance, this quotation appears to emphasise independence. However, the stronger analytical insight lies in the relationship between independence and responsibility. Nadeesha does not describe entrepreneurship as freedom from constraints. Instead, independence is achieved through continuous adaptation, learning, and resilience. This suggests that empowerment is relational rather than absolute. Participants became more independent precisely because they were required to navigate institutional, financial, and social challenges. Entrepreneurship therefore produced empowerment through struggle rather than through the removal of obstacles.

Lakshmi similarly stated:

> "*Personally, entrepreneurship has made me more confident and independent. I have developed stronger problem-solving skills and learned how to handle uncertainty and pressure."* (Lakshmi)

Comparing Lakshmi's account with Nadeesha's reveals a common pattern. Confidence emerged not before entrepreneurial engagement but as a consequence of confronting uncertainty. These finding challenges simplified narratives that portray entrepreneurs as naturally confident individuals. Instead, confidence appears to be developed through repeated encounters with risk, problem-solving, and adaptation. Entrepreneurial agency therefore emerges as a learned process rather than a pre-existing characteristic.

Ishara's account reinforces this interpretation:

> "*I truly believe that it takes self-strength to overcome a challenge. I succeeded in the business idea in the best way possible based on that self-confidence."* (Ishara)

This quote highlights resilience which is so significant. But this doesn't mean resilience is a personal quality. The findings were marked by financial constraints, institutional intricacy, and uncertainty over migration. Thus, the notion of resilience was not the individual's personal characteristic alone, but rather a reaction to the structural conditions. This poses an important theory tension. Entrepreneurship is more often seen as empowering because it affords a sense of autonomy and flexibility, but the results indicate empowerment can also be gained as a result of dealing with significant constraints. Freedom, in the form of independence, thus seems less to have been a state of freedom, and more to have been the ability to function in difficult conditions.

4.7.2 Experiences of Discrimination or Exclusion

Participants rarely described direct discrimination. However, their accounts reveal more subtle forms of exclusion associated with trust, legitimacy, migration status, and perceptions of belonging. These experiences suggest that inclusion within entrepreneurial ecosystems was often conditional rather than automatic.

Lakshmi explained:

> "*Yes, language and cultural differences did create some challenges when starting the business. For example, many realtors did not respond positively to our inquiries when*

> *we communicated in English. It sometimes felt like there might have been a lack of trust toward foreigners, which made it harder to find suitable commercial spaces."* (Lakshmi)

The importance of this quotation lies in what is absent as much as what is present. Lakshmi does not describe explicit discrimination. Instead, she refers to reduced responsiveness and uncertainty regarding trust. This suggests that exclusion may operate through subtle mechanisms that are difficult to identify and challenge directly. Access to opportunities can be limited not through formal barriers but through weaker trust relationships and lower levels of institutional confidence. Theoretically, this indicates that belonging is negotiated through everyday interactions rather than solely through formal inclusion policies.

Ayesha's experience reveals a similar pattern:

> "*Whenever I tried to collaborate with other organisations or with Växjö Kommun, they often asked about my residence status—whether I was Swedish or an immigrant and whether I would stay in the country long-term."* (Ayesha)

Unlike Lakshmi, whose experience centred on trust, Ayesha's account highlights perceived temporariness. Her entrepreneurial legitimacy was evaluated not only in terms of business competence but also in terms of migration status and future intentions. This suggests that migrant entrepreneurs may be positioned as uncertain partners because their long-term presence is questioned. The issue therefore extends beyond entrepreneurship itself and reflects broader assumptions about mobility, belonging, and permanence.

Ayesha further described her interaction with migration authorities:

> "*I applied for a business visa, and by that time I had already completed SFI (Swedish for Immigrants), including the SFI D course. However, they still said that my Swedish language skills were not sufficient to run the business and that my business idea was not realistic."* (Ayesha)

This quote is an example of other forms of institutionalized exclusion. Ayesha strived and progressed, but was still measured by her institutions for her competency. It's okay if they

reject you, but you are not proved if you are not accepted. They may have to prove their language proficiency, drive and entrepreneurial ability several times before being perceived as successful entrepreneurs. This leads to a skewed entrepreneurial environment, with acceptance depending on passing several layers of screening.

This means, therefore, that the process of 'exclusion' is complex. Opportunities and recognition are affected by a number of factors: Trust, Language, Migration status and institutional assessment. While not always illegal, they were usually expected to demonstrate extra skills, dedication and leadership. It is noteworthy that the international women entrepreneurs from South Asia are not only asserting their voice in the opportunities, but also in the social and institutional framework.

The results indicate that the concepts of feeling included, of feeling empowered and of feeling a part of oneself are intertwined. Entrepreneurship was a factor in developing confidence, independence and professional legitimacy. Meanwhile, such accomplishments came with conditions, and were always up for grabs. One important result is that entrepreneurial identity was not a pre-given, but was negotiated with the institutions, markets and social actors with which they engaged. Entrepreneurship, on the other hand, was seen as a means of personal development and even a means to make one feel legitimate and belong to the Swedish society.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings in relation to the study aim and research questions. The aim is to understand how South Asian women international students experience the transition from higher education into entrepreneurship in Sweden, with particular attention to motivations, institutional and labour-market challenges, social networks and gendered experiences, while also examining how migration status, institutional conditions and social embeddedness interact in shaping these experiences. The discussion therefore follows the same focus established in Chapter 1 and presented empirically in Chapter 4. Institutional infrastructure is used to interpret formal rules, labour-market conditions and institutional navigation; mixed embeddedness is used to examine networks, resources and opportunity structures; and the feminist intersectional lens is used to interpret how gender interacts with migration, family, culture and institutional positioning.

5.2 Entrepreneurial Motivations and Labour Market Adaptation

The first research question explored the motives affecting South Asian women international students' decision to start their own business during their transition from higher education into entrepreneurship in Sweden. The accounts suggest that the motivations to become an entrepreneur were complex, changing and contextually and subjectively influenced. Experiences of the participants did not neatly fall into one category or the other, opportunity- or necessity-based entrepreneurship, but into a space shaped and characterised by four processes: labour market marginalisation, uncertainty in the institutions, entrepreneurial ambition, and social embedding.

The findings of the research are that labour market barriers are one of the important factors that affects entrepreneurship transition. The participants also often shared their experiences of struggles to find a stable professional position with the Swedish university qualifications. Some of the issues were that individuals were not experienced in the Swedish workforce and

their professional networks were relatively narrow, as well as language demand and doubts about temporary residence permits. The results are in line with previous studies indicating that the process of migrant entrepreneurship often occurs in contexts of unequal labour market integration and limited institutional access (Barth and Zalkat, 2020; Kerimo, 2023).

The findings are especially relevant to the Swedish context as the country is considered to be a global leader in equality, innovation and inclusive labour market policies. The participants' experiences, however, indicate that formal equality does not necessarily lead to similar labour market outcomes for migrant graduates. This is also highlighted by OECD (2023) who note that the employment gap between the Swedish-born and foreign-born population has not closed despite institutional measures undertaken to include the foreign-born.

Nevertheless, entrepreneurship wasn't just an act of exclusion. Participants also recognised entrepreneurial opportunities related to cultural knowledge, transnational experiences, needs of migrant communities and personal interests. Entrepreneurship, therefore, can only be explained in terms of social and contextual processes and would not exist in economic motives alone (Steyaert, 2007). The results also support the mixed embeddedness view of Kloosterman (2010) that opportunity structures and resources influence the development of entrepreneurship. Participants' motivations were associated with some overlapping processes of adaptation, and opportunity recognition. As a result of labour market exclusion some of the participants were pushed towards self-employment, and the universities, community networks and cultural experiences all at the same time helped the participants get into an entrepreneurial mode.

The study thus calls into question the dichotomy between “necessity entrepreneurship” and “opportunity entrepreneurship.” Often, participants found they felt both feelings at the same time. Entrepreneurship was also described as one of the practical coping strategies to address institutional uncertainty and to provide personal aspirations, professional independence and long term settlement options. The findings corroborate the perspective of Adeel, Swail and McNaughton (2026) on a dynamic embeddedness and adaptation of migrant entrepreneurs (rather than static categories of entrepreneurs).

One other major finding in the area of entrepreneurship motivation was the role the university played. Universities not only became places for learning but also became entrepreneurial ecosystems which influenced entrepreneurial thinking and opportunity recognition. Some respondents described how courses and programmes in entrepreneurship, and peer contact, promoted entrepreneurial ideas. The results further support the view of Westhead and Solesvik (2016) that entrepreneurial education has a positive effect on entrepreneurial intention particularly for Women.

The results do, however, reveal some tensions between the discourse of entrepreneurial policy and entrepreneurial 'reality'. Participants encountered significant hurdles after graduation when accessing the labour market, migration and navigating the institutions, while universities had a positive attitude towards innovation and entrepreneurship. This aligns with broader critiques of the literature on entrepreneurship, which can instil entrepreneurial values and attitudes without giving much focus to structural inequities that affect migrants' entrepreneurship.

Self-determination and independence were another entrepreneurial motive that emerged. The flexible, autonomous and self-regulated nature of entrepreneurship was frequently referred to. These findings are consistent with the literature on feminist entrepreneurship which suggests that entrepreneurship may create opportunities for women to be empowered and confirmed in their identity in the absence of institutional and social inequalities. Concurrently, entrepreneurial intent was still strongly related to migration status. The temporary legal status of the participants had an impact on their understanding of security, a sense of belonging and plans for the future. Entrepreneurship was thus not only a means of economic involvement, but also a means of negotiating settlement and stability in Sweden. The results reveal that entrepreneurial intentions of South Asian women international students were entrenched in the context of the labour market, migration systems, institutional environments and social aspirations. Entrepreneurship, therefore, was an intersectionality of adaptation, agency and identity negotiation.

5.3 Institutional Infrastructure and Entrepreneurial Challenges

The second research question was related to the difficulties encountered by the respondents while adjusting to and becoming entrepreneurs in Sweden as foreigners. The findings strongly suggest the importance of institutional infrastructure, including institutional accessibility, the structure of the labour market, taxation policies, migration institutions and bureaucratic procedures, for entrepreneurial experiences.

The institutional infrastructure theory holds that the formal and informal institutional constraints on economic participation are important determinants of entrepreneurship (North, 1990; Welter, 2011). This is well supported by the results as entrepreneurship was viewed to be strongly anchored in institutional systems and regulatory environments throughout the study. One of the most important institutional influences that surfaced were the migration systems. Unclearness with regards to residence permits, transfer to post-study migration, and long-term settlement was also repeatedly mentioned. The temporary migration status led to an unstable situation with direct consequences on the entrepreneurial decision making and risk-taking behaviour.

These findings are consistent with those of Valdez and Richardson (2013) who argued that macro institutional aspects play an important role in the field of entrepreneurship. The entry of entrepreneurship was not done from stable institutional sources, but rather from the unstable and precarious migrations. They were not moving into entrepreneurship as a result of institutional stability, but rather from temporary and precarious migration routes. Entrepreneurship thus emerged in a context that was influenced by legal status and migration governance. Labour market barriers were also very significant for entrepreneurial experiences. Many of the participants reported their exclusion from professional employment opportunities, although they had educational qualifications from Sweden. The findings are consistent with the work of Barth and Zalkat (2020) who show that migrant entrepreneurs are often afflicted with the “liability of newness”, characterized by their lack of familiarity with local systems, the lack of trust in institutional structures and limited integration into the labour market.

It is also important to note that the results show that there was no report of labour market barriers as blatant discrimination. Environmental factors like institutional unfamiliarity, small networks, language and migration uncertainty, on the other hand, were more commonly linked to challenges. This difference is analytically significant since it highlights the importance of an understanding of inequality that goes beyond a simple binary logic. Administrative bureaucracy and navigating the institutions were other barriers. Frequently recurring issues were the challenges of understanding the tax administration, accounting, and the process of registering businesses as well as interactions with Swedish authorities. The outcomes of this study support the statement of Sendra-Pons, Comeig and Mas-Tur (2022) who assert that institutional systems can facilitate and normalize entrepreneurship and can also generate inequalities in access to entrepreneurship.

Within the institutional contexts experienced by participants, systems were described as that of transparency, structure and formalism, but also of a high degree of proceduralism. Many of the participants lacking an institutional culture background used informal guidance networks in an attempt to navigate in these systems. One of the salient points regarding financial access was also raised. There was restricted access to formal financial system and investment opportunities, with many participants making use of their own financial savings and family or informal financing. The results are consistent with Nosakhare and Yusoff's (2025) propositions that financial exclusion is often associated with the migration status, institutional trust and lack of local credit history of migrant entrepreneurs.

Participants described uneven familiarity with and access to the support available within their institutional contexts. Their accounts suggest that providing services and enabling entrepreneurs to navigate them are different tasks. This is an interpretation of reported experiences, rather than a national assessment of equality in Swedish entrepreneurship support. The concentration at Linnaeus University also limits the extent to which university-related patterns can be transferred to other settings.

Participants were also very flexible and resilient in the face of institutional challenges. Entrepreneurship, consequently, was a means to both economic engagement and to surmount institutional uncertainty and labour market marginalisation. The results lend strong support to the institutional infrastructure theory in that they demonstrate a high level of linkage between

the entrepreneurial opportunities and barriers and the migration systems, labour markets, financial availability and knowledge of institutions.

5.4 Mixed Embeddedness and Social Networks

The results clearly support mixed embeddedness theory since the importance of social relations, networks and embedded resources in determining entrepreneurial adaptation is evident. The mixed embeddedness theory on the process of entrepreneurship suggests that it is an interaction between institutional opportunity structures and socially embedded resources (Kloosterman, Van der Leun and Rath, 1999; Kloosterman, 2010). The course of their entrepreneurial lives, participants went to the universities, peer networks, migrant communities, family networks and transnational networks for support regularly.

Embeddedness was evident in universities and most prominently. The participants recognized that confidence in entrepreneurship, business ideas and networks of professionals were developed at the university.

The results are in line with the arguments of Trippl, Sinozic and Lawton Smith (2015) that universities may be entrepreneurial ecosystems that foster innovation and new business formation. So, the role of the universities was not only to educate but also to be a relation. Embedded support also became an important source of the migrant communities. Participants sought emotional support, practical advice, and customers and referrals from community networks. The results suggest that Granovetter's (1985) ideas on embeddedness in social networks are strong: that social networks have a significant influence on economic activity. The results also corroborate the findings of Korsgaard et al. (2022) who argue that entrepreneurship has to be interpreted relationally and in a process manner. Personal attributes were not the only thing that helped the entrepreneur to be successful; the socially embedded resources were also important.

It was an embeddedness that was dynamic. Participants' networks were regularly transformed as a result of their migration experiences, business development and institutional positioning. This pattern is consistent with Adeel, Swail and McNaughton's (2026) argument on the dynamic embeddedness of migrant entrepreneurs. The transnational embeddedness aspect is also reflected in the results. The participants made cultural knowledge, migration experiences

and transnational relations as entrepreneurial resources. Companies often catered to migrant populations or were found in niche industries related to migrants, like food services, consultancy, events and retail.

This result validates Wood and Cooke's (2023) thesis that migrant entrepreneurship is not just a national market phenomenon, but is taking place in transnational economic environments. This was not always the case though, as embeddedness was not always conducive. Some participants discussed the challenges of the independence of the entrepreneur and the expectations of the community, particularly the roles of caregivers and the culturally expected roles of women. Embeddedness thus served as a form of support and pressure.

Furthermore, the findings here support a discussion that Bisignano and El-Anis (2019) have recently investigated about mixed embeddedness in the context of informal and migrant entrepreneurship. Informally, participants also used informal advice in formal institutional settings in Sweden, and relied on community trust and relational support systems in formal institutional settings. The findings can be interpreted through mixed embeddedness, suggesting that entrepreneurship of the women international students from the South Asian countries was a result of the interplay of institutional context and the socially embedded resources.

5.5 Feminist Intersectionality and Identity Negotiation

Findings add to feminist intersectional understandings of immigrant women's entrepreneurship in revealing that gender was not always a discrete category of disadvantage. Instead, the social construction of gender was done through the interaction with migration status, family expectation, cultural norms, language, institutional systems, and entrepreneurial legitimacy. This is significant as feminist intersectionality is not just about whether or not women have been discriminated against directly, but rather the ways in which gendered expectations affect what is possible, legitimate, difficult, or risky for women in certain social positions (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Angela Martínez Dy and MacNeil, 2023).

One of the important results is that participants seldom talked about explicit gender discrimination in Swedish entrepreneurial spaces. This does not mean that gender was

irrelevant. But gender came in other, subtler, and more relational forms. Expectations around responsibility, respectability, family roles, mobility, confidence and acceptable forms of ambition formed the participants' entrepreneurial identities. In this way, gender was not simply an exclusion from business opportunities, but a constellation of social norms that shaped how the participants came across as entrepreneurs.

Gendered locations are significant especially for South Asian women international students as their entrepreneurial journeys were constructed through a series of gendered locations. They were not just entrepreneurs, but migrants, former students or current, daughters, wives, mothers, community members and women from culturally specific backgrounds. The identities were not standalone. Some family expectations might impact on the amount of time, risk and mobility that were deemed acceptable, and migration status might increase the pressure to demonstrate economic stability and respectability. Thus, becoming an entrepreneur was not only a career change, but also a process of gender negotiations.

The findings complicate an interpretation that would expect gender disadvantage to appear mainly as explicit discrimination. Participants more often discussed family responsibilities, cultural expectations, institutional unfamiliarity and residence uncertainty. This does not overturn feminist entrepreneurship theory: an intersectional reading already allows gender to operate through relationships and institutions (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Yeröz, 2019). The analytical tension concerns how gender became visible in these accounts, rather than whether the study disproves the framework. Nor can limited reporting establish that discrimination was absent.

The accounts also complicate explanations that portray migrant women entrepreneurs only through disadvantage. Not only were gendered expectations a constraint on participants, they were also negotiated and reworked. Entrepreneurship was an alternative path to claim independence, gain confidence and reposition themselves in the family and community. It is in keeping with Ahl's (2006) criticism of research that only portrays the role of women entrepreneurs as lacking or weak or at a disadvantage. The experiences of participants demonstrate that gendered agency can emerge out of constraint. In other words, entrepreneurship of women was not in one sense oppression and in another empowerment, but both oppression and empowerment at the same time – in one place and in one context.

These gendered negotiations were exacerbated by migration status. International students and non-EU migrants frequently faced uncertainty in the areas of residence permit, access to the labour market, and long-term settlement status. This had an impact on entrepreneurial identity unlike domestic women entrepreneurs. For these participants, entrepreneurship was not just about founding a business, but also about establishing a sense of stability, competence and future belonging in Sweden. This demonstrates the interaction between gender and migration. Being a woman was not the only factor that influenced the participants' credibility as entrepreneurs, but also the migrant women, who may have been viewed as having an uncertain long-term presence and institutional legitimacy.

This is the intersection of gender and migration that is the theoretical thrust of this study. When gender is examined by itself, the results might seem modest as participants did not often report explicit sexism. But, on a gender cross-cutting analysis, the underlying picture becomes more complex. The participants had a sense of entrepreneurship that involved overlapping expectations: being economic, institutional, cultural, professional, and personal. Expectations were established that lead to what amounted to conditional legitimacy. They might be considered as entrepreneurs, but this is only after showing high work ethic, tenacity, improved language skills, appreciation of institutions, and commitment.

The results also illuminate the negotiation of femininity in the terms of professionalism and respectability. Entrepreneurship was usually described as meaningful, responsible and socially valuable by the participants. This framing might be a form of strategic identity work. Participants could validate entrepreneurial ambition in a way that resonated with gendered expectations of caring and contributing in the community, while simultaneously making their businesses seem culturally significant and/or socially beneficial. By positioning their businesses as community-oriented, culturally valuable or socially impactful, participants could simultaneously validate entrepreneurial ambition, while making their businesses seem culturally valuable or socially beneficial. This doesn't take away their agency. Instead, it provides ways to imagine how agency is manifested in socially accessible gender norms. Through entrepreneurship, participants were able to be ambitious, and make that aspect of being ambitious a service, responsibility and contribution.

Family and community expectations also influenced entrepreneurial legitimacy and everyday business experience. For some participants, family or community networks provided encouragement, practical assistance and social support. At the same time, the findings suggest that these relationships could carry expectations concerning care, stability and socially acceptable forms of work. This pattern is consistent with the idea that embeddedness can involve both enabling and constraining relationships. Rather than claiming to extend mixed embeddedness theory itself, the findings provide contextualised empirical support for examining networks as socially situated relationships whose effects can vary according to gendered and cultural expectations (Kloosterman, 2010; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Yeröz, 2019).

The findings also showed that participants' identities were transformed as a result of entrepreneurship. Some of the participants reported enhanced confidence, independence and self-recognition. This is essential as feminist intersectionality must not only take in constraint, but transformation as well. Entrepreneurship was where women could find a space to renegotiate their roles – from students, dependants, migrants or prospective job seekers to business owners, professionals or community actors. This transformation was especially salient as it happened in a new country where participants were also seeking to connect with the nation they had just migrated to.

This study reveals that the concept of gender is used indirectly, relationally and intersectionally. While direct gender discrimination was less prominent, family roles, cultural norms, mobility, legitimacy, and self-presentation and confidence reflected gendered expectations to shape entrepreneurial experiences. The most potent theoretical argument is thus that gender should not be assumed to be a permanent demographic group or be confused with the term “women”. Gender is a socially constructed system of expectations that is interwoven in migration, culture and institutions. This lens brings to the fore the participants' experiences of becoming entrepreneurs both as a pathway to empowerment and as a continuation of gendered and migrant positioning.

5.6 Theoretical Discussion

The results of the study provide contextualised empirical insights into the experience of entrepreneurship for South Asian women international students in Sweden and at the same time highlight the importance of implementing institutional infrastructure, mixed embeddedness and feminist intersectionality simultaneously. The three theories were not ones that stood in isolation as explanatory views, but rather were integrated and interdependent, capturing entrepreneurship as a process that was influenced at the same time by structural arrangements, social relationships and lived experiences. Therefore, the findings help to confirm the overall argument of this study, that entrepreneurship cannot be described as purely an individual economic activity but as a socially situated phenomenon, which is embedded in institutional and relational contexts (Welter, 2011; Steyaert, 2007).

The institutional infrastructure perspective was especially useful for interpreting the structural conditions surrounding participants' entrepreneurial pathways. Consistent with institutional research, participants' experiences were shaped by migration and residence arrangements, labour-market conditions, administrative processes and the availability of formal support systems (North, 1990; Scott, 2014). In the context examined in this study, institutional difficulty was often described through complexity, unfamiliarity and uncertainty rather than only through direct exclusion. Participants referred to visa insecurity, administrative requirements, language and the need to understand Swedish business procedures. The findings therefore illustrate the relevance of institutional infrastructure for understanding how entrepreneurs with an international-student background experience and navigate formal systems, without claiming that these forms of institutional difficulty are unique to this study.

Participants' accounts complicate any assumption that the availability of formal support guarantees accessible entrepreneurial opportunities. Some described useful advice and connections alongside difficulties understanding procedures, meeting language demands or planning under residence uncertainty. This distinction between provision and experienced access is consistent with institutional approaches to opportunity and legitimacy (Valdez and Richardson, 2013). However, these accounts do not establish a uniform feature of the Swedish institutional environment, particularly given the concentration of eight participants at Linnaeus University.

The results also support mixed embeddedness theory, as they highlight the significance of social networks and how embeddedness is a dynamic phenomenon. As in Kloosterman and Van der Leun and Rath (1999), entrepreneurial adaptation was strongly associated with the participants' connections to the universities, the migrant communities, a migrant peer network, family relations and transnational contacts. These networks provided Granovetter (1985) and others with a collection of resources, emotional support, legitimacy and market opportunities: elements of the argument that economic action is strongly social.

The findings also provide further empirical support for a dynamic understanding of mixed embeddedness. Participants' networks were not fixed resources that remained unchanged throughout the entrepreneurial process. University contacts, migrant communities, family relationships, peer groups and professional connections developed and changed as participants' migration circumstances, business activities and local experience changed. This pattern is consistent with recent calls for multi-layered and dynamic approaches to migrant entrepreneurial embeddedness (Adeel, Swail and McNaughton, 2026). In this study, mixed embeddedness is therefore used to show how social relationships and opportunity structures were continually negotiated, rather than to claim that the study expands the boundaries of the theory itself.

Furthermore, the results indicate that embeddedness can be both a facilitator and a constraint to entrepreneurship. Family expectations/culture and gendered responsibilities were also pointed to as additional pressures and were often mentioned in relation to a lack of support in social networks. This finding builds on the nuanced literature on mixed embeddedness, which indicates that social embeddedness can be negative, too. Networks can be opportunities and resources, but also come with constraints, and can present conflicts between entrepreneurial ambition and community expectations. This can be interpreted as an indication to the need for an alternative critical approach that takes into account the 'mixedness' of social relationships within entrepreneurial processes.

One central theme is the relative salience of uncertainty regarding gender and migration in the narratives. Feminist entrepreneurship scholarship focuses on gendered power and unequal legitimacy (Ahl and Marlow, 2012) but participants did not report any explicit gender discrimination in entrepreneurial contexts. Language and institutional navigation, and

residence uncertainty were more central in their stories, whereas gender was more indirectly referred to in the context of family responsibilities and cultural expectations and identity. This relates to the salience of reported experiences, and the study did not measure or rank the independent effects of gender and migration status.

This pattern opens up an intersectional reading, but also confines the possible conclusions that can be drawn from it. The existing entrepreneurial roles of participants might have led to accounts of difficulty, while some of the earlier experiences might have been less visible due to retrospective narration. The study is unable to identify the reasons behind the lack of explicit reporting, as this may be due to indirect processes, positive hindsight, a reluctance to call experiences of discrimination by their name, or other factors. Absence from these accounts should not be mistaken for absence from entrepreneurial life, as covered in Sections 3.6 and 6.5. The framework is still useful as a sensitising perspective, not as a theory substantiated by all accounts..

The findings also complicate purely deficit-based representations of migrant women entrepreneurs. Participants did not describe themselves only through exclusion or discrimination; many also emphasised independence, confidence, learning and personal development. This reinforces feminist critiques of approaches that position women entrepreneurs mainly through disadvantage while overlooking agency and situated forms of action (Ahl, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012). The study therefore contributes contextualised empirical evidence showing that constraint and agency can coexist in the entrepreneurial experiences of South Asian women with international-student backgrounds in Sweden.

The institutional framework, embeddedness and feminist intersectionality are interrelated and complementary and offer a more holistic understanding of entrepreneurship than can be achieved from any one of them. Institutional infrastructure refers to processes that affect entrepreneurial opportunities through migration systems, the labour market structure, institutional arrangements. Mixed embeddedness can be helpful to understand how entrepreneurs leverage social resources in these configurations to manoeuvre around them. An approach to thinking about these institutional and relational contexts, sensitive to social positioning, and to migration experiences, is feminist intersectionality. The results, in turn, validate a multi-level approach to entrepreneurship that transcends the individual level and

embraces entrepreneurship as a phenomenon that is contextually situated, socially embedded and identity-based.

Finally, this study adds to the entrepreneurship literature, because it shows that the relationship between migration status, institutional environment, social networks and identity processes is not independent from each other, but rather interrelated. Entrepreneurship was not just a discovery of opportunity, a response to economic necessity nor a result of gender alone, but rather the result of a continuous negotiation among institutional constraints, relational resources and changing identities. This illustrates the importance of having interdisciplinary theories that are capable of explaining the complexities of entrepreneurial experiences in today's migration world.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Findings

This study aimed to understand how South Asian women international students experience the transition from higher education into entrepreneurship in Sweden, with particular attention to their motivations, institutional and labour-market challenges, social networks and gendered experiences, and to how migration status, institutional conditions and social embeddedness interact in shaping these experiences. The conclusion therefore answers the same three areas set out in the research questions rather than introducing a broader purpose. Overall, the findings show that participants' entrepreneurial journeys were shaped by a combination of opportunity, labour-market conditions, migration and residence uncertainty, institutional navigation, social relationships and gendered social expectations.

In relation to the first research question, entrepreneurial motivation was neither purely opportunity-driven nor purely necessity-driven. Participants recognised market gaps, wanted greater independence and drew on personal, educational, cultural and professional experience. At the same time, difficulties in obtaining suitable employment, limited local work experience, language requirements, restricted professional networks and uncertainty about future residence influenced the attractiveness of entrepreneurship. The findings therefore show that motivation developed through an interaction between personal ambition, recognised opportunity and the conditions participants encountered in Sweden.

In relation to the second research question, participants encountered several connected challenges during the transition into entrepreneurship. These included learning Swedish business and taxation procedures, understanding administrative and residence requirements, developing local professional networks, building trust, adapting to Swedish communication and business practices, and managing language demands. Gender was less visible as explicit discrimination than expected. Instead, it appeared more indirectly through family responsibilities, cultural expectations, mobility, respectability and the negotiation of independence and entrepreneurial identity.

Regarding the third research question, the institutional structures in Sweden were perceived as supportive and challenging. While universities, municipalities, advisory organisations and public information were helpful, it was not sufficient to navigate unfamiliar rules, administrative categories, taxation systems and residence requirements. Social embeddedness was also key. Information, encouragement, customers and legitimacy were provided by family, peers, migrant communities, university contacts, professional networks and transnational relationships, but some social relationships also included expectations that had to be negotiated.

Combined, the results address the rephrased objective and demonstrate how the process of higher education to entrepreneurship was created as a result of individual motivation and a broader social and institutional environment. Planning and security were impacted by migration status; institutional conditions impacted access and navigation; social networks provided resources and support; labour-market experiences influenced career choices; and gendered expectations shaped some participants' responsibilities and identities. Entrepreneurship also was included in the process of negotiating identity as participants talked about growing confidence, independence, responsibility and recognition as entrepreneurs.

The final part of the conclusion should not therefore be taken to mean that the experience of all South Asian women international students in Sweden is the same. It is based on the experiences of those who took part in this study. In this context, the main finding is that their entrepreneurial paths are not solely driven by aspirations. They are more commonly seen as a product of the interplay of motivations, labor market conditions, migration and residence situations, institutional navigation, social embeddedness, and gendered expectations and identity development. This conclusion is directly related to the aim of the study, research questions and empirical findings and discussion.

6.2 Recommendations to Policymakers

The results indicate several recommendations for the policy makers, universities and entrepreneurship support organizations in Sweden. Pathways towards entrepreneurship after graduation should be more clearly defined for international graduates. The instability caused by temporary residence permits and uncertainty regarding long-term settlement had an impact on business planning. More transparent and entrepreneur-friendly visa options would facilitate the international student to contribute to Sweden through entrepreneurship. Second, there is a need to improve the institutional support that is available for migrant entrepreneurs. The tax, business registration, migration policies and administrative procedures were often a challenge for the participants. By reducing institutional uncertainty, multilingual support, step-by-step business guidance and culturally aware advisory services would be helpful.

These recommendations arise from the difficulties described by participants and should be considered proposals for further assessment, rather than evidence that a particular reform will be effective. Because eight participants were connected to Linnaeus University, university-related recommendations especially require examination in other institutional settings before wider application.

Third, universities should enhance the support to transition from study to entrepreneurship. While entrepreneurial thinking was encouraged in university, participants still faced difficulties after they had graduated from university and had been transferred to business practice. This should include guidance on migration along with business mentoring, networking and legal support and connections with local businesses and the municipality. Fourth, policy makers should acknowledge the diversity of migrant women entrepreneurs. The intersectionality of gender norms, family responsibilities, migration status, language, cultural background and access to networks should be taken into account in the design of support programmes. This is especially significant for South Asian women international students, who have experienced entrepreneurial realities that are influenced by cultural expectations and institutional barriers.

6.3 Theoretical Findings

The theoretical value of the study is best understood as contextualised empirical support rather than as the creation of new theoretical concepts. First, the findings illustrate the relevance of institutional infrastructure for understanding how institutional complexity, unfamiliarity and unequal access to institutional knowledge shape the entrepreneurial experiences of international graduates. Participants often had to learn how Swedish administrative, migration and business systems worked even where formal support structures were available. The study therefore highlights how institutional navigability is experienced within this particular context, while remaining consistent with established institutional arguments concerning rules, legitimacy and access to resources (North, 1990; Scott, 2014; Welter, 2011).

Second, the findings provide further empirical support for a dynamic understanding of mixed embeddedness by showing how participants drew on university contacts, migrant networks, family support, peer groups and transnational relationships at different stages of their entrepreneurial experiences. These networks provided information, legitimacy and emotional or practical support, but they could also be connected to expectations and obligations. Rather than claiming to expand mixed embeddedness theory, the study demonstrates how its relational and structural dimensions are visible among South Asian women with international-student backgrounds in Sweden and how embeddedness can be both enabling and constraining (Granovetter, 1985; Kloosterman, 2010).

Third, the findings contribute contextualised empirical insights to feminist intersectional entrepreneurship research. Explicit gender discrimination was not dominant in most participants' accounts; however, gender appeared more indirectly through family responsibilities, cultural expectations, mobility, respectability, confidence and the negotiation of entrepreneurial identity. These experiences interacted with migration and residence status, institutional uncertainty and access to networks. The contribution therefore lies not in proposing a new feminist intersectional theory, but in showing how established intersectional concerns can be examined together within the specific experiences of South Asian women who entered Sweden through higher education and later pursued entrepreneurship (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Yeröz, 2019).

The study contributes contextualised empirical knowledge concerning an under-researched group rather than claiming to discover previously unknown barriers or mechanisms. Its value lies in examining institutional uncertainty, social embeddedness, educational migration and gendered expectations together within one qualitative study. The findings reinforce existing research on migrant and women's entrepreneurship while demonstrating how these processes operate among South Asian women with international-student backgrounds in Sweden. This more cautious formulation recognises that the study's contribution is primarily contextual and integrative, and that broader theoretical claims would require further comparative research.

6.4 Entrepreneurial and Practical Implications of the Research

The results provide practical implications for policy makers, institutions of higher education, entrepreneurship support organisations and migrant entrepreneurs in Sweden. The participants spoke of applying transnational knowledge, multilingual skills, cross-cultural understanding and cross-border connections in their ventures. The following stories showcase resources that South Asian women who have international-student backgrounds might be able to contribute to the entrepreneurial and community environment in Sweden. The study does not quantify their overall economic contribution or prove that these experiences are common to all international graduates.

Design of entrepreneurship support systems is one of the practical implications. The findings indicate that, in addition to the financing and business opportunities, the capacity of the entrepreneurs to manoeuvre institutional systems also influenced their entrepreneurial success. Some of the challenges faced by many participants were migration regulations, taxes, businesses registration and administrative requirements. Therefore, support for entrepreneurship should go beyond the business development concept and encompass institutional support. It would be beneficial to provide accessible, multilingual and culturally responsive support services to decrease the obstacles that international graduates and migrant entrepreneur's encounter.

The results also highlight the importance of mentoring and/or network building initiatives. Participants used peer groups, migrant communities, university contacts and informal

networks to get information, customers, emotional support and entrepreneurial confidence. This means that the focus of entrepreneurship ecosystems should be more on formalized mentorship programs to connect young migrant entrepreneurs with existing entrepreneurs and institutions. These can be useful in improving institutional literacy, fostering entrepreneurial networks and in the longer term, supporting the sustainability of entrepreneurs.

The study also highlights the role of the universities as entrepreneurial intermediaries. Universities provided more than education and helped with entrepreneurial aspirations, opportunity identification, building confidence and networking. However, there was a tendency for gaps between entrepreneurial learning and entrepreneurial experience after graduation. Higher education institutions need to expand their support packages to facilitate students to become entrepreneurs. This can encompass business incubation schemes, advising on migration, entrepreneurship mentoring, and better cooperation with municipalities and entrepreneurship support organisations at a regional level.

The results are important as they contradict the notion that entrepreneurship policies can be developed in a universal manner. The experiences of the participants differed with regard to migration routes, family situation, institutional knowledge, language proficiency and support networks. Therefore, support for entrepreneurship needs to be taken in a more intersectoral approach, recognizing the diversity of migrant women entrepreneurs. Policies that do not take into account the intersection of gender, migration status, educational background and social embeddedness can also be vulnerable to capturing the nuances of how barriers and opportunities to international graduate entrepreneurs is experienced.

The study further recommends that entrepreneurship can be considered an economic and social process. Entrepreneurs frequently mentioned that entrepreneurship gives them confidence, independence, growth and social involvement. Entrepreneurship thus plays a role in both identity formation, integration and belonging, as well as in new business creation. These wider outcomes should be recognised in support activities and entrepreneurial involvement in wider-inclusion and integration activities should be included. The findings reveal that individual skill is important but also important is the environment to be accessible,

supportive and to have a pro-entrepreneurial policy towards migrant women for their success as entrepreneurs.

6.5 Methodological Reflection

The present study employed a qualitative approach interpretivist method; this method was well suited to the problem of the South Asian women international students in the entrepreneurial stories in Sweden. The qualitative approach enabled consideration of the depth of understanding which might not have been possible through quantitative approaches given the context of meanings, motivations, identity formation, migration experiences and navigations of institutions. Entrepreneurship was not just an economic metric, but a socially situated and lived experience, rooted in various interacting factors.

Semi-structured interviews were especially useful, as it enabled the participants to express their experiences as entrepreneurs in their own words and provided some level of focus to the research questions. The flexible interview format enabled the participants to reflect on intricate connections between migration, work experiences in the labour market, institutional obstacles, social networks, gender expectations, and entrepreneurship. The entrepreneurial journey is complex and several experiences were mentioned in parallel, which was especially relevant for this flexibility.

A quality of the research process was the openness voiced by the participants in their interviews. Many of the participants were happy to share their experiences in relation to the migration uncertainty and/or the labour market exclusion, family expectations, entrepreneurial aspirations, and the transformation of identity. The interviewees were recruited from different parts of Sweden with the help of online interviewing, which facilitated and reduced the geographical barriers to participation. As a result, the study was able to reflect on a more diverse number of settings and institutional settings than may have been achieved.

Meanwhile, there were some methodological obstacles that arose. Sometimes discussions around the topics of migration insecurity, financial insecurity and institutional challenges were sensitive. This led to the need for trust and confidentiality to be established and maintained as part of the interview process. At times, participants were hesitant to talk about

experiences that could be seen as a criticism of institutional systems or migration processes. Creating rapport and using follow-up questions was very important to ensure that participants reflect deeply, and to provide comfort.

A central methodological reflection concerns the role of theory in the analytical process. Institutional infrastructure, mixed embeddedness and feminist intersectionality influenced the study from the design stage by sensitising the researchers to formal and informal institutions, networks and resources, migration status, gendered expectations and identity. Their role became more explicit during analysis, when the researchers moved iteratively between emerging empirical patterns and theoretical concepts. This did not mean that the theories dictated the findings. Initial codes were kept close to participants' accounts, after which theory was used to compare, contextualise and refine interpretations. The process was therefore abductive: empirical material informed the use of theory, while theory helped the researchers ask deeper questions of the empirical material. This was particularly important in relation to gender and inequality. Although feminist intersectionality guided attention toward gendered relations, the data did not strongly support a simple account of direct gender discrimination. The analysis consequently interpreted gender more carefully through family responsibilities, cultural expectations, identity negotiation, migration status and institutional positioning.

Overall, the methodological and analytical approach allowed the study to examine gender without assuming in advance that every entrepreneurial experience would be primarily explained by gender. The findings instead suggest a more complex relationship among migration status, institutional uncertainty, educational mobility, family expectations and gendered social positioning. In this respect, the study contributes contextualised empirical insights to feminist entrepreneurship research by illustrating the value of examining gender together with other social and institutional positions, rather than treating women entrepreneurs as a homogeneous category (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Yeröz, 2019).

Thematic analysis was particularly useful because it supported both data-led coding and theoretically informed interpretation. Coding and re-coding were iterative, with the researchers returning repeatedly to transcripts, codes, provisional themes and theoretical concepts. Themes concerning entrepreneurial motivations, institutional experiences, social

embeddedness, identity transformation, migration uncertainty and gendered expectations were not simply produced by applying the framework to the transcripts. They developed through comparison across participants and were subsequently refined through dialogue with institutional infrastructure, mixed embeddedness and feminist intersectionality. This approach harmonised the methodology with the discussion chapter, where theory is used more explicitly to explain the significance of the empirical patterns while the participants' accounts remain the evidential foundation of the analysis.

Various approaches were adopted to strengthen the trustworthiness and methodological rigour of the research, such as multiple readings of the transcripts, systematic coding, reflexive interpretation and careful anonymisation of participants. The analyses were also transparent, which helped to improve the reliability and validity of the findings (Janis, 2022; Ahmed, 2024).

The institutional concentration is a substantive limit on interpretation: eight of the twelve participants were connected to Linnaeus University. Some reported experiences may therefore reflect that university and the networks through which recruitment occurred. The accounts cannot represent all Swedish universities or all migrant entrepreneurs, and virtual interviewing did not eliminate this limitation. The study offers contextualised analytical insights into South Asian women's entrepreneurial transitions rather than a national evaluation of institutional performance.

Retrospective accounts introduce a further limitation. Participants spoke after entering entrepreneurship, and later achievements may have influenced how they remembered difficulties, described agency and interpreted gendered experiences. People who never started a venture or whose ventures did not continue were not represented as a comparison group. Consequently, positive hindsight and selection may partly explain the emphasis on adaptation and the limited reporting of explicit discrimination. Neither influence was independently established, but both limit the inference that can be drawn: explicit discrimination was not prominent in these accounts, which is not evidence that it was absent. Prospective interviews across different stages, institutions and entrepreneurial outcomes would help examine this issue.

The methodology enabled an in-depth analytical study of the intersections between migration, gender and education and institutional contexts from which the experience of

entrepreneurship was studied. This methodological technique was found to be of special help in identifying inequalities, adaptations, agency and negotiation of identity that may not have been captured in more positivist or quantitatively oriented research design.

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Appendix 1

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Contextual note: the interview guide reproduced below includes broader language about entrepreneurial interest and possible interview arrangements. It is retained as the interview instrument, rather than rewritten retrospectively to imply different questions were administered. The completed study's aim and analytical scope are stated in Sections 1.3 and 1.5: the transition into entrepreneurship among the twelve South Asian women participants with international-student backgrounds in Sweden.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study, which is part of a Masters project. The aim of this study is to gain an understanding of the motivations, experiences and lived challenges of South Asian women international students with an interest in, or involvement with, entrepreneurship in Sweden. The purpose of the study is to gain an insight into the motivations of these women in starting entrepreneurial projects and their potential difficulties in the entrepreneurial landscape of Sweden.

During the participation you will be invited to participate in an interview of about 30 minutes. The interview can take place either online or face-to-face. The interview will be about your experiences, your motivation, your perceptions and your challenges to entrepreneurship as a South Asian woman international student in Sweden. You are free to say no to any question and to terminate the interview at any time without giving any reason for your actions, whilst there is no obligation on your part to participate.

The interview can be audio-recorded with your permission, so that the information can be transcribed and analysed accurately. The recording and interview transcript will be both confidential and used only for this research. Personally identifiable information will be removed or anonymized whenever it is transcribed and analyzed. Your name and other identifying information will not be part of the final thesis or any academic publications related to it.

Part 1: Introduction

Here are the key themes that the interview will cover, and some examples of questions that you may find yourself addressing in relation to your lived experiences and challenges as a South Asian woman international student in Sweden, as well as your motivation and entrepreneurial experiences.

Part 2: Background Context

1. Can you briefly describe your background, including your country of origin, your field of study in Sweden, and the type of business you started?

2. What made you decide to stay in Sweden after completing your studies?

Part 3: Entrepreneurial Motivation

3. At what point did you begin thinking about starting a business?
4. What motivated you to choose entrepreneurship instead of employment?
5. Did you face any barriers in the labour market that influenced your decision?
6. Would you describe your motivation as more opportunity-driven, necessity-driven, or a combination of both? Please explain.
7. How did your experience as an international student shape your entrepreneurial intentions?
8. Did your university environment (courses, incubators, networks, peers) influence your decision? In what way?

Part 4: Transition Experience

9. Can you describe your transition from being a student to becoming an entrepreneur? What was that period like for you?
10. What were the biggest practical challenges you faced (e.g., funding, legal procedures, visa regulations, taxation)?
11. Did language or cultural differences create difficulties in starting your business?
12. Did you experience any gender-related challenges in the business environment?

13. Did you experience any challenges specifically linked to being an immigrant?
14. How did you overcome or navigate these challenges?
15. What kinds of support (formal or informal) were most important during this transition?

Part 5: Reflection on Experience

16. How has becoming an entrepreneur changed your personal or professional identity?
17. Looking back, how would you describe your overall entrepreneurial journey in Sweden?
18. What advice would you give to other international Women students considering entrepreneurship?