

# **‘Let’s play together for entrepreneurship!’ Engaging actors in academic capitalism within the policy discourse on entrepreneurship**

Päivi Siivonen, Hanna Laalo, and Michael Tomlinson

## **Abstract**

*Since the early 2000s, the promotion of entrepreneurship in higher education (HE) has become a central aim of educational policy in Europe. We apply a critical discourse approach to examine entrepreneurship HE policy discourse in the framework of academic capitalism. Using Finland as a case example, we investigate how academic capitalism materializes in and through the entrepreneurship discourse in a Nordic HE system and how social actors in higher education institutions (HEIs) are persuaded and engaged in entrepreneurship discourse, and within it, in academic capitalism. We analyze recent guidelines for HEIs produced by the Federation of Finnish Enterprises and university stakeholders. We show how the entrepreneurship policy discourse in HE intertwines with academic capitalism in multiple ways. The whole HEI community across disciplines is harnessed for the creation of an entrepreneurial ecosystem to enhance the innovation, creation, and renewal of businesses in order to create economic value for HEIs and businesses to secure national competitiveness. As business actors participate in generating the policy discourse, they also powerfully contribute to redefining the purpose of HE according to business logics and values. This will strengthen the marketization of a Nordic system that has so far followed social equality as its core principle.*

*Keywords: higher education; academic capitalism; entrepreneurship (education); entrepreneurial ecosystem; critical discourse approach*

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## **Introduction**

Universities worldwide have been harnessed to secure the knowledge economy and to deliver outstanding economic, social, and cultural benefits and innovations, thereby ensuring a nation’s competitive edge (Tomlinson, 2017). To achieve this end, universities are encouraged to become increasingly entrepreneurial by

commercializing knowledge, providing entrepreneurship education, and encouraging venture creation and an entrepreneurial mentality for both students and faculty members. As a consequence, since the early 2000s, the promotion of entrepreneurship from basic to higher education (HE) has become a central aim of educational policy in Europe (European Commission, 2004).

In the university context, entrepreneurship is typically defined broadly to include social actors, namely researchers, teachers, and students, across all academic fields (Laalo et al., 2019). Such a broad definition refers to both external entrepreneurship—that is, venture creation, commercial innovations, and self-employment—and internal entrepreneurship entailing individual skills and competences that form an entrepreneurial mentality at work and in personal life (Laalo et al., 2023a). Entrepreneurship in HE is closely linked with employability, broadly defined as the ability to become and stay employed. This is seen as crucial in the changing and uncertain labour markets in order to secure employability (Laalo et al., 2019). In this study, we focus on both external and internal entrepreneurship in order to analyze the multiplicity of entrepreneurship policy discourse in the Nordic HE context.

While entrepreneurship discourse in transnational policy documents downplays national differences, the cultural context and circumstances affect how entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education is understood and applied in practice (e.g. Blenker et al., 2012). In this study, we use Finland as a case example. Analytically, Finland forms an interesting context in respect to how entrepreneurship is promoted and justified in its HE system. For decades in Finnish and other Nordic education systems, social equality has been an important core principle while market ideals and activities have been more peripheral (Lundahl et al., 2013). All universities in Finland are public and mainly state-funded. Education has also remained free for Finnish and European students. This is in contrast with its Anglo-Saxon counterparts, which have a longer history of privatization and marketization of education. For example, in England the marketization of HE has materialized in the form of £ 9,000 tuition fees and a strong emphasis on employability as an educational outcome (Frankham, 2017). Nevertheless, over the past decades, university reforms such as the New University Act in 2009 (University Act 558/2009) have strengthened the marketization of HE also in Finland (e.g. Aarrevaara et al., 2009; Kankaanpää, 2013; Kauppinen & Kaidesoja, 2014; Tapanila et al., 2020). Due to the tightening of state funding, universities have found it increasingly necessary to turn to the market to secure their operations, which has created space for an entrepreneurial paradigm within universities (Kankaanpää, 2013). The new legislation afforded universities independent legal status resulting in increased financial independence and responsibility, which has

also promoted the universities' capacity for strategic management (Aarrevaara et al., 2009).

In this article, we contribute to the critical literature on entrepreneurship HE policy discourse in the framework of academic capitalism, which has only rarely been applied in HE entrepreneurship policy research (However, for an exception, see Tomlinson et al., 2021). Overall, critical literature on HE entrepreneurship policy discourse has so far been scarce (However, for an exception, see Kankaanpää, 2013; Laalo et al., 2023a; Laalo et al., 2019). Academic capitalism refers to a wide array of market – for example spin-off companies – and market-like – such as university-industry partnerships and tuition fees – activities and institutions (Kauppinen, 2012; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). These are used by faculty and HEIs to secure external funding due to reduced public funding. In addition, the task of HEIs has become to produce knowledge that facilitates the economic competitiveness of businesses (Kauppinen & Kaidesoja, 2014; Rhoades, 2005). Thus, academic capitalism is not restricted to commercialization of research but also takes into consideration other aspects of universities and changing relations between universities and their social environment. In Finland, it has been argued that the most significant markers of academic capitalism are the establishment of technology transfer offices, Strategic Centres for Science, Technology and Innovation, and the implications of the aforementioned New University Act (Kauppinen, 2012; Kauppinen & Kaidesoja, 2014). Moreover, in 2017 tuition fees were introduced for students coming from outside the EU and the European Economic Area (EEA) (Plamper et al., 2022). It is therefore important to analyze these recent changes in the framework of academic capitalism as the theory allows for the analysis of the dynamic relations and boundaries between markets, state, and HE (Kauppinen & Kaidesoja, 2014).

We apply a critical discourse approach (Wodak & Meyer, 2016) to investigate how entrepreneurship as HE policy discourse is promoted as a goal and practice in a Nordic education system. We also pay attention to how business actors participate in generating the discourse via the policy text. We ask: *How does academic capitalism materialize in and through the entrepreneurship discourse? How are social actors persuaded and engaged in entrepreneurship discourse, and within it, in academic capitalism?* To answer these questions, we analyze recent guidelines for higher education institutions (HEIs) produced by the Federation of Finnish Enterprises and university stakeholders.

Based on our analysis we show how the entrepreneurship policy discourse in HE intertwines with academic capitalism in multiple ways. This is achieved through the formation of an entrepreneurial ecosystem which harnesses the HEIs towards creating economic value for HEIs and businesses. We argue that as

business actors participate in generating the policy discourse, they also powerfully contribute towards redefining the purpose of HE according to business logics and values. This serves to strengthen the marketization of a Nordic education system that has so far been characterized by principles of social equality.

In what follows we will first discuss academic capitalism and entrepreneurship, and second describe our case example highlighting the promotion of entrepreneurship policy discourse in Finland. Third, we will describe the text data and the critical discourse approach adopted in this study. Fourth, we will present our findings about the intertwining of entrepreneurship discourse and academic capitalism. Finally, we will conclude with some final remarks.

### **Academic capitalism and entrepreneurship**

Slaughter and Leslie (1997) have defined academic capitalism as business activities that aim to provide external finances in faculties and academic institutions. Knowledge has become a commodified product that can be financially profitable for universities (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Understood broadly, academic capitalism provides a multifaceted framework for understanding marketization, performativity, new managerialism, and calls for accountability, assessment, rankings, and self-commodification in the context of HEIs (Kauppinen, 2012; Kauppinen & Kaidesoja, 2014; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). In short, it provides a framework for understanding how universities are responding to new business logics and commercial imperatives rather than solely producing public goods and academic knowledge (Kauppinen, 2012; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

In the academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime, universities are coupled more tightly with the economy, which enables members of university communities to engage in new kinds of economic and entrepreneurial activities (Kauppinen & Kaidesoja, 2014). Students are positioned as market agents and consumers of education who expect economic returns from HE (Frankham, 2017; Siivonen & Filander, 2020). Laalo et al. (2019) identified four imperative standards that construct entrepreneurial university graduates in European level discourse: encouraging university students to business careers, fostering their identities as intrapreneurial employees, preparing their capability to solve problems entrepreneurially, and embracing entrepreneurship as a principle of life.

Moreover, academics are constantly pressured to prove their ability to attract external research funding and produce publications at a fast pace to consolidate university finances and institutions' national and international rankings (Slaughter

& Rhoades, 2004; Tapanila et al., 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2021; Ylijoki, 2003). They have been recast as entrepreneurial “academic capitalists” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) as their primary goal is to maximize additional revenue through external funding, patenting research, and related intellectual property, showcasing its economic and social impact and leveraging influence from industry in the forms of commercial partnerships.

However, academics and students also participate in co-producing and mediating policy discourse, thus linking HEIs to the new economy (Ylijoki, 2003). Market-driven policy, therefore, promotes new relational dynamics between different social actors and academic institutions in ways which accord to market logics: competitive accountability, customer leveraging, instrumental value orientations, and strong emphasis on private returns (Tomlinson et al., 2021). A significant theme in this policy context has been the imperative for HEIs to generate favourable outcomes for graduates when they enter the labour market, ensuring their future employability and adaptability to a global knowledge economy.

More recently, the focus has shifted towards a more systemic perspective to promote academic capitalism, namely entrepreneurial ecosystems (Alvedalen & Boschma, 2017; Eriksson et al., 2021). Entrepreneurial ecosystems are made of cultural, social, and material attributes that provide benefits and resources for entrepreneurs (Spigel, 2017). Furthermore, it is the relationships between those attributes that form the ecosystem. At universities, knowledge production in the form of research and education is defined as a key activity in providing material resources to an entrepreneurial ecosystem (Eriksson et al., 2021). A university-based entrepreneurial ecosystem is a community of all university actors, all of whom are connected to each other, and who contribute to and benefit from knowledge production at university (Eriksson et al., 2021). Siegel and Wright (2015) suggest that entrepreneurship in HEIs should be broadened to engage all university actors, professors, researchers, teachers, students, administrators, managers, and their stakeholders in entrepreneurial activities to enhance high-growth entrepreneurship.

Overall, academic capitalism blurs the boundaries between markets, states, and HE within the nation-states but also transnationally as universities intersect with a global economy in ways that do not always produce profit for local economies and regions alone (Kauppinen, 2012; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Thus, national HE systems cannot be understood exclusively in the nation-state framework but in relation to global politics, and how various global and regional pressures are affecting policy priorities of national HE systems (Kauppinen & Kaidesoja, 2014). Neoliberalism as a political rationality that determines how society should be organized (Olssen & Peters, 2005) and the globalizing knowledge-economy form

the broader structural context that provide openings and incentives to universities to move towards academic capitalism. International organizations such as the World Bank, OECD, EU, and state agencies such as ministries of education promote different forms of academic capitalism through their policies.

### **Promotion of entrepreneurship in higher education: The case of Finland**

The promotion of entrepreneurship in transnational HE policy (e.g. European Commission & OECD, 2012; Lackéus, 2015) is justified by appealing to societal impact, graduate employability, and the needs of the knowledge economy (Laalo et al., 2019). Among European countries, Finland has been in the forefront in promoting entrepreneurship in education and creating a culture and mindset for both external entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship (e.g. Laalo et al., 2019). Overall, entrepreneurship, and within it, innovation and dynamism, has been promoted in post-industrial Finnish society by political actors, educational institutions, public administrators, and key industrial players to attain economic growth and employment (Koskinen, 2022).

In Finnish HE, the increasing interest towards entrepreneurship has meant emphasis on economic and professional goals, which has given space to commercial activities and business cooperation (Laalo et al., 2023b). Governments have expected universities to offer entrepreneurship studies to students in all disciplines (Prime Minister's Office, 2007), to strengthen work-life relevant education (Prime Minister's Office, 2011), and to strengthen collaborations related to innovations with enterprises (Prime Minister's Office, 2015). Accordingly, the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland has guided HEIs to create an entrepreneurial culture and to get involved in entrepreneurial activities (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015). HEIs have been flexible and responsive to the change that has happened in a relatively short time. As we show in this paper, they have, for example, engaged in collaboration with business actors in promoting entrepreneurship in HEIs.

According to Laalo and Jauhiainen (2019), who analyzed documents from a Finnish university, Ministry of Education and Culture, and the Federation of Finnish Enterprises, entrepreneurship in Finnish HE appears as a solution to three "problems" which are shaped in the policy language and which reform seeks to address: old-fashioned structures, academics' reluctant attitudes towards entrepreneurship, and passive and overly theoretical pedagogy. The aim is to change universities to follow the logic of enterprises to produce economic value and to emphasize work-life relevant education.

Overall, to reach a vast audience, the policy discourse on entrepreneurship is broad and vague (Laalo et al., 2019). Also, the language changes depending on the context and circumstances. What is more, the discourse varies based on who is producing it. For example, ministries' documents reflect the views of various stakeholders and interest groups, while business actors may focus on their own interests in their outputs.

In Finnish HE, economic and business actors have also become active in the promotion of entrepreneurship—through their guidelines and recommendations they position themselves as educational experts in HE. In this article, we focus on the policy documents and guidelines on entrepreneurship for HEIs produced by the Federation of Finnish Enterprises together with university stakeholders. Our analysis demonstrates how business actors wish to promote entrepreneurship in HEIs, and within it academic capitalism. Overall, using Finland as a case example to analyze the promotion of entrepreneurship in HEIs in the framework of academic capitalism and different types of market and market-like activities, is interesting in the Nordic context where market ideas are spreading but applied in distinctive context-specific ways (Lundahl et al., 2013).

### **Analysis of policy documents**

Our analysis is based on three entrepreneurship policy documents that provide both a vision and practical guidelines for HEIs. The first document, *Yrittäjämönteinen korkeakoulutus 2025* (Entrepreneurial higher education 2025), was published in 2017 by the Federation of Finnish Enterprises (Doc1). This document is part of a larger Finland 2025 project, which aims at improving the circumstances of entrepreneurship and enterprises in Finland. The document provides a vision for entrepreneurial HE and recommendations for reforms to reach the proposed vision. Moreover, we analyzed *Recommendations for the promotion of entrepreneurship at higher education institutions* (2018) cooperatively produced by the Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (Arene), the Rectors' Council of Finnish Universities (UNIFI), and the Federation of Finnish Enterprises (Doc2a). The document also includes a gamebook: *Entrepreneurship gamebook for higher education institution. Recommendations for the promotion of entrepreneurship* (Doc2b). The gamebook is targeted at supporting HEIs in the practical implementation of the recommendations. It is grouped under the same three themes as the recommendations (Doc2a): 1. Entrepreneurial attitude and capacities, 2. New entrepreneurship, and 3. Evolving entrepreneurship. The

audience of the documents includes HEIs, enterprises, and different social actors, such as university managers, faculty members, students, entrepreneurs.

The aforementioned documents were chosen for analysis as they are the most recent Finnish policy documents that provide both entrepreneurship policy recommendations and practical guidelines on how to promote entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education in HEIs. Moreover, they are the only ones available that illustrate how business actors, represented by the Federation of Finnish Enterprises, have a key role in influencing the formation of a university-based entrepreneurial ecosystem and changing traditional academic culture and its values. Although the documents do not represent official government policy, they provide an intriguing lens to study HE entrepreneurship policy discourse produced co-operatively by social actors that represent the public knowledge regime (UNIFI, Arene) and the private knowledge regime (the Federation of Finnish Enterprises). While UNIFI and Arene, which represent HEI rectors, emphasize cooperation between universities on issues related to research and education policy as their main task, the Federation of Finnish Enterprises states as its core mission 'to improve the position of entrepreneurs and the conditions for entrepreneurship' in society (Yrittäjät Organization, n.d., The mission of the organization). UNIFI represents all universities (n=14), and Arene all universities of applied sciences (n=24) in Finland. The policy statements that they formulate, thus, officially represent all universities in Finland. The Federation of Finnish Enterprises, on the other hand, represents small- and medium-size enterprises (over 100 000) in Finland. The federation promotes entrepreneurship by formulating policy statements in different areas of society, including education.

All in all, the three documents chosen for this study include 50 pages of policy text. This sample was deemed appropriate as it allowed us to illuminate how business actors contribute to the HE entrepreneurship policy discourse. Each instance of language use is here taken as 'an occurrence which evidences the operation of a set of cultural understandings currently available for use by cultural members' (Baker et al., 2012). The purpose of the study is to provide an illustration of the studied phenomenon rather than present generalizable facts, although the results of the study may be transferable to similar contexts.

We apply a critical discourse approach (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Wodak & Meyer, 2016) to investigate how entrepreneurship as HE policy discourse is promoted and taken to practice in a Nordic education system. Policy as discourse is here understood as language use in policy documents about entrepreneurship, which also frames how entrepreneurship is understood and how people act with respect to that issue (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). We understand discourse as language use and social practice that constructs and reflects social realities (Fairclough, 1993).



Discourse is a form of social practice that implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situations, institutions and social structures that frame it (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Policy is a social practice, constructed and reconstructed in policy discourses (Saarinen, 2008a). The discursive event is both socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned (Steyaert & Bouwen, 2004). Policy text is not neutral but subject to both reproduction and transformation: ‘[E]very instance of language use makes its own small contribution in reproducing and/or transforming society and culture, including power relations’ (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 273). Discourse analysis of policy texts makes visible which policy goals are seen as important (Saarinen, 2008b).

In our joint analysis we read both the contents and the argumentation of the documents to understand how academic capitalism materializes in and through entrepreneurship policy discourse. We focused on how entrepreneurship policy discourse in HE is conceptualized and justified in relation to the market mechanisms of academic capitalism. We paid attention to both proposed goals and measures related to entrepreneurship. In addition, we analyzed who the different social actors (e.g. managers, coaches, players) are and how they are positioned as market actors. The representations of different positions and activities of the social actors allowed us to view different spheres of policy action in the documents (Saarinen, 2008b; Van Leeuwen, 1996). We paid attention to who is included and who is excluded, who is represented as an active agent and who is represented as the passive actor, that is the “patient in need of treatment” and the goal that the action is targeted at (Van Leeuwen, 1996). We also read how the social actors were positioned in relation to each other in creating conducive conditions for the formation of an entrepreneurial ecosystem. The positionings of the social actors are not static but may also vary within documents.

We also focused on strategies of persuasion, how the audience is convinced, and sought the underlying value assumptions to reveal intentional language use (Laalo et al., 2019; Saarinen, 2008a). We probed both textual and linguistic tools in our analysis, notably, the use of metaphors (most importantly the game metaphor) as they are pervasive not just in language but also in action; what we do is structured by concepts and how we understand them (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). We read both what was written and not written, that is “silences” (e.g. green entrepreneurship) in the discourse (Ogbor, 2000). Our reading of the data allowed us to analyze the shifting discursive practices of entrepreneurship as one facet of social change (Fairclough, 1993). Next, we will present our results charting the policy goals (mainly based on Doc1) and measures that focus on the positioning of social actors (mainly Doc2a and Doc2b) in the formation of a university-based entrepreneurial

ecosystem as a manifestation of academic capitalism. In our analysis, we pay special attention to persuasive language use (e.g. argumentation, justification).

### **The formation of an entrepreneurial ecosystem**

Business actors actively participate in the promotion of entrepreneurship in HE, and as a result, they also participate in producing the policy discourse on entrepreneurship in Finland. Simultaneously, the role and purpose of HE in Finnish society gets redefined and, it seems, restricted to economic functions. This is clearly visible in our data and analysis. In the light of the analyzed documents, the overarching goal for HEIs is to create growth and innovations for the business sector nationally and globally. In these definitions, the primary purpose of HE is to serve the needs of the business world and economy.

In the documents, the imperative to promote entrepreneurship in HE is justified as a guarantee for national competitiveness and well-being of citizens. The entrepreneurial higher education 2025 document produced by the Federation of Finnish Enterprises (Doc1) clearly states that Finland *has to* become an entrepreneurship society (Doc1, p. 2), representing entrepreneurship as a necessary principle that covers and benefits the whole society. The education system, especially HE, is seen as a key in reaching this goal: ‘We want a higher education system that supports entrepreneurship in different parts of the country, integrates entrepreneurship with top-quality research and competence and guarantees the success of Finnish based businesses in increasing international competition’ (Doc1, p. 2). The vision of the HE system is to serve the needs of entrepreneurs and businesses and imitates the logic of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship is pictured in a positive, even idealistic, light, and critical reflection related to entrepreneurial values or any risks is silenced (see also Siivonen et al., 2020). The focus is first and foremost on ‘entering the wider entrepreneurial ecosystem’ (Doc2b, p. 11) in order to enhance high quality or ambitious entrepreneurship based on research and innovations (see also Alvedalen & Boschma, 2017). Overall, the HE policy discourse on entrepreneurship articulates the appropriate institutional conditions in promoting entrepreneurship.

To enter the entrepreneurial ecosystem Doc1 proposes the creation of a few university centres with strong research profiles to serve the economic needs of the local regions and the country. However, the purpose of the current wide university network has been to provide equal opportunities for HE studies in different regions of a sparsely populated country. The envisioned university centres are justified by the need to increase the quality of research as ‘mediocrity is not sufficient in

research' (Doc1, p. 13). In this argumentation only top-quality research guarantees international visibility and can create innovations needed to create value in business life and increase collaboration between HEIs and businesses. The primary purpose of research is reduced to serving businesses rather than to promoting in-depth understanding of phenomena.

In order to achieve 'entrepreneurship-friendly higher education' (Doc1, p. 5), Doc1 proposes several structural reforms. Most notably, it is seen as important to reform university legislation and establish unified legislation for both universities and universities of applied sciences. This would mean the abolition of the Finnish dual HE system and making professional goals and work-life relevant education the core principles of the whole HE sector in order to enhance the connection between universities and industry. Suggested competence-based university degrees would also serve this end. Thus far, there has been a clear division between traditional science-oriented universities and universities of applied sciences, which concentrate on providing professional and vocational education. Entrepreneurship-friendly HE, thus, indicates increasing emphasis on the primacy of vocational goals also in science-oriented universities that have traditionally emphasized academic achievement and theoretical abilities (Siivonen et al., 2020). This reduces the purpose of HE to serving short-term economic benefits rather than such traditional academic values as the construction of new knowledge, introducing new perspectives, or enabling critical observation of society (Laalo et al., 2019).

Furthermore, emphasis on entrepreneurship-friendly HE and vocational goals in education is visible in the recommendation to offer entrepreneurship studies to all HE students (Doc1, Doc2a, Doc2b). The Federation of Finnish Enterprises (Doc1) also posits that students should be provided opportunities for internships abroad to gain international experiences and to be able to work in a global business environment. Moreover, teaching should be provided all year round to enable quick graduation and transition to the labour market. HE selection based on certificates and not on time-consuming entrance exams is favoured to enhance graduates' smooth transitions into employment. It is apparent how the goal of ensuring smooth transitions from HE to the labour market is to serve the needs of the economy by efficiently producing highly educated competent workforce. In a university-based ecosystem, established firms are able to access knowledge produced at universities through hiring graduates (Spigel, 2017). Such developments result in a technical-rational and instrumental perspective on education that emphasizes employability, that is individuals' ability to obtain and maintain a job, to ensure the supply of competence in the labour market (Siivonen & Filander, 2020).

It is also proposed that researchers could work in businesses and business actors in research projects (Doc1). This would enable researchers to engage in business collaboration and entrepreneurial activities to provide revenue for HEIs. Universities should also provide continuing education for entrepreneurs. It is proposed that such competence-based teaching should be made a normal part of university teachers' work. Emphasis on business collaboration is a positive way to describe business sector involvement in HE. Collaboration between HEIs and businesses is instrumental in the formation of an entrepreneurial ecosystem (see, e.g., Spigel, 2017). This illustrates how HEIs are expected to enhance business interests, and thus academic capitalism.

Along with suggested structural and educational reforms, academic capitalism is most strikingly visible in the notions concerning funding. It is argued by the Federation of Finnish Enterprises (Doc1) that university centres should have a large funding base divided between universities, communities, and the private sector, all of which are also an essential part of an entrepreneurial ecosystem (Spigel, 2017). Such structural reforms in the HE sector are considered necessary because of reduced public funding. Private funding is needed to cover the expenses of developing HE in the future. The document proposes several market activities and forms of academic capitalism, to generate private funding for universities. Tuition fees are proposed for all students coming from the EEA. This would enable the commodification of degree education and revenues for public universities. Tuition fees are also justified by quicker graduation and improved quality of teaching. Moreover, establishing private universities would allow marketing degree education in Finland and abroad. The document also proposes the privatization of HE research and innovation services (or technology transfer offices), identified as a clear sign of academic capitalism (Kauppinen, 2012), in order to guarantee easy and efficient collaboration between HEIs and businesses.

Overall, in line with academic capitalism the proposed policy goals and measures would clearly blur the boundaries between HEIs and businesses. The reasoning with a strong emphasis on economic goals and value of HE follows the logic in the business world and contributes to the marketization of HE. Based on our analysis it becomes evident that business actors' vision of the HEIs is to transform them into university-based entrepreneurial ecosystems that produce high-quality research and education for the needs of the market economy. Business actors are positioned in a prominent role within this new institutional context in shaping universities' core activities.

*Engaging social actors in the game of entrepreneurship*

Within the policy discourse on entrepreneurship, several explicit and implicit strategies to engage social actors in academic capitalism can be identified. Imperative language and persuasive metaphors are efficient tools that give the impression that the promotion of entrepreneurship in HE is inevitable. In the intentional language use, HEIs, students, teachers, researchers, and other staff members are positioned as proactive, responsible, and committed market actors in the promotion of entrepreneurship.

A game metaphor is a good example of intentional language use in documents 2a and 2b, most strikingly in the gamebook (Doc2b) that has been structured as a game with three rounds of play. The game metaphor is used to inspire all social actors in HEIs to engage with entrepreneurship. Everyone is encouraged to participate in unison: ‘Let’s play together for entrepreneurship!’ (Doc2b, p. 3). Vocabulary related to playing a game is repeated throughout the documents in a systematic manner to underline the message: HEI is a team, social actors are named coaches and players, it is important to know the tactics and follow the rules of the game, the training conditions need to be authentic and functional. The entrepreneurial team works for the common goal—different skillsets and strengths are harnessed for this goal. Everyone must be ready to play and compete and either win or lose the game. Participation is inclusive, but only winners are awarded by funding. The game metaphor highlights the elements of competition, collaboration, excitement, and entertainment in entrepreneurship. Representing entrepreneurship as a game gamifies entrepreneurship education and entrepreneurship pedagogics into a narrow business-centred approach. It underlines competition as an inherent part of entrepreneurship education in HEIs.

As Billig (1987, p. 22) argues, the use of the game metaphor as the basis for argumentation only includes one side of the rules of the game, that is accepting those rules. It is then excluded, how the rules of the game are decided, established or how they are negotiated. The game metaphor, thus, indicates that in order to flourish all social actors within HEIs must be ready to play by the rules of the game that have been decided and established by business actors in collaboration with university stakeholders. These rules become centred on commercial outcomes rather than research and educational ones.

HEI community appears as a team that is positioned at the core of the entrepreneurial ecosystem (see also Eriksson et al., 2021). The guidelines for HEIs (Doc2a) produced by the Federation of Finnish Enterprises in cooperation with university stakeholders are targeted at all universities and universities of applied sciences in Finland. They are intended for the whole HEI community: ‘The goal has been to formulate the recommendations so that people working in various tasks

and roles at the higher education institutions could find their own perspective effortlessly, and apply the recommendations in a natural way' (Doc2a, p. 3). The purpose is, thus, to naturalize entrepreneurship as an integral part of HEIs' activities including all social actors across all units and disciplines.

HEIs are given tasks that promote and support entrepreneurship. They are to contribute to the creation of entrepreneurial attitudes and capacities of different groups of actors. They should also contribute to the creation of new businesses and the renewal of entrepreneurship. The broad definition of entrepreneurship, typical to policy language on entrepreneurship (Laalo et al., 2019), is thus recognized in the documents. The emphasis, however, is on creating new and successful businesses, that is, on external entrepreneurship, and not that much on intrapreneurship. This is where the business actors' viewpoint also differs from the viewpoint of the other policy actors that participate in shaping entrepreneurship policy discourse (see Laalo & Jauhiainen, 2019). Entrepreneurial mentality and entrepreneurial skills are seen as crucial for external entrepreneurship, that is, starting new businesses and renewing existing ones to make them more profitable. Such recent forms of entrepreneurship as green entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship are, however, absent from the documents (cf. Tomlinson et al., 2021).

In the recommendations (Doc2a) HEI is represented as an active agent capable of promoting entrepreneurship. HEI should work in close cooperation with companies and entrepreneurs (Doc2a) and contribute to the 'excellent conditions' for the promotion of 'entrepreneurial attitudes and capacities of students, teachers, researchers and other staff' (Doc2a, p. 4). The hierarchically positioned social actors are constructed both as "patients in need of treatment" and active agents in the promotion of entrepreneurship.

#### *Positioning of managers, coaches, and players in the entrepreneurial team*

All social actors in HEIs are given a role to play and are connected to each other in the entrepreneurial team of the university-based ecosystem delegated across institutional levels. *HEI managers* are in charge of the team's strategy and the team as a whole. *Coaches* consist of the middle management responsible for teaching, research, development, and innovations. *Players* include students, teachers, researchers, and other experts responsible for implementing activities around entrepreneurship. Students are positioned as an important target group in the promotion of entrepreneurship. It is articulated how all students across disciplines in all universities should be provided entrepreneurship education. This should include both basic knowledge and practical experience on entrepreneurship. Demanded close cooperation between HEIs, startups, and incubators also serves

this end. The aforementioned roles highlight entrepreneurship as a competitive game and the positioning of managers and coaches exemplifies new strategic management for the promotion of academic capitalist incentives in HEIs. Those who do not understand themselves as entrepreneurial actors are “coached” to do so. Consequently, academic work and autonomy are changed into forced entrepreneurial behaviour. Paradoxically, the game of entrepreneurship is simultaneously construed as both carefully structured and innovative.

The gamebook (Doc2b) provides a division of labour between different social actors. Managers are represented as ‘the main architects for designing the practice conditions,’ who ‘create positive financial and other types of incentives,’ ‘actively widen and maintain’ HE ‘network of business partners,’ ‘set an example (...) with their unified team play’ (Doc2b, pp. 6–7). Managers promote a culture and an environment that enhances entrepreneurship, like high tolerance of trial and error and an open and positive attitude towards entrepreneurship and experimentation. By skilful leadership they act as role models for coaches and players. They manage coaches and players as well as the team: ‘managers will give coaches and players freedom to take advantage of the gaming environments true to life and encourage them to apply learner-centred and entrepreneurial operation modes’ (Doc2b, p. 5). Managers, thus, appear as main designers responsible for the formation of an entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Coaches (middle management) are depicted agential in relation to players. They plan the playing strategically and use resources effectively, but also ‘leave room for the players’ initiative and creativity to experiment and learn’ (Doc2b, p. 6). They are constructed as experts in entrepreneurship, who set an example for the players ‘by their quick decision-making and controlled risk-taking’ (Doc2b, p. 6). They also guide the players ‘in the construction of team learning models’ (Doc2b, p. 7) and share their knowledge on team pedagogy with the players. Students are ranked lowest in the hierarchical game culture. In the team, other players’ (teachers’, researchers’, experts’) expertise and guidance is targeted at these novice players. They are thus pictured as “patients in need of the most treatment”.

Overall, students, teachers, researchers, and other staff are to adopt an entrepreneurial mentality and learn entrepreneurial skills. However, they are also represented as the agentic individual capable of managing their own learning. The capacity of owning and being entrepreneurial towards one’s own learning is represented as fundamental for effective learning and entrepreneurial outcomes. This transformation from a “patient” to the individual responsible for his/her own learning—for both the success and failure of it—individualizes the entrepreneurship discourse as students as well as other actors become learners. This individual learner is represented as capable of starting a business and incubating

new business ideas. The former “patients” become self-responsibilized and active agents in charge of their own learning. They are to internalize the entrepreneurial culture and become entrepreneurial actors ready to accomplish the entrepreneurial ecosystem as their shared “goal” and to effectively operate within.

## **Discussion**

In this article, we have applied a critical discourse approach to analyze recent Finnish entrepreneurship policy documents that provide guidelines and recommendations for entrepreneurship in HEIs. These documents, produced by The Federation of Finnish Enterprises together with university stakeholders, confirm that in Finland entrepreneurship is part of the wider policy frame that conceptualizes HE as integral to economic growth within a social imaginary of the “knowledge economy” (see also Laalo et al., 2019; Laalo et al., 2023b). The paper shows how entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education have become manifestations of academic capitalism, which in the policy discourse are promulgated to benefit HEIs, business organizations and society at large. The discursive practices in Finnish documents produce and legitimate the ideal market agency of the neoliberal order that is a proactive, self-responsible, and committed social actor with an entrepreneurial mindset and/or who is ready for a new business venture (see also Brunila & Siivonen, 2016; Laalo et al., 2019).

Our analysis shows that the policy goal is to create a university-based entrepreneurial ecosystem to serve the needs of entrepreneurs and businesses according to business logics and values. This effectively binds institutional actors’ behaviours collectively towards greater market-oriented pursuits. The abolition of the Finnish dual university system to emphasize professional goals of HE, the promotion of entrepreneurship education for all university actors, and closer collaboration between university actors and entrepreneurs are the most striking examples of the proposed HE reforms to serve this end. The proposed reforms would strengthen the ties between HEIs and businesses, and enhance business interests, and consequently academic capitalism. Moreover, the introduction of tuition fees for all students coming from EEA to enable the commodification of degree education and revenues for public universities is a clear marker of academic capitalism (see also Kauppinen, 2012; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

The ultimate policy goal is to engage the whole HEI community across disciplines in ‘the wider entrepreneurial ecosystem’ to enhance innovation, creation, and renewal of businesses based on research (see also Alvedalen & Boschma, 2017). Every social actor is given a predetermined role to play, everyone



is included and needed in the game that has established rules. Those who might hesitate are “coached” to become entrepreneurial. In contrast to former studies that have pointed at entrepreneurship as a vague and empty signifier in the HE policy discourse (Laalo et al., 2019), in the analyzed recommendations entrepreneurship as business venture is clearly emphasized. We interpret that this is because of our focus on how business actors have participated in generating the policy discourse. Moreover, our analysis makes clearly visible how business actors wish to develop HEIs in the future by creating a university-based entrepreneurial ecosystem and engaging all university actors in entrepreneurship. This is in contrast with former research that has shown how the promotion of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education aims to cultivate individual HE students’ entrepreneurial mindsets (e.g. Laalo et al., 2019; Laalo et al., 2023b). Engaging the whole HE community ‘to play together for entrepreneurship’ aims at changing the university culture, not just individual students, in a fundamental way. Collaboration with such university stakeholders as UNIFI and Arene makes the business actors’ mission a convincing policy goal for HEIs. Ecosystem cooperation between the public and the private sector clearly blurs the boundaries between markets, states, and HE (see also Kauppinen, 2012; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). This creates possibilities for business actors to influence universities’ core activities.

This study contributes to the critical literature on entrepreneurship HE policy discourse in the framework of academic capitalism, which has only rarely been applied in HE entrepreneurship policy research (However, as an exception, see Tomlinson et al., 2021). Even though the dataset of this study is limited as it focused on the three policy documents available, generated by The Federation of Finnish Enterprises together with university stakeholders, it clearly shows how business actors wish to reform the Finnish HEIs. Based on the study we argue that as business actors participate in generating the policy discourse, they also powerfully contribute to redefining the purpose of HE according to business logics and values. This will further strengthen the marketization of a Nordic system that has so far followed social equality as its core principle. The ideal of equal educational opportunities for all and the absence of tuition fees for most HE students may contribute to legitimize the marketization in the Finnish HE system and other Nordic contexts (see also Lundahl et al., 2013). Business actors are eager to reform Finnish HE according to their interests and so far, this has only rarely been questioned. The formation of university-based entrepreneurial ecosystems to enhance business values would, however, disrupt the very foundations of a Nordic HE system, and redefine and restrict the future and purpose of HE in a fundamental way. The adoption of entrepreneurial culture and activities in HE also exemplifies a broader neoliberal and entrepreneurial ethos in society and actively reinforces the

goals of academic capitalism within institutions. In all, the promotion of entrepreneurship in the Nordic HE policy discourse participates in shaping the new entrepreneurial European 'Homo Academicus' (Laalo et al., 2019). In future research it is important to investigate entrepreneurship policy more widely in different Nordic contexts with different HE systems and practices.

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## **Appendix 1. Data**

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