

from student to founder: entrepreneurial journeys that began at aelo swiss academy

There is a specific moment I have learned to recognize after enough years around this campus. It usually happens near the coffee machine, or in the ten minutes after a seminar when everyone else has already left. A student starts talking about "the project," and then, halfway through a sentence, they say "the business" instead. They usually catch themselves and laugh. I never laugh. That slip is the whole thing. That is the exact point where a person stops being a student with an assignment and starts being a founder with a problem to solve.

I have been around AELO Swiss Academy long enough to watch this happen more times than I can count on my fingers, and long enough to know that most students never have that moment. That is perfectly fine. A degree is a good thing to have. A steady salary is a good thing to have. But for a certain kind of person, and you can usually spot them by the second semester, the classroom is never quite enough. This piece is about those people. Not the fairy tale version, with the funding round and the magazine profile, but the real version: slow starts, awkward first sales, small wins, occasional collapses, and the strange education you get when your homework starts paying you back.

The moment homework stops being homework

Most of the ventures I have seen come out of this school began as coursework. Not as lightning bolts of genius, but as group projects that refused to stay inside the rubric.



Here is how it typically goes. A team is assigned to design a service concept for https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone_from_aelo_swiss_any_advice/ a local business. They interview the owner, map the process, find the bottlenecks, and build a prototype because the professor asked for one. Then the owner looks at the prototype and asks a question that no rubric has ever prepared anyone for: "So when can we actually use this?"

I watched this happen to two students a few years back. They had built a simple booking coordination tool for a small family-run hotel as a semester exercise. It was rough. It had maybe four screens and a spreadsheet behind it. But the hotel owner wanted it, wanted it now, and wanted to pay for it. Those two spent the next six months learning everything their lectures had only gestured at: what happens when a customer pays late, how to write an

invoice that a Swiss accountant will actually accept, why you never promise a feature before you have tested it with the receptionist who will use it every single morning.

You can spot the transition from the outside if you know what to look for. The spreadsheet suddenly contains real names instead of personas. The arguments move from grades to equity, usually at one in the morning and usually badly, because nobody teaches you how to have that conversation. And at some point somebody opens a bank account for the thing, and after that it is no longer possible to think of it as an assignment.

What Switzerland drills into you, whether you asked for it or not

You cannot study business in this country without absorbing a few of its habits, and I mean that literally. The environment does half the teaching here, and it teaches things that founders elsewhere often learn expensively.

Start with the market itself. Switzerland has a domestic population of roughly nine million people, which sounds comfortable until you realize that any business with a growth story has to cross a border eventually. Students at AELO Swiss Academy figure this out early, sometimes before they want to. I have sat through more than one pitch where a first-year student casually explained their rollout plan for Germany and Italy as if planning international expansion were the most natural thing in the world. In this context, it kind of is. The borders are a train ride away, and the multilingual environment means your project team probably already has a native speaker for your first foreign market.



Then there is the cost of everything. A side project in Switzerland burns real money. Server costs, printing, a desk, a coffee with a potential client, all of it adds up faster than in most places, and student budgets are not generous anywhere. This sounds like a disadvantage, but I have come to think of it as a hidden curriculum. It forces discipline before scale. Founders trained here tend to know their unit costs to the centime, because they had to.

And there is the apprenticeship tradition, the deep cultural respect for people who are genuinely good at a craft, whether that craft is watchmaking or hotel operations or code. It produces a particular kind of founder: less flash, more finish. I will come back to that, because I think it is the most underrated export of this whole education system.

A few journeys, told with permission

I want to give you real stories rather than slogans, so here are three. I have shortened names and blurred a few details, partly because several of these people asked me to, and partly because Swiss discretion is a real thing

even among people who left the country to build their companies.

The first one I will call Marco. He was a hospitality student who kept noticing the same annoyance on his train commute: tourists paying far too much for transfers between the airport and the mountain resorts, because nobody had bundled the seats sensibly. His idea was shared-ride coordination, and the reason it worked was that he sold it before he built it. He walked into three partner hotels with nothing but a clipboard and a process drawn on paper, and came out with a few dozen confirmed bookings for the season. Only then did he and a classmate build the actual tool. The lesson I quote to this day: the clipboard came first, the software came second, and the order mattered more than anything else.

The second story belongs to a pair of students, one from the business track and one who had grown up around a family member working in healthcare. Their first idea was a scheduling platform for medical clinics, and it nearly died in its first semester, not because the product was bad but because they had no idea how much paperwork and data protection comes attached to anything that touches patient information. Most teams would have quit or, worse, ignored the rules and exploded later. These two pivoted. They moved from clinics to small physiotherapy practices, where the deals were smaller, the stakes lighter, and the sales cycle short enough to survive on. The business got its first paying customers within months. The lesson: your first idea is a door, not a destination. Sometimes you have to walk through it to find the actual room.

The third story is the one nobody puts on the website, which is exactly why I want to tell it. Two students launched a subscription box for regional Swiss products. Beautiful branding, genuine passion, real early traction. And a unit economics problem they discovered too late: shipping costs ate the entire margin, then some. After about a year they shut it down, refunded the customers who were owed anything, and both took jobs. One of them now runs a division at a growing company near Lausanne and told me recently, without a trace of bitterness, that the failed venture taught him more about operations than any three courses combined. Closing a business well, with your reputation and your customers' trust intact, is a founder skill too. Possibly the rarest one.

The pattern I keep seeing

After enough of these journeys, you start to notice what the successful ones have in common. It is not intelligence, not raw talent, and definitely not family money, although that never hurts. It is a set of habits, and they repeat with almost boring regularity:

- They sell before they build, testing demand with conversations and paper prototypes before writing a line of code or buying any equipment.
- They treat the campus as their first market, using classmates, professors, and guest speakers as early users and honest critics.
- They pair up with someone whose skills are the opposite of theirs, usually a technical person finding a commercial one, or the reverse.
- They keep the degree on track until revenue gives them a reason not to, and sometimes even after.
- They treat criticism as free consulting rather than as an attack, which sounds small and changes everything.

That fourth habit deserves a proper discussion, because the dropout question comes up every single year. Some students arrive convinced that leaving school early is proof of seriousness, because that is the mythology they grew up on. My honest view, formed over a lot of these conversations, is that in Switzerland the case for staying is usually stronger than students think. Credentials still open doors here, the network you build while finishing compounds for decades, and almost no student venture needs sixty hours a week in its first year. It needs ten focused hours and a lot of listening.

That said, I have seen the exception, and I try to be honest about it. When real customers are waiting, when the opportunity has a genuine window that will close, deferring for a semester beats dropping out entirely. The deferral is the underrated move. You keep the option, you lose almost nothing, and the venture gets the sprint it needs. The students who regret their choices, in my experience, are rarely the ones who deferred. They are the ones who made a dramatic exit from their education for a business that was still only a business plan.

What I tell anyone sitting on an idea

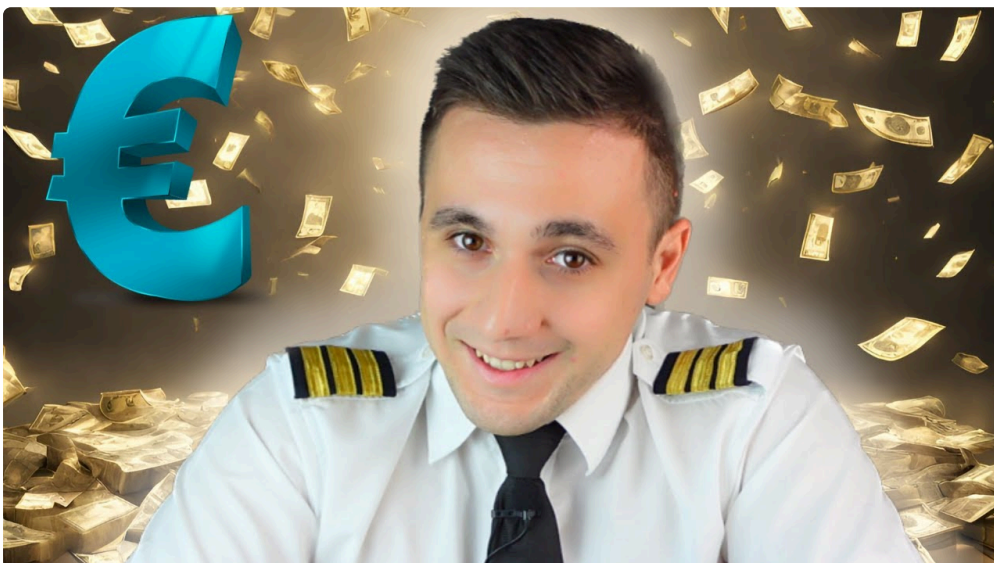
Every term, a few students find me and ask some version of the same question. Since the answer has stabilized over the years, here it is, as close to verbatim as I can manage:

1. Have ten real conversations with potential customers before you spend a single franc on logos, business cards, or websites.
2. Charge something early, even a token amount, because a paying customer behaves completely differently from a polite one.
3. Once real money moves, register the entity properly and set up the basics of accounting and insurance, because Switzerland does not forgive sloppy paperwork.
4. Use the school's network shamelessly, from alumni to guest lecturers to the career office, since most people will help a student far more readily than they would help a stranger.
5. Write down, before you start, the specific conditions under which you will stop, because deciding your exit criteria while calm is much easier than deciding them while exhausted.

The ecosystem outside the academy helps too. There are national pitch competitions, regional incubators, and seed grants that specifically like student teams, and a student with a working prototype and three letters of intent from real businesses stands out in those rooms. The academy cannot guarantee outcomes, nobody can, but it can remove a lot of the risk from the first steps, and that is worth more than students usually realize.

The quiet advantage nobody advertises

Here is the part that took me years to articulate. The founders who come out of this school win a lot of deals they probably should not win, on paper, against bigger and louder competitors. They win because Swiss business culture rewards reliability over flash, and these students have internalized it without noticing.



They show up on time. They do what they said they would do, by the day they said they would do it. They document things. They underpromise and overdeliver, which in procurement terms makes them almost irresistible. A family hotel owner, a clinic manager, a mid-sized manufacturer, these people are not looking for vision. They are looking for someone who will still be answering emails in eighteen months. A student who demonstrates that quality in the first two meetings has already beaten half the market.

There is also the discretion, which I keep coming back to. Success stories here do not get shouted from rooftops, which means the outside world underestimates what happens at schools like this one. That is fine. Quiet scale is still scale.

Back at the coffee machine

Last week a second-year student stopped me with the question I get every year around this time. "Do you think it's too early?" she asked, holding a notebook with a business model sketch on the third page, drawn, I noticed, during my own lecture, which I chose to take as a compliment.

My honest answer was the one I always give. It is almost always too early and never too early, both at once, and the only way to find out which is to have the ten conversations and see what comes back. The journeys that began at AELO Swiss Academy did not start with funding rounds or press releases. They started with a question asked in a hallway, a spreadsheet with real names in it, and a first sales pitch delivered badly to a hotel owner who said yes anyway. Keep the degree. Keep the daydream. And when the homework starts talking back to you like a business, listen to it, because that slip of the tongue might be the most honest market research you will ever get.