International entrepreneurship began emerging as a field of research in the late 1980s with the aim to understand the phenomenon of international new ventures and born global firms, i.e., firms that internationalize early on from inception. Over time, the field has progressively enlarged, extending its scope and positioning at the intersection of entrepreneurship and international business (McDougall-Covin, Jones and Serapio, 2014). This enlargement raised increased academic interest in the topic and a growing amount of contributions dedicated to special issues in leading journals (e.g., Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice, Vol. 38, Issue 1, 2014), as well as the Journal of International Business Studies decade award to Oviatt and McDougall the for their 1994 contribution, and to Knight and Cavusgil for their 2004 article.

On the other hand, this growing body of literature is still rather fragmented and – according to some authors – lacks unifying paradigms and theories (Keupp and Gassman, 2009; Jones et al., 2011), methodologies (Coviello and Jones, 2004), and even has gaps (Rialp, Rialp and Knight, 2015). Above all, an holistic and interdisciplinary approach to research in international entrepreneurship is still needed (Dana, Hetemad and Wright, 1999). At the same time, it is also true that these calls for unifying theoretical frameworks and approaches in international entrepreneurship may be the result of the normal process of development of scientific disciplines (Jones, Coviello and Tang, 2011).

Our analysis of the field begins with the review of the definitions of IE suggested by different authors, we then propose a review of the typologies of international entrepreneurial organizations (IEOs) and analyse the drivers of international entrepreneurship.
1.1 International entrepreneurship and international entrepreneurial organizations

Morrow (1988) introduced the term “international entrepreneurship” in describing the evolving technological and cultural international environment that was opening previously untapped foreign markets to new ventures.

One of the first empirical studies in the international entrepreneurship area was McDougall’s (1989) work on new ventures’ international sales. This study has provided important insights into the differences between these firms and those ventures that did not start out on an international scale. McDougall (1989, p. 388) defined international entrepreneurship “as the development of international new ventures or start-ups that, from their inception, engage in international business, thus viewing their operating domain as international from the initial stages of the firm’s operation”.

In the early 1990s, Oviatt and McDougall further developed the study on the so-called “international new ventures” defined as “...a business organization that, from inception, seeks to derive significant competitive advantage from the use of resources and sale of outputs in multiple countries” (1994, p. 49).

The definition of the boundaries of international entrepreneurship has been discussed by many researchers: while some authors identify its domain in new ventures, others emphasize the construct of entrepreneurial behaviour, which can be observed in very different kinds of organizations. Zahra (1993, p. 9), for example, suggested that the study of international entrepreneurship should encompass both new and established firms, defining international entrepreneurship as “the study of the nature and consequences of a firm’s risk-taking behaviour as it ventures into international markets”. Wright and Ricks (1994) suggested that international entrepreneurship is observable at the organizational behaviour level and focuses on the relationship between businesses and the international environments in which they operate. Also other authors recognize that a firm’s business environment plays an important role in influencing the expression of entrepreneurial activities (Zahra 1991, 1993) and their returns (Zahra and Covin, 1995). The importance of national cultures as “loci” for different expressions of international entrepreneurship and the specific influence of the business environment emphasize the need for comparative studies as one of the areas of interest in international entrepreneurship.