

SOCIAL INNOVATION AS A CHANCE AND A CHALLENGE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Why Higher Education Institutions are important for social innovation and how they can promote social innovation initiatives and projects.

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ON THE UNTAPPED POTENTIAL OF ACADEMIA IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

Social innovations are often developed at the interfaces between different societal sectors. The links between them are mainly created by single organizations and initiatives. Many of these institutions consider themselves as a coupler between different parts of the society. They develop new, joint methods of research, guidance, consultancy, promotion and financing. Nevertheless, in a knowledge society academia may have the most important role in developing, testing and

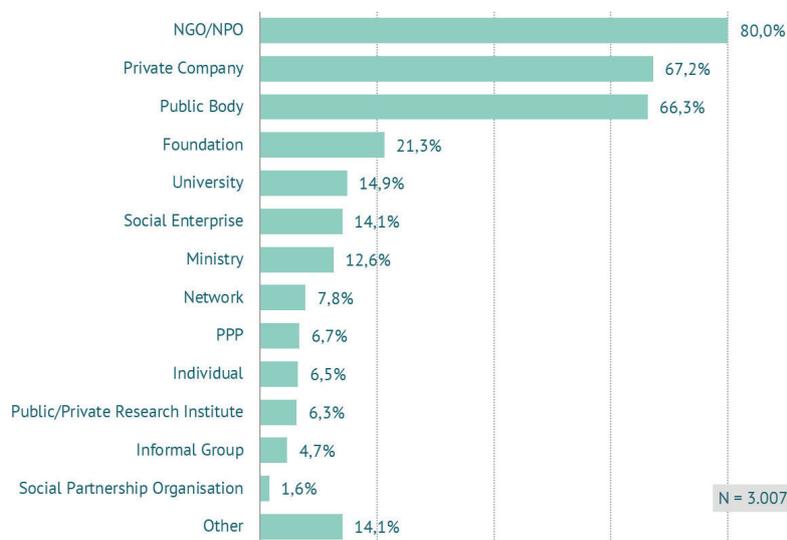
diffusing social innovations. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and research institutes represent important platforms to promote intensive exchange between different disciplines, business sectors and cultures.

However, the results of the global mapping of the research project SI-DRIVE (with about 1000 cases) show that HEIs do not engage systematically in the field of social innovation so far. Universities participated in only 14.9 percent of the reviewed initiatives and in total organizations from the field of research and education were involved in slightly more

than 21 percent of social innovations (see graph). Hence, this sector plays a relatively small role compared to other societal sectors when it comes to developing and diffusing social innovations [1].

This raises the question of the role of universities in social innovation processes. The marginal engagement of research and education institutions is in strong contrast to their essential role as knowledge providers in classical innovation processes as well as one of the pillars of the triple helix model and an indispensable part of the concept of innovation systems. Furthermore, while in natural and technical sciences there is a long tradition of innovation support accompanied by formation of qualified human resources, in social sciences there is still a lot of unexploited potential in this regard.

Partners involved in the Initiative by Type (multiple responses, % of all engaged partners)



The results of SI-DRIVE's global mapping show a low participation rate of academia in social innovation initiatives.

In Germany, this issue was explicitly addressed through the declaration Social Innovations for Germany, elaborated by actors from all societal sectors and presented to the Federal Government in 2014.

While their potential remains largely untapped, HEIs represent ideal partners to help break down or at least mitigate against multiple barriers to social innovation. They can serve as intermediaries between the subversive nature of social innovation and its need for institutional and political recognition. They can provide appropriate R&D for robust, empirical evaluations of the effectiveness of social innovation, offering an understanding of what can accelerate and scale-up social innovation. Just as technical expertise in specialized areas can support commercial businesses and give them the means to help grow and expand; the same technical expertise can be offered to social innovators. But in addition to this, HEIs are providers of a range of logistical support to their community that can provide real added value to social innovation: through the exploitation of their tacit and codified knowledge; through capacity building, mentoring and training; through the use of specialized equipment; through the provision of real and virtual spaces for networking, hot-desking or more formal incubation facilities; through selection and evaluation expertise; through lobbying.

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IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL INNOVATION AT HEIs: THE EXAMPLE OF LASIN'S SOCIAL INNOVATION SUPPORT UNITS

The LASIN Project (Latin American Social Innovation Network) [2] is an initiative funded under the European Commission's Erasmus+ Capacity Building Programme. It specifically seeks to address the issues raised above by establishing units specialized in social innovation support in eight HEIs in Latin America (Chile, Colombia, Brazil and Panama) and also to widen the Network into other countries and institutions throughout the region. Each of these Social

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Innovation Support Units (SISUs) have developed a model for driving social change within their local communities through research, training and knowledge exchange, tailor made to the needs of their communities but also playing to the strengths of their University. What they share is a common purpose: to harness the facilities, knowledge and

resources at their disposal to serve their communities in an innovative, effective and sustainable way.

An essential characteristic of the SISU is that it is a physical space, as much as possible exclusively dedicated to social innovation. It should be a space for dialogue, where different societal stakeholders (e.g. policy makers, academics and experts, representatives of a local organization or

community, and the private sector) are invited to engage with each other, to discuss their ideas and create innovative solutions in order to tackle commonly recognized problems or discuss issues where there may be conflicting perspectives. This means that a SISU does not act only when ideas are already developed, but it actively works to foster new ideas, by encouraging new collaborations and relationships; and making connections between the different stakeholders in society. It should also be a space for innovation and co-design, where new ideas can be developed with a participatory and co-design approach between universities and society. By being based in a HEI, the SISU participates in this process by providing its own internal resources (staff) and allowing society to access resources available within the university (academics, students, tacit and codified knowledge, infrastructure, space, networks etc.), and bringing together different stakeholders in society to one place (citizens and communities; public and private sector etc.).

In order to help guide the partners to establish their SISU but also as a way of benchmarking their progress, a number of evaluation criteria were defined: strategic position within the university (in particular the degree of institutional commitment), stakeholders and users (both external and internal), physical space (including size and signage), equipment (including an inventory of specialized equipment), communication and promotion, process for delivering support, users (internal and external).

A generic blueprint for the SISU was developed jointly by the Universidad de Desarrollo in Santiago de Chile and Universidad de Brazil. As part of this blueprint, a set of clear objectives were defined: to increase social innovations, social enterprises and new projects; to identify new funding opportunities, including microcredit resources; develop new collaborations between university academics, students, communities and social programmes in order to lend academic credibility; create new innovation models (foundations, cooperatives, not-for-profit companies). In particular, the SISU blueprint underlined the importance of the SISU for the communities with which they worked,

contributing a hands-on experience to the learning process, connecting learning experiences to the social context, boosting innovative ideas and maximising context, and providing students and academics with the capacity, motivation and experience to engage with the community and drive social change.

The Blueprint also recommended a number of characteristics that the SISU should adhere to:

- **Creativity:** the SISU is a creative environment, which is not only generated by the physical spaces it offers but also through people who work within them. The SISU encourages the presence of people in their facilities. A SISU encourages people to use spaces and resources available to develop ideas, projects and also enhance and generate knowledge.
- **Collaboration with society:** a SISU will not deliver or provide a top-down solution to a society, as experts from university providing knowledge to passive citizens but will recognize the diffused creativity available in society and that social innovations often emerge from bottom-up initiatives such as citizens' activism, emerging spontaneously from a specific group of people. A SISU recognizes and relies on existing capabilities and resources in people and institutions.
- **Open-door policy:** a key policy of a SISU should be to have an open-door policy in order to attract social innovators but also any kind of stakeholder. This is a key factor for supporting projects but also to raise awareness inside and outside LASIN's institutions. In this way, a SISU is a hub that connects multiple stakeholders around societal problems.
- **Mutual-learning process:** a SISU will foster knowledge exchange between universities and society in a mutual learning process. Universities recognize the knowledge embedded in society (e.g. traditional knowledge) and, at the same time, they make scientific and technological knowledge available to society. This defines the innovative status of a SISU using new and resourceful strategies to tackle societal demands.
- **Innovative copyright policy:** social innovations are the result of collaborations between different stakeholders in society to face commonly recognized challenges. Traditional copyright policies may not be appropriate in a SISU if it is to foster the right environment for the development of social innovation, it might hinder the process.
- **Academic credibility:** an active SISU contributes to academic credibility in the realm of social innovation (as universities have done in scientific and technological innovation through institutes and dedicated centres).

OUTLOOK: SOCIAL INNOVATION AS A CHANCE AND A CHALLENGE FOR HEIs

The role that HEIs are playing in social innovation has evolved in recent years. Besides researching transformation processes, more approaches in which science itself is

considered an active participant in processes of social innovation are increasingly coming to the fore. Concepts such as Design Thinking or Transformative Research with focus on active participation of stakeholders are becoming more important for the work of HEIs with their environments [3]. Through transformative research, science seeks to solve societal problems by activating processes of societal change. Against this background, creation of appropriate structures (Living Labs and other spaces for exploration and learning) that help to develop knowledge based on experience in order to establish new social practices has received growing attention and needs to be further promoted. Only by sensitizing people about societal problems and possible solutions, HEIs can advance the development of social innovation with community members. Through concepts, such as Service Learning or Explorative Learning, knowledge and experience of students are taken on and links between academia and society are developed, with the latter becoming an important partner in addition to economy. This also includes the question of new modes of knowledge production and scientific co-creation of knowledge aiming at an integration of practitioners and social innovators in the innovation processes.

Nevertheless, there are several challenges that HEIs need to meet in order to advance in the area of social innovation. First, they need to better understand what is social innovation: while more and more HEIs recognize the importance of social innovation for societal development and the need to engage in this area, they do not necessarily understand what social innovation is exactly about (e.g., it is often confused with the area of University Social Responsibility, which does not necessarily refer to (social) innovations). On the one hand this is not surprising considering the lack of conceptual clarity in this area. But on the other hand, while solid academic knowledge on social innovation remains scarce, many universities still rarely – if at all – participate in social innovation research. Hence, as

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long as those who work in this area and aim at introducing change have no clear concept and understanding of social innovation, it will be difficult to succeed. While in the EU social innovation has become an increasingly important research topic in recent years, in many parts of the world it is still quite seldom. This leads us to the next challenge.

Thus, second, social innovation should be integrated along the three missions. As described above, social innovation is appearing on a growing number of universities' agendas, sometimes even becoming an important part of their development strategies. Some universities offer classes and degrees, such as Master or Bachelor. Others focus on

research in social innovation. Probably the most common way for universities to engage in this topic that we can observe is related to manifold activities within what is usually referred to as the third mission (here mainly understood as social responsibility, outreach and engagement). Nevertheless, we can rarely see a university where social innovation is integrated in all three missions. Moreover, the challenge is not only to develop activities in teaching, research and the third mission. It is the issue of integrating social innovation along the three missions in a comprehensive way: the work in every 'mission' needs to be connected to the work in other missions, so that it can benefit from the others.

Third, there are two interrelated, fundamental characteristics of university support for social innovation that need to change:

- i) social innovation support activities tend to be ad hoc and largely altruistic, universities have not recognized or systemized a process to measure the social return on investment;
- ii) as a result, while commercial innovation is recognized and institutionally supported by well-established knowledge transfer offices, there is no professional support function within universities for supporting social innovation. Until now, neither the infrastructure nor the funding has existed to make this possible, largely because governments and even university executives have been resistant to the notion of social innovation as an effective socioeconomic instrument. The adoption of social innovation at a policy level by governments throughout the world is creating an environment in which institutional support for this area is becoming increasingly prevalent with funders willing to invest in projects.

Fourth, there is a challenge of integrating both the top-down and the bottom-up perspective. Usually, when universities assume their role as socially responsible institutions regarding their environment they start developing initiatives, which are supposed to favour different target groups (e.g. communities). However, such initiatives tend to be designed and implemented from the university's perspective, missing to involve the target group

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right from the start. It is not surprising then that projects developed by HEIs do not necessarily respond to the needs, the ideas and the visions of communities and other target groups. HEIs have to learn how to work with target groups on equal footing and how to integrate their own perspective with the latter's perspective. As shown above, projects such as LASIN have already started to address this issue.

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