

# BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN ACADEMIA AND PRACTICE: SOCIAL INNOVATION THROUGH KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

Lack of knowledge is one of the biggest barriers for successful development of social innovations. The approach of SIKE demonstrates the potential of universities to use their knowledge by developing new paradigms and tools for targeted exchange between actors from all societal sectors and shows how universities can learn from other organisations, which have more experience in supporting social innovation.

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The results of the global mapping (with more than 1,000 cases) of the research project SI-DRIVE ([www.si-drive.eu](http://www.si-drive.eu)) show that as yet Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) do not engage systematically in the field of social innovation. Universities participated in only 14.9 percent of the reviewed initiatives and in total organisations from the field of research and education were involved in slightly more than 21 percent of social innovations. While SI-DRIVE's findings indicate that cross-sectoral collaborations are of great importance, the marginal involvement of research organisations contrasts with their key role in classical innovation processes and as one of the key actors within the triple helix model. Therefore, the empirical results suggest quite an unbalanced quadruple helix for social innovation.

The importance of HEIs to take over more societal functions besides their tasks as an academic institution (teaching and research) has increased over recent decades. HEIs qualify employees for the public and private sector and play a major role in tackling social and economic challenges. Consequently, HEIs have to adapt their strategies to changing processes in the educational sector taking into account responsibility for the interest of different stakeholders. Social innovation has become a particularly interesting topic in the academic context regarding the third mission and the interconnection between HEIs and society. While the third mission has grown in importance, there is no uniform definition. It could be broadly defined as HEIs' engagement with partners from society and economy [1]. Another definition is to see the third mission as everything that does not belong to traditional teaching and research [2].

For many years, universities have formed an integral part of the so-called knowledge triangle or triple helix model in which innovation is generated through a symbiotic relationship between government, business and universities. Institutions universally recognise that knowledge exchange is an important task for universities in all three missions and in particular in the third mission. However, while social innovation clearly plays an important role in all three missions we rarely see a university where social innovation forms an integral part of all three missions [3].

At the same time, it is clear that new paradigms need to be developed for universities to play a role in driving social change. Traditionally the model has been based on a purely commercial process aimed at protecting the knowledge coming from universities, then licensing or creating spin-off companies. This ignores many of the cultural, social and economic challenges of the different regions and fails to take into account much of the knowledge being produced by the different universities. Although many research projects have sought to address this, there is still an urgent need to create a better understanding of the new processes, skills and tools that are required to exploit the knowledge coming out of universities more effectively and to drive the social innovation agenda. For social innovation to take place, to grow, and flourish, sustainable knowledge exchange practice

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needs to adapt and create new tools and processes to help drive it.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF A NEW APPROACH FOR KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

As the global mapping of the SI-DRIVE project has shown, knowledge gaps represent one of the biggest barriers for successful development of social innovations, especially leading to limited transfer and diffusion. Often, social innovators are lacking capabilities and skills (especially, business and managerial skills, staff training and personnel development skills, networking and communication skills) as well as professional knowledge (e.g., information technology and recruiting staff). In addition, they have difficulties accessing required information and therefore external expert knowledge is needed in some areas [4]. Against this background, social innovators who participated in the survey expressed the need for building up skills and capabilities (upskilling and training, workshops, learning etc.) as well as providing managerial training (e.g., administration procedures, business plan design etc.). They also stressed the necessity of more and better knowledge exchange and connecting with other organisations, collaboration for learning, facilitating knowledge transfer, exchange and learning opportunities, buying in knowledge as well as collaboration with external experts to gain specific expertise [4].

On the other hand, universities generally do not recognise the important role social innovation can play as part of their knowledge exchange policy, and regional ecosystems also tend to favour more commercial and technological forms of innovation. While academia and other sectors with their different strengths could perfectly complement each other in supporting social innovations, there is still a huge gap between them when it comes to cooperation and communication. The SIKE project (Social Innovation through Knowledge Exchange – [www.sike-eu.org](http://www.sike-eu.org)), a new initiative under the Erasmus+ Knowledge Alliances Programme seeks to demonstrate the potential of universities to use their knowledge by developing new paradigms and tools for targeted exchange between actors from all societal sectors. At the same time, it shows how universities can learn from other organisations with more experience in supporting social innovation. The rationale of SIKE is based on experience of leading universities in the field, especially through two similar projects implemented in universities outside Europe – the Latin American Social Innovation Network ([www.lasin-eu.org](http://www.lasin-eu.org)) and the Southeast Asian Social Innovation Network ([www.seasin-eu.org](http://www.seasin-eu.org)). Both projects focused on developing units at the universities to support social innovation initiatives.

## THE SIKE UNITS

SIKE is forging alliances between universities and stakeholders across the social innovation ecosystem including business, local government, civil society organisations and community groups in order to develop a new concept for knowledge exchange, informed by a needs analysis and monitoring of local social innovations. By combining the different experiences from five universities and six non-HEI practitioners (SMEs and NGOs), the SIKE project has developed a blueprint for a ‘SIKE Unit’ which combines a series of tools and services to support social innovators both within and outside the university. The five HEIs based in five European regions (in the UK, Croatia, Portugal, Spain and Germany) – have then adapted the Unit to their regional context, creating a physical space to bring together different stakeholders in order to support social innovation processes.



### Services offered by SIKE Units

The Units offer training, policy-briefings and online tools as part of a suite of incubation and knowledge exchange services applying specialist research, equipment, outreach programmes and existing business support tailor-made to the needs of social innovators, whether they are students, academics or external stakeholders. By the end of the project a series of strategic recommendations and case studies, as well as online tools and teaching materials, will be produced

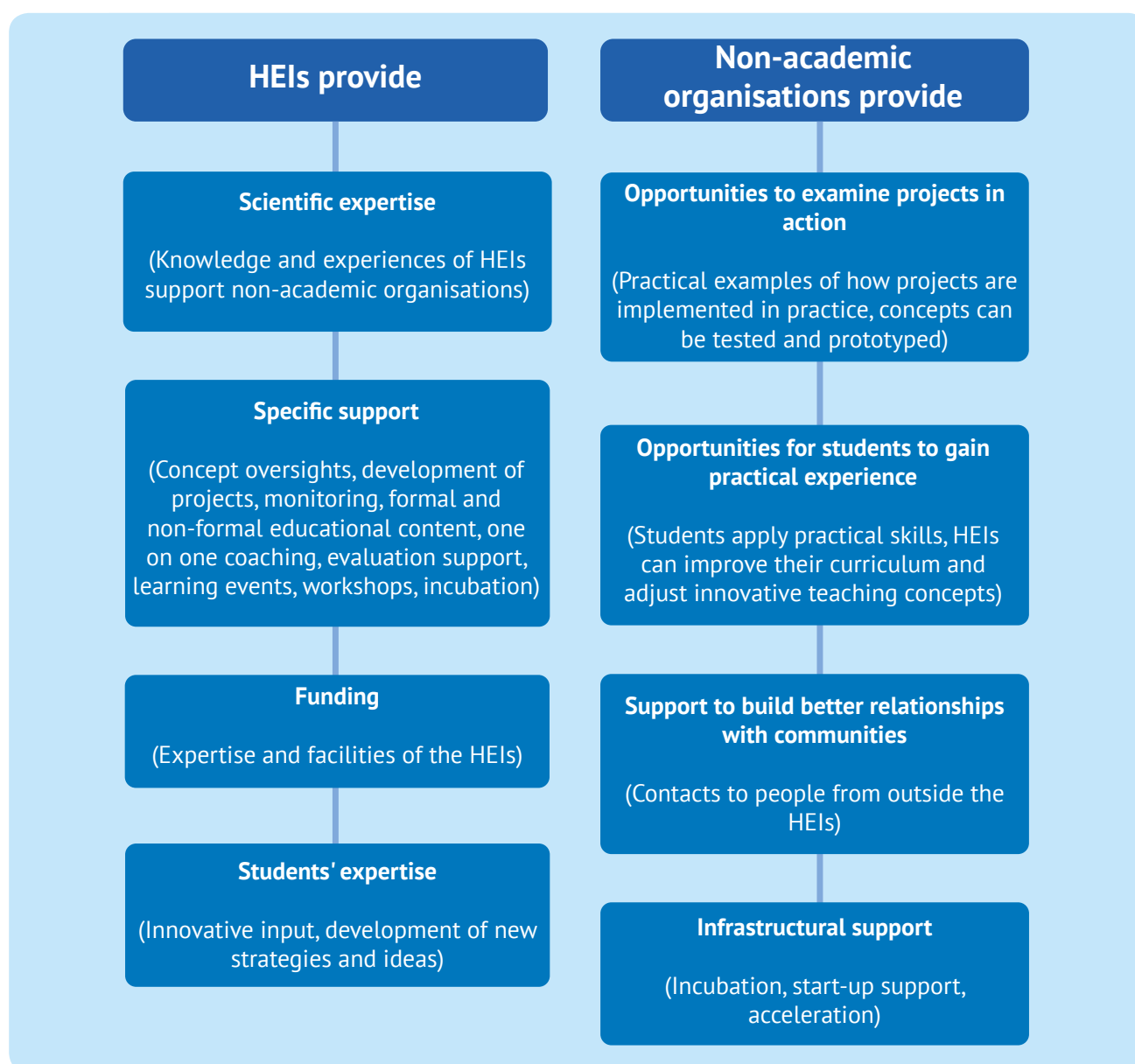
to help other HEIs wishing to create similar units for driving social innovation through knowledge exchange.

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SIKE proposes that to successfully support social innovation, it is not enough to rely on traditional methods and processes for knowledge exchange. A university needs to establish a specialised unit that is specifically geared towards the needs of social innovators. The SIKE approach argues that universities should support social innovation in a systematic

way beyond ad hoc initiatives and sporadic activism. A SIKE Unit is the next step towards institutionalisation of social innovation through universities. Moreover, the explicit notion of this form of knowledge exchange clearly places universities as conscious actors within the social innovation ecosystem: they proactively assume the task of facilitating the exchange, flow and co-creation of knowledge.

There are many ways in which SIKE Units can contribute to knowledge exchange within the social innovation ecosystem. They can help to develop socially entrepreneurial mind-sets and transferable skills, creating schemes of transversal skills learning and application in cooperation with social enterprises aimed at strengthening employability, creativity and new professional paths. In addition, SIKE Units open up new learning opportunities through the practical application of



socially entrepreneurial skills, which can lead not only to the commercialisation of new services, products and prototypes, but also to the creation of social enterprise start-ups and spin-offs. Furthermore, they can boost innovation within the participating institutions and the broader socioeconomic environment by jointly developing and implementing new multidisciplinary, problem-based continuing educational programmes as well as jointly developing solutions for challenging issues and developing social innovation practice. It is important to underline that the universities' social innovation support should not be limited to areas of social science. Specialisms in engineering, health or even pure sciences have a role to play in supporting social innovators.

SIKE's approach not only sees HEIs in their role as facilitators, moderators or brokers within the ecosystem, but also as social innovators themselves. An important function of the SIKE Units is to develop (or to participate in the development of) social innovations. Against this background, SIKE directly involves – along with HEIs – non-academic actors as project partners in each one of the regions where it is operating. Usually, universities are not the most experienced social innovators. There are many organisations in other societal sectors with a longer tradition of developing social innovations. SIKE is aimed at creating opportunities for universities to learn from practitioners, such as SMEs, NGOs or social enterprises. Hence, while the idea of the entrepreneurial university is not new, the concept of HEIs as social innovators is still largely unexplored.

For the purpose of learning from existing social innovation initiatives, every partner region in the SIKE project has mapped ten cases in their area located in the field of social innovation and social entrepreneurship. Two of those are cooperating with the SIKE Unit during the time of the project (2018-2020). By offering specific workshops where the SIKE partners function as facilitators to connect important stakeholders, the initiatives receive support to further develop their potential. Through the analysis of the mapped initiatives, it can be demonstrated that both HEIs as well as non-academic organisations benefit from collaboration with each other. In order to examine those benefits specifically, the contribution of HEIs as well as the input of non-academic organisations can be illustrated in the information graphic.

By cooperation and knowledge exchange, HEIs and non-academic organisations are gaining several mutual benefits. During the SIKE project, more opportunities are being emphasised in order to identify specific methods for knowledge exchange to support social innovation.

## CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

SIKE is a promising approach towards systematic institutionalisation of knowledge transfer both within HEIs as well as between HEIs and non-academic actors in the field of social innovation. The necessity of explicit network building for knowledge exchange is apparent in order to complement social innovation along all three missions of universities and to generate mutual benefits for all actors involved.

Previous projects, such as LASIN and SEASIN have already shown the importance of a knowledge exchange strategy for HEIs in other world regions. However, there are several major challenges for universities. First, continuation of SIKE Units beyond the project's lifetime is not automatically guaranteed. While the project offers an important basis for setting up such a unit making even more than a pilot out of it, the whole initiative can only use its potential if it becomes part of the university's long-term strategy. Second, replicating SIKE Units can turn into a difficult task. Although, there are always similarities in how HEIs engage in the area of social innovation, each university has its own specifics and each region has another reality. It is crucial to understand that in order to establish a SIKE Unit there can be a basic concept as described above, but not a recipe for a successful implementation. Each HEI needs to find out what its strengths and opportunities are. While some universities can be strong in incubation, others might be better in community involvement. Furthermore, the ways of achieving an established SIKE Unit at a university can differ largely. In some cases, it can immediately become a centralised structure, in others it may come from a faculty or an institute. Finally, SIKE Units will only be successful if they manage to involve practitioners in the way the latter also benefit from such collaborations. In other words, HEIs cannot expect practitioners just to deliver knowledge and to share experience or infrastructure. The purpose of a SIKE Unit is not just to meet the university's strategic goals. Much more than that, it is to support the ecosystem and, hence, to contribute to societal development.

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