

JO OPPORTUNITIES TO FOSTER THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS' SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP COMPETENCES AT HIGHER EDUCATION LEVEL

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Abstract.

Purpose and aim of the study: *The aim of the study is to explore the development of social entrepreneurship competences at higher education level, to identify which competences are relevant for social entrepreneurship and what methods can be used to develop them.*

Design / Methodology / Approach: *General research methods are used in the research: information analysis and synthesis, content analysis, for obtaining quantitative data - questionnaires, and for obtaining qualitative data - structured interview and focus groups.*

Main Findings: *The study explored the theoretical underpinnings of social entrepreneurship competencies, highlighted their role in promoting innovation, social impact and responsible entrepreneurship, and collected examples of best practice in creating an ecosystem within universities with structured support for the development of student competencies.*

Originality: *The originality of the study lies in the possibility of detailed analysis of the existing experience in this field in different European countries and subsequent adaptation of solutions to Latvian reality.*

Implications: *Social entrepreneurship, with its focus on innovative solutions to societal issues, has gained significant prominence in recent years, prompting the need for educational institutions to adapt their curricula to empower students in this domain.*

Keywords: *competences, social entrepreneurship, careers, higher education.*

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Introduction

Unemployment, its consequences, pandemics, immigration problems, social exclusion and environmental degradation are the challenges of the 21st century for every country. There are many different ways of tackling

social problems, for example by placing the burden of responsibility and accountability entirely on the state, but the level of public spending on social problems depends on a country's overall income and cannot be disproportionate. Alternative solutions must therefore be found, based on solidarity and cooperation between people.

Whereas in the past the production model was based mainly on linear economics aimed at maximising consumption and production, the concept has changed over time and with more and more evidence of the limited availability of resources in the world. Muhammad Yunus (1997), Nobel Laureate and founder of the social economy, said that the mission of a social enterprise is to impact people's lives, not to count the money earned. It is the concept of social entrepreneurship that means that by doing business, people not only earn a living, but also solve problems that are important to society. Unfortunately, it should be noted that the ideas of social economy are not yet so popular in the Latvian society compared to Western Europe.

Developing competences in entrepreneurship can be done at all levels of education, but it is most effective at the level of higher education, because when working with students this process takes place at a deliberate level and the students themselves, knowing what competences will help them in their careers, will be able to develop them independently through practical work in the study process. The role of the docents in this process is to provide information and, using the right pedagogical methods, to guide and support students, creating an ecosystem for structured development.

The aim of the study: to explore the development of social entrepreneurship competences at higher education level, to identify which competences are relevant for social entrepreneurship and what methods can be used to develop them.

The research tasks are:

- Conduct a comprehensive literature review to identify and analyse the existing theoretical frameworks, definitions and theoretical foundations related to social entrepreneurship competencies;
- Develop a quantitative research methodology to assess the impact of social entrepreneurship competencies on innovation and social impact.
- To Analyse the experiences of universities and institutions known for their successful support systems and programs aimed at developing students' social entrepreneurship competencies. Conduct in-depth case studies to explore best practices, patterns, and frameworks in these ecosystems.

- Research object: social entrepreneurship competences. Subject of the study: promoting the development of students' social entrepreneurship competences at higher education level.

Hypothesis: the competences required for social entrepreneurship are different from those required for business.

The work was based on the analysis of specialised literature and scientific studies and on contingent analysis. The following methods were used for data collection: questionnaire for quantitative data, structured interview and focus groups for qualitative data. The study used a mixed research methods approach for data processing and analysis. A triangulation model is used, in which one method of data extraction is the main one, while data extracted by another method plays a complementary role in the study. The research design used face-to-face questionnaires and structured interviews conducted remotely using MSTeams and Zoom platforms.

Novelty of the research: development of recommendations for the application of social entrepreneurship competences development methods and eco-environmental design based on the experience of 5 EU universities.

Study period: 2021-2023.

Research validation: in the framework of the SeinHE project, through joint workshops and discussion clubs.

Research results and discussion

Literature review

Social entrepreneurs, like any entrepreneur, need a broad set of competences. However, their importance, scope or focus may be greater or even different in the context of social entrepreneurship because of their social mission. For example, social entrepreneurs may choose the legal status and economic orientation of their organisation (i.e. non-profit, for-profit, hybrid). Social entrepreneurs also need to decide what outcomes (social, commercial and/or environmental value) to aim for and how to combine them (Zahra et al., 2014).

Moreau and Mertens (2013) argue that social enterprise management should use a competency model. According to their research, such a model should be incorporated into the competencies of managers to develop a strategy to be aware of, achieve the multiple objectives of social enterprises; know, understand and mobilise internal management systems; manage different external stakeholders; manage staff and volunteers; manage financial aspects and know, understand and be able to position the social economy.

In addition, Rossano et al. (2019) identify three competences that they consider crucial for social enterprises: agility, resilience and governance.

Agility in this context refers to the ability to react and adapt quickly to change, and can be related to the firm's operations, partners and customers (customer contribution to product innovation). Resilience, on the other hand, refers to a company's ability to resist, absorb and respond to inevitable change. It can also mean something new, if necessary. Agility and resilience are particularly necessary in a fast-changing environment and are closely linked to innovation, which is why researchers consider them to be competences for social entrepreneurship. The third competency, leadership collaboration, refers to a leader's ability to organise for discussion, communication and collaboration in order to support innovation for employees and business partners.

Amini et al. (2018), on the other hand, identified eight core competences that are all individual competences: personal competences (e.g. self-acceptance), strategic thinking, organisational skills, communication skills, networking, HR ageing, social participation development and group goal identification. Most of these eight competences can also be found within *EntreComp*.

As innovation and social change are closely integrated into social entrepreneurship, there is a certain demand for creativity and innovative thinking. Shek and Lin (2015, cited in Rossano et al. 2019) describe social entrepreneurs as reformers and revolutionaries who want to address social problems that are not fully solved by government, philanthropic or commercial organisations, using fundamental or systemic strategies to address them. They can also be seen as people who find creative ways of doing things, using underused resources to address a social problem or social need.

Innovation and creativity, as well as challenging traditional ways of thinking, were also highly valued by Miller et al. (2012), adding that it is important to focus on innovation from both an economic and a social perspective. In other words, innovations in social entrepreneurship should not only be novel and cost-effective, but also deliver social value in a way that is accessible to the intended beneficiaries.

Social entrepreneurs may have to make decisions between their social mission and their business activities. shows that harnessing social values while building a business can increase profitability (Choi & Gray, 2011). However, some scholars argue that social enterprises face contradictions in balancing social and business objectives (Choi, 2006; Tracey & Phillips 2007; Myyryläinen et al., 2021).

In the case of social enterprises, skills and competences related to communication with customers, suppliers and other stakeholders, as well as social and interpersonal relationships, are crucial, as social entrepreneurship

often involves building new value chains and business models (Bacigalupo et al., 2016).

Because of the innovative nature of social entrepreneurship, entrepreneurs in this context can be seen as reformers and revolutionaries who solve social problems or as people who find creative solutions to the use of underused resources to address a social problem or social need. Social entrepreneurship often involves the creation of new value chains and business models, which also emphasises the need for competences such as networking, collaboration and mobilisation (Tracey & Phillips, 2007).

The literature review shows that there is not much research on the role of skills and competences for successful careers as social entrepreneurs, but the EntreComp framework study conducted by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, which laid the foundations for the study and classification of competences needed for a successful career in entrepreneurship, should be highlighted as an important one. The competences described in the EntreComp framework are also present in social entrepreneurship. For example, it has been interpreted that most of the competences required in social enterprises are similar to those in commercial enterprises (Amini et al., 2018). In a study of the EntreComp framework, the required competencies and social entrepreneurship skills that practitioners rated as important were collected and compared to competencies taught in social entrepreneurship courses at different universities. The survey revealed that the competency considered most important by both practitioners and educators was the ability to solve problems. While problem solving is a general competency in the context of social entrepreneurship, it can be broader, as the problems of social entrepreneurs are often deep, intractable and embedded in communities, government or infrastructure.

Methodology

Research base: research and data collection from 5 universities in the European Union - Kaunas University of Applied Sciences, LAB University of Applied Sciences, Thomas More Kempen, University of Nicosia and Rezekne Academy of Technologies - within the SeinHE project.

The common feature of the research groups - students of different specialisation groups, social enterprises, institutions supporting social entrepreneurship, university lecturers. The distinguishing characteristic is nationality (Lithuania, Finland, Belgium, Cyprus and Latvia).

The authors participated in the SeinHE project and had the opportunity to take part in data acquisition from 5 universities of the European Union and to process the data in a percentage, as well as to carry out the validation of

the methods after the realisation of the project at the Rezekne Academy of Technologies.

The SEinHE project's main objectives are to understand the related competences for social entrepreneurship. The project team organised the collection of cross-cultural data in the context of the consortium members' respective country of origin. The aim of the data collection was to understand the views of docents in different disciplines, business docents, business incubators, social entrepreneurs and business organisations, as well as student groups on social entrepreneurship. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were considered, and a mixed methods approach by Tashakkori & Creswell was also used to maximise the benefits of both.

data was collected quantitatively with as wide an audience as possible and then analysed using content analysis.

data collection was organised in several stages. Project partners from five universities participated in the data collection, so that each was responsible for the data collection in their own country. The authors were responsible for the data collection in Latvia. All interviews were semi-structured thematic interviews. Interviewees could receive the interview questions in advance if they so requested. interviews lasted on average one hour, were recorded on Zoom and then transcribed and translated into English in cases where the interview was originally conducted in another language. In total, the data collection lasted from February to July 2021.

Five entrepreneurship lecturers and two business incubator specialists were interviewed in each country, while the remaining interviews were with university lecturers from different disciplines. Five institutions collected responses to the online survey using the Webropol platform. Two social entrepreneurs from each country were also interviewed. The criteria for selecting the entrepreneurs were set so that the interviewed enterprise met the EU requirements for the definition of social entrepreneurship (European Commission 2020). The selection criteria for the selected enterprises were related to having a clear social mission, being continuously active in the market and being a non-governmental organisation.

One social enterprise organisation from each of the 5 country partners was also interviewed. The selected organisation had to have a broad vision and/or play an active role in the field of social entrepreneurship in their country or region.

Finally, each partner institution (LAB University of Applied Sciences (Lithuania), Thomas More Kempen (Belgium), Rezekne Academy of Technologies (Latvia) and University of Nicosia (Cyprus)) interviewed groups of three to five Masters or Bachelor students. The main descriptions of the data sets can be seen in Table 1 below.

The SEinHE project has partners from five institutions. Each partner had collected and analysed the interviews. The partners shared a common analysis framework and each group of respondents to the study had a common set of questions on social entrepreneurship. During the student interviews, students were informed about the EU definition of social enterprise in order to reduce differences in perception of the concept.

Table 1 Data collection descriptions (Compiled by the authors)

Target group of respondents	Institution	Volume
<i>Lecturers for the Entrepreneurship course</i>	LAB University of Applied Sciences (Lithuania), Thomas More Kempen (Belgium), Rezekne Academy of Technologies (Latvia) and University of Nicosia (Cyprus).	25 interviews
<i>Representatives of business incubators</i>	Business incubators in Lithuania, Latvia, Finland, Belgium and Cyprus.	10 interviews
<i>Social entrepreneurs</i>	Companies that meet the EU standards for social enterprise in Lithuania, Latvia, Finland, Belgium and Cyprus.	20 interviews
<i>Students</i>	Masters and Bachelor students from LAB University of Applied Sciences (Lithuania), Thomas More Kempen (Belgium), Rezekne Academy of Technologies (Latvia) and Nicosia University (Cyprus).	100 students : 2 groups per country, 10 people per group
<i>Support organisations</i>	Organisations supporting SUs or social enterprise associations from Lithuania, Latvia, Finland, Belgium and Cyprus	5 interviews
<i>University lecturers</i>	Lecturers from LAB University of Applied Sciences (Lithuania), Thomas More Kempen (Belgium), Rezekne Academy of Technologies (Latvia) and Nicosia University (Cyprus).	A single survey with 10 questions.

Research results

The key findings of the study were that, as revealed above, the competences of social entrepreneurs are similar to those of entrepreneurship in general, but because of the social mission, some of the entrepreneurial competences are becoming more important than others.

It should also be noted that, depending on the sector and business model, social entrepreneurs need to consider different ownership and stakeholder groups and build value chains and networks accordingly. The study has crystallised 5 key competences for a successful career as a social entrepreneur:

1. innovative thinking

2. networking, or communications;
3. problem-solving skills
4. cooperation, or working together;
5. identifying and creating societal values

Today, modern higher education is focusing on the introduction of innovative teaching methods. The right combination of traditional and innovative teaching methods helps to develop students' cognitive interests and creative abilities and to prepare them for practical work. In today's fast-changing world, where competition is becoming fiercer by the day, students' lack of practical experience and skills can become a serious and significant barrier to their employability and career development. In this context, modern teaching methods aimed at developing certain practical skills in students are becoming increasingly popular. The departure from the classical academic tactic of lecture-seminar-exam is becoming widespread, especially in Western universities. The use of various new methods greatly enhances the process of learning the material, teaches students to think and actually apply the knowledge acquired in lectures.

Conclusions and suggestions

The main impacts for the development of students' social entrepreneurship competences could be:

Educators at all levels of education to try to change the paradigm and stereotypes about the purpose of entrepreneurship by explaining to students that business profits can be not only a financial benefit, but can be calculated as a value, or a contribution to society, providing a livelihood for the entrepreneur and solving an important societal problem.

In Universities, in all curricula, to update and stimulate lecturers to use examples from social enterprise practice in the organisation of the study process.

In Universities, when organising the study process, find a way to create free electives or organise hackathons related to the acquisition of social economics guidelines, working more practically in groups made up of students from different specialisations or even students from different Latvian or foreign universities. This will allow students to develop both communication and innovative thinking competences.

Universities, in collaboration with local authorities, to find opportunities to create a community collaboration platform where, working together, various local entrepreneurs, business angels, lecturers and other stakeholders can advise students on career opportunities in social entrepreneurship and addressing local community issues.

In an era characterised by complex global challenges and growing socio-economic disparities, the cultivation of social entrepreneurial competences among students is paramount for creating a more equitable and sustainable future. Successful support systems and programmes aimed at developing students' social entrepreneurship competences will help achieve the Global Sustainable Development Goals faster and more effectively.

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