

Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Final-year Social Area Students' Intervention Initiatives Intentions

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Abstract: Education for social entrepreneurship in higher education is an area in consolidation. However, social innovation is a labour market requirement to which students in the social field should not be oblivious. We sought to explore the interests in the field of social entrepreneurship - type of proposal, target audience, theme/social issue to be solved - of 94 final year students of a Social Education degree, 96% of whom were female. An *ad hoc* questionnaire was used. In analysing the content of the answers, the intention to develop a social project after graduation or to create a social support product/material prevailed, 32% and 31% respectively. Less expressive were the intention to innovate an existing organisation or to create a company/organisation, 17% and 16%, in that order - the latter perhaps due to the greater risk it entails. In terms of the proposals target population, there was a variety of groups covered (to be expected in this social area), with children and young people/school community and the elderly standing out (27% and 26%), as well as people with disabilities (19%) and children and young people at risk (15%). Other groups in vulnerable situations, such as the unemployed, immigrants and refugees, prisoners, informal carers and the homeless (between 2 and 6%) were mentioned to a lesser extent. Ideas included, above all, the implementation of skills training programmes (33%). This was followed by the distribution of essential goods/access to services (19%), artistic activities to promote inclusion (17%) and support services at home (14%). Other possibilities included leisure initiatives, intergenerational activities, support to promote employability, infoinclusion actions and the development of support materials (between 3 and 8%). Despite the relevance of the proposals, the majority (69%) did not anticipate any source of funding (public funds or corporate/organisational social responsibility). These students training should provide for the development of entrepreneurial skills centred on creativity and social innovation and, in a structured way, knowledge of financing options and business plans design using management skills, which are equally fundamental in the social area.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship; Innovation; Social Intervention; Students; Higher Education

1. Introduction

Currently, the responsibility of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) goes beyond the concern with graduation and certification of graduates, committing themselves to the overall training of students, facilitating their preparation for the growing demands of the job market (Fernandes and Amante, 2022). A set of transferable skills (soft skills), which are structural for career development, are important here, as they make it easier to adapt to the opportunities and challenges of the world of work, which is increasingly demanding and undergoing permanent and accelerated change (Qizi, 2020). The personal and social development of students and graduates must therefore be promoted, so that they are critical citizens and can seek their own personal and professional fulfilment (Monteiro, Gonçalves and Santos, 2019).

In this context, it is essential to include curricular units on entrepreneurship and innovation in study plans, to create support services for career preparation at HEI and to implement co-creation projects joint with community organizations, along with other initiatives that enhance the development of training actions that complement the formal curriculum and offer opportunities for students to get involved in innovative actions, emphasising research in the area (Arulmani et al, 2014; Fernandes, 2013; Fernandes and Amante, 2022; Orteu, 2017).

The adaptive transition of students to the job market should include the concerns of HEI leaders, as those of the researchers and teachers. Therefore, updating training in pedagogical practices centred on the student is the biggest teachers' challenge. These innovative practices have proved promising in some HEI, with benefits in students' transition job market skills (Carvalho et al, 2022; Fernandes and Amante, 2022). Success in promoting these soft skills, essential in a globally competitive world of work, has been related to the involvement of academia in projects with organizations and community (Fernandes and Amante, 2022; Mangas, 2020).

In Portugal, self-employment was at the forefront of employment dynamics in pre-pandemic, with 57% of created jobs between 2018 and 2019 (INE, 2025). The global daily life great impact of public health crisis (Covid-19 pandemic) at 2020-21, was even more unpredictable on the world of work (Link to Leaders, 2020): i) working methods have changed, with increasing use of technology (remote work), and the economy was strongly shaken; ii) citizens and companies/organizations were more resilient, and multiple opportunities also arose, emerging many innovative projects in all areas, including social ones. In 2024, a new maximum of employed population in Portugal was reached, due to the increase of self-employed workers (INE, 2025).

A new political commitment is needed to promote entrepreneurship, considering what is happening in Portugal and around the world (as a result of the digital transformation of the labour market, the financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, conflicts between countries), in order to sustain competitive and innovative advantages that promote inclusion and social cohesion (Moreira, 2023).

In fact, entrepreneurship has growing of interest, not only in economics, but also in the humanities and social sciences (Baggio and Baggio, 2014). Also, within organizations, human resources have progressively become a more important source of richness (Noutel et al, 2021).

The entrepreneurship and innovation as content in training programs, a priority for HEI, allows for the development of essential skills for creating business ideas and self-employment, but also soft employability skills (entrepreneurial attitude, creativity, teamwork, communication, among others). So, is imperative to consolidate the education for social entrepreneurship in higher education (Filipova et al, 2024; Mónico, 2021; Ndou, 2021), emphasizing the active methodologies role (e.g. analysis of social issues/cases) which greatly promote empathy and proactivity (Pischetola and Martins, 2021). Innovation is a job market requirement, crossing all training areas (Fernandes et al, 2021; von Thienen, Royalty and Meinel, 2017), especially social innovation, such a particular challenge for students in the social field (Roslan, 2020).

In this paper, we sought to explore the social entrepreneurship interests of final year students at a Social Education degree.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

A quantitative exploratory study was developed, with 94 finalists of a degree in Social Education, mostly female (96%), which in fact translates the reality of this professional area.

2.2 Instruments and Procedure

An *ad hoc* questionnaire was used, filled out in the context of class, and the ethical assumptions that include informed consent were guaranteed. In addition to the sign of the informed consents by the participants, to ensure the confidentiality and protection of the personal data obtained, the researchers were available to clarify any doubts following the reading of the document or later. In relation to the data, a content analysis of the emerging categories was carried out.

3. Presentation and Discussion of the Results

The content analysis (Figure 1) showed the intention to develop a social project after graduation or to create a social support product/material prevailed, 32% and 31% respectively. Less expressive were the intention to innovate an existing organisation (17%) or to create a company/organisation (16%), the latter perhaps due to the greater risk.

Participants prefer to invest in something from scratch (namely a project/product/material - 63%), rather than innovate/transform something that already exists, perhaps associated with their greater decision-making/intervention power. However, this willingness to invest in something new is not an intention to create a company/organization, possibly due to greater economic and even psychological demands/risks. Policy education and risk management should include how to assess and mitigate the potential negative impacts of business activities (Al Issa, Thai and Nguyen, 2024).

In another study in Portugal, a high proportion of the university students surveyed (76%) considered entrepreneurship as an alternative to employment. However, most of them (82%) were hesitant about the

viability of an entrepreneurial activity in the current context, considering that all situations should be carefully considered (Moreira, 2023).

There are multiple factors to consider, discussed in the literature (e.g. Moreira, 2023; Xanthopoulou and Sahinidis, 2024), which influence higher education students' decisions to become self-employed or start a business. These include contextual factors, such as the economic and socio-political environment; motivational factors, such as needs, individual characteristics and personality, ranging from self-confidence, risk-taking and autonomy; and factors associated with personal history, such as the impact of education, the influence of family and peers.

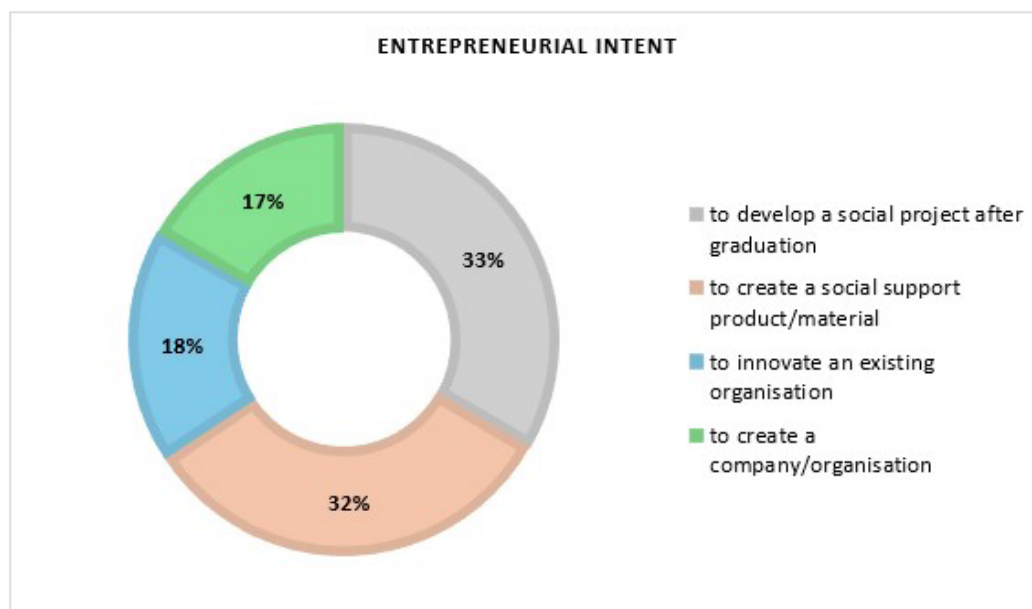


Figure 1: Percentages related to entrepreneurial intent

About the proposals target population (Figure 2), there were many groups covered (as expected in this social area), with children and young people/school community and the elderly standing out (27% and 26%), as well as people with disabilities (19%) and children and young people at risk (15%). Other groups in vulnerable situations, such as the unemployed, immigrants and refugees, prisoners, informal carers and the homeless were mentioned to a lesser extent (between 2 and 6%).

The choice of the school community (in first place, but only 1% away from the following) may be related to the greater affirmation of the role of the social educator in the school to respond to social transformations, with new roles associated with it (Martins, 2020; Prada, Novo and Lima, 2025).

Concerning the elderly, perhaps the 51.7% (136.4% to 188.1%) of increasing aging rate on the Portuguese population from 2013 to 2023 (PORDATA, 2025) influenced the perception that it is a privileged employment area. In fact, it coincides with the gap in terms of social services for this population, since, according to the *Carta Social*, in 2022, the average coverage rate of the main responses in mainland Portugal was limited to 11.6%, with a decrease starting in 2021 (GEP, 2024).

Reinforcing this idea is the following group (people with disabilities), in which the institutions are also insufficient, with 4.2% of coverage rate in mainland Portugal in 2022, according to the same source.

Regarding children/young people at risk, the interest may be related to the issues mentioned in relation to the school community, of which they are also a part, and with whom the role of the social educator also stands out.

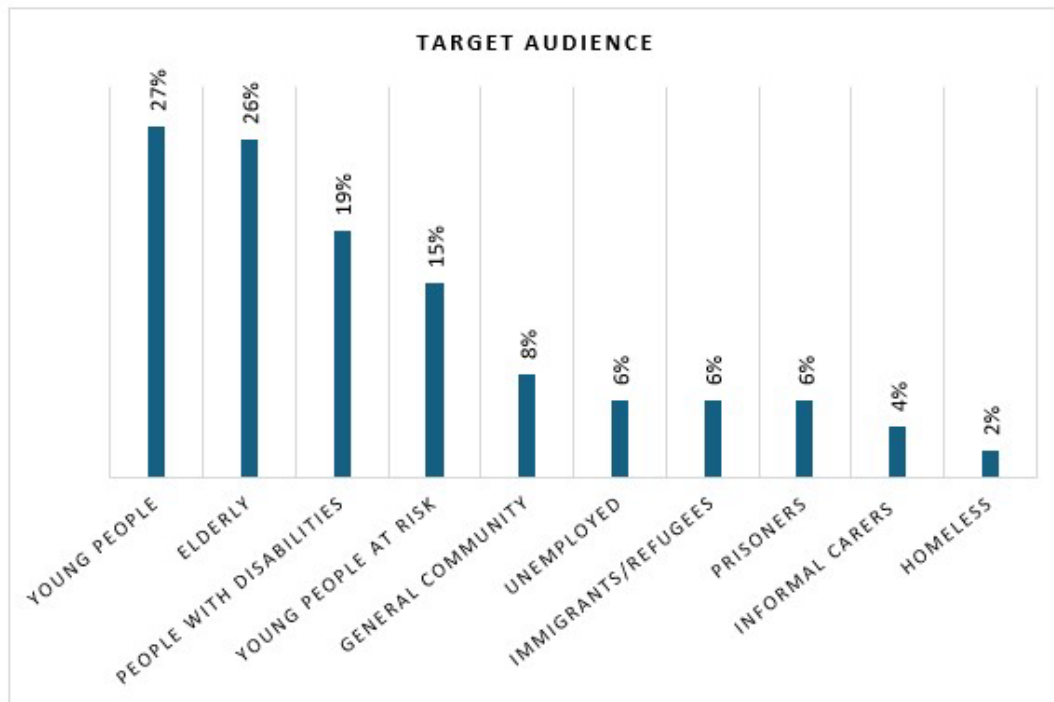


Figure 2: Percentage of entrepreneurial ideas by target audience

The type of project ideas (Figure 3) includes, above all, the implementation of skills training programmes (33%). This is followed by the distribution of essential goods/access to services (19%), inclusion by artistic activities (17%) and support services at home (14%). Other possibilities include leisure initiatives, intergenerational activities, support to promote employability, infoinclusion actions and the development of support materials (between 3 and 8%).

Unsurprisingly, the results are associated above all with the most targeted populations in the proposals (children and young people, the elderly, and people with disabilities), and those in the most fragile situations (particularly the elderly and people with disabilities), closely followed by children and young people at risk.

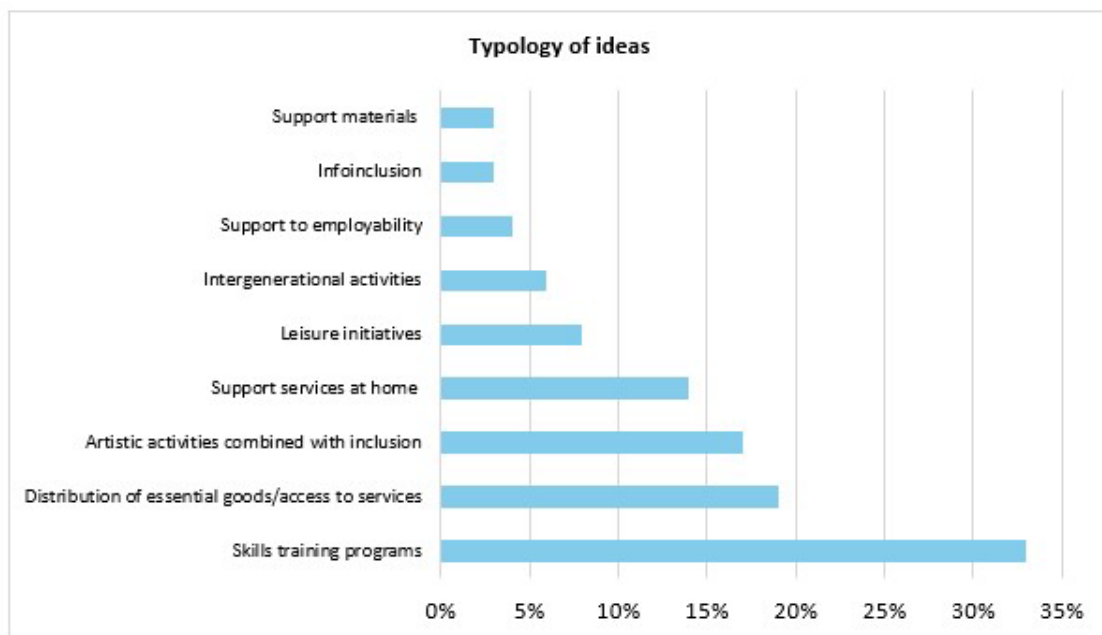


Figure 3: Percentage of ideas typology

Despite the relevance of the proposals, the majority (69%) do not anticipate any source of funding (public funds or corporate/organisational social responsibility), perhaps related to a very young population of participants

(due to the reduction in the number of years of the post-Bologna degree), eager for ideas and projects, with little experience to anticipate needs/resources, in which emotional inferences and training can be relevant.

It is also interesting to note that research into entrepreneurial intention has focused on the area of administration - 32.6% of the world's publications - also focusing on business management. As for the social sciences, the figure drops to 21.8%, still a far cry from the lower percentage of 2% in arts and humanities. At a country level, Malaysia has the largest number of publications on the factors that influence university students' entrepreneurial intentions, which can be justified by the strategic emphasis on entrepreneurship as a catalyst for economic development, entrepreneurship education in the academic system, funding and support for research, etc. (Xanthopoulou and Sahinidis, 2024).

In Portugal, the students with a high orientation towards entrepreneurship are more represented in "engineering, technology and architecture", "law, management and administration", "tourism, sports and leisure" courses, compared to "social sciences, humanities and education" and "exact sciences, health and environment", which also attests that entrepreneurship in higher education is centred on courses in which men predominate (Moreira, 2023). Therefore, once again, these are not isolated issues, but distinct factors influencing entrepreneurial intention, which should be studied and possible gaps overcome.

4. Conclusion

The results leave us optimistic about the development of entrepreneurial skills in students in the social field, while at the same time highlight the need for them to be enhanced and worked on. The importance of HEI in fulfilling this role calls for curricular requirements that include experiences that facilitate the development of entrepreneurial skills centred on creativity and social innovation and, in a structured way, knowledge of financing options and business plans design using management skills, which are equally fundamental in the social area. More than the areas in which young students intend to invest, it is above all important at this stage to understand their desire to create their own jobs, with a wealth of ideas, and to take advantage of this intrinsic motivation to work on skills that will enable them to be successful. This is even more important as employment figures worsen, but also as social vulnerability increases because of the successive crises we have been going through due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the economic challenges arising from recent North American policies.

One limitation of the study is the dimension of the sample, which could be extended. The comparison of results could also be more robust, considering that the literature focuses on entrepreneurship in higher education students in general, and not so much in social courses. It may therefore be pertinent to carry out future research with students in that area from different universities and with longitudinal approaches, allowing for a more in-depth assessment of the impact of addressing these contents/skills development on graduates' career paths. The factors that interfere with this process should also be analysed.

Acknowledgements

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Ethics Declaration

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. The informed consent was guaranteed from the participants.

AI Declaration

No AI tools were used in the development of the paper.

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