

Value Co-Creation in Social Innovation Ecosystem: The Translational Role of Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract: Creating value for social innovation in developing countries often faces many challenges. The Quadruple Helix model emphasizes the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in promoting social change. This study sheds light on the role of HEIs in developing countries by examining their contribution to the development of a social innovation ecosystem. Data were collected from two focus groups and 13 interviews with various stakeholders in Vietnam. Findings show that HEIs play a translational role by aligning the different perspectives and resources of various actors within the ecosystem. Furthermore, by following a bimodal approach that simultaneously shifts their strategy toward innovation and promotes the interpersonal governance of professionals, HEIs overcome the institutional void and provide a protective space for innovation initiatives necessary for the formation of social innovation in the country.

Keywords: HEIs, Value Co-Creation, Social Innovation, Vietnam, Service-Dominant Logic, Professional Network Community

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly becoming more important in addressing social challenges for national growth. The Quadruple Helix model contends that interactions among government, industry, and community are crucial to driving social change and transformation. Collaborating with these groups is challenging because they may have different, even conflicting, interests. Often, HEIs need to integrate diverse resources of these stakeholders and align their various needs to generate value in achieving system goals. Research has shown that HEIs often serve as facilitators of knowledge sharing (Chen et al, 2024) and as knowledge contributors (Marra, 2022) in addressing social issues. These practices are mainly found in developed or Western countries, leaving the phenomenon in developing countries underexplored.

Adopting the Service-Dominant Logic and the Professional Network Community theory, this research investigates the value co-creation activities of Vietnamese HEIs to support the formation and development of the country's social innovation ecosystem. The paper first presents a literature review that discusses two theoretical frameworks that provide the foundation for investigating HEIs' activities and highlights gaps in the existing body of research on social innovation ecosystems. Subsequently, the research implementation will be discussed in the methodology section, followed by the findings. The paper concludes with implications for HEIs and stakeholders to promote the effectiveness of social innovation ecosystems in developing countries.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical frameworks, Service-Dominant (S-D) logic and Professional Learning Community (PLC), lay the foundation for this study. From the S-D lens, service provision is implemented through interconnected systems of actors, who exchange resources and co-create value. This perspective moves away from the goods-centered view toward a service-centered logic, where service is defined as the application of specialized competencies, particularly skills or knowledge, for the benefit of another party (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008). Adopting this

view, this study considers HEIs as key resource integrators that collaborate with other actors to create value for customers (Vargo and Lusch, 2016; Ystrom et al, 2025).

Complementing the S-D logic, PLC explains how educators transition from professional isolation to cross-institutional networks to share knowledge and enhance pedagogical value for learners. These networks are formed by both educators' intrinsic motivation and institutional support, which create opportunities for professional collaboration (Katz and Earl, 2010). In line with S-D logic, PLC theory focuses on enhancing educators' competence, enabling them to create greater value for students. While the collaborative activities are carried out among professionals, institutions play a vital role in supporting the formation and growth of such networks (Prenger et al, 2017).

2.2 Literature Review

Social innovation ecosystems (SIE) are generally described as dynamic, multi-actor networks that collaboratively generate and sustain socially beneficial change. Scholars define these through various lenses: structural models like the Quadruple Helix (Howald et al., 2016); behavioral mechanisms focused on resource integration (Babu et al., 2020); and political perspectives addressing power asymmetries (Avelino et al., 2019). Pel et al (2020) further conceptualize SIEs as empowering constellations built on local embedding, translocal connectivity, and discursive resonance.

Previous studies have revealed various roles of HEI in the development of an educational ecosystem. The most common function of HEIs in supporting their stakeholders is to create networks that drive systemic societal change and address social challenges (Katz and Earl, 2010; Panetti et al, 2019; Pel et al, 2020; Tallinn University, 2023). In addition, SIEs are designed to serve the educational purpose of student learning and professional skill enhancement (Prenger et al, 2017) or to facilitate the translation of scientific knowledge into commercially and socially valuable outcomes (Chen et al, 2024).

The function of HEIs requires them to build relationships and interact with a wide range of external and internal stakeholders to achieve the system's purposes, including government, not-for-profit organizations, industries, communities, academics, and students. In their relationships with these stakeholders, HEIs often engage in various activities and play different roles in supporting the ecosystem.

In their relationships with other organizations, HEIs have been found to actively collaborate with commercial enterprises to facilitate knowledge transfer from researchers to market recipients (Chen et al, 2024) or to support students in accessing high-level expertise (Panetti et al, 2019). They also work with social enterprises to address community issues (Ahmed, 2024; Leipik and Urmanavičienė, 2023). A more common activity of HEIs is conducting research to address social challenges.

While Western and developed countries have received much scholarly attention in this area, the role and inter-organizational activities of HEIs in developing countries in supporting social innovation are underexplored. Understanding how HEI can help to transform social practices in developing countries is important, as it can shed light on how to respond to social challenges in this area. This prompts the following research question for the current study.

RQ: How do Higher Education Institutions in developing countries engage with their stakeholders in the value co-creation process to foster the formation of a social innovation ecosystem in an emerging economy?

We focus on Vietnam, an emerging country that has explicitly leaned toward social innovation as part of its economic growth (STAMEQ, 2024). To address the question, the following research objectives are proposed.

1. To examine the value of co-creation activities and resource integration practices performed by HEIs in their interactions with these stakeholders.
2. To analyze the mechanisms and strategies HEIs employ to align conflicting stakeholder needs and foster ecosystem formation.
3. To evaluate the role of HEIs in providing legitimacy and capacity-building support for social innovation activities.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study is situated within Vietnam's social innovation ecosystem in its early stages. While the social enterprise law was enacted to provide a formal legal definition, its practical implementation remains limited. This is largely due to persistent institutional voids, in which a significant lack of stakeholder awareness of social enterprises is compounded by a dearth of clear policy guidance and specialized support mechanisms.

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate how HEIs engage with stakeholders to foster the formation of a social innovation ecosystem in an emerging economy. Given the exploratory nature of our research question, a qualitative approach is most suitable for capturing in-depth insights and multiple perspectives on complex organizational interactions (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

3.2 Data Collection and Sampling

The study utilized purposive sampling to select participants who possess significant experience or involvement within the social innovation landscape. Data were gathered through 13 semi-structured interviews and two focus groups (Table 1). Participants include not only HEI leaders but also lecturers, policy makers, practitioners, social entrepreneurs, and NGOs, ensuring a holistic view of the ecosystem.

Table 1: List of Interviewees

No.	Type of Data Collection	Interviewee Code	Type of Stakeholders
1	FG1 (Focus Group 1)	P15a	Intermediary
2		P15b	Social entrepreneur
3		P15c	Academic
4		P15d	Academic
5		P15e	Academic
6		P15f	Academic
7	FG2 (Focus Group 2)	P14b	Academic
8		P14a	Academic
9	Interview	P1	Policy Maker
10	Interview	P2	Policy Maker
11	Interview	P3	HEI Leader
12	Interview	P5	HEI Leader
13	Interview	P6	Academic
14	Interview	P7	Academic
15	Interview	P8	Academic
16	Interview	P9	Academic
17	Interview	P10	Intermediary
18	Interview	P11	Intermediary
19	Interview	P12	NGO
20	Interview	P13a	Social entrepreneur
21	Interview	P13b	Social entrepreneur

3.3 Data Analysis

To ensure academic rigor and transparency, the study follows the hybrid thematic analysis framework developed by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), which integrates deductive (theory-driven) and inductive (data-driven) coding. This approach allows for the interpretation of raw data through the lens of established theories while remaining open to new insights that emerge directly from participants' discourse. The analysis progressed through six systematic stages:

- *Stage 1 & 2: Developing the Code Manual and Testing Reliability.* An initial code manual was developed *a priori*, based on the research questions and our dual theoretical framework: Service-Dominant (S-D) Logic and Professional Learning Community (PLC) theory. These theories provided the foundation for identifying deductive codes related to resource integration and knowledge sharing. To establish the "postulate of logical consistency", the research team tested the manual on sample transcripts to ensure the codes were applicable and consistently understood.
- *Stage 3: Summarizing Data and Identifying Initial Themes.* The research team engaged in deep data immersion by reading and summarizing transcripts of interviews and focus groups. This process allowed for the identification of potential sub-themes, such as the "embryonic state" of the ecosystem and the prevalence of "institutional voids" in the Vietnamese context.
- *Stage 4: Applying the Template of Codes and Additional Coding.* The *priori* template was applied to the entire dataset. Simultaneously, inductive coding was employed to capture nuances not covered by the initial template. For instance, while "Relational Management" was a predefined theme, codes such as "trust-based actions" and "boundary spanning" emerged as specific, data-driven descriptors of how HEI actors navigate informal networks to overcome administrative rigidity.
- *Stage 5: Connecting the Codes and Identifying Themes.* We clustered the codes to discover overarching patterns, focusing on the three central themes of this study: Relational Management, Networked Learning, and Value Co-creation. This stage involved analyzing how HEIs act as central hubs to align the conflicting needs of different stakeholders through strategic partnerships.
- *Stage 6: Corroborating and Legitimizing Themes.* Finally, the themes were refined to ensure they accurately represented the initial data. This final interpretive phase confirmed that value co-creation in the Vietnamese ecosystem is a "tripartite" process between HEIs, practitioners, and students, resulting in a crucial "mindset transformation". By adhering to this systematic trail of evidence, the study demonstrates "interpretive rigor" and ensures that the findings are directly grounded in the participants' subjective realities.

4. Findings

The activities and strategies of HEI in collaboration with various stakeholders are centered around their relational management to align different groups and how they can support the network learning and value co-creation in the ecosystem.

4.1 Managing Stakeholders and Synergizing Resources

Based on the Service-Dominant (S-D) logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2016; Yström et al, 2025) and Professional Learning Community (PLC) (Prenger et al, 2017), we found that HEIs acted as hubs for social innovation, driven by a strategic shift in leadership vision and institutional mission. This leadership commitment facilitated boundary spanning through education, training, research, and stakeholder partnerships. However, these collaborations often remain decoupled from formal administrative structures, relying instead on informal, trust-based networks.

4.1.1 Leadership as a Foundation

Leadership is the primary catalyst for orienting stakeholder relationship management (SRM) (Anholon et al, 2026; Hazenberg et al, 2016). Recognising the significance of social responsibility, HEI leaders expressed a strong willingness to collaborate: *"We welcome all stakeholders, not only startups... Our goal is to serve the community."* (P3, HEI leader). This collaborative intent aligns with institutional long-term plans to cultivate an internal innovation ecosystem:

In the long term, the university aims to build an environment where students proactively engage in creative and innovative activities. (P4, HEI leader)

When discussing the role of social innovation in institutional strategic development, leaders confirmed that these initiatives are central to their core missions. As one leader noted: *They [Social innovation and entrepreneurship] are truly part of our university's mission.* (P3, HEI leader)

Furthermore, HEI leaders shared their plan to translate these missions into formal policies and actions. Collaborating with stakeholders to integrate social innovation and entrepreneurship was viewed as a strategic pathway to enhance their educational programs:

In the near future, we will need to shape policies... From our university's perspective, we are beginning to develop related policies [as] a way forward in teaching. (P5, HEI leader)

The commitment of HEI leadership toward social innovation and entrepreneurship—underpinned by a partnership-oriented approach—provides a robust foundation for staff and lecturers to actively engage with external stakeholders (Katz and Earl, 2010). Consequently, academic and administrative staff demonstrate a high level of awareness regarding social innovation and the value of collaborative partnerships:

The role of the university is threefold: first, to advance research in this field; second, to develop innovative human resources; and third, to provide students with volunteer and charitable opportunities to engage with the community. In this capacity, the university serves as a strategic connector, addressing the needs of various stakeholders through its diverse programs (P8, Academic).

4.1.2 Boundary Spanning and Stakeholders' Relationship Mechanism

This strategic orientation has facilitated boundary spanning across multiple levels of the institution (Katz and Earl, 2010; Prenger et al, 2017). Internally, these efforts are evidenced by the systematic integration of social innovation into both formal curricula and extracurricular programming, often supported by international programs like the British Council:

Over the last three years, we have integrated social innovation and social entrepreneurship modules into our entrepreneurship courses. This progress stems from lecturer training programs organised by the British Council and Active Citizens. We also host short courses on social innovation for people outside the university. (P7, Academic)

Externally, faculty acts as intermediaries between students and the social economy:

I am currently piloting a collaborative project with the social enterprise Tò He. Their president is eager to partner with academic institutions to support his ongoing initiatives. Through these connections, we can connect students with internship opportunities and support their social innovation ideas.- (P9, Academic)

It was obvious that HEIs could be central hubs for multi-stakeholder partnerships, fostering a collaborative ecosystem where academics, practitioners, policymakers, and social organisations work together to promote social innovation (Gustafsson et al, 2026; Mason et al, 2020). The collaborations among the stakeholders were mutually transformative: while the university significantly enhanced its institutional capabilities through these external connections, practitioners and social organisations simultaneously achieved their own strategic objectives (Jackson and Temperley, 2006; Nguyen et al, 2023; Ystrom et al, 2025). This exchange of resources created a reciprocal value chain tailored to each actor's specific needs. For instance, enterprises sought access to the business school's human capital (P12, NGO) and required technical expertise in areas such as business development and impact evaluation (P13a, P15b, SE). Similarly, NGOs looked to the university for expanded training opportunities for academics, while students and short-course trainees relied on practitioners, experts, and scholarly guidance to transform their social innovation concepts into viable projects (P15a, Intermediary).

However, despite the strategic intent, these collaborative relationships relied primarily on trust-based, interpersonal networks rather than formal institutional mechanisms. Lecturers characterised these engagements as "voluntary," "individualised," or lacking a "formal coordination framework" (P9, P15c, 15e, P15f; Academic). External partners echoed this sentiment, emphasising the necessity of a pre-existing personal connection to initiate collaboration:

We don't know which department to contact... each university operates differently. (P15c, SE)

Consequently, stakeholders often bypassed official channels to work directly with lecturers, whom they perceived as the most "accessible and helpful in implementation" (P11, Intermediary). Participants' insights suggested that although there was a strategic commitment to social innovation, these partnerships were

primarily driven by individual initiative and had not yet been fully integrated into the institution's formal administrative structure. This reveals a decoupling strategy in which international governance prevails to overcome the gap between formal structures and practical implementation.

4.2 Networked Learning and Value Co-Creation

The results highlight how actors within the emerging social innovation ecosystem gradually shift from fragmented collaboration to a networked learning structure that facilitates value co-creation among multiple stakeholders. The findings suggest that the sustainability of the ecosystem depends largely on ongoing knowledge exchange and collaborative learning processes. Our findings show that this process occurs through three connected mechanisms: lateral learning, knowledge integration, and mindset change, which together illustrate how networked learning practices support value co-creation within the ecosystem.

The first mechanism is lateral learning, which involves the exchange of knowledge horizontally among actors, especially among HEIs and academics. Without a centralized coordinating authority or a "main conductor" of the ecosystem, actors rely heavily on informal professional networks to share knowledge and collectively build capacities. One mechanism frequently mentioned by respondents is the Training-of-Trainers (ToT) programs organized by international NGOs, which offer opportunities for academics from different universities to collaboratively learn social innovation methods and pedagogical practices. Importantly, the knowledge acquired through these initiatives does not remain confined to training sessions but cascades across institutions. Lecturers who participate in these programs often adapt and transfer the knowledge into their teaching practices and professional networks.

"Many (of my students) had never heard of the concept before the course... But the program's most significant impact was personal transformation: participants shifted from indifference... to an entrepreneurial mindset." (P14a, Academic)

These dynamics reflect the features of networked professional learning communities, where professionals work across institutional boundaries to share knowledge and enhance practices (Jackson and Temperley, 2006; Katz and Earl, 2010; Prenger et al, 2017). For example, respondents shared cases where universities collaboratively experimented with entrepreneurship and innovation curriculum models:

"With the knowledge learned, they will propose a solution, which could be supporting social enterprises such as strategic cash flow, or managing revenue and expenditure." (P14a, Academic)

Such collaborative experimentation demonstrates how networked learning structures allow institutions to co-develop capabilities and collectively explore new educational practices, reinforcing the role of HEIs as knowledge hubs within the ecosystem.

While lateral learning facilitates knowledge exchange among actors, knowledge integration represents a deeper stage of networked learning, in which shared insights become embedded in institutional practices. Several respondents reported that social innovation has gradually been incorporated into formal academic programs, particularly within business and entrepreneurship education. At some universities, the topic has evolved from an optional subject to a compulsory module in the Business Administration curriculum. Teaching methods have also shifted toward experiential learning approaches, including service-learning and project-based learning, allowing students to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world social challenges.

These practices illustrate how HEIs operate as multi-actor learning platforms, integrating inputs from NGOs, practitioners, and academic communities into structured learning experiences. From the perspective of S-D Logic, such integration is a key process that combines diverse resources and competencies to generate shared value within the ecosystem (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Through these processes, HEIs move beyond their traditional role as knowledge providers and instead function as facilitators of collaborative learning and value creation among ecosystem actors.

The most significant manifestation of value co-creation identified in the findings is a transformation in students' mindsets. Respondents emphasized that the primary objective of social innovation education is not merely to equip students with technical knowledge but to reshape their perspectives on entrepreneurship and social responsibility. The focus should move from "creating enterprises" to cultivating individuals with an "entrepreneurial spirit and social mindset" (P1, Policy Maker).

This transformation is not produced by a single actor but emerges through collaborative interactions among multiple stakeholders. Practitioners contribute practical knowledge and methodologies, universities provide the

institutional learning environment, and students actively develop their own projects using local resources and addressing community needs. This process involves a tripartite collaboration between HEIs, practitioners, and students, enabling learners to move from passive knowledge recipients to active social innovators (*P15b, SE*).

Consequently, students begin to perceive themselves not only as future employees but as agents capable of addressing social challenges through entrepreneurial initiatives. This outcome demonstrates how networked learning processes ultimately translate into value co-creation, generating both individual transformation and broader societal impact.

Overall, the findings suggest that networked learning is a critical mechanism for enabling value co-creation in emerging social innovation ecosystems. Through lateral learning, knowledge integration, and mindset transformation, HEIs and their partners collectively construct new forms of knowledge and capabilities that strengthen the ecosystem's capacity for social innovation.

5. Discussion

HEIs promote social innovation by functioning as intellectual engines and innovation hubs. This research demonstrates that a strategic shift toward innovation is an essential enabler of value co-creation. The study's findings shed light on the strategies of HEIs for supporting the value co-creation process to cultivate a social innovation system in developing countries.

First, HEIs play a central role in an ecosystem that promotes social innovation when they function as intellectual engines, transforming societal mindsets (Pel et al, 2020; Prenger et al, 2018). Being an innovation hub (Pel et al, 2020; Babu et al, 2020), HEIs serve as key resource integrators and facilitate value co-creation to align the perspectives of various stakeholders (Babu et al, 2020). In line with previous studies (Katz and Earl, 2010; Jacobides et al, 2018), this research shows that a strategic shift of HEIs toward innovation provides symbolic legitimacy, empowering faculty to conduct innovation-related teaching and research under a moral institutional cover.

Furthermore, when leadership targets innovation outcomes - such as mindset change - rather than mere graduation rates, value co-creation is oriented toward the use of knowledge in real-world application. Students are becoming active social innovators rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Besides, strategic change at the top level enables HEIs to formalize resource sharing and eventually turn informal networks into sustainable structural coordination.

The finding of decoupling how HEIs navigate institutional voids in developing countries. This phenomenon can be viewed as a buffer for innovative action when formal and traditional academic measures have not consistently aligned with social outcomes. This gray area provides a safe place (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) for social innovation to grow without being penalized by rigid administrative requirements and regulations. It is important to note that HEIs overcome this inevitability by allowing interpersonal governance rather than relying on institutional governance. With the dual strategy from both the top - strategic shift - and the bottom - supporting lecturers to act as boundary spanners, HEIs can deal with the institutional void inherent in developing-country systems (Khanna and Palepu, 2010).

An important practical implication from this study is that HEIs should legitimize interpersonal governance by providing resources for their academics to engage in professional network activities. Providing travel budgets or time off for lecturers to network with external stakeholders is valuable in supporting academic innovation-related practices. The connections among these stakeholders can provide additional input into the development of formal structures and help avoid potential friction that might stifle social innovation.

6. Conclusion

This study provides insight into HEIs' practices for supporting the development of social innovation in developing countries. The study's findings support the Quadruple Helix model, which emphasizes the role of HEIs in a multifactor ecosystem for innovation. Furthermore, the research reveals the need for both top-down and bottom-up approaches by HEIs to address the institutional void and facilitate innovation growth in developing countries.

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Ethics Declaration

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AI Declaration

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Grammarly to support language editing, proofreading, and enhancing the manuscript's linguistic coherence. Additionally, Gemini (Google) was used as a qualitative research aid to develop the initial coding system and identify thematic structures from the primary dataset. Following the use of these technologies, the authors conducted a rigorous manual review of all AI-generated suggestions and coding outputs to ensure thematic accuracy. The authors take full responsibility for the final content, the interpretation of the data, and the intellectual integrity of the research findings.

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