

# Enhancing Social Innovation through Active Methodologies in Higher Education

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**Abstract:** Social innovation is now part of the political agenda, funding programs, and economic development policies. The world is changing, and, among other factors, digital transformation is assuming a key driver in the paradigm shift. Challenges appear, and solutions are needed, especially in what concerns human wellbeing and innovative approaches. Higher education can have an important role in this ongoing process, as it can supply an open, transformative platform for collective knowledge creation through research, education, innovation, and culture. In fact, it can shape the future of a knowledge-driven society if it works closely with its stakeholders and tries to meet their needs. Implementing new educational methodologies where students can participate and have a more dynamic and active role can be an effective answer. Combining formal education with non-formal education seems to develop the needed 21st -century skills. This article aims to share some best practices already developed at the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave, based in Portugal. It reflects students' perceptions of their participation in nonformal projects during their formal education. Students seem to get more involved, more committed, and empowered, while they are learning by doing and contacting real cases in real conditions. The results seem to reinforce the notion that there is a strong relationship between learning, innovation, and social innovation. Students feel more holistically integrated into the world and with a lot of developed skills that will differentiate them in the future, in a more sustainable approach.

**Keywords:** Higher Education; Social Innovation; Nonformal Education; Skills; Education for Sustainable Development; Methodologies

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## 1. Introduction

Globalization, uncertainty, and challenges are, among others, some of the buzzwords that characterize our days. The world is changing, and even if 2020 and 2021 have been unforeseen and challenging, 2022 is another testing year: from the continuing COVID-19 pandemic to aggravating climate impacts, shocking humanitarian crises, and the persistent unwinding of hard-won gains in everything from poverty reduction to bridging the gender boundary (Brown, 2021).

The multitude of challenges require commitment and determination in people's ability around the world to stimulate and build trust within and across communities.

Higher education institutions (HEI) can have an important role in this ongoing process, as it can supply an open, transformative platform for collective knowledge creation through research, education, innovation, and culture (Dieguez, et al., 2021). However, HEI is a change-resistant organization (Blass & Hayward, 2014), and there is no specific framework and guidelines on how HEIs should contribute to the social innovation process (Kumari et al., 2019).

Indeed, the process of social innovation in HEIs has been studied in academia from two perspectives: the first, focusing on the process of institutional adaptation of HEIs to the challenges of internal (institutional) (Kezar & Eckel, 2002) and external (ecosystem) change (Cunha, & Benneworth, 2013). These institutional changes can be clarified by the institutional entrepreneurship theory, which investigates the role of HEIs as change agents that support the causes and settings required to start such changes and dynamically contribute to the application of these changes. Changes in the institutional environment improve innovation in teaching and research practices to increase student involvement in social innovation initiatives. Likewise, system change theory focuses on understanding the organization as a system and focuses on the interrelation of constituents that raise work efficiency (Kumari et al., 2019).

The needed changes can be carried out by HEIs by innovating the learning environment and introducing new approaches that help develop the knowledge and skills needed to facilitate social innovation. And there are

several ways in which HEIs can engage with society (CERI, 2021). However, for these changes to be facilitated, HEI needs to broaden its scope to facilitate new learning processes and experiences that require a disruptive innovation model.

Implementing new educational methodologies where students can participate and have a more dynamic and active role can be an effective answer, as education has a vital role to play in developing the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that empower people to provide for and benefit from an inclusive and sustainable future (Abdurashidovich & Botir, 2020). Learning to form clear and purposeful goals, working with others with different perspectives, finding unexploited opportunities and detecting several solutions to great problems will be vital in the upcoming years. Education needs to be more ambitious than preparing young people for work; it needs to equip students with the needed skills to become active, proactive, responsible, and engaged citizens (OECD, 2018).

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Social Innovation**

The concept of social innovation is not easy to define, since it can be related to a research field, a process, a phenomenon, or a concept (Benneworth & Cunha, 2015). It has evolved over time and today is understood by Pinto et al. (2021) as a sense that consciously attempts to better fulfil explicit or latent social needs and problems, through developing capabilities, social and power relations transformation. It aims social change and new social practices that impact people's lives (Mulgan, 2006; Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Nogueira et al., 2017; Westley & McGowan, 2017).

From its beginning, the expression had a "highly socio-political and ideological connotation" (Moulaert et al., 2017, 13) making social leaders reflect and struggle to change the status quo that has kept economic, social, political, cultural and educational systems stagnant (Godin, 2015). It relates to practices and processes linked with collective initiatives, involving private and public initiatives between citizens, individuals, communities, and organizations. It generally aims to promote greater equity and envisages socio-political transformation, while state and market players appear involved in collaboration (Moulaert et al., 2007; Moulaert et al., 2013; Moulaert et al., 2017; Moulaert & MacCallum, 2019).

These initiatives are basically bottom-up initiatives evolving from the local communities, regarding a substitute model of local innovation (Moulaert et al., 2005) and gathering people in formal or informal networks (Moulaert, 2016). How they collaborate, co-create, and manage power during resource integration is what will determine the modes and approaches of social innovation (Kumari et al., 2019).

Concerning co-creation, it should be noted that the co-creation process involves four phases, namely: i) preparation, ii) project design, iii) creation, and iv) implementation. This means that the co-creation process involves the understanding of challenges and problems, while delivering time to think about all possible solutions, team building, and capacity building. It is also linked with challenges' definition, stakeholders' engagement, and process definition. The connection with similar challenges, pilot work resources, and collective creation of solutions is needed before the application and testing of the solution (figure 1).

The resource capabilities of other actors will constrain co-creation activities between actors. Also, resource integration and knowledge diffusion will influence networking and relations between actors (Adner & Kapoor, 2016). Relational capacities to interact with external partners transform social relations by reorganizing resources and power amongst players. Actors with superior relational capabilities can better interact, have greater access to knowledge and resources, and improve the co-creation process. This dissemination of knowledge and research by the combination and change of social relations, governance, and power arrangements are the fundamental components of social innovation (Howaldt & Kopp, 2012): new and innovative solutions to achieve sustainability in society (Schröder & Krüger, 2019).

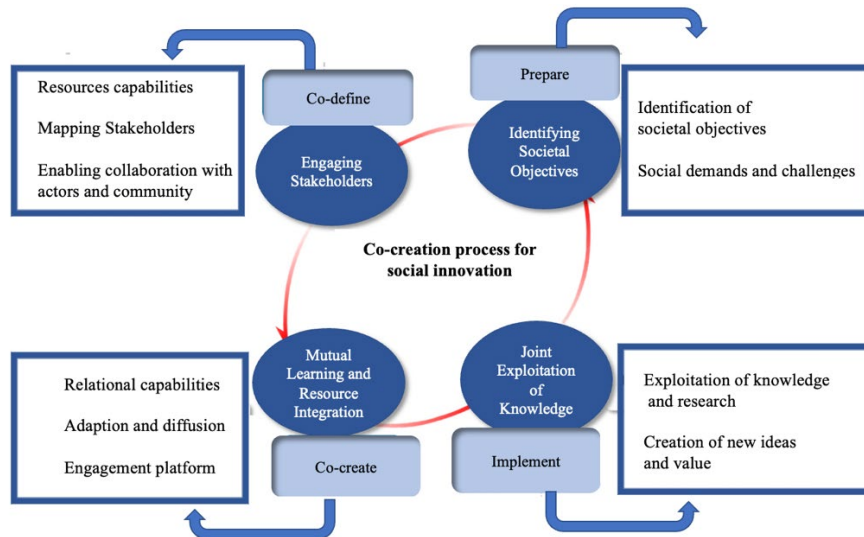


Figure 1: Co-Creation stages for the Social Innovation Process. Source: Nagore and Bynon (2018).

## 2.2 Social Entrepreneurship and active learning methodologies

The concept of social entrepreneurship (SE) designates entrepreneurial activity with a centered social purpose (Austin, Stevenson, & Wei-Skillern, 2006). The singularity of social entrepreneurship tests our postulations about human behaviour and economic action. It also defies our viewpoints on the role of entrepreneurship in society. Social entrepreneurship is as complementary economic approach that is based on value creation and, through its own rules and logic, seems to be able to face and solve some of the most demanding problems in modern society (Santos, 2021).

Social entrepreneurship is the process where social value is created by creating social value through an open range of entrepreneurial activities and initiatives carried by individuals, non-profit organizations, public agencies, or non-profit organizations in partnership with for-profit enterprises, envisaging the equilibrium between corporate profit and social responsibility (Kamran et al., 2022). In recent years, social entrepreneurship has become a social, economic, and cultural phenomenon, especially due to the importance given to social impact instead of economic one (Petrella & Richez-Battesti, 2014). It is an innovative process as it requires being able to attract both entrepreneurs and the society at large to socially pressing issues that do not directly impact profit (de la Garza Carranza et al., 2020).

Some academic research suggests that differences in the knowledge, attitude, and awareness concerning entrepreneurship between business and non-business students are not exploited enough in what relates to the entrepreneurial potential of non-business students (Hussain et al., 2022). Chengalvala and RENTALA (2017) argue that understanding of social entrepreneurship was among the most important influences that affected the intention of students in favor of social entrepreneurship. Given this probability, it seems to make sense to explore a teaching program based on the understanding of the learning process (Collins & Robertson, 2003).

Previous studies in entrepreneurship courses (Täks et al., 2014; Williams Middleton et al., 2014; Heinze, 2020) stressed the importance of understanding the entrepreneurial learning experience in an early phase of a student's course degree. In fact, it seems that when students are engaged in their learning process, develop meaningful learning activities, and critically think about them, they present better results and better prepare them for the challenges of professional situations (Dieguez et al., 2019).

Thus, it is crucial to design undertakings that encourage other important skills, among which are collaboration and problem solving. Active learning is one of the best methods to potentiate learning (Marín & Espinoza, 2021), ranging from simpler to more complex activities (Innovation Institute for Teaching and Learning, 2018). The generated interactions enable students to have an improved understanding of different learning processes that they should go throughout: learning is an active mechanism that differs on the learner's cognitive activities and facilitates to get holistically integrated into the world (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). The Non-formal education was considered to learn "in situ", and one of the most relevant foundations of it is "learn by doing", making non-formal education a basis for active learning and an effective means of education (Marín & Espinoza, 2021).

### **3. Case Study**

#### **3.1 Method**

This article aims to share some best practices already developed in the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave, based in Portugal. It aims to investigate the developed skills of the Management students in a public management bachelor under a curricular unit called "Coursework Project", whose aim is to enhance students' needed skills while working with IAFA (Intercultural Association For ALL), a nonprofit association for the development of international youth mobility projects. For this purpose, a constructivist approach or worldview was selected, which focuses on the subjective meanings that individuals connect with their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The emphasis throughout was on the meanings that the students of Management assigned to the different aspects of the course project, taking into account their opportunity to study abroad for a non-formal learning experience. Data was collected between March 2020 and June 2022. Twelve students participated in different activities, and this sample was taken as the respondents following the purposive sampling technique, which is the most commonly used technique of sampling in qualitative research (Miles et al., 2014). As the research is based on a social constructivist approach, it is important to understand the meanings that the students of a specific discipline attach to their learning experience of a Coursework Project. Therefore, purposive sampling best fit the research approach as it helped to first-rate participants whose experiences were most relevant to the research questions (Hussain et al., 2022).

As for research questions, this article aims to understand if formal education combined with non-formal education can be of added value to students and their learning process. It also intends to reflect on how it can help people to become more aware of its potential role in building a better future. Questions related to motivation, practical knowledge, fears, expectations, and learning outputs.

The data was collected through semi-structured interview questions for the research, and the students were requested to write detailed responses. This approach increases the self-interpretation, which enriches the quality of the data and allows the respondents to be free to say what they really think (Handy & Ross, 2005).

#### **3.2 Coursework Project and IAFA**

Public Management Bachelor in IPCA has one special curricular unit, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year, that aims to develop some of the needed skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as leadership, creativity, and critical thinking (Dieguez et al., 2021). It also targets enhancement of communication, intercultural collaboration, coordination with others, and emotional intelligence, among other skills (Dieguez et al., 2022). This unit can be developed with more theoretical or more practical work. Students usually prefer to work in a more theoretical way, even if the management school encourages students to work near the community and, if possible, internationalize themselves. Unfortunately, the take-up of ERASMUS mobility (formal education) by students is very low. In the last 2 years, only 4 students went to Slovenia, University of Economics and Business, in Maribor.

IAFA is a nonprofit organization that helps to organize erasmus+ projects and activities, encompassing volunteering projects, non-formal educational workshops, and internships. It helps foreign students fit in with Portuguese culture while navigating and overcoming the obstacles of new experiences. It also assists Portuguese students with finding projects abroad and getting past the usual bureaucracy and logistics.

The most recent projects promoted by IAFA and where IPCA's students were involved are: i) Fashion for Tomorrow: a project designed by Kasta Morrely, Romania, in partnership with Portugal and the University of Sfax, in Tunisia; ii) European Solidarity Corps (ESC): previously known as the European Volunteer Service (EVS), ESC is the European Union's volunteering programme and has been supplemented with a focus on the social area; iii) Expanding soft skills borders, PasSPORT in education: a project carried out in an international consortium of partners formed by Sport Club Association "Kasta Morrely Star" Iasi, Romania, Gambitul Damei Chess Club Romania, Gambitul Damei Chess Club Romania, IAFA Portugal, Development Youth & Sports Association, Turkey Exchange: a Centre for youth activism in KRIK, North Macedonia; iv) Cancer Awareness of Young People – Youth Exchange: a project that aims to help young people with cancer by enabling volunteers, increasing knowledge and skills about health rights, and enhancing cooperation between organizations from participating countries by creating a solid and trustable network of partners.

Students participate in these projects, being these projects of short duration, between 1 to 3 weeks, depending on the event.

### **3.3 Data analysis and Findings**

#### *3.3.1 Sociodemographic data*

The participants on this study are twelve students, being 8 men and 4 women, all aged between 18 and 21 years old. They don't work and are willing to go further in their studies, as they want to get a master. 50% of them want to go abroad and 20% of them already have experience in some projects in their local communities. They have good skills in digital media and love to travel and have fun. They prefer to do practical things instead of studying theoretical contents. They care about future and sustainability.

#### *3.3.2 Motivation*

The participants identified why they chose to participate in these events. One of the most frequent reasons mentioned in the data was the proximity to the teacher of the unit and her teaching methods.

*"My teacher was always full of energy when talking about these projects. She told us what she had done when he was our age, and he made me dream and feel alive.*

*"I prefer to participate in more practical activities." I feel more engaged, and I learn more and better".*

*"I was too upset. With COVID, we lost contact with everyone. We could no longer go out and travel. Taking part in the project could be a way to cheer me up and, who knows, be useful to anyone who might need me".*

*"Well, my teacher had good teaching methods and wanted our opinion. It included discussions and debates. We all have opinions, and this is important to me. "*

*Another reason seemed to be the opportunity to participate in a completely unique experience that will be valorized for evaluation. an experience where students could have contact with social and societal problems.*

*"I was very curious. I have done some volunteering when I was young. I liked it. I felt proud of doing volunteer work and, with time, I lost that feeling. Maybe I can feel the same now".*

*"I had never worked with social associations and projects. I was just curious and wanted to learn more".*

*Some students referred to the development of some skills related to sustainable development and a better world.*

*"I felt I could learn something to realize my dream: open an association to help people and make a better world".*

*"I want to really change life in my community and make it better. If I can see and work what others are doing, maybe I can replicate it".*

#### *3.3.3 Practical Knowledge*

The participants revealed their interest and curiosity in directly contacting successful social entrepreneurship organizations, applying theoretical concepts in real life, and, in some cases, starting a social entrepreneurship organization.

*"Sometimes I see in newspapers and media so much information about NGO's in areas where catastrophic things happen. I always felt curious about it: about logistics, stress, comfort, people, volunteers..."*

*"It is easy to find solutions in exams. But how about in real life? How difficult is it? How can we gather people to jointly embrace a challenge? I think I will be able to understand the process if I am there. "*

*"I always wanted to have my project turned into reality. my dream. Maybe with this I will be stronger"- I will do my best. I must enter in".*

#### **3.3.4 Fears**

The participants confessed that they were afraid of not knowing and understanding other cultures, traditions, or habits. Some other students declared that they do not know enough English or any other foreign language to communicate.

*"I always wanted to have my project turned into reality; my dream." But if I do learn nothing? If I do not understand, how can I talk about the experience itself? When will it be my grade?"*

*"And if my experience is not good? If I choose a project with really very different people? Or in a geographical place far from where you are? "*

*Another fear seemed to be the small knowledge of social entrepreneurship concepts among general companies, future employees, and relatives.*

*"After my graduation, what is more valuable in the marketplace? Theoretical or practical coursework? Future employees will appreciate a candidate with this experience?"*

*"I never been abroad. And if I go alone and no one who cares about my security and wellbeing?"*

*"No, my relatives think that if I travel, I only go on holidays. I have to prove them that I am going to work, and I need to feel alive".*

#### **3.3.5 Expectations**

The participants admitted that they want a more practical way of learning and a more proactive involvement in their learning process.

*"I am much better when I am working on a real problem".*

*" I need to see and feel to engage in the process".*

*"I want to define my future. Maybe I can go abroad and find a new world and a future".*

*"I want to run a project. I want to run a sustainable startup".*

*"I want to see things that I never imagined and be able to help/save people".*

#### **3.3.6 Learning Students' Output**

The participants seem to be very enthusiastic about the overall experience. They feel, at the end of the project, that they are more holistically integrated into the world and have developed a lot of skills that will differentiate them in the future.

*"I was afraid of my English, but now I survive, and I want to go to the institute to better learn it. I want to be able to communicate everywhere".*

*"I want to go abroad to do my master's and see the world".*

*"Now it is time to go to rest for a year. I just wanted to finish my studies. What I would do in the future is not relevant. Now, I think in a completely different way. I want to go out and see... and know people... and find solutions for problems".*

*"I just loved it and I think this should be mandatory for all students"-*

*"Now I have a big network and I believe it is important for professional future".*

### **3.4 Discussion**

The Coursework Project, if worked under the protocol with IAFA, boosts the concept of entrepreneurial Higher Education Institution resulting in a collaboration between HEI, IAFA (nonprofit association), and other public and private institutions. The role of HEIs is no longer limited to education, research, innovation, and development. Social engagement with the surrounding society involves collaboration, networking, and collaboration, as well as sustainability and social engagement (Fronzizi et al., 2019).

The teacher's profile and methods seem to be one of the major reasons why students choose to get involved, as they are in contact with someone who has already experienced similar situations. Also, it seems important to have contact with entrepreneurs and volunteers who are engaged in big challenges to understand how they can help. The opportunity to participate in a unique experience is also important as it makes them feel more valuable and with a more precise knowledge of the problem and solution at the end.

Fears are some of the constraints to getting involved, namely fear of different cultures, habits, traditions, loneliness, and logistics in a foreign country. It seems important to give this opportunity to students, as the world is more globalized than ever, even in our country, with different citizens.

More practical and active learning processes are expected from the students, and students want to have more proactive engagement while they are in the HEI. As an output of their experience, participants seem very enthusiastic about the overall experience.

### **4. Conclusion**

This article aims to share some best practices already developed in the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave, based in Portugal. Students seem to get more involved, more committed, and empowered, while they are learning by doing and contacting real cases in real conditions. Multicultural projects, different backgrounds, and profiles, combined with volunteering and joy, can result in unique value proposition experiences, able to develop skills and prepare students to successfully enter the market. Students can have a more active and dynamic role in their education, getting more satisfaction and performance from it.

The results seem to reinforce the notion that there is a strong relationship between learning, innovation, and social innovation. And this can be achieved by combining formal with non-formal education. Individuals, teams, and organizations learn and co-create to find societal solutions and define the process of developing social innovation. Students feel more holistically integrated into the world and with a lot of developed skills that will differentiate them in the future, in a more sustainable approach.

The main limitation is related with the sample size, and findings cannot be generalized for all the HEI

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