

The role of universities in supporting social innovation

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Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are under increased pressure to transform society to serve its increasingly complex needs amidst continued debates about the relevance of higher education and its relationship with community. Universities are key institutional players within their localities because they have been shown to have significant economic and social impacts on their communities (Bonner, 1968; Glasson, 2003). Driving the development and sustainability of social innovation ecosystems in their localities can also drive social innovation globally. In this context, higher education has the potential to address important local and global social issues through education and teaching, research and knowledge creation, resource acquisition and provision, network creation and partnerships, community engagement and knowledge transfer and policy advocacy and innovation. The focus of this special issue emphasizes the changing landscape of HEIs with relevance to researching, studying and developing social innovation. We aim to uncover challenges and best practices, highlight innovative approaches to assessing effectiveness, examine the role(s) of diverse voices and cultures and interrogate the ways that students, faculty and community are invited to participate in social innovation through research, teaching and partnerships. This editorial will first explore the global social innovation ecosystem and research field before going on to explore the role of HEIs in growing social innovations. This will be followed by an exploration of the interdisciplinary nature of social innovation and the role of practitioners. Finally, an overview of the nine papers that make up this special issue will be presented.

Global social innovation overview and key emergent research themes in the field

Social innovation has been studied in various disciplines such as studies of innovation (Van der Have and Rubalcaba, 2016), management science (Drucker, 1987), social policy (Borzaga and Bodini, 2014; Ayob *et al.*, 2016), social entrepreneurship (Maclean *et al.*, 2013; Shaw and de Bruin, 2013; Phillips *et al.*, 2015), urban planning (Moulaert *et al.*, 2005; Domanski *et al.*, 2020) and creativity (Mumford and Moertl, 2003). As social innovation can be studied from various perspectives and approaches, scholars also have been discussing social innovation from a conceptual and definitional perspective (Nicholls and Murdock, 2012 or Domanski *et al.*, 2020). Moulaert *et al.* (2013) demonstrate that the meaning of social innovation differs by social, political, cultural and economic contexts by reviewing the historical development of social innovation. Therefore, they emphasize that socio-political contexts should be considered when studying social innovation. In fact, examples of social innovation have been studied in various national contexts, including the EU (Sabato *et al.*, 2017; Von Jacobi *et al.*, 2017; Nicholls and Edmiston, 2018), Canada (Goldenberg *et al.*, 2009; Westley *et al.*, 2014), South Korea (O'Byrne *et al.*, 2014), India (Rao-Nicholson *et al.*, 2017), Malaysia (Nasir and Subari, 2017) and other Asians context (Hazenberg *et al.*, 2020).



Social innovation can be achieved by multiple actors, including individuals, organizations, network/movement and systems (Nicholls and Murdock, 2012). Any actors can initiate and can be involved in social innovation initiatives (Avelino and Wittmayer, 2018). Social innovation can also be created with the combined effort of multiple actors, including private, public and civil society actors (Phills *et al.*, 2008). While some research focuses on the role of multi-actors in initiating social innovation (Murray *et al.*, 2010; Baker and Mehmood, 2015), other researchers study the role of civil society (Swyngedouw, 2005; Gerometta *et al.*, 2005), social enterprise (Leadbeater, 2007; Barraket and Furneaux, 2012), social entrepreneurs (Howaldt *et al.*, 2016a), governments (Wolk and Ebinger, 2010; Berzin *et al.*, 2014; Gordon *et al.*, 2017) and universities (Alden Rivers *et al.*, 2015; Elmes *et al.*, 2012; Castro-Spila and Unceta, 2014; Benneworth and Cunha, 2015; Hazenberg *et al.*, 2020). This last focus on higher education and universities is of particular pertinence to this special issue.

Higher education as a means for fostering/growing social innovation

Higher education has long been seen as a critical cog within the modern economy for driving economic growth and innovation, being as it educates the workforce of tomorrow, and its research is a key driver of innovation (Universities UK, 2011). Globally, we are seeing a race towards high-skilled workforces and increasing research density, with a recognition that innovation drives job creation and leads to economies that are more resilient to economic shocks (*ibid*). In the modern context, with the global recession of 2008 still fresh in the memory and now the challenge presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, the need for *social* innovation is ever more acute if we are to achieve a more sustainable global society. Indeed, the global pandemic has demonstrated our acute reliance on research and social innovation as vaccine developments and rollouts help the world to begin its journey out of lockdown, with the World Bank (2021) estimating that a successful and fast-paced vaccine rollout will add around 3.4% to global GDP in 2021 (aside from the millions of lives it will doubtless save). Outside of the pandemic, the role of more general research and development within economies has been shown to be positively correlated with economic growth in the long-term (OECD, 2001), with a study by Valero and Van Reenen (2019) estimating that a 10% increase in universities per capita leads to an increase of 0.4% in future GDP.

The need for social innovations to be developed in and/or supported by universities is critical, particularly as we move globally towards sustainable growth and development as embodied by the United Nations SDG framework. Indeed, placing higher education support at the heart of the social economy could provide a critical boost to the growth of social innovations and social enterprises. The rise of social innovation activity in higher education has been marked in the past few decades, with the emergence of global HEI networks focused on social innovation such as the Social Innovation Exchange, the Social Innovation Linkages for Knowledge Exchange Network and the Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability (DESI) network providing a few examples. Nevertheless, it remains a niche focus in many institutions, with research by Howaldt *et al.* (2016a, 2016b) identifying that of over 1,000 social innovations mapped globally, only 15% involved universities. Discussion of why universities fail to engage sufficiently in social innovation has demonstrated that this often is the result of a normative focus on core innovations (economic and technological) within institutions, that means that noncore innovations such as social innovation get overlooked (Cinar and Benneworth, 2020).

The role of HEIs in social innovation is a critically under-researched area, albeit one that is witnessing exponential growth. For example, in the last year we have seen papers in this area published exploring social innovation within higher education (Bellandi *et al.*, 2021;

Benneworth *et al.*, 2020; Monteiro *et al.*, 2021; Sormani *et al.*, 2021; Unceta *et al.*, 2021; Vargas-Merino, 2021). This interest in what has been termed a university's "third mission" to support social and environmental growth and drive wider benefits to society (Cunha and Benneworth, 2013), has been juxtaposed in the literature against the increasing marketisation of higher education and the competition between HEIs (Benneworth and Cunha, 2015). The ability of universities to support social innovation is also enhanced by their brand value and the trust in the institution often held locally by business and social innovators, as well as their long experience in promoting knowledge exchange and engaging diverse stakeholders (Cockshut *et al.*, 2020). Universities' role here can also encompass the measurement of social impact, aligning local work with global indicators such as the SDGs, and lobbying government and policymakers for support for social innovation. In doing so, they become hubs for interdisciplinary work that encompasses multiple stakeholders to help to solve society's "wicked problems" (Rittel and Webber, 1973).

Interdisciplinary research and need for this around social innovation

Social innovation is by nature a very diverse field. Innovation by its nature requires creativity, systems thinking and a social focus, and these elements cross the boundaries of traditional disciplinary inquiry (Pacheco *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, social innovation is necessarily pragmatic in nature: one does not have an innovation with meaningful social engagement unless one takes a transdisciplinary approach (Moulaert, 2013). This means that effective research into social innovation processes must involve stakeholders from communities, the private sectors and academia. For universities, this means they must make efforts to reach beyond the ivory tower and work directly with, rather than on, communities. This directive extends to both the teaching of social innovation and also research into the phenomenon of social innovation (Penin *et al.*, 2015), this issue will highlight some examples of universities stretching beyond their comfort zones to work with and for communities. Single disciplinary frameworks are not always well equipped to help solve the "wicked problems" that social innovation strives to address. Instead, collaborative research partnerships are needed (Reid *et al.*, 2021), which is something the research in this special issue truly highlights.

Many of the articles we are highlighting here adopt approaches to teaching and research similar to what has been in other contexts identified as a theory of change (ToC) framework (Belcher and Hughes, 2020; Brest, 2010). In fact, the use of implied or explicit ToC's can move the activities in class from a "sage on the stage model" of information transfer to a living lab in which design principles can be used to address real issues of importance to students (Westley *et al.*, 2017). In this special issue, we can see different scholars wrestling with the best way to bring the classroom into the world, and the world into the classroom, as they negotiate different ways of making education transdisciplinary, focused on change and driven by needs. Of course, this type of approach also necessitates different measures for assessing research and teaching effectiveness. The field of social innovation as a whole benefits from robust measures of its effectiveness (Sinclair and Baglioni, 2014). But if educators and researchers begin by looking directly at the needs of their community members, they are more likely to be able to also measure effectiveness of their social innovation efforts beyond student learning (Belcher and Hughes, 2020).

In this volume, social innovation in the university setting is approached with a wide variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives. At first glance, there is no single unifying framework from which social innovation is understood – and in fact, many of the studies portrayed here draw from specific cases due to the uniqueness of each institution and their publics. There is a wide variety of approaches to understanding social innovation

in the university context, including quantitative analysis, qualitative interviewing, case study and mixed methods, but what unites the different papers contained here is a deep awareness of the fact that social innovation requires a transdisciplinary approach. Furthermore, all recognize both the important role already played by and the potential for even greater involvement of the university in the communities that they serve. Higher education often gets criticized for being a medieval institution that is an ivory tower – out of touch with the realities faced by 21st century communities. Our scholars and university social innovators break down this accusation by embedding their work within communities, working as practitioners to prepare students to apply their learnings to address complex issues on the ground.

Practitioner focus and social innovation

Professor J. Gregory Dees taught the first social entrepreneurship class, called “Entrepreneurship in the Social Sector” at Harvard Business School in 1994. The predominant terminology at the time was *social entrepreneurship*, which spoke to its initial values and impetus deriving from the business school lens and the practitioner world of entrepreneurship. The growth over the past 25 years can be found in research with the development of research convenings [e.g. 13th International Social Innovation Research Conference (ISIRC) 2021 – Milan], dedicated social entrepreneurship/innovation publications (e.g. Social Enterprise Journal), tracks for social innovation and entrepreneurship in existing higher education convenings (Times Higher Education Innovation and Impact Summit) and special issues on social entrepreneurship and social innovation in existing research publications (e.g. this issue of Social Enterprise Journal; Special Issue on Social Innovation and the Future of Business and Business Education in Humanistic Management Journal). It can also be found in curricular offerings, such as social entrepreneurship minors, majors, certificates, institutes and campus-wide initiatives dedicated to this area. Perhaps most importantly, social innovation education has grown from a nascent field of study, housed only in business schools with an entrepreneurship focus and available at only a few elite institutions, to a global movement of HEIs embedding social innovation skillset and mindset development as a core part of a student’s learning journey.

Effective social innovation education requires educators to cross or blur conventional disciplinary boundaries between theory and practice, teachers and students and between the ivory tower and community/private enterprise (see the papers in this special issue titled “The Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative” and “Completing the CiCLE”). Social innovation education also requires an approach that encourages students to develop skills such as self-efficacy and to develop social identities as changemakers (see the paper in this special issue titled “Transformational Spaces”). It requires that educators teach values, skills and knowledge that emphasize social change (see the paper titled “Integrating Equity, Diversity and Inclusion into Social Innovation Education”) and requires an orientation that takes into account an ecological view of humans embedded in social and cultural systems (see the paper titled “University as a Vehicle to Achieve Social Innovation and Development”). The benefits of effective social innovation education have been documented: in return for educating students about social innovation, universities can experience such outcomes as reputational gains, material resources and a connection with their communities (see the papers titled “Decentering Social Innovation”; “HEI as a Pressure Cooker” and “Evaluating and Improving the Contributions of University Research to Social Innovation”). As we look to the future, we are excited by the possibility that social innovation can also be applied as a methodology for reimagining the role of higher education in society. The papers in this special issue are proof that we have reason to feel this way and demonstrate the

Paper overviews

This special issue of the Social Enterprise Journal contains nine papers that as outlined above explore the role of higher education in the social innovation ecosystem across a number of different areas. Each paper will now be briefly outlined in the order that they will appear in this issue:

- *Decentering Social Innovation: The Value of Dispersed Institutes in Higher Education* (Dr Benjamin Lough, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign) <https://doi.org/10.1108/SEJ-08-2020-0059>: This paper explores the role of dispersed institutes of social innovation within higher education and the role that they can play in overcoming institutional bureaucracies and barriers when developing social innovations. In exploring the role that social innovation “labs” can play in this area, the paper identifies the strategies that can be used within HEIs, such as bridging academic-practice divides, enabling co-creation/coproduction with users, facilitating experiential/co-curricular education, supporting interdisciplinary collaborations and generating place-based solutions.
- *Completing the CiCLE: long-term assessment of community-involved collaborative learning ecosystems for social innovation in higher education* (Dr Danielle Lake, Dr William Moner and Dr Philip Motley, Elon University, USA) <https://doi.org/10.1108/SEJ-10-2020-0089>: This paper explores innovative pedagogy centred on design-thinking and community engagement in supporting social innovation teaching and development within higher education. In doing so, the paper examines the tensions between the disruptive nature of social innovation and the need to operate within university institutional structures, positing what this might mean for the sustainability of such programmes of work.
- *Evaluating and Improving the Contributions of University Research to Social Innovation* (Rachel Davel, Dr Brian Belcher, Rachel Claus and Stephanie Jones, Royal Roads University, Canada): This paper explores the social impact of university research projects in helping to solve social problems, finding that it is not the knowledge created that is most important in the research but rather the process of empowering people, capacity building and network building. In embedding the evaluation of these social innovation research projects within a transdisciplinary setting, the paper seeks to show the need for universities to train staff in multi-disciplinary research and to evaluate impacts on social change.
- *University as a Vehicle to Achieve Social Innovation and Development: Repositioning the Role of the University in the Society* (Lwando Mdleleni, University of the Western Cape, South Africa) <https://doi.org/10.1108/SEJ-10-2020-0093>: This paper explores the role that universities can play as socio-economic problem-solvers through social innovation, with the need to position higher education in the 21st century away from institutions just focusing on research and teaching. As universities have a wide variety of resources, they can act as network hubs for stakeholders, helping to build social capital and community cohesion, whilst using social innovation as a means to drive sustainable development.
- *Strengthening Social Innovation in Higher Education Institutes – An Organizational Change Process Involving Staff and Students* (Dr Judith Prantl, Dr Susanne Freund

and Professor Elisabeth Kals, Catholic University of Eichstaett-Ingolstadt, Germany) <https://doi.org/10.1108/SEJ-10-2020-0094>: This paper explores the attitudes to university staff and students at an institution that was developing a third mission centred on social innovation. The paper demonstrates that attitudes change over time and are shaped by the degree of engagement of individuals in the change process. The research demonstrates key attributes for developing third missions within HEIs and shows the need for empowerment of staff and students in the change process.

- *The Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative: Case Studies of the Social Innovation Process at a University Research Center (Jacen Greene, Portland State University, USA)* <https://doi.org/10.1108/SEJ-08-2020-0061>: This paper explores two social innovations designed to target the social problem of homelessness. It combines three theoretical frameworks to better understand this process related to social innovation processes, higher education and community partnerships and social value creation, to develop an integrated process model for social innovation interventions within universities. In doing so, it offers a roadmap for how academics, funders, policymakers and practitioners can work together to solve social problems in their localities.
- *Integrating Equity, Diversity and Inclusion into Social Innovation Education: A Case Study of Critical Service-Learning (Dr Rebecca Otten, Dr Faughnan Maille, Megan Flattley and Samantha Fleurinor, Tulane University, USA)* <https://doi.org/10.1108/SEJ-11-2020-0101>: This paper explores the tensions between the empowerment aims of social innovation curriculum and equality, diversity and inclusion agendas, with the former seen as a potential reinforcer of existing power imbalances. Viewing social innovation through a lens of empowerment, the paper explores the impact of a service-learning programme that was designed from an EDI perspective, demonstrating that social innovation teaching needs to be more inclusive in its design and focus, if students are to reach their learning potential.
- *Transformational Spaces: Educators Discuss Map the System and Supporting Canada's Emerging Generation of Systems Thinkers (Dr Katharine McGowan et al., Mount Royal University, Canada)*: This paper explores whether participation in international HEI competitions focused on social innovation can help to drive institutional transformation and systems thinking in HEIs. The focus on this transformational change is centred on both inter-HEI learning and also crucially supporting transformative capacity in students. The research reveals that there is a tension between the value placed on "winning" competitions and the transformational change that can be driven irrespective of this. This is embedded within discussions of institutional barriers to campus culture change and the Covid-19 pandemic.
- *HEI as a Pressure Cooker: Crafting the Secret Sauce to Social Justice in Social Innovation (Professor Samantha Wehbi, Dr Melanie, Panitch, Jessica Machado, Jocelyn Courneya and Afrah Idrees, Ryerson University, Canada)* <https://doi.org/10.1108/SEJ-10-2020-0080>: This paper explores social justice orientated social innovation within HEIs. The research identifies that when embedding social justice principles into social innovation programmes, there is a key need for creativity, collaboration, adaptability and creating alternative stories. In promoting these traits institutionally, interdisciplinary working can be encouraged, and student activism can be enabled.

Summary

We believe that the arguments made above, and also presented across the nine papers in this special issue, demonstrate that social innovation is central to the development of third missions within HEIs in the 21st century. Indeed, we would argue that embedding social innovation within institutional frameworks and strategic orientation is paramount if the HE sector is going to help lead the drive towards a more sustainable and socially just world. The ongoing climate emergency, Covid-19 pandemic and the increasing inequality being witnessed globally, means that this third mission cannot be an “add-on”. This editorial has sought to demonstrate that social innovation is both a process for driving change and a methodology for working within HEIs in itself and that following this methodological process can ensure that universities maximise the social value that they create. The interdisciplinary nature of social innovation, the growing global networks to support it, and the recognition of the need for impact and third missions as embodied through frameworks like the Times Higher Impact Rankings, clearly indicate that we are witnessing a paradigmatic shift in how the higher education sector organises itself. It is the opinion of the editorial team, and we believe of the authors present in this special issue, that it is only by universities placing themselves at the nexus of theory, policy and practice that higher education can take this leading role in driving sustainability and social justice. We hope that the conclusions drawn across the nine papers in this special issue can support HEI stakeholders from all backgrounds to design, implement and evaluate socially impactful social innovations moving forwards.

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Note

1. The Editors are presented in alphabetical order by surname and all contributed equally to this Editorial and the editing of the Special Issue.

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