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Analysis of the involvement of higher education institutions from selected Central European countries in the process of creating, implementing and supporting social innovation.

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ASHOKA

Introduction
– the context, scope and general concept
of the study

This report forms a part of a broader research project entitled
**"BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF SOCIAL INNOVATION
IN HIGHER EDUCATION"**
carried out from December 2016 by Collegium Civitas, University
of Northampton, University of Iceland and Ashoka Poland.

The research took place from February to April 2016.
The idea for the research has grown out of the need for general,
information concerning the engagement of Central European
universities in matters of social innovation. No such database
was available at the commencement of this study.

Research goals and intents

The main goal of the study is to create a multi-faceted image of the activity of higher education institutions in Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Lithuania in the area of social innovation, and the phenomena and processes associated with creating, implementing and supporting social innovations.
The analysis covered the educational, academic, research and collaborative capabilities of Central European universities.

The three detailed goals presented below were devised to assist in reaching the main goal

Identifying the manners in which higher education institutions become engaged in creating social innovations (incubators, mentors, networks, etc.).

Examining the relations between higher education institutions and non-profit sector entities, and identifying the best practices in the forms and outcomes of such collaborations

Creating a typology of inter-sector collaboration between higher education institutions and entities from other sectors (NGOs, businesses, public administration including local authorities).

Research, data gathering and analysis methods

The main method used to reach the above goals was desk research, analysing secondary sources, such as articles, study reports, project documentation, websites, etc.

Example of a search algorithm: name of the institution + concepts relating to the three research goals, including: social innovation; CSR; social value; innovation; incubator; incubation; organization; projects; networks.

Definition of Social Innovation

The understanding of social innovation depends largely on the faculty or the university profile of a given respondent. Respondents from technology universities had much more trouble explaining social innovations than academics from other universities. Most of them admitted to not knowing what social innovations are at the beginning of the interview. They saw innovations as results of the inventions created by their faculties.

On the other hand, academics from faculties specializing in the social sciences were willing to consider a wide array of activities, especially those carried out by their faculty, as social innovations. They provided examples of studies, papers or even single events organized by the faculty as social innovations.

Selected quotes
concerning the definitions of social innovation

It is an innovative manner of seeking solutions to certain social problems, tackling a certain social challenge in a way that allows for more effective allocation of existing resources and interpersonal relationships. Social innovations solve problems effectively and permanently. Innovations are not inventions, but rather discovering ways of bypassing certain obstacles.

The following general definition of social innovation was adopted for the needs of this study: breaking out of preconceived notions and patterns of activity relating to social life, the manners in which it can be affected, as well as proposing and implementing specific solutions.

Desk research

The Desk research delivered data concerning:

125 universities from Poland,
the majority of which are operated by the state,
16 from Hungary, 9 from Slovakia,
17 from the Czech Republic and 8 from Lithuania.

Note:
The number of public and private higher education
institutions in Poland is about 350, whereas
the number in all other countries combined
is only about 250.

UNIVERSITIES FROM
POLAND (125)

UNIVERSITIES FROM
HUNGARY (16)

UNIVERSITIES FROM
CZECH REPUBLIC (17)

UNIVERSITIES FROM
LITHUANIA (8)

UNIVERSITIES FROM
SLOVAKIA (9)
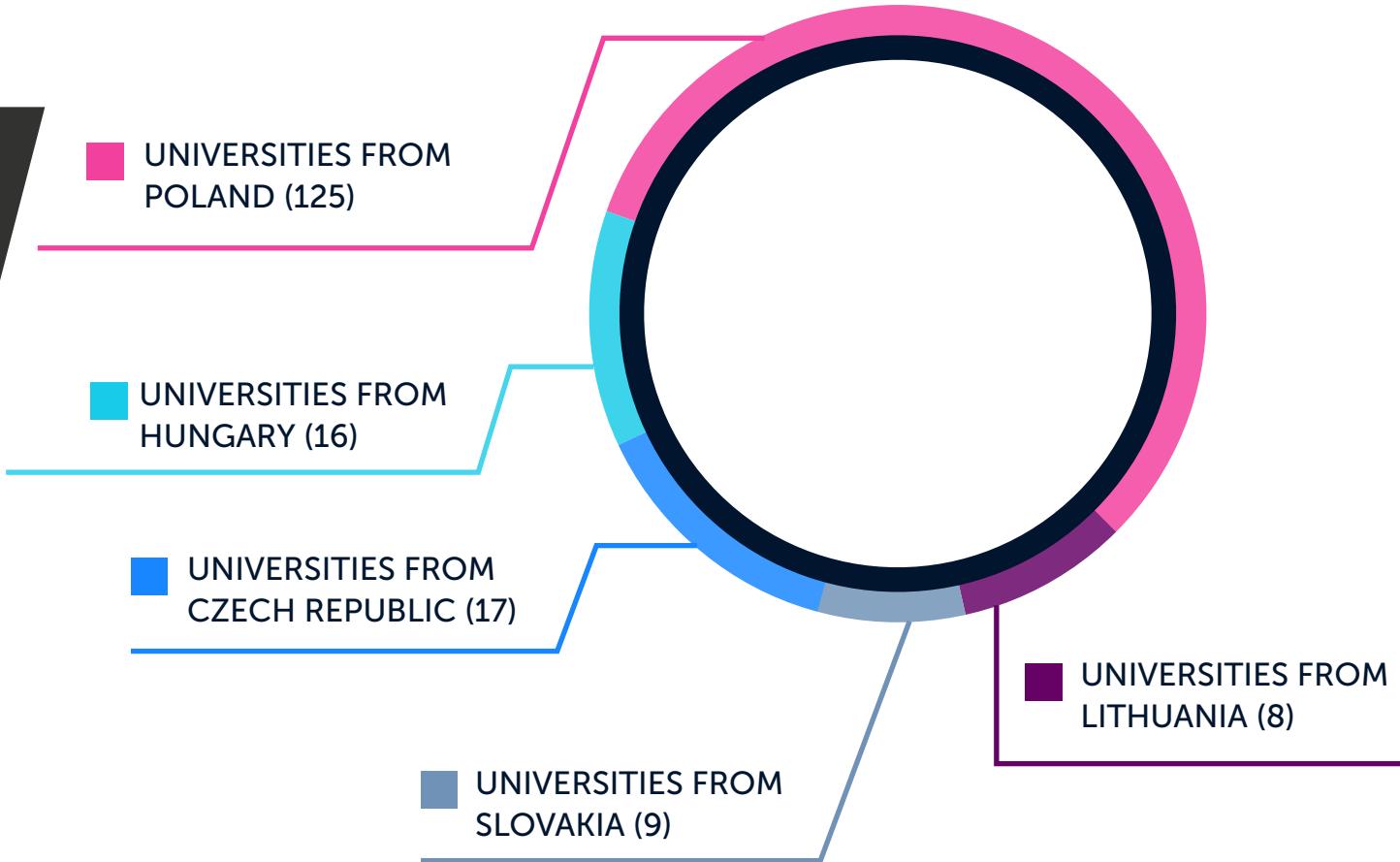
Qualitative study

- 13 higher education institutions from Poland
- 7 from abroad (Czech Republic, Hungary and Lithuania).

The respondents were selected based on the results of the desk research. The qualitative study consisted of individual in-depth interviews conducted with: university experts specializing in social innovations; heads of departments, innovation centres, incubators; individuals responsible for activities relating to social innovation(such as conferences, studies, projects, etc.).
The IDI script was divided into the following thematic blocks:

Definition
of social innovation

Factors that contribute to the successful implementation
of social innovations in the university.

Implementation of social innovation
in the university

Collaboration between various sectors
in creating social innovations

Findings:

Creating and implementing social innovations at Polish universities

The number of innovative projects executed by Polish universities paints a rather unfavourable picture of Polish universities as innovation centres. The representatives of public universities often admitted that no innovative projects are being worked on or talked about projects that are hardly innovative at all.

Respondents recalled less examples of social innovations resulting from research than those concerning teaching or growth of the university. The research carried out by academics, especially those specializing in technology, are considered to be innovations only by the respondents themselves because they are aimed at businesses and fall into the activities of the technology transfer centres based at universities.

Examples of social innovations given by the respondents include:

1. E-learning methods used in teaching students and course attendees;

2. Professional development of university staff and students through tutoring, mentoring and coaching projects;

3. Innovative projects in the area of providing aid to individuals affected by social exclusion e.g. individuals aged 50, disabled students, inmates, welfare recipients, migrants, refugees;

4. Creating Children's Universities, Universities of the Third Age and Open Universities;

5. Innovative course programs, such as Social Rehabilitation, Socially Responsible Business, Innovator Training, designed in collaboration with representatives of business and other sectors;

6. Providing support to business owners, including a project aimed at popularizing beekeeping among small businesses, a project in which students helped local business owners make their establishments look more modern using interior design techniques;

7. Creating business incubators, i.e. spaces allowing students to flesh out their business ideas.

The conditions of creating social innovations by the universities and at the universities

AMONG THE FEW FAVOURABLE FACTORS LISTED BY THE RESPONDENTS WERE:

1. A culture that facilitates creating and implementing innovative projects by academics, administrative workers and students – it was very often emphasized that freedom from regulations makes it easier to create social innovations;

2. Internal market demand for innovative solutions;

3. Employing leaders and knowledge brokers who motivate academics and university employees to become engaged in executing innovative projects, and who are also able to seek out customers for the innovations.

The obstacles to the creating social innovations by the universities and at the universities

BELOW ARE THE SYSTEMIC BARRIERS AND OBSTACLES LISTED BY THE RESPONDENTS:

1. Highly hierarchical and conservative university management structure (especially true for public universities), which translates into slow and ineffective decision-making processes;

2. Promoting established patterns of activity (especially true for public universities);

3. Elaborate public administration bureaucracy that chooses to promote only low-risk projects;

4. The New Public Management model - it requires that the effectiveness of innovative projects be measurable;

5. Technological innovations are promoted and supported by the public administration – the importance of social sciences and humanities is not recognized.

6. No permanent collaboration between scientific institutions, universities and public administration bodies.

7. Not including social innovation in official university development strategies (especially true for public universities). Universities focus on preserving the status quo.

BELOW ARE THE MENTAL AND SOCIAL BARRIERS LISTED BY THE RESPONDENTS:

1. Lack of determination and knowledge among university employees (mostly academics) that research work may result in developing social innovation projects;

2. Low level of trust and social capital among university employees (especially true for public universities);

3. Low social and cultural capital (education) of the society, which is not ready to accept social innovations;

4. University employees are unwilling to take the risks associated with creating social innovations;

5. Academics are unwilling to go beyond their sphere of expertise; low probability of forming interdisciplinary teams that could develop social innovations;

6. The public administration officials responsible for creating grants are unaware of how universities operate and which social innovations are in demand.

Selected quotes concerning the obstacles to and favourable conditions for creating social innovations:

I attended a couple of conferences on social innovations and I was surprised that innovation is often an empty catchword. I think that, unfortunately, most innovative projects are developed outside of universities. I even think that universities hamper innovation rather than being an incubator, as they are ruled by academics, by certain powers, who are unable to look at things in a different way.

Creating and implementing innovations at universities in Central Europe except Poland

The interviews confirmed the findings of the desk research. The term of social innovation is rarely used at the universities included in the study. The respondents admitted that the idea of innovation is only starting to gain a foothold in their work environment.

The majority of the universities operate centres or institutes that include innovative activities in their mission statements. Their staff was also unable to provide examples of social innovation. However, they were aware of their lack of knowledge. They explained that such activities are new to their universities and even new to their countries.

Selected quotes concerning the implementation and development of social innovation:

Almost nobody in the Czech Republic understands the concept of social innovation. They are simply not being developed here yet. We prefer to stick with traditional solutions rather than trying innovative ones.

The obstacles to the creating social innovations by the universities and at the universities in Central Europe except Poland

Most of the respondents consider the universities are innovation-friendly mainly due to the favourable environment and infrastructure. However, when asked about specific innovations and the factors that encourage academics to create them or make the process easier, the respondents focused on listing the obstacles to social innovation. They emphasized that their universities have the potential for developing social innovation, but it is not fully utilized yet.

The main obstacle to introducing social innovation is the conservative way of thinking about the university by its staff. According to the answers given by the respondents, the majority of university staff are not determined to create social innovations. They lack motivation or are simply not interested.

The universities themselves were stated to be very conservative. Even though many of them agreed to create new structures meant to change the approach to creating social innovations, few academics actually take advantage of the new possibilities. Other obstacles listed by the respondents include: red tape, lack of creative thinking and time.

Respondents rarely included the lack of funds among the obstacles, which was listed often by Polish respondents.

Selected quotes concerning the obstacles to and favourable conditions for creating social innovations:

The main factor that supports social innovation is the demand for it, and the solutions are expected to be created mostly by representatives of the social sciences. Working on social innovations is made more difficult by the attitude of academics, who see no purpose in activities of this kind and do not wish to change their working habits. The long implementation process of social innovation also turns many people off.

# Forms of university involvement in the social innovation

Below is the complete list of forms of university involvement in activities associated with social innovations, as well as their creation, implementation and support, that also provides the number of cases of each (number of identified types of activity in a given area):

1. Social innovations in the organizational structure of the university (mostly e-learning);

   Conferences and workshops (organizing and participating);

2. Social innovations as a field of knowledge included in the curriculum (post-graduate studies and sporadically: courses; specializations; semester courses; doctoral studies);

3. Publications (books, articles, research reports);

4. University centres of: technology transfer, entrepreneurship, research, knowledge, evaluation, innovation, social innovation;

5. Business incubators (operating at the universities);

6. Projects: national; international; independent; inter-sector; governmental/European; in partnership with the non-profit sector or businesses;

7. Networks/communities (collaboration with universities);

8. Laboratories (based at the universities or collaborating with the universities);

9. Consortiums/partnerships with entities from other sectors;

10. Competitions for the best social innovations (co-organizing and/or participating).

The share of individual activities in the total number of social innovations identified in selected Central European countries (PL, CZ, HU, SK and LT)

TYPES OF ACTIVITY - SOCIAL INNOVATION (%)

■ forms of involvement

Labels:
- social innovations at the universites (mostly e-learning)
- organizing and participating
- social innovations as a field of knowledge
- publications
- university centres
- business incubators
- projects
- networks/communities
- laboratories
- consortiums/partnerships
- competitions
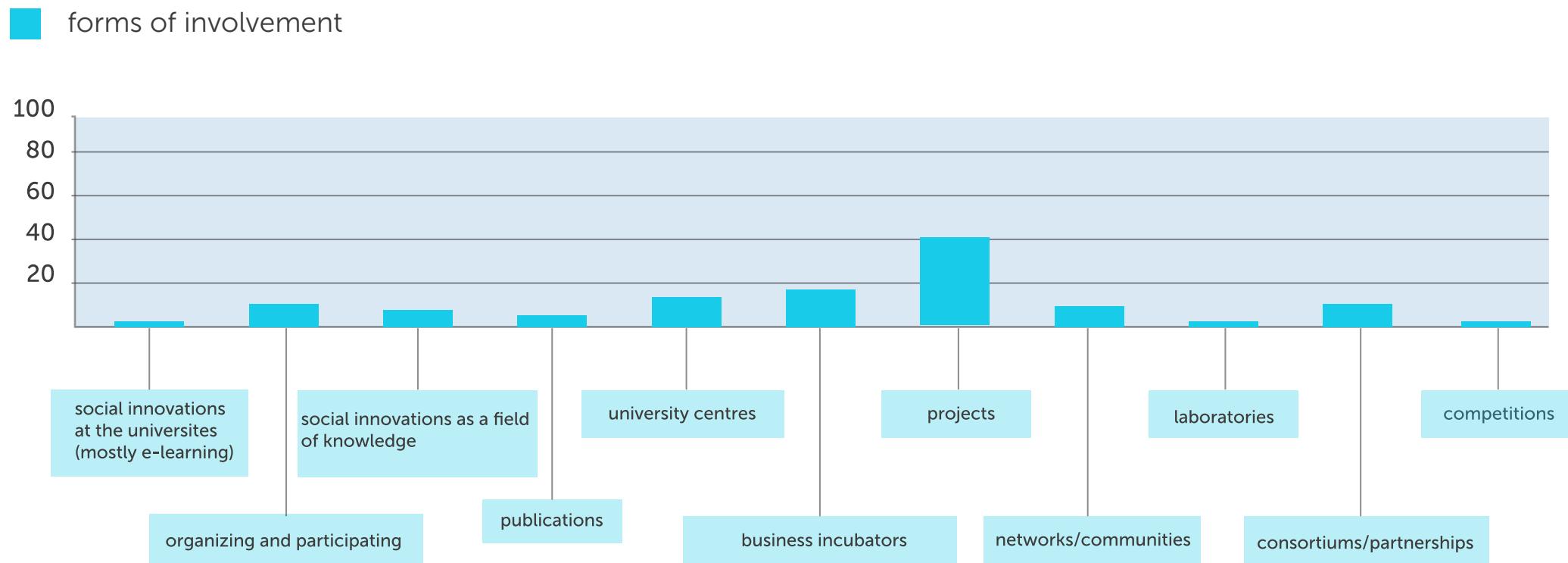
Source: the authors own research

Projects are definitely the most numerous while other notable forms of involvement include business incubators, centres operating at universities, partnerships and social networks. It may prove worthwhile to compare the identified forms of involvement and their numbers with the data gathered and presented on the Ashoka website as part of the Ashoka U census – a global campaign tasked with aggregating data on social innovation and entrepreneurship from across the world.

The share of individual activities in the total number of social innovations identified in the USA and other selected countries (based on the methodology used by Ashoka U Census)

CUMULATIVE NUMBER OF SOCIAL INNOVATION OFFERINGS
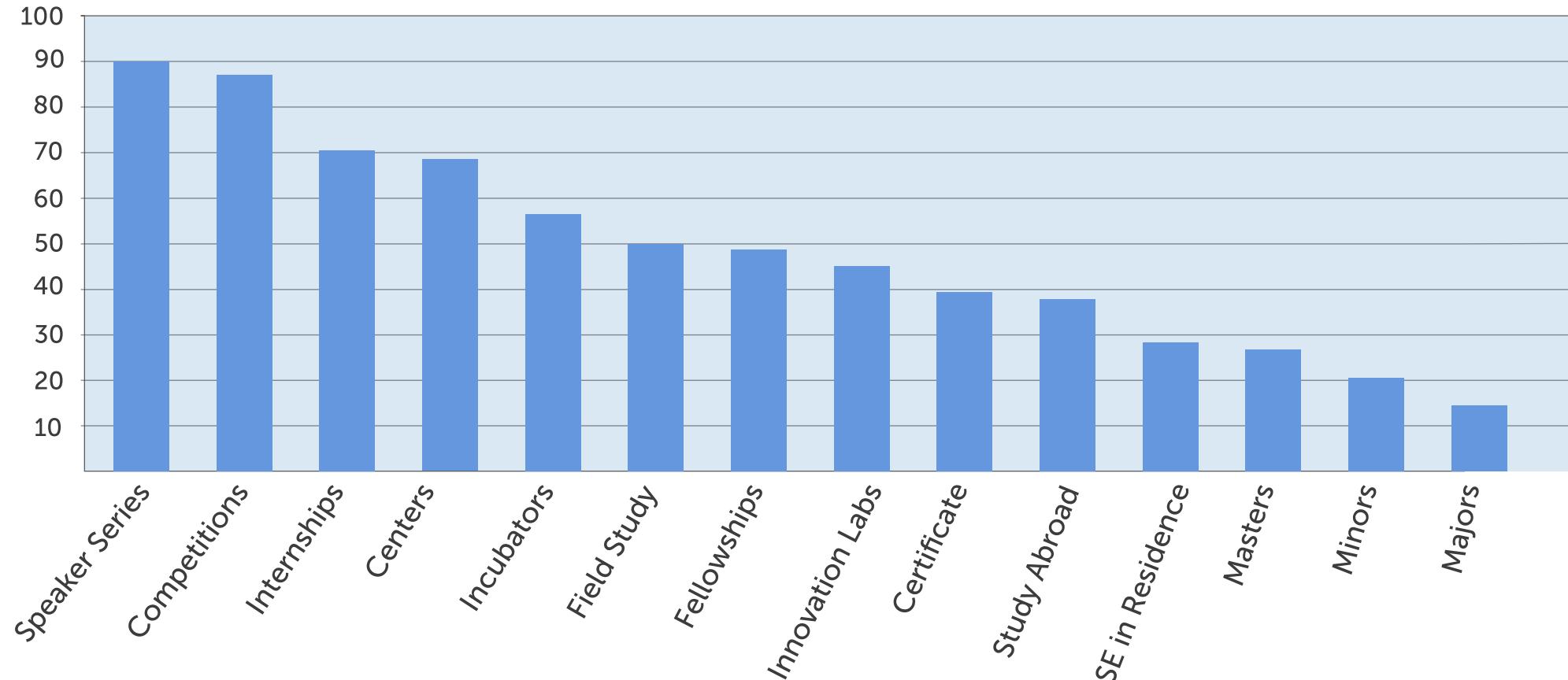
Source: Ashoka U Census, available at:
http://ashokau.org/trends/trend-calls/curricular-teaching/curricular-teaching-findings/

We can see that the types of involvement are mostly similar with a few notable exceptions. The Ashoka U list does not include social innovations that the universities implement within their organizational structures, nor does it have separate categories of projects, partnerships and publications – this may be caused by the differences in social innovation activities in other countries where the above activities are considered "less important" or fit into different categories.

The Central European list lacks the categories of: internships and training programmes, scholarships, certificates, foreign exchange programmes, master's studies and fields of study, which were included in the Ashoka U list.

Collaboration between various sectors in creating social innovations in Poland

NGO's

Cooperation with non-profit organizations proves to be the most effective, which results from three factors.

- **First**, non-profit organizations are dedicated to achieving strictly social goals, serving the society as a whole or specific segments of it, which also constitutes a natural part of social innovation.

- **Second**, non-profit organizations manage projects in the most effective possible manner, therefore they are often tasked with coordinating joint efforts, whereas universities are responsible for providing knowledge.

- **Third**, many academics are also social activists working for non-profit organizations and, therefore, become a natural and informal bridge between the university and the non-governmental organizations when developing social innovations projects. Due to the social nature of non-profit organizations, the majority of projects developed by them in cooperation with universities focus on helping individuals who are in danger of social exclusion, such as the unemployed, elderly and disabled.

BUSINESS

Many universities collaborate with businesses, however there are certain limitations that they encounter. First, collaborating with businesses is, in most cases, limited to creating innovative study programs aiming to reconcile the courses and knowledge transferred to the students with the actual needs of the labour market. The second most prevalent sphere of collaboration stems out from businesses commissioning universities to develop certain solutions, however this applies mainly to technology.

The differences in logic are evident in the highly bureaucratic operations of universities, with an inefficient decision-making process, while businesses expect the solutions to not only be inexpensive, but also quick to develop and implement.

PUBLIC SECTOR

As regards the relationships between universities and the public sector. The respondents have not identified any notable problems resulting from this type of collaboration.
However, as is the case with other innovative projects, one may question, and rightly so, whether the collaboration with the public sector leads to true innovation. The respondents often stated that universities are mostly tasked with carrying out research and preparing analyses for the public sector. Universities often execute innovative projects for the local government, which answer the needs of the residents and solve specific social problems, such as homelessness or the current immigration and assimilation issue. Opinions on this type of collaboration vary. Some local governments are open to universities putting forward suggestions of social innovation projects, but sometimes it is the local governments request universities to prepare them.
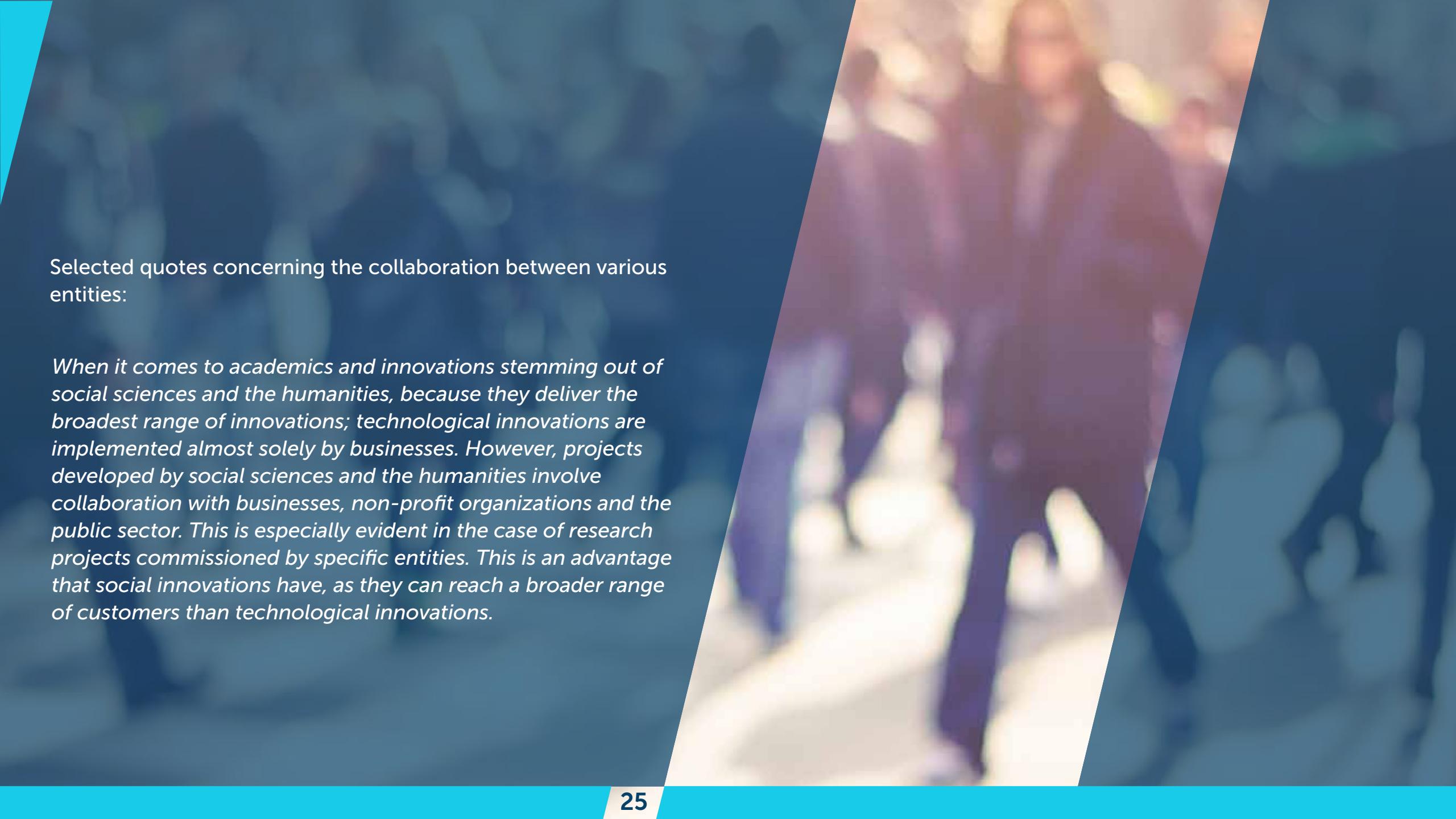
Selected quotes concerning the collaboration between various entities:

When it comes to academics and innovations stemming out of social sciences and the humanities, because they deliver the broadest range of innovations; technological innovations are implemented almost solely by businesses. However, projects developed by social sciences and the humanities involve collaboration with businesses, non-profit organizations and the public sector. This is especially evident in the case of research projects commissioned by specific entities. This is an advantage that social innovations have, as they can reach a broader range of customers than technological innovations.

Polish universities seldom cooperate with other Polish universities.
This is probably caused by a number of factors.

First, the competition among universities, especially private ones, is fierce. Attendance numbers are dropping each year and, therefore, universities have to compete to attract prospective students and, thus, generate revenue.

Second, Polish universities are highly independent by nature. All attempts at collaboration require universities to give up some of their independence on account of establishing a relationship with another higher education institution.

Third, Polish universities do not have an interdisciplinary culture – they would rather isolate themselves from the outside world, are reluctant to pool resources, do not make attempts at collaborating with outside entities especially on scientific projects and study programs.

Collaboration between various sectors in creating social innovations in Central Europe except Poland

Universities lack a structured network of relationships with external partners. The examples of such cooperation were isolated and the cooperation rarely focus on creating social innovatio

NGO's

Collaborating with non-profit organizations usually involves carrying out research or applying for a financial grant together. In Lithuania and Hungary this type of cooperation does not take place very often, as the non-profit sector is described as undeveloped, underfunded or even corrupt. Therefore, universities do not perceive non-profit organizations as worthy partners. They have a much better opinion of businesses and the public sector. Those types of cooperation make it easier to apply for financial grants, increase their prestige and ensure that projects receive bigger funding.

BUSINESS

Collaborating with businesses takes place at each university and is deemed to be the most satisfying and beneficial for both sides. It includes, for example, activities aimed at providing job opportunities for students and graduates. However, collaborations with business are desired mainly for the direct financial gains that they provide universities with. Universities cooperate with big corporations, banks and insurance companies. Those sectors were listed the most often by the respondents.

PUBLIC SECTOR

Universities actively collaborate with public entities. This mostly involves academics acting as experts in developing strategies for public institutions or government programs.

All of the abovementioned types of collaboration rarely focus on creating social innovation. They are rather a result of maximising organizational and financial gains through cooperation.

Selected quotes concerning the collaboration between various entities:

Cooperating with business is more popular than working with non-profit organizations. There is a lot of competition for collaboration on projects in both cases, but my co-workers are more inclined to work with private companies as they increase our financial gains. Companies want universities to develop specific solutions and are ready to pay for it.

Conclusions

General conclusions

As attested to by the sources of information that were explored, the concepts of social innovations and social entrepreneurship are fairly new to countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania and Slovakia. Moreover, they have been largely ignored by their education systems.

The sphere of social innovation is unstable, with plenty of initiatives that, unfortunately, are narrow in scope and reach, not communicated enough, but mostly independent. For them to improve and grow a network of institutions and support should be set up, which would take constant efforts aimed at building an inter-sector ecosystem of supporting social innovations, in which higher education institutions would play a major part.

We may see that it is mostly universities that specialize in technology, economics and management, as well as "general" universities and universities of various profiles, e.g. economics, natural sciences, medicine, agriculture, that undertake the most initiatives meant to support social innovations. This is most likely due to the fact that these universities are working on new technologies to improve various aspects of society on the one hand, and often take up issues of social economics and social entrepreneurship, or have special units in their structure meant to address these problems, on the other. Other universities that are involved in social innovations to various degrees include academies and all kinds of private education institutions (including those with profiles focusing on economics, management, finances, entrepreneurship, business, law and administration).

The above situation also leads to the possible risk of blurring and imprecisely defining the concept of social innovation, low recognisability of solutions attributed to the concept, and, in effect, a lack of understanding of the concept of social innovation even in communities that use very specialized languages.

This reveals one of the important tasks that universities in the region may take upon themselves, namely the task of popularizing the social innovation discourse, creating a widely available and accessible system of concepts and categories, which would allow representatives of various practical fields to find ready-made solutions and test them, but also co-create "recipes" for successful solutions with the aim of fostering social development.

The development and popularization of the discourse should focus mainly on effective education and establishing a system of providing support to educational processes in accordance with academic standards. Popularizing the discourse may lead to a long-term outcome of creating a new social way of thinking about social innovations as a category that is indeed needed and useful, and not only a "EU term" that needs to be included to receive EU project funds.

When analyzing the issue of social innovations one must keep in mind that Central Europe is a developing region with a socialist past. The concept of "social innovations" should have a local and contextual nature — it is often the case that what may be considered an innovation in poor and marginalized areas in the region, and sometimes in urban areas as well, had been implemented in the West decades ago.

There are some activities and institutions that are present in Poland while being absent in the other countries and vice versa. As concerns the differences between the individual countries, they are manifested at the level of activity – the research proves that the lowest number of initiatives happen in Slovakia, more take place in Lithuania (but some of them stand out among all the others), the Czech and Hungarian activity levels are similar, but aimed at slightly different issues (the Czechs focus more on the technological and business aspect of social innovation, whereas the Hungarians are very interested in resolving social problems and developing social entrepreneurship).

Conclusions pertaining to building networks and infrastructure in the field of social innovations

The most significant conclusions drawn from the study relating to the process of building networks of support for social innovations apply to the potential, which should be taken advantage of, and areas in need of further inquiry. Both of these issues have a common set of elements reflecting the network-based and constant collaboration between universities and a variety of other institutions:

1. The network of business incubators operating at higher education institutions – a potential network of social innovation, which however does not emphasize this area of its activity,

2. Organizations specializing in innovations, technology transfers, CSR, quality, etc. operating at higher education institutions have a high potential for building collaborative networks of higher education institutions. These organizations are, by definition, tasked with establishing cooperation with other education institutions and representatives of other sectors,

3. Taking advantage of widespread collaboration on projects – striving to replace temporary work on social innovations with a permanent collaboration meant to create, incubate and test social innovations.

Conclusions pertaining to inter-sector collaboration

At the moment of the study, the biggest potential for integrating communities and creating complex support infrastructure for social innovations was observed among non-profit organizations and businesses, both of which often enter into such partnerships – this is attested to by numerous examples of organizations from these two sectors being identified. Local authorities seem to be the least engaged in such matters.

The widespread project-based inter-sector collaboration model is potentially feasible for both researchers and universities committed to social innovations. University administrators responsible for social innovation may see projects as an opportunity for establishing contacts and developing wider capabilities for cooperation, which in practice may even necessitate taking risks and adopting new approaches to actively searching for new/further avenues of developing a given initiative.

The lack of a stable network of relationships between universities and external partners. According to the respondents, strong networks are absent in Central Europe and, what is more, networks of any type are approached with mistrust by the public administration during social innovation contests. The problem results from the requirement that, in many projects, partners be selected through a contest or a market analysis. This approach is misguided, as the most effective networks are formed as a result of long-term relationship building based on mutual trust. Incidental partnerships are never permanent and cannot serve as a base for developing effective collaboration.

The most important differentiating factor for the universities seems to be the level of development of social innovation support employed by each of the higher education institutions included in the study. Northampton University may serve as an example of an institution with a highly-developed system of social innovation by being oriented towards furthering social change, collaborating with local businesses and industries, implementing a coherent system of educating social innovators, cooperating with the local community with a variety of tailor-made programmes on offer, engaging in the life of the local community and implementing the solutions in its immediate neighbourhood.

Examples of collaboration usually are dispersed. It seems that no unit is tasked solely with supporting social innovation, both in theory and practice, by consistently implementing a detailed social innovation plan. The following levels of commitment to creating, implementing and supporting social innovation were identified during the study:

1. **universities that are visibly, albeit sporadically, involved in the development of social innovations** – less than 5 examples of such involvement were found,

2. **universities that are involved in the development of social innovations on a substantial level** – at last 5 but less than 10 examples of such involvement were found, including initiatives varying in character and reach, among which were project partnerships and other initiatives requiring advanced social innovation support.

3. **universities that are involved in the development of social innovations on an advanced level (their activity in this area is developed)** – more than 10 examples of such involvement were found, including various types of activities such as project partnerships, permanent partnerships with other bodies, etc.

4. **universities resembling the Northampton model** – stand out among other universities due to their commitment to supporting social innovations.

The last two categories are the most interesting when considering setting up the networks and infrastructure to support creating, implementing and supporting social innovations.

The following universities had the highest level of social innovation activity:

1. Mykolas Romeris University (LT),
2. Budapest University of Technology and Economics (HU),
3. Janusz Korczak Pedagogical University in Warsaw (PL),
4. Kozminski University (PL),
5. University of Warsaw (PL),
6. Jagiellonian University (PL),
7. School of Form in Poznań (PL).
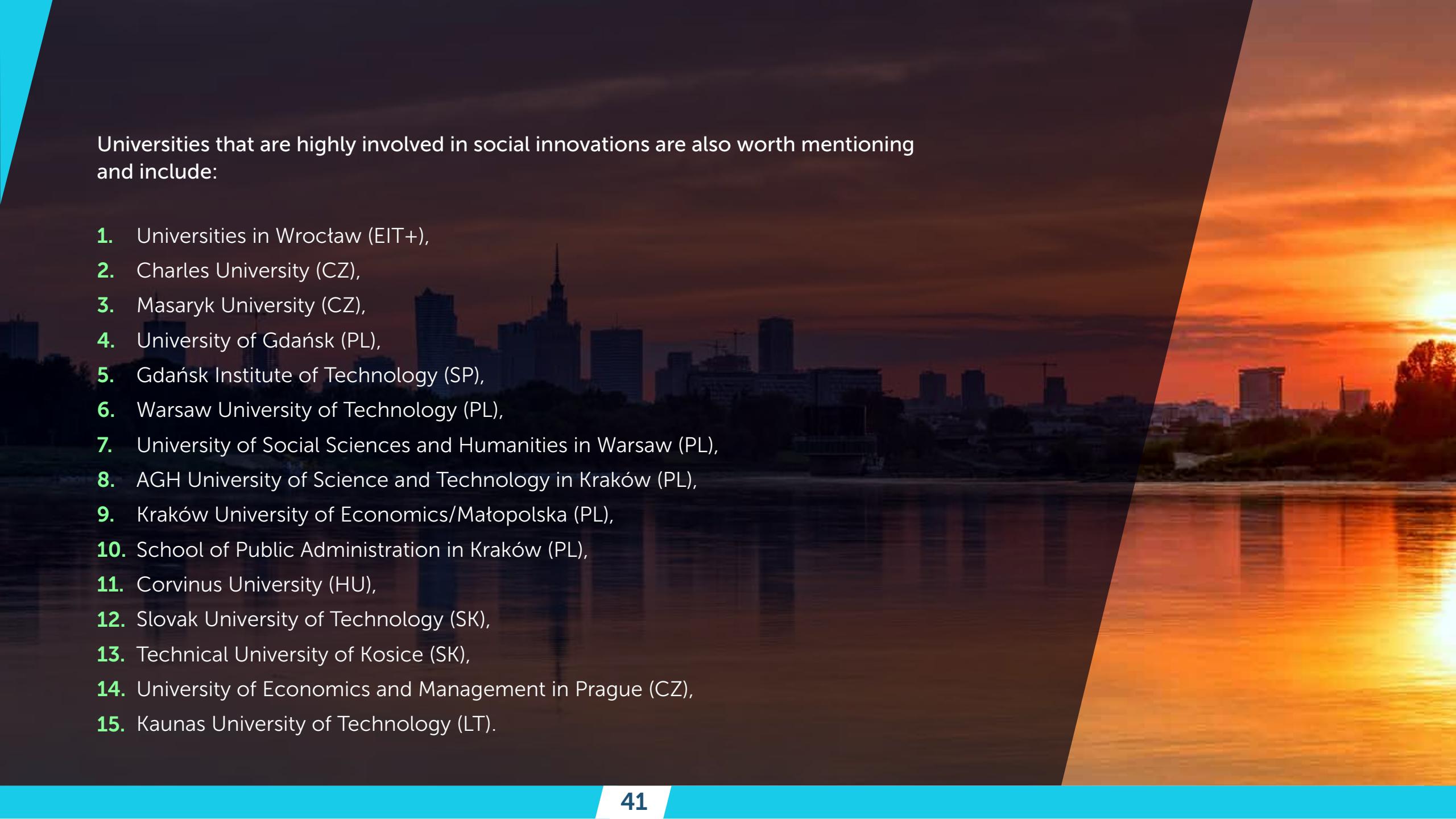
Universities that are highly involved in social innovations are also worth mentioning and include:

1. Universities in Wrocław (EIT+),
2. Charles University (CZ),
3. Masaryk University (CZ),
4. University of Gdańsk (PL),
5. Gdańsk Institute of Technology (SP),
6. Warsaw University of Technology (PL),
7. University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw (PL),
8. AGH University of Science and Technology in Kraków (PL),
9. Kraków University of Economics/Małopolska (PL),
10. School of Public Administration in Kraków (PL),
11. Corvinus University (HU),
12. Slovak University of Technology (SK),
13. Technical University of Kosice (SK),
14. University of Economics and Management in Prague (CZ),
15. Kaunas University of Technology (LT).

To sum up:

The overall image of the activity of universities in the area of social innovation in Central Europe is made up of single undertakings of higher education institutions – activities and solutions that are carried out without outside assistance or in collaboration or partnership with external institutions and organizations. These activities are most often projects usually carried out as part of EU programmes and competitions organized by state institutions. Upon closer scrutiny we saw a curious pattern – despite the initiatives being "European" at the outset, they are often developed to fit the "local" conditions and "fit" the local social and cultural environment. Unfortunately, due to them being projects, they are often temporary and so is their impact.

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