



White Paper on building the culture of social innovation in higher education

# Recommendations

June, 2018

## Introduction

This White Paper is one of the intellectual outcomes and a product of the *Building the Culture of Social Innovation in Higher Education* (BCSIHE) project implemented by Collegium Civitas in partnership with the University of Iceland, the University of Northampton and Ashoka, co-founded by the European Commission. The document attempts to reflect in a nutshell relevant experiences and key insights of outstanding scholars and practitioners who contributed to the project. It is also meant as a form of conceptual summary designed for stakeholders and

decision-makers at different levels to indicate reasonable ways in which the development of social innovation culture in higher education can be strengthened and supported.

## Social innovation: why it matters?

As stated by William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, 'always human beings will progress to greater, broader, and fuller life'. This over-optimistic claim can be challenged with at least two observations by a critical mind: firstly, progress is a gradable phenomenon and we should always be concerned if its pace is fast enough and couldn't be improved; and secondly, what is the right direction of this progress or, another words, what is exactly this greater, broader and fuller life? However, assuming that human beings are entrepreneurial and innovative on the one hand, and that there are some context-specific social problems, needs, challenges (presumably preventing us from living a greater, broader and fuller life) on the other, pragmatically speaking, our goal is to link this entrepreneurial drive with these social (and not necessarily individual) needs in order to make it work for our benefit. And this can be perceived as the merit of social innovativeness and actually an issue that does matter.

In practice this abstract depiction needs to be boiled down to match a particular economic and social context. For it has to be emphasized that there is no universal definition of social innovativeness and in this sense the very discourse concerning social innovation depends on a given society and the embracing culture which forges it. According to different models and intellectual settings social innovation can overlap with other narratives, like social economy or sustainable development. It can be also developed with respect to various political frameworks. Moreover, it has to be stated that human beings were socially innovative far before they started speaking about it and thus it is not about reinventing the wheel. Our first and foremost challenge

here is to better understand the phenomenon of social innovation, identify its practical meaning, and learn it to enable ourselves to support its development.

## Features

How to recognize then what we intend to support? Even though the definition of social innovation is a diffuse concept, we can still indicate several features which are typically distinguished to identify social innovations in various environments:

- (1) our attention should be paid to what a given activity really represents, how and in which sense it is innovative, and what social needs it meets, independently on how it is being institutionally classified (institutional classifications should follow reality, not the other way around);
- (2) social innovativeness should be also perceived as a certain attitude of an individual or institution, not attached to any particular area of human/institutional activity but rather permeating all its activities;
- (3) social innovation is a socially embedded construct based on a meaning-making activity, which implies introduction of a new language and new habits, which then need to be accepted by a given community – thus it always involves changemaking and managing the process of change;
- (4) the creation and development of a social innovation is rather a process than a single action, and it is rather collective than individual, even if inspired by an individual action; it is even more so in case of social innovation culture – the natural environment for the development of social innovation culture is a 3.0 setting where the distinction between the beneficiaries, experts and

co-producers disappears and where a genuine community engagement based on co-agency and co-responsibility is encouraged;

(5) critical thinking and emphatic insight are the backbones of any innovation as well as any systemic, systematic and sustainable approach to social innovation and creation of social innovation culture.

## Challenges

These features of social innovativeness are related to a number of structural challenges that need to be taken into account and addressed in the context of policy planning as well as when designing schemes for the development of social innovation culture in higher education institutions:

(1) structural and systemic support for the development of social innovation is a complex and demanding challenge due to its fuzziness and unpredictability; in particular, social innovations cannot be planned in advance according to a special formula for success – its development is based on and requires creation of appropriate, context-specific circumstances and conditions where social innovation can blossom naturally;

(2) in the above sense it makes social innovation culture a potentially highly profitable, but long-term investment, which needs time and patience to bring tangible results;

(3) moreover, as innovations bring new behavioural patterns and mechanisms, as they rearrange socio-economic schemes, side-effects of the processes triggered are often hard to predict – in a consequence we usually cannot be sure if a given social innovation is a good thing, even when it causes some positive changes; in this sense measuring social and economic

impacts of a given social innovation in a comprehensive way is a difficult task, yet of highest importance;

(4) cutting-edge activities lacking clear points of reference, benchmarks and parameters to be measured and evaluated, activities which are based mainly on mutual trust, are vulnerable to typical abuses; it usually involves questions on the meaning and sense of a given innovation as well as concerns regarding its real impact;

(5) thus keeping a good balance between enthusiasm and trust on the one hand and sound criticism on the other is another important issue to be taken into account.

## Who can support the development of social innovation culture?

An immediate answer: everyone. In case of social innovation motivation to do it can result from a variety of different gains, starting from individual profits – revenue from investment, business opportunities, access to talents | knowledge | learning communities, prestige etc. – and ending up with the sense of social responsibility and belief in the worth of the idea.

For a number of reasons power – understood as institutions, political power (policy), finance, social networks – can be considered central to enabling social innovation. In this sense powerful actors can use their access to capitals (economic, social, intellectual, political, human etc.) to develop dominant narratives and influence / shape the discourse on social innovativeness to support its development. On the other hand social innovators can overcome any particular discourse to reshape societal structures and thus create new values. This makes empowerment of those without traditional access to resource central to social innovation as well. Everyone is potentially an agent of change, even though everyone has different means at her/his disposal.

Among these many roles, a particularly important one is played by higher education institutions (HEIs), which are in a privileged position to support the development of social innovation culture quite comprehensively. They can unlock creative capital and encourage social innovativeness by teaching and educational means, by acting as hubs initiating broader partnerships, by linking different actors/elements of the economic and social environment as well as by fostering a

collaborative and positive ethos using influences and prestige of experts, scholars, teachers, mentors and many other potential stakeholders active in the academic field. Therefore HEIs can and should be recognized as crucial actors providing support, empowering and encouraging social innovations.

Below, we formulate a number of recommendations to be considered by those who are committed to support the development of social innovation culture in (and through) higher education.

## Strengthening socio-economic environments for social innovation culture in higher education

Even though challenges and obstacles happen to be inspirational for novice innovators, their success rate is lower when they face a constant uphill struggle. Therefore social innovation as well as social innovation culture need a friendly and encouraging socio-economic environment, “eco-system”, to grow. This general meta-level objective can be further particularised by distinguishing a number of areas of the support needed.

**1. Recognition and promotion.** First of all social innovation, similarly as education in social innovativeness, has to be identified as legitimate, relevant and valuable field of study and activity. It involves several layers of recognition, starting from the legal and administrative perspective up to a broad promotion and popular perception of the concept. Clear definitions, legislative framing, institutional framing as well as policy framing create environment where social innovation becomes an official and justified element / part of higher education system. Furthermore, it needs to be codified to an extent enabling its measurement, monitoring and evaluation. On the other hand popular dissemination and promotion can be realized by means of branding, implementation of quality norms, standards and marks, databases collecting good practices, thus proving their efficiency, as well as communication of success stories.

Achievement of these objectives requires strong engagement of public, private as well as civic actors.

**2. Growth and development.** Higher education institutions should be further supported in their efforts to develop culture of social innovations by providing structural solutions and financial instruments at their disposal. Definitely, it assumes deeper understanding of the meaning and role of higher education institutions within a given socio-economic environment in the process of creation of social innovations. In this sense structural solutions have to be adjusted and selected to fit local context and match actual needs. In general they might include tangible tools such as infrastructure and e-infrastructure, start-up incubators, technology hubs, community centers, and intangible ones such as formal and informal bodies and councils, strategic documents, regulations (in the field of education, research, fiscal/tax policy etc. supplemented with appropriate cohesion policies).

Access to different and diversified sources of funds and financial instruments (including: public funds, market investment capital, social funding, etc.) should be granted to HEIs in the form of structural programmes as well as temporary tailor-made measures.

**3. Trans-sectoral partnerships, networking and multilateral fora.** Sharing experiences, critical reflection and knowledge is central for diagnosing social needs on the one hand, and developing efficient and innovative solutions on the other. Thus the culture of social innovation requires a lot of communications and mutual understanding among various public, business, non-governmental, collective and individual actors. It cannot be achieved without creating rich and diverse eco-systems around higher education institutions, based on trans-sectoral and interdisciplinary partnerships. Therefore decision makers as well as community leaders should feel strongly encouraged to arrange networking opportunities, launching new multilateral fora and create institutional and informal conditions for dialogue.

## Culture of social innovation in higher education institutions

The development of culture of social innovation in higher education institutions should be understood as a multidimensional and holistic process that gradually involves and changes

whole environment around a given higher education institution. Five key areas for driving social innovation in higher education institutions are to be distinguished:

- (a) defining what social innovation means for a given higher education institution
- (b) becoming a genuine community hub;
- (c) empowering students to become creative changemakers;
- (d) investing in social innovation strategically across the institution;
- (e) embedding social innovation effectively in the curriculum, through academic, policy and practical methods.

In particular, the very process of integrating social innovation into the teaching curricula (e) requires another complex and comprehensive process. It starts with a general shift in attitude impacting all programs and courses taught rather than launching a number of specific courses in social innovation.

Educators and mentors need to develop a clear understanding of social innovation and its relevance in today's society first, so that students can recognize why social innovation is important and relevant to their learning. It is also crucial to emphasize that teaching of social



innovation has to be based on certain specific didactic methods, including learning by doing and development of students' own initiative, entrepreneurship as well as sense of responsibility.

Within the framework of *Building the Culture of Social Innovation in Higher Education* project these five areas have been related with the following maturity scale of social innovation culture for a given higher education institution:

**Stage one – defining social innovation** – desired outcome: there is a clear institutional definition of social innovation.

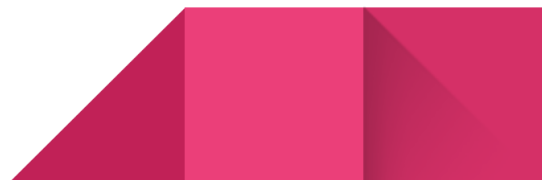
**Stage two – planning and development** – desired outcome: social innovation is integrated into the HEI's ethos.

**Stage three – investment and commitment** – desired outcome: there is a clear investment strategy for social innovation in the HEI.

**Stage four – measurement and reporting** – desired outcome: there are systems in place to maximise and build on social innovation in the HEI.

**Stage five – maintaining a commitment to SI** – desired outcome: there is a clear direction and on-going commitment to the development of social innovation in the HEI.

All higher education institutions are strongly advised to follow the above development ladder in order to build up the culture of social innovation in a comprehensive and reasonable way.



## Fostering SI learning communities and communities of practice

Apart of the institutionalized actions at high decision-making levels, the development of culture of social innovation in higher education can be strengthened in a bottom-up way. Moreover, the engagement of community actors is essential to this process and its sustainability.

Obviously, this might be triggered by policy-makers opening 'policy-windows' meant to inspire and empower social actions (for example by providing special funding as an important enabler of social innovation). However, it can be also initiated independently by community leaders with a clear vision and commitment to social innovation. For this reason all local actors – academic teachers, students, social entrepreneurs, activists and enthusiasts – should feel encouraged to do so.

When appropriately planned, independent and genuine local actions can gain the momentum and lead to implementation of complex and systemic policies. This can be facilitated by building and fostering SI learning communities (driven by educational/scientific motives) and communities of practice (driven by entrepreneurial motives) within the higher education environment. Especially when linked with external partners – in particular: business environment and/or community actors, including actual social enterprises – such bottom-up initiatives can influence decision- and policy-makers to trigger / make a change at an institutional level. Eventually, the entire process can lead to creation of a supportive and sustainable environment for the development of culture of social innovation.

## SI tool kit: applying intellectual outputs of the BCSiHE project

Apart of the general directions and recommendations on how to successfully support the development of social innovation culture in higher education, the BCSiHE project offers a rich array of tools, enumerated briefly below, to be freely exploited and applied:

**I01 University – a hub of social innovation or a nest?** – an in-depth analysis on the activity of Central European HEIs in the field of social innovation. The document contains

recommendations on how the potential of these organizations can be unlocked and further used for the benefit of the culture of social innovation.

**I02 Universities for the society of tomorrow – introducing the social innovation into the university** – guidelines for managers/provosts. To address the lack of cohesive campus-wide vision for social innovation an instrument which is useful for defining and applying social innovation into HEIs vision, mission, identity, culture and strategy has been created.

**I03 Integrating social innovation into learning curricula** – a manual for the educators and mentors. The document provides educators with a detailed instruction on designing modules on social innovation for different learning programmes as well as with a manual containing implementation schemes.

**I04 Sustaining the momentum – supporting the learning outside the campus** – guidelines for educators and mentors. This comprehensive paper on modern 360-degree entrepreneurship education contains useful recommendations on the environment, processes and measures supporting the learning process.

**I05 Train the trainers course in social innovation – introducing social innovation into teaching** – curriculum with the manual. It is a tailor-made instrument meant to support development of key competencies of lecturers, trainers and facilitators working in the field of social innovation.

**I06 – I07 – I08 A basic teaching module in social innovation (30h)** – available in three different versions which have been diversified with respect to specific needs of the three different target groups: students graduating in sociology, new media and management.

**I09 Autonomous MOOC on designing social services** – this content-rich MOOC consists of six modules devoted to introducing the very idea of social innovativeness, motivations behind the development of social innovation culture, examples of social innovations and social enterprises presented by SI practitioners as well as guidelines for those who are interested in launching their own initiative.

**I010 Incubating and accelerating social innovation ideas** – a guidebook meant to help to develop competencies of people working with social innovation ideas, including: identifying business opportunities, creating business models, measuring social impacts, innovativeness,

replication potential, searching for funds as well as approaches to growing, scaling and diffusing social innovations.

**IO11 Best practices in the field of inter-organisational collaboration in the field of social innovation** – a sourcebook – the document provides educators and interested readers with real life examples of relevant and inspiring practices in social innovation as well as tips and tricks for adaptable solutions.

**IO12 Recommendations for decision makers** – white paper, this document containing general recommendations on how to support the development of social innovation culture in higher education institutions – to be shared and disseminated among all those who could potentially influence the policies related to tertiary education as well as create an impact among the HEIs and other stakeholders.

**IO13 MOOC for educators** – this course is an abridged and enriched version of the autonomous MOOC on designing social services (IO9) addressed to educators / teachers who are already interested in fostering the culture of social innovation.

## Summary

Building the culture of social innovation (SI) in higher education is a multidimensional and complex processes, which requires a highly context-specific support. Moreover, even though social innovations are widely recognized and generate measurable benefits, they cannot be easily planned and delivered in form of turnkey projects. Similarly, teaching social innovation is a non-obvious and demanding challenge. Therefore social innovation as well as building the culture of social innovation should be considered potentially highly-profitable but long-term investments, requiring commitment, consequence, trust, creation of a sustainable, supportive, trans-sectoral environment as well as involvement of multiple actors, from local communities and its leaders, all the way up to decision- and policy-makers.

**Recommendations on how to build the culture of social innovation in higher education** are organized according to three layers/levels of support for its development:

1. Policy level: to strengthen socio-economic environments for social innovation culture in higher education, including:

1.1. legal and administrative recognition of social innovation, measurement of its socio-economic impacts as well as broad dissemination and promotion of the concept,

1.2. provision of appropriate structural solutions and financial instruments at the disposal of higher education institutions (HEIs) interested in becoming social innovation hubs,

1.3. building up trans-sectoral partnerships, networks and multilateral fora enabling mutual understanding, dialogue and collaborations among various public, business, non-governmental, collective and individual actors.

2. HEIs level: to support the development of social innovation culture in higher education institutions, including:

2.1. developing a clear institutional definition of social innovation,

2.2. integrating social innovation into a given HEI's ethos,

2.3. planning, developing and implementing a clear investment strategy for SI,

2.4. setting up a system in place to measure SI in order to maximise and build on it,

2.5. maintaining a clear direction and on-going commitment to SI.

3. Local level: to foster SI learning communities and communities of practice, including:

3.1. creating bottom-up learning communities (driven by educational/scientific motives) and communities of practice (driven by entrepreneurial motives) committed to support the development of social innovation culture,

3.2. strengthen and empower these communities by linking with external partners: business environment and/or community actors (also: actual social enterprises),

3.3. influence decision- and policy-makers to create supportive and sustainable frameworks for sustainable, institutional and systemic development of culture of social innovation..

Finally, everyone committed to social innovation should feel encouraged and advised to freely exploit and make use of all the intellectual outputs of the *Building the Culture of Social Innovation in Higher Education* project available at:

[www.civitas.edu.pl/uczelnia/building-the-culture-of-social-innovation-in-higher-education-erasmus](http://www.civitas.edu.pl/uczelnia/building-the-culture-of-social-innovation-in-higher-education-erasmus)

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