Empowering the Next Generation of Changemakers

A dual approach to social innovation education

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Introduction

Joining the Pact for Skills on Proximity and Social Economy, the European Social Innovation Campus (ESIC) contributes to the challenge of the upskilling and reskilling of 5% of the workforce and entrepreneurs of the sector each year to tackle the green and digital transitions in the social economy by boosting social innovation capacities.

The Alliance brings together higher education and vocational education and training, social economy organisations and enterprises from several European countries as well as European level actors.

Drawing on evidence regarding the skills needs of occupational profiles, the Alliance boosts the provision of new skills and addresses skills mismatches by creating a new general Core Curriculum for the social economy and curricula to different EQF levels.

The Alliance designs and delivers transnational education and training content, as well as co-produce teaching and training methodologies for quick uptake of the contents at regional and local levels and for emerging occupational profiles.

In addition, the project will establish a strong communication and dissemination network, promoting the social economy sector as a career choice and supporting the development of a sense of initiative and entrepreneurial mind-sets in the EU.
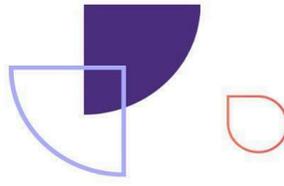
Executive Summary

As global challenges grow more complex and urgent, the role of education, particularly business and higher education, must evolve. It is no longer enough to prepare students for efficiency and competition alone. Tomorrow's leaders must be equipped to navigate uncertainty, lead across sectors, and drive positive social change. This two-part practice-oriented report series explores how educational institutions and support ecosystems can rise to that challenge. Drawing from in-depth research and real-world insights, the reports offer practical frameworks for developing the competencies, pedagogical strategies, and organisational shifts needed to embed social innovation into learning environments. The first report, "Future-Ready Skills for Social Innovation", presents a pragmatic competency framework to guide educators, funders, and program developers in cultivating the skills most critical to changemakers. The second report, "Redesigning Business Education for Impact", examines how business schools can update their pedagogies, overcome institutional inertia, and more actively support social innovation through experiential and purpose-driven education. Together, these insights serve as a call to action for educators, program leaders, and ecosystem actors who want to prepare the next generation, not just for success, but for significance.

Key Takeaways:

- Social innovation education requires both core (transversal) and contextual (specialised) competencies.
- Emerging pedagogies (from hackathons to living labs) are key to delivering this learning.
- Institutions must overcome internal rigidity and support faculty experimentation to enable change.

Keywords: Social Innovation Education, Competencies, Transformative Pedagogies, Ecosystem Learning, Institutional Change

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1.   Equipping Social Innovators
Key Competencies for a Sustainable Future

Abstract

In a fast-changing world marked by climate change, inequality, and social disruption, the need for social innovation has never been greater. Yet, many social entrepreneurs and changemakers struggle to develop the skills needed to create a lasting impact. This practical report distils insights from over 150 academic articles into a concise and action-focused guide for educators, policy advisors, and innovation ecosystem builders. The report identifies key competencies needed for successful social innovation, organised into transversal competencies (e.g. collaboration, learning agility, and sustainability awareness) and specialised competencies (e.g. leadership, operations, digital capacity, and innovation). These skills are increasingly essential for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) aiming to equip their students, and society at large, with the tools to build solutions for a sustainable and inclusive future. While rooted in academic evidence, this report focuses on practical takeaways, curriculum suggestions, and capacity-building insights for those designing education, training, and policy interventions in the social innovation field.

Introduction

Across Europe and beyond, there is growing momentum behind the idea that solving today's complex societal challenges requires more than technical solutions. It demands a new generation of capable and values-driven innovators who can lead change across sectors and disciplines. Social innovators, whether they are entrepreneurs, educators, civil servants, or community leaders, are at the forefront of these efforts. But many find themselves underprepared, especially when it comes to navigating uncertainty, managing partnerships, and scaling impact. Despite an explosion of programs in social entrepreneurship and sustainability over recent decades, there remains a lack of clarity about what skills are truly needed, and how education providers can equip people with them. This report responds to that gap. Rather than offering a theoretical model or academic analysis, it provides a practical and accessible overview of key competencies that are emerging as essential for social innovators. It draws on extensive evidence and expert validation, but is

designed for practitioners, educators, and policy advisors who are building curricula, designing training programs, or shaping support systems for changemakers.

Overview of competencies needed

Many aspiring changemakers or social innovators face a steep learning curve. Whether they are launching a social enterprise, developing a new service in a non-profit, or testing new approaches in local government, the challenges are remarkably similar: working across sectors, adapting to uncertainty, and finding sustainable ways to deliver impact. This means social innovators need a broad mix of competencies; not just in entrepreneurship or sustainability, but in leadership, communication, digital skills, and systems thinking. Yet these are often developed unevenly, if at all. Some training programs focus heavily on values or business models, but neglect operational know-how. Others stress creativity and ideation, but overlook collaboration and ecosystem building. To address this, it is helpful to group competencies into two broad categories:

- **Transversal competencies**: These are foundational skills that apply across most roles and contexts, such as collaboration, critical thinking, and digital literacy. They form the basis of effective participation in any innovation process.
- **Specialised competencies**: These include more role-specific skills, such as leading a team, designing innovative solutions, managing operations, or handling finances. While not every innovator needs all of these, they are crucial when scaling impact or running an initiative over time.

Importantly, these competencies are not just technical. Many involve attitudes and mindsets, like resilience, curiosity, or a willingness to navigate ambiguity. They are also deeply interdisciplinary, cutting across sectors and requiring individuals to learn from practice as much as from theory. By understanding and developing these competencies more deliberately, educational institutions, support programs, and funders can ensure that social innovators are not just idealistic but also ready and able to drive meaningful, lasting change.
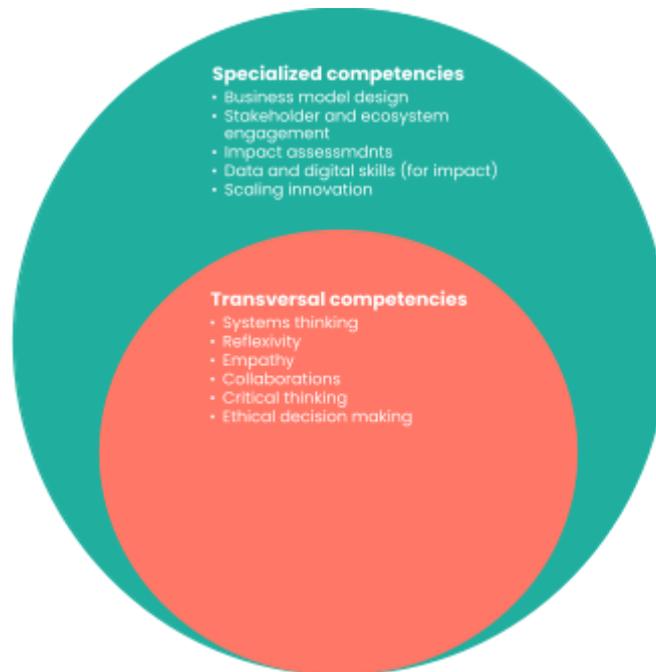
Figure 1. Two-tier competency framework for social innovation. Core (transversal) and role-dependent (specialised) competencies to develop purpose-driven changemakers.

Two-tier competency framework

To design effective training, curriculum, or capacity-building programs, it helps to distinguish between two essential sets of competencies that either cut across all roles or are more role-specific or situational. Transversal competencies represent foundational skills that any social innovator needs, regardless of their role or organisation. They are transferable, widely applicable, and often the building blocks for more specialised development. We clustered them into the following subsets:

- **Collaboration and Communication**
  Working with diverse stakeholders across sectors and cultures, using both clear communication and active listening.

- **Critical Thinking and Learning Agility**
  Reflecting, analysing, adapting; especially when navigating complex or uncertain environments.

- **Sustainability Awareness**
  Understanding the environmental and social challenges at stake, and embedding long-term thinking into action.

- **Digital Literacy**
  Using digital tools confidently for operations, outreach, and innovation, ranging from spreadsheets to social media and AI.
- **Ecosystem Building**
  Developing networks, alliances, and stakeholder coalitions that sustain and amplify impact.
- **Personal competencies** (self-care, ethics, self-esteem)

These skills help innovators stay grounded, informed, and resilient, regardless of whether they're just starting or scaling a project. The second set is specialised competencies, which tend to depend on the specific role, stage, or sector the innovator operates in. No one person needs all of them, but every team needs most of them. These competencies are not just technical but are deeply tied to real-world execution, often learned by doing and refined over time. These are clustered into the following subsets:

- **Leadership & People Management**
  Inspiring others, managing teams, and aligning efforts behind a common mission.
- **Innovation & Design Skills**
  Turning ideas into testable prototypes and scalable solutions through creativity and experimentation.
- **Management, operational & financial Skills**
  Managing budgets, logistics, compliance, or day-to-day delivery in a resource-constrained environment.
- **Entrepreneurial Thinking**
  Spotting opportunities, building partnerships, and making strategic decisions under uncertainty.

It is important to consider offering a modular learning structure when teaching these competencies. It could help learners identify their core strengths and then customise their development path by adding targeted skills based on their role or ambition (e.g., founder, facilitator, policy maker, etc.).

Reflections

As interest in social innovation grows, many (applied) universities, training providers, incubators, and public agencies are launching programs to support changemakers. Yet, without a clear understanding of the competencies needed and how they differ across roles, these programs risk being fragmented, superficial, or disconnected from practice. The two-tier framework outlined above offers a practical foundation for those designing education, training, or capacity-building initiatives. Rather than reinventing the wheel, it helps actors focus on the right building blocks: transversal competencies as the baseline, and specialised competencies tailored to learners' goals.

For higher education institutions, this means rethinking curricula to ensure students are not only taught theory but are also equipped with practical, ethical, and adaptive skills. It also means moving beyond static classroom models to more experiential and interdisciplinary approaches, including real-world projects, ecosystem engagement, and reflective practice. For incubators and support organisations, the framework highlights the importance of mapping competencies over time. Early-stage support might focus on self-awareness, systems thinking, and storytelling. Later-stage support may shift toward operational strategy, team building, or financial resilience. For policymakers and funders, the implication is that capacity-building needs to be multidimensional. It's not enough to finance innovation projects; the people behind them need consistent support in learning, adapting, and growing. Investment in skills, especially lifelong, digital, and ecosystem-based skills, can unlock more durable impact across the board. Finally, for social innovators themselves, the framework provides a helpful tool for self-assessment and development planning. Understanding which competencies are already strong and which need to be strengthened (either personally or through partnerships) is key to sustainable growth.

Based on the insights and framework presented in this report, the following recommendations aim to support those developing and delivering social innovation education and support programs: i) Build Modular, Competency-Based Learning Pathways. Avoid one-size-fits-all curricula. Design flexible, modular programs that allow learners to develop transversal skills first, then specialise based on their role or career goals; ii) Integrate Real-World, Interdisciplinary Experiences, by using live cases, social labs, service learning, and partnerships with social enterprises or public actors.

Learning must happen in the same messy, cross-sectoral environments where social innovation unfolds; iii) Use Competency Self-Assessments and Team Mapping to encourage learners to reflect on their strengths and development areas. Support teams to map their combined competencies and identify gaps to fill via training or recruitment; iv) Train the Trainers, such as educators, mentors, and program coordinators who, let's face it, often lack the support to teach social innovation effectively. Invest in faculty development, peer exchange, and communities of practice.; finally, v) co-design with Stakeholders! Innovative and crucial skills can only be taught if they are offered in an innovative way, which requires higher levels of engagement and empowerment for learners, social entrepreneurs, funders, and community actors in the design and review of programs. This ensures relevance, ownership, and continuous improvement.

As the world faces increasingly complex social and environmental challenges, we need more than good intentions; we need well-equipped innovators who can turn vision into action. Our two-tier framework helps with this, offering two key messages: first, that foundational (transversal) competencies, such as collaboration, learning agility, and sustainability awareness, are essential for everyone involved in social innovation. Second, that specialised competencies, like leadership, innovation management, and operational execution, must be cultivated based on role, context, and stage of development. Looking ahead, this framework can serve as a starting point for reviewing curricula, designing training programs, or structuring mentorship and support services. It can also help learners and teams assess where they are today, and what skills they still need to build. With the right competencies in place, we can empower the next generation of social innovators to not just dream of a better future, but to build it.

2. Redesigning Business Education for Impact: Pedagogies for Social Innovation

Abstract

Today's business challenges are no longer limited to maximising shareholder value; they involve navigating environmental risks, social justice issues, and systemic uncertainty. The next generation of business leaders will need a very different skillset to thrive and create meaningful impact. Based on cross-European insights, we explored how business schools and training programs could rethink their role in society by equipping students with the right competencies and learning experiences to lead social innovation. Based on an extensive set of interviews with educators, innovators, and ecosystem actors across nine European countries, it identifies key themes around not just the core competencies needed for social innovation in business, but also emerging pedagogies that move beyond lectures to real-world learning. Designed for business school leaders, curriculum designers, and corporate training teams, this guide offers practical recommendations to better align business education with the realities of a changing world and to prepare future leaders who can lead business as a force for good.

Introduction

Business education is at a turning point. Around the world, companies, governments, and civil society are looking to the next generation of leaders to help address issues that go far beyond financial performance: climate instability, inequality, social cohesion, and ethical governance. But while business schools have begun integrating topics like sustainability and ethics, many programs still fall short of preparing students to navigate the complex realities of social innovation. Core curricula often focus on planning, analysis, and competition, while what changemakers really need are adaptability, collaboration, systems thinking, and a clear sense of purpose. At the same time, many faculty members and institutions face real constraints: siloed departments, rigid structures, or a lack of clarity on how to teach these new forms of leadership. Despite strong intentions, efforts to embed social innovation into business education often remain fragmented, underfunded, or marginalised. This report responds to these challenges. It draws on dozens of in-depth conversations with educators and practitioners across Europe to distil a clear message: if business

schools want to stay relevant, they must rethink what they teach, how they teach it, and why it matters. What follows is a practical guide, designed for deans, program directors, and educational innovators, on how to build future-proof business education that empowers students to lead with purpose, drive innovation, and build a better world.

Pedagogies for social innovation

Preparing students for social innovation requires more than adding a few elective courses. It demands a shift in how we approach teaching and learning. Traditional methods, lectures, case studies, siloed subjects, etc., are often ill-suited to help learners deal with real-world complexity and systemic change. Across Europe, pioneering educators are moving away from knowledge transfer toward transformational learning. These new approaches blend theory with lived experience, involve community actors, and create room for personal reflection, uncertainty, and experimentation. The most promising pedagogies share three core traits:

- **Experiential**
  Students engage in real-world problem-solving with partners from public, private, or social sectors. Learning happens through doing, failing, and reflecting.
- **Interdisciplinary**
  Challenges like inequality or climate change don't fit within one academic box. Successful programs break down barriers between faculties and bring diverse perspectives together.
- **Reflective and values-driven**
  Social innovation is not just about solving problems; it's about clarifying purpose, examining assumptions, and making ethical choices under pressure.

Educators also report that students feel more engaged, motivated, and empowered when these approaches are used. But integrating them into mainstream curricula remains a challenge, requiring changes not only in teaching style, but in organisational culture and support structures. Across Europe, a growing number of business schools and innovation hubs are experimenting with new formats to teach social innovation in ways that are immersive, meaningful, and systemically informed. While no one-size-fits-all model exists, several inspiring approaches stand out.

For example, social innovation labs are places where students work in small teams to tackle real-world societal challenges presented by local municipalities, NGOs, or companies. These labs often include fieldwork, prototyping, and public feedback loops. The goal is not just to create solutions, but to learn through co-creation and uncertainty. Another example goes by the name "challenge-based learning". Instead of starting with lectures, courses are organised around complex, open-ended questions (e.g., "How might we reduce digital exclusion in urban youth?"). Knowledge is built as students research, consult stakeholders, and test ideas iteratively. Living labs or community-based learning represent some programs that embed students directly into ongoing community initiatives or urban innovation projects. These partnerships give students hands-on experience while creating real value for underserved groups, and deepen their understanding of systems-level change. Two more examples are called integrated reflection practices and hackathons. The first type of example represents programs that incorporate guided self-reflection, journaling, peer coaching, and ethical discussions into the curriculum. This strengthens not only emotional intelligence and purpose orientation, but also the student's ability to navigate ambiguity and value tensions. The second is where students from business, design, engineering, and social sciences join forces in short, intense collaboration formats. These break down silos, push creative thinking, and simulate the kind of multi-actor dynamics found in real-world social innovation work.

These approaches could be furthermore considered from "easier to implement" to "more complex/systemic to implement. This could help to foresee the progression of depth, resource needs, and institutional change required. Hackathons are relatively easy to organise in the short term and require minimal curriculum changes, whilst encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration. Challenge-based learning can be integrated into existing courses, whilst further encouraging inquiry and problem-solving mindsets. This already requires a more moderate planning and facilitation. One level "higher" would require integrated reflection practices, which add depth to existing learning approaches, but need trained facilitators and time for reflection. So far, these approaches remain relatively "in-house". The next approach involves partnerships with (local) organisations from the ecosystem, and thus requires more coordination and alignment with community needs. A Community-Service Learning approach offers real-world impact and student engagement, but starts putting more weight on the educator. Finally, living or social innovation labs require the most institutional support, flexibility, culture change, long-term partnerships and systematic thinking. But it could also allow students to be

embedded in ongoing urban or community projects, where social impact is highly probable to be developed, as students are immersed and co-create solutions with stakeholders. But, obviously, this is the most complex to manage. An overview of these examples is to be found in the figure underneath (Figure 2).
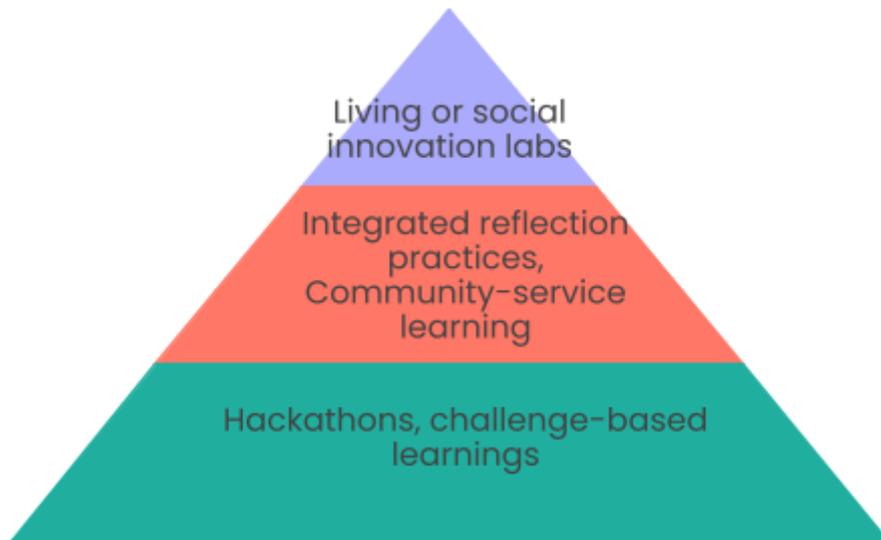

Figure 2. From easier to implement (base-level) to more complex to implement (top-level) approaches to social innovation pedagogies.

Institutional barriers

While many educators are eager to adopt new approaches, they often find themselves pushing against structural and cultural resistance. Social innovation education challenges the traditional role of business schools, and that can create friction at multiple levels. Two common issues are, on the one hand, the issue of rigid perspectives or visions, and, on the other hand, inefficient faculty operations. Please note that these barriers are not insurmountable, but addressing them requires leadership, alignment, and strategic commitment from the highest level throughout the whole institution.

Rigid perspectives

Standardised course structures, tight learning outcomes, and rigid accreditation rules can leave little room for experimentation, interdisciplinarity, or open-ended learning. Furthermore, some schools still view social innovation as peripheral, an "add-on" to the core business curriculum. There may be fears that focusing on purpose-driven education will weaken academic credibility or industry appeal.

Inefficient faculty operations

Collaboration across faculties is difficult when performance metrics, budgets, and teaching loads remain separated. Instructors interested in innovation often work in isolation. Furthermore, faculty members may lack institutional support or recognition for investing in new pedagogies. Research publications are often prioritised over teaching impact or community engagement. To make things worse, developing partnerships, setting up social labs, or organising experiential modules takes significant effort. Without dedicated time, funding, or administrative support, even well-intentioned programs stall.

Reflections

To meaningfully embed social innovation into business education, schools and program leaders can take several strategic steps. The following recommendations are based on real practices observed across European institutions:

1. **Start small and strategically**

Pilot a social innovation module, studio, or lab within an existing course. Don't wait for full curriculum reform; use small wins to build internal momentum.

2. **Incentivise pedagogical/faculty experimentation**

Offer teaching grants, release time, or recognition for faculty who develop new learning formats. Celebrate success stories internally to shift the culture. This also means breaking silos by forming informal working groups or co-teaching arrangements across departments. Social innovation thrives on interdisciplinary friction.

3. **Engage the ecosystem**

Involve social entrepreneurs, NGOs, public officials, and students in co-designing learning experiences. This builds credibility, relevance, and long-term buy-in. Invite them to think beyond exams. Use reflective journals, peer reviews, ecosystem feedback, or prototype presentations to evaluate both mindset and practical application.

Business schools have an urgent opportunity and responsibility to evolve. In a world facing overlapping crises, future leaders must be able to navigate complexity, act ethically, collaborate across boundaries, and lead innovation with purpose. This report

has outlined how business education can rise to that challenge. Not through theoretical add-ons or elective courses, but by rethinking the very way we teach: emphasising experiential, interdisciplinary, and reflective pedagogies that mirror the real-world conditions of social innovation. While institutional inertia is real, change is possible, and already happening in pioneering programs across Europe. By starting small, aligning incentives, and building supportive communities, business schools can unlock the creativity and leadership of both educators and students.