European Social Innovation Campus

Sectoral Skills Strategy

Deliverable D3.1

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Acronyms and Definitions:

- DigComp – Digital Competences in Digital Skills Playbook
- Digivisio – Digivisio 2030 pedagogical quality criteria are based on several sources and reference frameworks. In general, the development of the Digivisio quality framework has been guided by the Finnish Audit model for higher education institutions (FINHEEC/KARVI – Finnish Education Evaluation Centre) and European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).
- ECTS – European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
- ECVET – the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training
- EISMEA – European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency
- ESIC – European Social Innovation Campus
- EQF – The European Qualifications Framework
- ESF+ – European Social Fund Plus
- HEI – Higher Education Institutions
- SE – The social economy covers entities sharing the following main common principles and features: the primacy of people as well as social and/or environmental purpose over profit, the reinvestment of most of the profits and surpluses to carry out activities in the interest of members/users ("collective interest") or society at large ("general interest") and democratic and/or participatory governance. Traditionally, the term social economy refers to four main types of entities that provide goods and services to their members or to society at large: cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations (including charities), and foundations. They are private entities independent of public authorities and have specific legal forms. Social enterprises are now generally understood as part of the social economy. (European Commission, 2021)
- SI—The European Commission's definition of social innovations is that they are new ideas that meet social needs, create social relationships, and form new collaborations. These innovations can be products, services, or

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models that more effectively address unmet needs. The European Commission encourages market uptake of innovative solutions and stimulates employment.

- Social enterprises operate by providing goods and services to the market in an entrepreneurial and often innovative fashion, with social and/or environmental objectives as the rationale for their commercial activity. Profits are mainly reinvested to achieve their societal objective. Their method of organisation and ownership also follows democratic or participatory principles, or focuses on social progress. Social enterprises adopt a variety of legal forms depending on the national context. (European Commission, 2021)
- VET – Vocational Education and Training

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1. Overview and background

1.1 Context and Objective of the Skills Strategy

By joining the Pact for Skills on Proximity and Social Economy, the Erasmus + Inno-BLUEPRINT project, and the European Social Innovation Campus (ESIC) is at the forefront of the challenge to upskill and reskill 5% of the workforce to tackle the green and digital transitions in the social economy by boosting social innovation capacities. The Alliance, a collaborative effort involving 15 partners from 10 European countries, unites educational levels from vocational education and training to higher education, social-economy organisations and enterprises from various countries, and European-level actors.

Figure 1: The European Social Innovation Campus consortium (ESIC, 2024)

The Sectoral Skills Strategy for Social Innovation aims to identify skills gaps and propose strategies for addressing them, responding to labour market demands in ways that promote inclusive and sustainable employment

opportunities. The Strategy focuses on competencies for driving social innovation within and throughout social economy organisations. As demand for socially responsible, impact-oriented businesses continues to grow (Baudo Felter, E., & Komar, B., 2023), there is a growing need for workers and social entrepreneurs with expertise in social innovation, sustainable business models, ethical practices, and community engagement.

Building on this foundation, the Strategy, in alignment with the objectives of the European Social Innovation Campus (ESIC) project, will work closely with the Consortium to identify, define, and operationalise the competencies required for the green and digital transitions. These transitions are key pillars of the EU's broader policy agenda, and the skills and competencies developed through the project will directly strengthen the workforce's capacity to navigate and lead these changes. By embedding green and digital dimensions into the skill framework, the strategy ensures that social economy actors are resilient and proactive in shaping a more sustainable and digitally inclusive future. Recognising these transversal skills within the ESIC project enhances the adaptability and employability of workers and social entrepreneurs in a rapidly evolving socio-economic landscape.

Social Economics (SE) organisations provide unique employment prospects that differ from traditional for-profit models. The strategy supports creating training programs, workshops, and professional development pathways that equip individuals to thrive in social economy organisations. By fostering skills such as project management for social impact, social financing, and digital literacy, the strategy opens doors to diverse employment opportunities in social and healthcare, education, environmental sustainability, community development and more.

Demographic changes, labour market dynamics, and the push for sustainability drive today's economic and social needs in the SE ecosystem.

In the face of significant transformations and rapid change, we require groundbreaking social innovations that act as the cohesive force in our societies, ensuring no one gets left behind. Emerging social innovators who prioritise impact, equity, participation and justice over profit in resource allocation and value creation are becoming crucial sources of innovative solutions to these challenges.

The European Commission (EC) can address social challenges and foster economic resilience by leveraging interdisciplinary collaboration and implementing supportive policies. Additionally, fostering creative solutions and cooperation drives positive change across various domains. Social innovation delivered through digitally accessible means can significantly improve the lives of vulnerable citizens and benefit EU society.

A sectoral skills strategy requires a holistic governance approach to develop critical, adaptable, and interdisciplinary competencies for social innovation. Its main goal is identifying priority actions and concrete measures to balance future skills demand, raise awareness, and integrate sustainability into business practices. Ultimately, the strategy strengthens a resilient workforce and social innovators, fostering economic growth and societal well-being through innovative, socially driven organisations. Continuous learning and skills development are essential to meet the evolving needs of the social economy. The European Social Innovation Campus is a key initiative supporting social economy actors.

1.2 Overview of the Social Economy in the European Union

According to EISMEA's (2024) recent benchmarking study, social economy entities include cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations, foundations and social enterprises (4,231,055 entities). The European social economy in the European Union represents 2.8 million organisations and over 13.6 million paid jobs, i.e. 6.3% of the working population. Paid employment in the social economy ranges from 0.6% to 10% of total jobs

across member states, highlighting significant untapped potential for job creation.

Social economy organisations' ability to identify emerging needs and develop appropriate answers is primarily due to their multi-stakeholder nature. These organisations often involve their workers, clients, and volunteers, ensuring that the new services they develop and deliver are closer to the needs of local communities. Due to their proximity to users and local context, social economy organisations are ideally positioned to anticipate emerging societal needs and develop innovative responses to social and environmental challenges.

One growing trend in this area is the rise of impact startups. Often supported by incubators and accelerators, these organisations can drive job growth in social and healthcare innovation, sustainable social services, and affordable housing. They are also a potential source of job growth, as employment in these areas is projected to grow as more resources are allocated to innovative social projects (EU Commission, 2023). For example, social innovations connected to the collaborative or sharing economy, such as shared mobility or resource pooling platforms, will likely generate new employment and freelancing opportunities. Innovations aimed at marginalised groups, such as people with disabilities or the long-term unemployed, will also play a crucial role in diversifying the labour market by creating job opportunities for underrepresented populations.

The OECD's Recommendation 0472 (2022) identifies nine building blocks which provide the conditions for the social economy to thrive at international, national and local levels: 1) social economy culture; 2) institutional frameworks; 3) legal and regulatory frameworks; 4) access to finance; 5) access to markets; 6) skills and business development support; 7) managing, measuring and reporting impact; 8) data; and 9) social innovation.

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Despite these guidelines and the EU's common legislative framework, each country has developed its laws shaped by national and local contexts, legal frameworks, and political landscapes. These differences are also evident in the various funding sources supporting the social economy ecosystem (Audretsch et al., 2022).

1.3 Social innovations

The European Commission defines social innovations as "New ideas that meet social needs, create social relationships, and form new collaborations. They can be products, services, or models that more effectively address unmet needs. The European Commission aims to encourage the market uptake of innovative solutions and stimulate employment".

Social innovation is a dynamic, creative restoration process that requires clear conceptual understanding and is driven by cross-sectoral collaborations and impact. It is not just about invention; it is about rethinking how we approach complex problems (wicked problems). It is the spark that turns challenges into opportunities for collective well-being. From climate resilience to equitable social and healthcare systems, social innovation is how we adapt and build a sustainable future.

Social impact emphasises generating positive social outcomes to address urgent societal challenges. Therefore, it involves diverse stakeholders, including individuals, organisations, communities, and governments, in the innovation process. Additionally, it incorporates systems thinking, which considers the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental factors, aiming to address root causes rather than merely treating symptoms (Jail, 2023).

Social innovations are more than creating new solutions; they are also about transforming the social institutions that created the problems in the first place (Jail, 2023). They often involve a holistic approach, recognising

the interconnectedness of various societal factors and aiming for sustainable, long-term impact.

Social innovation cannot be understood solely by its innovative outcomes. Engagement in social innovation must include a critical concern for the process leading to the innovative outcome; social innovation is social both in its means and its ends (EU ESF+ regulation 2021). Social innovation requires multidisciplinary skills and competencies: handling, managing, and measuring social processes; producing, piloting, scaling, implementing, controlling, and more. In social innovation processes, social entrepreneurship plays a role in commercial markets, civil society, inside existing public services or in hybrid combinations.

This sectoral skills strategy for social innovation will be strengthened by identifying key elements of social innovation ecosystems and conducting competence needs analyses. Special emphasis will be placed on multi-sectoral and multi-professional co-creation, as innovations often span disciplines and offer fresh perspectives. To achieve this, it is crucial to provide accessible, coordinated opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds to collaborate and explore new perspectives.

1.4 HEIs and VET in Social Innovation Skills Development

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems play pivotal roles in fostering skills development essential for societal progress. These two educational pillars create a complementary ecosystem that addresses diverse learning needs, promotes lifelong learning, and enhances individuals' capacity to contribute effectively to their communities and industries.

Higher Education Institutions (HEI) focus on driving social innovation by utilising their academic resources, research, and educational programs to address societal challenges and foster positive change (Wu et al., 2023). They serve as hubs for knowledge creation and innovation, offering

intellectual resources and expertise to develop impactful solutions. Through research and educational programs promoting social entrepreneurship, sustainability, and social responsibility, HEIs prepare students to lead societal change. They collaborate with businesses and communities to implement innovative solutions, facilitating knowledge and technology transfer. Evaluating the social impact of their initiatives, HEIs continuously improve their contributions to social innovation (Krlev et al., 2023).

Vocational education and training (VET) are crucial for developing hands-on skills tailored to workforce demands and for bridging the gap between theory and practice. In social innovation, addressing challenges like poverty, inequality, sustainability, and social and health care, VET helps build a workforce capable of designing and implementing sustainable solutions.

Tailored VET programs in social innovation, sustainable business, and community development equip individuals to create a positive societal impact. Integrating digital and technological skills further enhances the effectiveness of social initiatives. By embedding social innovation into VET, we foster a skilled, adaptable workforce that supports an inclusive, sustainable, and resilient economy.

Through their third mission, which includes collaborations with industry, government, and community engagement, HEIs and VET can contribute to policymaking, product development, and cultural activities that meet societal needs. By fostering co-creation and dialogue, they can act as catalysts for addressing societal challenges through collaboration and innovation (Păunescu et al., 2022, pp. 68-69).

Integrating social innovation education into formal curricula across European countries is a notable trend. This takes various forms, such as standalone courses or interdisciplinary modules within existing programs, reflecting the growing importance of fostering social innovation competencies alongside academic knowledge (Kaputa et al., 2022).

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Overall, the pedagogical landscape of social innovation education in Europe is evolving towards more participatory and interdisciplinary approaches, demanding a broad range of expertise. Projects involving multiple disciplines and partnerships with external stakeholders are becoming more common in educational institutions.

Informal and non-formal learning environments also play a significant role. Extracurricular activities such as student-led initiatives, innovation labs, and social entrepreneurship programs offer valuable hands-on learning opportunities. These initiatives foster creativity, leadership, and social innovation skills (Perikangas et al., 2022) despite advancements, challenges persist, including the lack of standardised frameworks, limited faculty training, and institutional barriers. Overcoming these requires coordinated efforts from policymakers, educational institutions, and other stakeholders (Lepik & Urmanavičienė, 2022).

1.5 Importance of contextual sensitivity within the ESIC project

The ESIC project brings together partners from multiple European countries, each embedded within distinct historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. These contextual differences are particularly salient in social enterprise and social innovation education, where policy frameworks and pedagogical practices vary widely. As Defourny and Nyssens (2010) argue, the evolution of social enterprise policy - ranging from legal recognition to fiscal incentives - has been strongly shaped by national contexts, resulting in a diversity of definitions and models across Europe. This contextual embeddedness underscores the need for a flexible and locally responsive sectoral strategy.

In the realm of social innovation education, similar contextual dynamics apply. Despite the proliferation of innovative pedagogies - such as service learning, problem-based learning, and digital modalities (Kaptua et al., 2022; Yeratziotis et al., 2022; Dryjanska et al., 2022) - there remains a lack of

unified methodology across countries and institutions. This has led to fragmented practices often reflecting local institutional norms and educational cultures. Consequently, any strategy to support skills development in social innovation must accommodate this diversity, fostering coherence while allowing for meaningful local adaptation.

Furthermore, although the European Qualifications Framework provides a harmonised reference for educational levels across Europe, not all countries apply it uniformly. Therefore, tailoring learning content and training pathways to different EQF levels must also consider variations in national educational systems and qualification recognition.

Recognising and addressing these contextual dimensions is not only a matter of relevance and inclusivity, but also a prerequisite for the successful co-design and implementation of the ESIC project's transnational skills strategy, embedding contextual sensitivity into all stages of the project - from curriculum development to competence profiling - the ESIC consortium ensures that its outputs are scalable and grounded in local realities.

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2. Framework

2.1 European Social Innovation Campus

As a digital learning platform, the European Social Innovation Campus (ESIC) brings together higher education and vocational education and training (VET) providers, social economy organisations and enterprises from several European countries, and European-level actors. Given the diversity of its user base, the Campus is designed to address the needs of a wide range of occupational profiles. Its offerings are not limited to static learning modules; they are dynamically enriched through accelerators and similar events, providing arenas for co-creation, cross-sectoral learning, and broadening perspectives.

The ESIC project aims to enhance the provision of new skills and to reduce skills mismatches by developing a new core curriculum tailored to the social economy. It designs and delivers transnational education and training content while simultaneously co-producing teaching and training methodologies to ensure that this content can be adopted quickly and effectively at regional and local levels. Particular attention is given to emerging occupational profiles within the sector. Drawing on robust evidence of skill needs, the ESIC Sectoral Strategy strengthens the development of relevant competencies through education and training content tailored to various levels of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The design adheres to competency-based learning principles, is grounded in sound pedagogy, and is aligned with online quality criteria to ensure a high-quality learning experience.

This holistic approach seeks to meet immediate skills demands and foster long-term adaptability and interdisciplinary capabilities essential to social innovation. By embedding sustainability thinking within socially driven business practices, the strategy aims to contribute to a more inclusive, resilient, and forward-looking economy capable of addressing complex societal and environmental challenges.

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At the same time, the ESIC Strategy recognises that accessibility and scalability remain critical concerns. While the current design facilitates content comparability and integration across Europe, additional efforts are needed to ensure that the platform and its resources are equally relevant and accessible beyond Europe, including in regions with limited digital infrastructure. To this end, the ESIC Consortium collectively commits to actively exploring scalability and continuity pathways throughout the project lifecycle. This includes engagement with international stakeholders to identify how content, methodologies, and digital access strategies can be adapted to varying socio-economic and technological environments. The project will also pilot low-threshold and hybrid learning formats and engage in foresight-driven planning to anticipate and respond to future needs.

Investigating sustainable governance and funding models will pursue stability beyond the project's formal timeline. The aim is to anchor the Campus as a shared and open infrastructure for education, collaboration, and innovation. The Consortium will seek alliances with international networks and organisations that can carry forward the work initiated by ESIC, ensuring its long-term relevance and impact within the global ecosystem of social innovation.

Through this evolving and co-designed strategy, ESIC positions itself not only as a European digital learning platform but as a strategic initiative with global aspirations, one that is analytically robust, operationally grounded, and adaptable across diverse contexts.

2.2 Focusing on Competencies

The offerings of the European Social Innovation Campus (ESIC) alliance will address the diverse competence needs of social economy organisations and enterprises (skills, knowledge, and attitudes), enhancing their development opportunities. Focusing on developing specific competencies

in social innovation, ESIC aims to provide better opportunities to create innovative solutions to social challenges and societal problems. The competence-based approach bridges the gap between education and employment by enhancing practical skills and applying theoretical knowledge in real-life situations.

Both higher education (HE) and vocational education (VET) play key roles in developing competencies for the social economy. In applied sciences universities, HE emphasises applying theory to real-world challenges and engaging in applied research, while VET focuses on practical skills. Both approaches integrate Transdisciplinary learning, which occurs through collective and collaborative interactions across disciplines and with external actors outside the higher education institution (Fam et al.,2018), ensuring learners can navigate diverse working environments and societal needs.

Developing a strong foundation of competencies is crucial for personal growth and contributing effectively to the community. These concepts are defined in the European Commission's (2024) Digital skills playbook, which generally sees competencies as a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Key competencies are developed throughout life.

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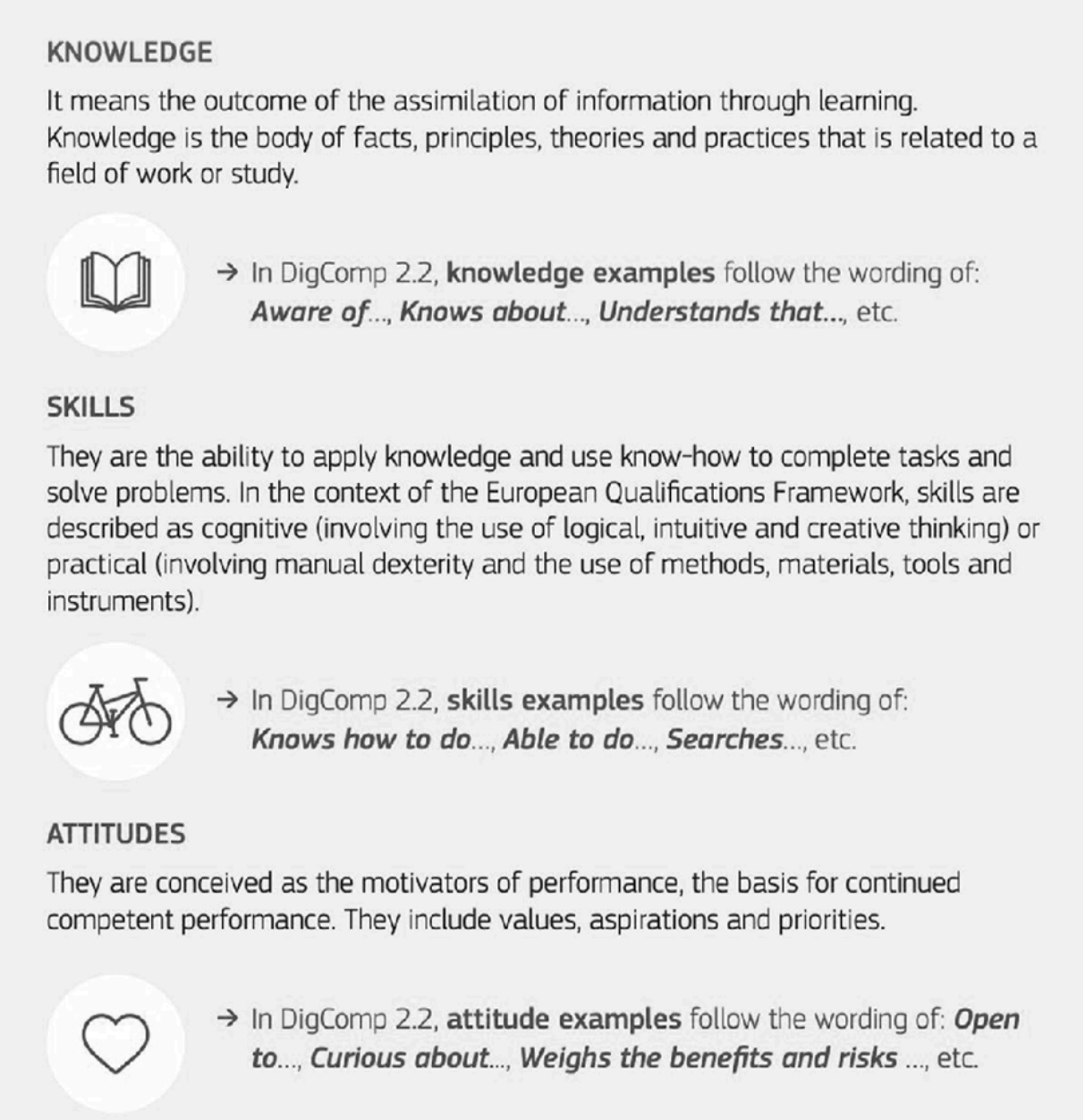

Figure 2. DigComp framework outlines examples of knowledge, skills and attitudes, European Commission (2024)

2.3 Continuous learning and adaptation

Educational offerings must be comprehensive and adaptable across different levels to support the upskilling and reskilling of 5% of the workforce and social innovators annually in the social economy and the green and digital transitions. This aligns with the European Commission's Pact for Skills, a key initiative under the European Skills Agenda, which promotes

large-scale skills partnerships across industries to address workforce shortages and ensure businesses have the talent needed for innovation and growth. This Skills Strategy mainly focuses on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) levels 3-7 and, to some extent, level 8. The levels provide a common European reference framework for comparing the levels of different qualifications and are as follows:

Level 3:

- Comparable to upper secondary education
- Vocational education / Intermediate knowledge and skills
- Emphasises theoretical or practical application with problem-solving.

Level 4:

- Further and specialist vocational knowledge and skills
- Similar to post-secondary non-tertiary education.
- Prepares learners for specific roles or occupations.

Level 5:

- Broad knowledge and specialised skills
- Corresponds to short-cycle tertiary education.
- Combines theoretical understanding with practical expertise.

Level 6:

- Advanced knowledge and specialised skills
- Equivalent to first-cycle tertiary education (bachelor's degree).
- Learners gain in-depth expertise in a specific field.

Level 7:

- Highly specialised knowledge and skills
- Comparable to second-cycle tertiary education (master's degree).
- Focuses on research, innovation, and professional practice.

Level 8:

- Expert knowledge and mastery
- Corresponds to third-cycle tertiary education (doctorate).
- Learners contribute significantly to research, development, and leadership.

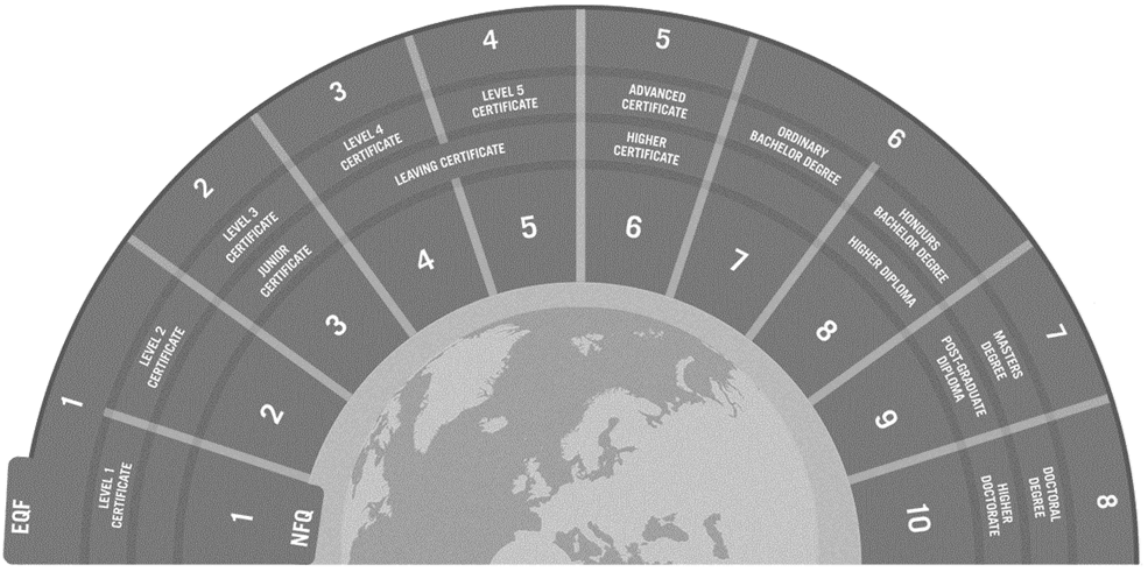

Figure 3. European Qualifications Framework (EQF) levels (European Commission, 2020)

Professional profiles within ECVET (the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training) align with the EQF, European Qualifications Framework, which standardises education and qualifications across Europe. This alignment helps make qualifications comparable between countries, ensuring that a professional in one EU country meets the same standards as one in another country at the same qualification level.

ECVET promotes competency-based learning over the traditional approach of measuring progress exclusively through the duration of training. A professional profile is a set of skills, knowledge, and competencies needed for specific occupations. These profiles are built on learning outcomes, which describe what a learner should know, understand, and be able to do after completing a training program.

Another key aspect of ECVET is the recognition of skills and competencies acquired through formal and informal learning. This ensures that professionals can transfer their skills across borders without needing to

repeat training, provided their learning outcomes meet the standards of the receiving country.

Beyond providing opportunities for employees to enhance their skills and stay updated with industry advancements, fostering social innovation competencies requires selecting practical pedagogical approaches for program design and learning content development. These approaches must align with evolving market needs and societal challenges to ensure relevance and impact (Bogdan, 2016; Gonzalez-Perez & Ramirez-Montoya, 2022).

A comprehensive skills strategy for social innovation education and learning encompasses:

1. Needs analysis / Competence framework: Understanding the specific needs of social innovators, including the skills and knowledge necessary to address current and future challenges in the social economy sector.
2. Pedagogical approaches: Creating learning content with the most effective learning methods to develop social innovation competencies is a central pillar of the strategy. This includes adopting competence-based learning principles and ensuring that online learning environments meet high-quality criteria, such as modularity, accessibility, and interactivity, to enhance learning experiences. The most effective term is understood in the context of the ESIC project, referring to learning methods that are both evidence-informed and practice-proven. These methods are selected in accordance with the project's Grant Agreement, which commits to research-based and inclusive pedagogical practices. Furthermore, the Strategy leverages pedagogical models from the piloting institutions, which bring diverse national and institutional experiences into the learning design. In addition, learning approaches will be further developed, tested and refined through continuous dialogue with the Consortium, ensuring that they are

theoretically robust and validated through practical relevance and alignment with the educational needs of learners across different contexts. This iterative and participatory approach allows for identifying and deploying learning methods that are demonstrably effective in supporting the development of competencies for social innovation across varying European contexts.

3. Market and societal alignment: Ensure educational content and strategies align with market demands and societal needs. This alignment ensures the skills taught are relevant and applicable to real-world challenges and opportunities.

To address all these components, advances must be made by equipping social innovators with a broad spectrum of skills and knowledge and fostering the digital ESIC campus environment. The environment must facilitate continuous learning and adaptation, essential for promoting long-term innovation and growth.

2.4 The Digital Learning Platform

The Howspace (Howspace Ltd., 2024) digital facilitation and collaboration platform, developed by the Finnish company Howspace Ltd., was selected as the environment for presenting various training content. Howspace is a versatile end-to-end transformation platform that supports learning, collaboration, and organisational development. It offers a space to create separate digital study courses, events or micro-credentials. Micro-credentials are short, focused certifications that validate specific skills or competencies. The platform can also host other types of content, such as courses or units, for which participants can receive a certificate upon completion. By creating more micro-credential training courses or units (a maximum of 5 ECTS), representatives from different countries can build the training content into comprehensive structures suitable for their qualification frameworks. Information about available training content can be accessed on the ESIC website [https://socialinnovationcampus.eu/].

Howspace platform facilitates engagement, inclusivity, and decision-making throughout learning and transformation initiatives. In addition to synchronous activities, the platform supports asynchronous learning, enabling learners to engage with content at their own pace while participating in discussions and reflecting with others, independent of time, whenever suitable for participants.

Access to training content must be easy to achieve so that participants can upskill and reskill in the social economy ecosystem each year. Logging into the platform occurs via an invitation link sent to participants based on their registration on the project's website [https://socialinnovationcampus.eu/]. The website will provide descriptions of the goals and levels. However, based on their work experience or practice, participants can freely update their skills and knowledge as needed.

In the same place, a summary description of the recommended or possible sequence of separate courses will also be created, with flexibility to support a meaningful learning path.

2.5 Online quality criteria for content creation

Ensuring the creation of high-quality training content for upskilling/re-skilling people in the selected eLearning platform, Howspace, the five online quality criteria (Digivisio, 2024) will be embraced: 1) Research-based, 2) A diverse range of learning methods, 3) Modularity, 4) Accessibility of digitally supported learning, and 4) Usability.

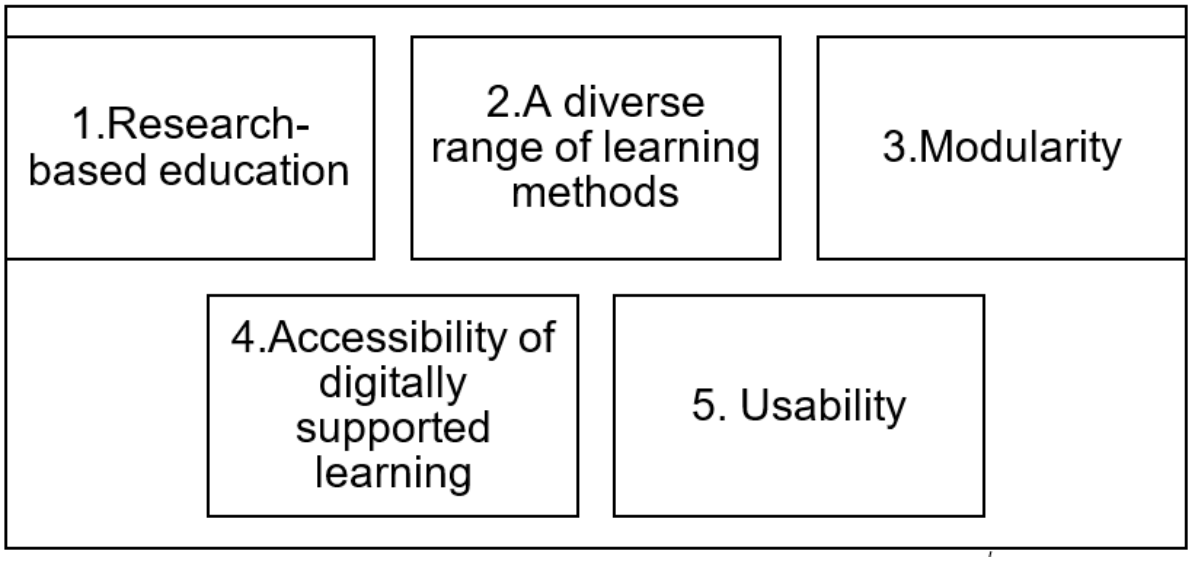

Figure 4. Online quality criteria for content creation, Digivisio 2030. (2022).

In line with the first quality criteria, the ESIC training content relies on research on social innovation. The chosen pedagogical model and learning design are firmly grounded in research while considering the unique aspects of continuous education. It represents a lifelong journey of acquiring new knowledge, skills, and competencies and requires a blend of theoretical understanding and practical application.

The second criterion is the broadest, encompassing diverse learning methods, prioritising learner-centred approaches. Activities that ensure an interactive and engaging educational experience will be preferred. The learner's participation in learning must be carefully planned, incorporating feedback, guidance, assignments, and assessment elements. Using asynchronous and synchronous components offers flexibility while providing learners with immediate engagement and participation opportunities.

The third criterion, modularity, is a principle in which training courses or micro-credentials are structured step-by-step from relatively independent modules. The objectives and content of these materials are described separately, and each can be awarded a separate certificate of completion.

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These materials can be integrated into various programmes to create personalised learning paths, offering greater flexibility and efficiency while providing learners with more choices. Modular courses can be updated quickly as new research or regulatory changes occur.

The fourth criterion, accessibility of digitally supported learning, refers to developing equitable learning materials for all students with diverse needs and abilities. Ensuring visual accessibility means considering factors such as font, colour contrast, and layout, and including alternative text for images. Ensuring accessibility across devices and support for assistive technologies is essential. This involves safeguarding student privacy and addressing ethical issues, such as plagiarism. Further, inclusivity involves actively fostering a sense of belonging, accommodating learners' diverse needs and perspectives and fostering a culture of mutual respect and understanding. Students are encouraged to offer feedback, highlighting our commitment to continuous improvement.

The last criterion, usability, refers to a user-friendly training program with a consistent structure. It ensures that the layout, navigation, and design elements of the training materials remain uniform across sections. When students encounter a familiar structure, they spend less time searching for information and engage more with the content. Transparent menus, intuitive buttons, and logical pathways improve usability and a positive user experience.

Behind these five criteria is a learner-centred approach that prioritises students' needs, interests, and goals. It emphasises constructive alignment, ensuring that learning activities and assessments are directly linked to and support the intended competencies' achievement.

Additionally, creating online learning content meticulously considers the development needs of competencies that underpin workplace demands and social innovations. This involves incorporating industry standards, current practices, and real-life challenges into the curriculum to ensure the

educational experience is tailored to support the achievement of the intended competencies. Please see Chapter 4, Recommendations for Social Innovation Education, for further information.

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3. Sectoral Skills Strategy for Social Innovation

The ESIC project is inherently a co-design and co-development initiative, reflecting the dynamic and participatory nature of social innovation. While the project is anchored in a well-defined Grant Agreement that outlines the core objectives, structures, deliverables and milestones, the Sectoral Skills Strategy is not a static blueprint. Instead, it is conceived as a living, iterative framework that will evolve throughout the project lifecycle, continuously informed by stakeholder engagement, emerging insights, and contextual developments across the social economy landscape.

This approach reflects the essence of social innovation: responsive, inclusive, and grounded in real-world practice. Accordingly, while this chapter presents key components of the Strategy, the project's strategic elements are being shaped collaboratively over time; strategic decisions will thus not be limited to the initial design phase but will be continually refined in dialogue with project partners, associated stakeholders, and the broader social economy ecosystem. While some of the educational and competency-related proposals presented here remain indicative, the ESIC Consortium is committed to crystallising these into tangible strategic directions as the project progresses.

This subchapter, therefore, serves both as a conceptual foundation and a roadmap for development. It frames our collective ambition to co-create a resilient and forward-looking Strategy—one that supports the systemic integration of social innovation across sectors and enhances the capacity of learners, educators, and practitioners to engage with the green and digital transitions, including the Triple Transition, while also considering environmental sustainability (OECD, 2023). Through continued co-creation, iterative decision-making, and shared learning, we aim to build an analytically robust, operationally relevant, and adaptable strategy.

To support this ambition, a structured approach to measuring the Strategy's effectiveness has been embedded in its governance logic. While analyses and competence frameworks provide the analytical foundation, their success ultimately depends on how well they are translated into meaningful, measurable action. Therefore, the Strategy incorporates a set of initial impact indicators to assess reach, relevance, and systemic resonance over time:

- The European Social Innovation Campus will function as an open-access platform for disseminating project outcomes and fostering engagement. Its target audience is over 10,000 visitors who will engage with shared outputs and insights.
- A dynamic, integrated Skills Monitor will provide open-data intelligence on skills needs and innovation trends, supporting evidence-based development across sectors.
- A minimum of 70 organisations will be involved in research and stakeholder committees, ensuring the inclusion of diverse territorial and institutional voices.
- Pilot training programmes will involve at least 375 learners, testing and refining educational pathways aligned with sectoral transformation goals.
- Dissemination and co-creation events will engage more than 500 participants, amplifying knowledge transfer and strengthening the project's ecosystemic impact.

Beyond these quantitative indicators, the ESIC Consortium recognises the importance of qualitative evaluation dimensions, such as stakeholder satisfaction, perceived relevance of the developed competences, and the evidence of strengthened cross-sectoral collaboration. These insights will be continuously gathered and reviewed through participatory governance mechanisms, enabling ongoing learning and adaptive strategic steering.

In this way, the Strategy is not only built on co-creation but also governed through co-evaluation, ensuring that it remains aligned with the lived

realities, evolving priorities, and systemic opportunities of the European social economy.

3.1 Scenario for Social Innovation

In the first phase, project partners analysed extensive data, conducted a needs analysis, and developed a competence framework. This research involved mapping competencies across countries, regions, and sectors to identify the skills needed to promote and implement social innovation.

The next step in strategy development involved creating pedagogical principles to guide decisions and actions using quality criteria. These principles aim to standardise the content of skills development for social innovations produced by various stakeholders. They are strong recommendations to guide overall direction without strict rules or regulations, allowing content to be created across various EQF levels, from 3 to 8.

The third phase involves considering market and societal needs, which guides the selection of topics and content for building open-access courses or micro-credentials. Factors that guide topic selection across European countries include labour market demands, societal challenges, and evolving skills needs across sectors. Each partner's strategy partially guides these choices and supports foresight data.

As noted in several chapters of this strategy, developing and implementing socially innovative solutions requires a mix of competencies, including knowledge, skills, and attitudes, as our research indicates. Some competencies must be context-specific, while others are more general. Competencies may focus on relationships, themes, or specific social problems. Several evidence-based frameworks emphasise different aspects: entrepreneurial competencies (Lans et al., 2014), sustainability competencies such as systems thinking (Ploum et al., 2018), and interpersonal skills such as collaboration and leadership (Foucrier & Wiek,

2019; Orhei et al., 2015). However, many of these frameworks remain fragmented, as much of the literature is based on case or country studies. This makes it challenging to develop a comprehensive framework for social innovation competencies.

European policy priorities, supportive regulations, and access to funding, such as fostering innovation, inclusivity, and continuous learning, also play a crucial role in shaping training content. Successful social innovations often involve the active participation of the communities they aim to serve. Engaging stakeholders helps ensure that solutions are culturally relevant and effectively address specific challenges. Aligning with these broader goals ensures that educational offerings are relevant, future-oriented, and accessible to diverse populations across the continent.

From a skills development perspective, competencies can also be divided into high-level systems thinking, interpersonal, and individual dynamics. In addition to high-level sustainability competencies, such as systems thinking to recognise the broader context, every social innovator needs strong interaction skills, including collaboration, partnership building, leadership, and change management. Ethical decision-making, while rooted in individual judgment, also involves considering the impact on others and overlaps with both interpersonal and personal expertise. Adaptive individual expertise encompasses competencies such as creativity, resilience, problem-solving, and decision-making, which are crucial for driving social innovation. These skills and others are essential for the social economy, and understanding specific forms of social problems is the foundation for successful social innovation.

To ensure that a social innovator has all the necessary competencies, they should regularly assess their skills and identify areas for improvement. Social innovators can actively seek professional development opportunities by recognising their limitations. Additionally, leveraging technology can streamline operations and help bridge specific skill gaps. Furthermore,

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leveraging technology can help streamline operations and fill skill gaps. They can also better hire individuals with the skills they lack and delegate tasks accordingly. No one succeeds alone today, and social innovations require collaboration, support, and diverse expertise. Building a strong network of mentors, advisors, and peers provides valuable insights and guidance, and adapting to changing circumstances and recovering from setbacks is essential.

3.2 Competencies for Social Innovation

The systematic literature review yielded an overview of 11 competency clusters and 35 mid-level competencies necessary for social innovation. These were developed bottom-up based on 140 competencies, attitudes, skills and knowledge topics related to social innovation in academic literature.

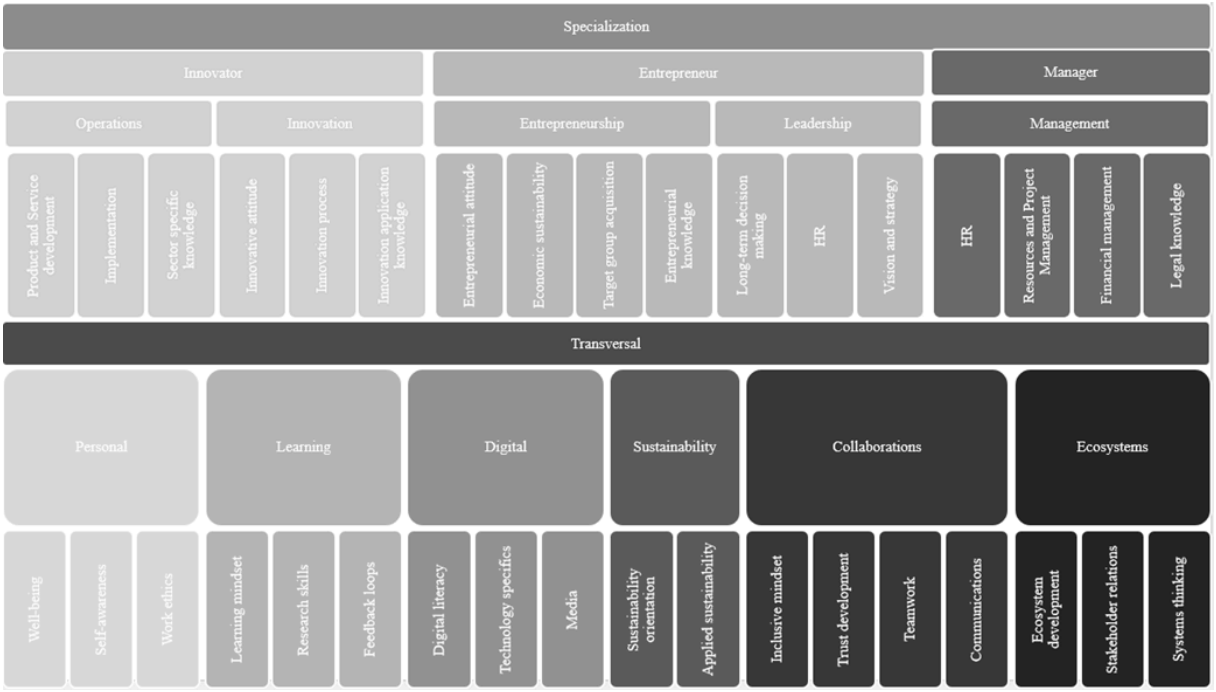

Figure 5: Competency framework for social innovation with 11 clusters and 35 mid-level competencies (ESIC, 2024)

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Within the framework, we identify six transversal competency clusters. These are relevant for everyone involved in social innovation. Furthermore, there are five specialisation clusters that are essential depending on your role in social innovation. Currently, three roles are assigned to the specialisation clusters: social innovator, social entrepreneur, and social economy organisation manager.

The literature findings were compared with the competencies identified in the qualitative data. Analysis of the interviews (55) and focus groups (32) did not result in additional competencies, indicating that the literature provides a good overview. Furthermore, the interviews and focus groups yielded the same wide range of competencies necessary for social innovation. While the framework seems very broad, this qualitative data finding shows that a certain level of proficiency in many different competencies is needed to be a successful social innovator. This does not mean that a social innovator needs to master all these competencies, but a certain level of proficiency and a complementary team is deemed necessary.

3.3 Profile of the Social Innovator

Analysis of the focus groups from the ESIC research activities identified four core characteristics of social innovators: systems thinking, stakeholder engagement, drive to innovate, and empathy. While sharing some traditional entrepreneurial traits, social innovators were distinguished by notably higher empathy, stronger prosocial values, and greater creativity, combined with a pronounced stakeholder orientation. These broader attributes help differentiate social innovators from other economic innovators and employees within the social economy.

As systems thinkers, social innovators look beyond the immediate causes and outcomes of issues, focusing instead on the broader system and long-term solutions. From a holistic perspective, social innovators see how

micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors interact to structurally produce social problems. Focusing on antecedents or outcomes may produce short-term results with reasonable investments, but the system structure may return to business as usual once efforts are halted. However, thinking in structures, taking a long-term view, and engaging in interdisciplinary thinking enable social innovators to understand how social issues persist. It forms the foundation for developing accurate solutions and meaningful innovation.

Social innovators do not work alone. Only by engaging stakeholders can they orchestrate system changes. First, they work in teams. It is unreasonable to expect one person to reach the level of mastery needed in all necessary competencies to create a successful social innovation. Second, social innovators build communities rather than "customers" or "accounts". A community implies shared meaning, which a social innovator needs to build legitimacy and support for system changes. Third, communities not only include individuals but also institutions. Being part of larger coalitions where different stakeholders take complementary roles towards a common goal is essential to affect systems. Social innovators tend to be cultural and disciplinary polyglots, being able to engage with people from all walks of life.

Social innovators are driven to innovate. With social innovators, insights lead to initiative: convincing others, sharing ideas, inspiring the community, further research, or immediately starting to prototype and test. Whatever the starting initiative, social innovators aspire to develop new products, services or models to create positive change. While this often entails personal and professional risks, their desire for positive impact leads social innovators to overcome their fears.

Ultimately, social innovators' empathy for others and the environment drives them to address social issues. Engaging with society and nature empowers social innovators to rise above their egos and dedicate their

lives to serving the people they support. This commitment aligns with a strong sense of integrity, allowing values, rather than self-interest, to guide their actions.

Traditionally, we often think of social innovators as social entrepreneurs or experienced leaders of organisations in the social economy. Indeed, in the focus groups, these people are identified as playing important roles as changemakers, inspirators, challengers and role models. However, one of the findings from the qualitative data (SLR, including 154 academic contributions, and qualitative research comprising 55 interviews and 32 focus groups) is that social innovation does not have to come from leadership or management profiles. Employees, too, can be part of social innovation by sharing ideas, helping with implementation, and coaching.

Furthermore, one can argue that "the" social innovator does not exist. Collaboration is an integral part of the social innovation process, and we must also value the efforts collaborators contribute to products, services or models. These collaborators, too, may put personal or professional resources on the line to help a social innovation succeed. Consequently, investigating emerging job profiles and roles within this social innovation process is paramount.

The social entrepreneur and the organisation manager in the social economy are commonly referred to throughout the data collection. The social entrepreneur generates ideas and prototypes that lead to a startup and, ideally, scales into a mature organisation. They are the leaders of new social-economy initiatives and may evolve into or merge with an organisational management profile. Organisation managers may not be involved in starting up new organisations, but they lead in generating a positive impact in existing organisations. Younger organisation managers are often social entrepreneurs, but for more mature innovations and larger organisations, this position can be taken by people who were not involved from the beginning. Of course, organisation managers in the social

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economy are engaged in social innovation by launching new products or services, redesigning existing ones, copying external innovations into their processes or launching spin-offs. However, for a social economy organisation manager, there are fewer personal risks than for a social entrepreneur, as they often deliver unpaid work in the first stages and still need to prove impact and viability.

While more data still needs to be analysed, the qualitative data indicate three emerging roles in social innovation. The first is the social innovation project manager. These are employees in organisations responsible for implementing specific social innovation projects and managing the relevant resources. These projects can take many forms, for example, leading a service design process for new products, facilitating a process adaptation, or coaching colleagues in social innovation. A second profile is the employee involved. Some organisations try to create a fertile environment for socially innovative ideas by supporting all employees, especially those working "in the field", in their efforts to drive change for greater impact. These employees' primary responsibilities remain operational. However, collecting and sharing experiences, contributing to ideation, and testing and implementing are activities in which employees can make significant contributions during the social innovation process. The third profile is the collaborating stakeholder. As mentioned, social innovation aims for systemic change, which requires multi-stakeholder coalitions to succeed. We also need educators, researchers, legislators, lawyers, financiers, public servants, and others to be "social" and foster a social innovation environment.

3.4 Education for Social Innovation

The qualitative data analysis resulted in several insights that will help educate future social innovators. While ex-cathedra lectures are necessary to provide foundational knowledge, gaining a proper understanding,

developing learning skills, and changing attitudes require more than one-way communication. Taking initiative, engaging, and creating actual change are essential aspects of being a social innovator, so this should be reflected in teaching approaches. Participants in the research indicated a need for pragmatic education that equips students with critical thinking and problem-solving skills in real-world applications. Furthermore, students should be exposed to different contexts, disciplines, and stakeholders to gain perspective and stimulate critical and systems thinking. Teamwork and peer learning are also opportunities to engage with others as equals. These approaches help students learn about the “messiness” of teamwork, real-life context and sometimes conflicting points of view. Education methods like community service learning, experiential learning, site visits, internships, case studies, and applied research tasks are best practices. Challenge-based learning, especially, seems promising for social innovation education, as it simulates the actual work of social innovators trying to solve real-world issues. At the level of educational methods and content, participants in the research were advised to co-create educational content with students and to adjust teaching support to learners' needs. Continuous improvement of educational methodologies, including evaluation, impact measurement, and feedback, is also essential for developing practical training.

Age should also be considered when organising education for social innovation. From a young age, children learn about social innovation through stories in their families, media, and schools. Unfortunately, examples of social innovation from the social economy are rare. It must become more visible in the media and in curricula to bring social innovation to the forefront and stimulate student interest. At the other end of the spectrum, many social innovators begin their journeys after completing formal education and having some professional background. In addition to formal education, this highlights the need for a) recognition of non-formal and informal education, such as youth work or work experience, and b) lifelong learning courses. One finding suggests that

aspiring social innovators with a social science background, but lacking business competencies, indicate a deficiency in business courses from a social innovation perspective. Most business courses target “regular” innovators and entrepreneurs, who use different cases, vocabulary, processes, and attitudes than social entrepreneurs. There appears to be a need for business courses in a “social” language.

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4. Recommendations for Social Innovation Education

In the rapidly evolving 21st-century landscape, education must adapt to new paradigms to equip future leaders to solve complex challenges. Social innovation education is a critical component of this transformation. Our recommendation outlines a holistic strategy and the development of sustainable partnerships to embed social innovation principles effectively within education.

4.1 Holistic Strategy for Social Innovation Education

To integrate social innovation principles comprehensively, educational institutions should focus on four key areas:

1. Curriculum Integration:

- Gradually embed social innovation within existing curricula across disciplines using case studies of social innovators relevant to each course. For example, a marketing course could include cases of social enterprises building brand loyalty through values-driven campaigns.
- Develop and introduce specific modules on social innovation, initially as electives, and eventually integrate them into the core curriculum.

2. Interdisciplinary Collaborations:

- Foster cross-course and interdisciplinary committees within education institutions involving experts from business, public policy, engineering, and environmental sciences to co-design curricula.
- Promote joint degrees or certificates within or across institutions to break down silos and encourage collaboration, including international partnerships to learn from diverse geographical contexts.

3. Pragmatic Learning Approaches:

- Shift teaching methods to hands-on perspectives, incorporating community service, experiential learning, and problem-based learning.
- Complement theories and frameworks with practical tools like design thinking workshops and social business model canvases, bridging theory and practice.

4. Industry and Community Partnerships:

- Engage industry, community, and social innovation partners in co-creating new cases, modules, programs, and curricula.
- Leverage these partnerships to secure internships, arrange guest lectures, and tap field expertise to enrich the educational experience.

4.2 Sustainable Partnerships for Education

To operationalise social innovation education, educational institutions must establish sustainable partnerships based on three core building blocks:

1. Unified Vision:

- Align institutions' goals with societal needs through a mission and vision statement accepted by all internal and external stakeholders.
- Facilitate discussions to identify the role of education in fostering sustainable development and preparing responsible leaders.

2. Stakeholder Engagement:

- Clearly define the roles and contributions of each stakeholder type, including faculty members, students, and industry or community partners.
- Encourage co-development and shared responsibility for the social innovation curriculum.

3. Phased and Iterative Implementation:

- Adopt a long-term vision with initial steps to pilot social innovation modules and projects within existing courses.
- Establish committees and governance structures to support stakeholder collaboration and the development of social innovation education.

4.3 The way forward

Education must embrace social innovation as a necessary paradigm shift to develop future-proof leaders. By transforming their educational approaches and adopting more transformative strategies, educational institutions can revolutionise their offerings, foster interdisciplinary collaborations, and create dynamic learning environments that benefit students and society. Empowering educators and administrators with the right tools, knowledge, and incentives will inspire new generations of conscious business leaders to address complex societal challenges.

Given the unprecedented pace of transformation currently reshaping the social innovation field within the social economy, the project's entire lifecycle must integrate mechanisms for continuous monitoring, reflection, and adaptation. This dynamic approach is essential to ensure that pedagogical frameworks and project outcomes remain aligned with the evolving realities, emerging practices, and shifting paradigms characterising this rapidly developing field.

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Figures

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