
6. Pedagogical strategies for social innovation education: an analysis of European higher education institutions

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social innovation (SI) has become a key approach to addressing complex societal challenges, fostering creativity, and promoting sustainable development (Krlev & Dey, 2023; Backhaus et al., 2017a). While SI began to attract increased scholarly attention in the 2010s, the concept itself has deeper historical roots. Given its diverse interpretation across disciplines, SI continues to require further conceptual clarification (Backhaus et al., 2017a). Educational institutions, notably higher education institutions (HEIs), play a pivotal role in preparing individuals to engage with these challenges by equipping them with the necessary skills and competencies (Schröder et al., 2017; Kumari et al., 2019).

As societies face increasing challenges, such as aging populations, labor-skill shortages, and high youth unemployment (Schröder et al., 2017; Kumari et al., 2019; European Commission, 2020), there is a rising expectation that educational institutions will foster not only economic development but also social welfare (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). Although SI in higher education has been widely studied, further exploration is needed to understand how evolving pedagogical approaches to SI education enhance graduates' ability to address contemporary societal challenges through inclusive and impactful practices (Hasanefendic et al., 2017; Schröder & Krüger, 2019). It is critical to address this gap, as HEIs have the potential to improve youth employment, foster inclusion, and contribute to sustainable socio-economic development through SI (McDonnell-Naughton & Păunescu, 2022).

This chapter explores how HEIs across Europe are adapting their educational initiatives aimed at fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and experiential learning, with the goal of effectively integrating SI education and addressing contemporary societal challenges. It offers insights into the educational strategies employed by HEIs across Europe to foster SI within their curricula and institutional frameworks. It emphasizes the shift toward interdisciplinary and experiential learning practices, focusing on integrating SI into curricula through hands-on, collaborative, and participatory learning methods. By investigating this, the chapter aims to shed light on how higher education can be a critical driver of positive social change.

A key research question guiding this inquiry is: How are HEIs adapting their educational strategies to teach SI? Drawing on research from the European Social Innovation Campus (ESIC) project, this chapter relies on exploratory data from semi-structured interviews with educators, policymakers, and practitioners to ensure a comprehensive and multifaceted analysis. Integrating perspectives beyond academia is essential for preparing graduates to address complex societal challenges. Policymakers, civil society organizations, industry

representatives, and labor market actors provide critical insights that enhance the practical relevance of SI education. Their involvement fosters holistic problem solving, inclusivity, and adaptable, impact-driven solutions. By engaging with external stakeholders, HEIs equip students with the skills to navigate and influence multisectoral environments, maximizing SI's real-time impact (Trechsel et al., 2023; Rey-Garcia & Mato-Santiso, 2020). Early research highlights a shift toward participatory and experiential learning models that emphasize real-world problem solving and collaboration between academia, industry, and civic society (Păunescu et al., 2022). However, challenges remain, including the lack of standardized frameworks, limited faculty expertise, and institutional barriers. Growth opportunities include leveraging digital technologies and international partnerships to broaden access and foster cross-cultural learning (Kaputa et al., 2022; Lepik & Urmanavičienė, 2022).

This study comprises five sections. First, we explore SI pedagogy and European trends; second, we outline the research design; third, we present the study's results; fourth, the discussion addresses challenges and opportunities; finally, the conclusion offers recommendations for enhancing SI education in European HEIs.

SI Pedagogy

SI refers to novel ideas, practices, and collaborations that address societal challenges and create social value (Hubert, 2010; Phills et al., 2008). It encompasses diverse approaches, including technological, process-based, and governance innovations, that empower communities and foster new roles among stakeholders (Mulgan, 2007; Baturina, 2022). In education, SI is particularly relevant in shaping strategies that equip students with the skills and competencies to tackle complex social issues.

HEIs are increasingly recognized as key players in SI, responding to growing societal demands such as demographic shifts, labor-market changes, and sustainable development challenges (Schröder et al., 2017; Kumari et al., 2019; European Commission, 2020). Rather than operating in isolation, HEIs are called to integrate more deeply with their communities, ensuring that educational frameworks align with real-world needs (Hunt, 2011; McDonnell-Naughton & Păunescu, 2022). This engagement fosters a more practice-oriented approach, bridging theory and application while enhancing the societal impact of education.

Innovative pedagogies in SI education introduce participatory, experiential, and interdisciplinary learning approaches beyond traditional theoretical instruction. These include service-learning, problem-based learning, competency-based education, and multidisciplinary projects, all of which aim to develop students' ability to engage with social issues in meaningful ways (Kaputa et al., 2022; Yeratziotis et al., 2022; Dryjanska et al., 2022). Digital and blended learning, accelerated particularly by the COVID-19 pandemic, has also played a transformative role in expanding access and enhancing interactive learning experiences (Păunescu et al., 2022). Despite these advancements, no unified methodology for SI pedagogy exists, leading to a fragmented landscape of educational innovations. Further conceptual clarity and shared frameworks are needed to enhance the coherence and effectiveness of SI education.

This shift toward SI pedagogy aligns with global educational priorities, particularly the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which emphasizes inclusive, equitable, and quality education. By embedding sustainability, social responsibility, and community engagement into their pedagogical practices, HEIs can better prepare students to contribute meaningfully to SI and sustainable development.

University Initiatives in SI Education: European Examples

SI education has gained increasing traction within European HEIs, with universities adopting diverse approaches tailored to their contexts (Păunescu et al., 2022). While these initiatives vary, common themes emerge, including integrating digital tools, competency-based learning, and sustainability-driven frameworks. The examples presented below illustrate university-led initiatives rather than country-wide trends. The examples included in this chapter have been purposefully selected to represent diverse geographical regions across Europe, as reflected in the ESIC project. Rather than offering a comprehensive or comparative analysis by country, these illustrative cases highlight how individual HEIs are actively integrating SI education through interdisciplinary collaboration and experiential learning approaches. These initiatives are important not only because they showcase a variety of institutional responses to contemporary societal challenges, but also because they reflect emerging pedagogical shifts in HEIs toward more socially responsive, engaged, and practice-oriented learning environments. By examining these concrete efforts, the chapter provides insights into how HEIs contribute to the advancement of SI education within their unique institutional and regional contexts, offering inspiration and guidance for similar developments across the European higher education landscape.

SI, particularly in Flanders HEIs, is advancing through the Flemish Network for Service-Learning in Higher Education. The network fosters collaboration among universities and universities of applied sciences to integrate service-learning into curricula (Somers, 2024). Institutions such as KU Leuven and Ghent University have tailored service-learning to their contexts, leveraging the autonomy of the Flemish education system (Somers, 2024).

Entrepreneurship education is central to fostering an innovative society, aligning with broader goals to increase employment and promote inclusivity (Education Strategy 2021–2035; Estonian Research and Development, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Strategy 2021–2035). Tallinn University’s Social Entrepreneurship master’s degree program engages students and stakeholders in developing innovative social services, particularly for underserved rural areas. Project-based learning and community-driven hackathons emphasize local needs, such as those of special-needs populations (Lepik & Urmanavičienė, 2022).

The DiakHub at Diaconia University of Applied Sciences exemplifies co-creative approaches to tackling complex social challenges. Employing a quadruple-helix model, the hub fosters collaboration among academics, practitioners, and communities, with students acting as co-designers. This initiative supports human-centered service innovation, particularly in social, healthcare, and employment sectors (Perikangas et al., 2022).

Another illustrative initiative is Campus Engage, a national platform promoting civic engagement in higher education by fostering stronger connections between universities and their surrounding communities (McDonnell-Naughton & Păunescu, 2022). Through service-learning, the initiative encourages students to engage with real-world challenges while developing skills in social responsibility, empathy, and ethical awareness. Participating institutions have implemented projects addressing issues such as food waste, mental health, and social inclusion. These examples point to a broader pedagogical shift toward integrating community-based learning within higher education strategies for SI.

At the University of South-Eastern Norway (USN), the “Student Enterprise” program exemplifies an innovative approach to fostering entrepreneurship and creativity among students, enabling them to create and manage businesses that address societal needs. Organized by the

non-profit organization Junior Achievement (JA), the program provides hands-on experience, equipping participants with valuable skills in social entrepreneurship, business creation, and creativity while offering network opportunities (USN, 2022).

At the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV), engagement with SI education remains limited at the institutional level, with no formal structures or dedicated funding in place (Monteiro et al., 2021). Nonetheless, individual faculty members and researchers are actively advancing SI through grassroots initiatives, such as the Jovesólides program, which trains student university volunteers to work with marginalized communities. UPV has hosted SI forums to promote awareness and interdisciplinary collaboration. Growing interest from staff and students, especially for dissertation-related support, has led to calls for increased funding, institutional recognition, and regional partnerships, including with the UPV's POLIBIENESTAR Research Institute (Monteiro et al., 2021).

In Romania, SI education is gradually gaining traction within HEIs. There is increasing emphasis on developing entrepreneurial competencies, as seen in Politehnica University Timișoara's (UPT) Industrial Economic Engineering program, which integrates the Entrepreneurship Competence Framework (EntreComp) into its curriculum (Strauti et al., 2018). However, broader institutional commitment and enhanced funding are still needed to support a more robust and sustainable ecosystem for SI education (OECD, 2019, pp. 49–73).

From structured national platforms, such as Campus Engage and DiakHub's co-creative ecosystem, to grassroots, faculty-led efforts at UPV and policy-aligned initiatives in Estonia, we observe a diverse yet converging movement toward integrating community-oriented, real-world problem solving into academic practice. These initiatives reflect a pedagogical shift in which students move from passive recipients of knowledge to active agents of change, co-designers, innovators, and entrepreneurs addressing complex societal challenges. Nevertheless, the landscape remains uneven. While the university-led initiatives found in Finland, Ireland, and Estonia benefit from strategic alignment and institutional support, others, including the examples from Romania and Spain, continue to face systemic challenges, such as fragmented funding, limited institutional recognition, and insufficient coordination.

For SI education to achieve its transformative potential across Europe, a more cohesive and collaborative effort is required. Bridging the gap between policy and practice, fostering cross-border learning, and ensuring sustained investment in institutional and individual capacity-building are essential. Ultimately, HEIs must be willing to critically reflect on and, where necessary, reimagine their societal role. Advancing inclusive, sustainable, and impactful SI education demands not only collaboration and adaptation, but also the courage to rethink the fundamental purpose of higher education in the twenty-first century.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Data Sampling Collection

This study examines how HEIs are adapting their educational strategies to teach SI using a qualitative and exploratory approach. This study offers insights into how HEIs can cultivate SI capacities to address pressing societal challenges. It aims to capture diverse perspectives, practices, and expertise in SI education across multiple European contexts.

To investigate pedagogical approaches to teaching SI in European HEIs, this study collected qualitative data through 28 semi-structured interviews. The aim was to explore how educators, policymakers, and practitioners design and implement pedagogical practices that address societal challenges, with a particular emphasis on how these practices are linked to competency development. Additionally, the study sought to capture stakeholder perspectives on the future of SI education, including key challenges and evolving conceptual frameworks.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method for their flexibility and capacity to generate rich, in-depth data while allowing for consistency across different national contexts. To ensure content validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000), the interview protocol was piloted and refined through expert feedback rounds prior to the data collection. This process helped ensure that the questions aligned with the study's constructs and allowed us to reliably investigate the intended dimensions of SI education (Yin, 2009).

The interviews were conducted in four European countries: Finland, Ireland, Spain, and Romania. These countries were selected based on two main criteria. First, each hosted national partners in the ESIC project, which facilitated access to key stakeholders in SI education and enabled a purposeful and convenient sampling strategy. This ensured that participants had direct, relevant experience. Second, the selection was designed to capture geographic and systemic diversity across Europe, spanning Northern (Finland), Western (Ireland), Southern (Spain), and Eastern (Romania) regions, thereby encompassing a wide range of educational systems, institutional frameworks, and socio-cultural contexts. This diversity strengthened the study's potential to offer transferable insights and to reflect variations in how SI education is conceptualized and practiced (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participants were identified using purposeful sampling strategies supported by national research committees in each country. These committees consisted of academic leads, policymakers, and practitioners affiliated with the ESIC project, ensuring both credibility and access. Their role was to recommend and verify individuals who met the study's inclusion criteria: having direct involvement or expertise in SI education either as educators, curriculum policymakers, or practitioners implementing SI principles. Stakeholders without such direct engagement were excluded from participation. This collaborative recruitment strategy also helped mitigate potential selection biases by ensuring a diverse mix of institutional roles and perspectives within each national sample.

The sample size of 28 interviews exceeds the threshold commonly considered sufficient to generate in-depth insights in exploratory qualitative research (Guest et al., 2006; Creswell, 2016). Moreover, the inclusion of varied regional and institutional contexts enhances the study's analytical richness and the transferability of its findings across different European settings.

Data Analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, which involved six phases: 1) Familiarization, where transcripts were reviewed to gain an in-depth understanding; 2) Initial coding (ad verbatim) using NVivo software to identify emerging patterns; 3) Searching for themes where similar codes were grouped into key themes such as "SI conceptual clarity" and "interdisciplinary collaborations"; 4) Reviewing themes, ensuring they were refined and validated, distinct yet interconnected; 5) Defining and naming themes

aligned with the research objectives; and 6) Producing the report, where the themes were organized into coherent narratives that provided insights into the pedagogical evolution of SI.

To ensure internal validity, we applied a systematic and iterative coding and refinement process, ensuring themes accurately represented the data and addressed the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through an iterative process of refinement and agreement for both the interview protocol and the discussions on the main findings and themes, this study provides an overview of valuable topics regarding SI education across Europe, highlighting the gaps and opportunities between policy and practice.

To ensure credibility, using a process of collective reflection on the findings and codings of the research allowed for peer reviews and discussions, which are critical when examining preliminary results and assumptions during the analysis (Patton, 2015). To strengthen the robustness of the findings, methodological rigor was maintained through triangulation (Patton, 2015), involving diverse stakeholders and iterative feedback loops (Creswell & Miller, 2000). A detailed overview of respondents, including their roles, fields, and pseudonyms, can be found in Table 6A.1 in Appendix 6A.

To maintain ethical rigor, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their rights before data collection began. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation and understanding of the research objectives. Confidentiality and anonymity were upheld by anonymizing participant details and securely storing data in compliance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Orb et al., 2001).

RESULTS

In the following, we present the findings on how HEIs are adapting their educational strategies to teach SI. While the informants provided rich and detailed descriptions of the concept of SI, its educational applications, and context-specific characteristics, they did not explicitly outline a linear trajectory of how pedagogical practices in this field have evolved. Nevertheless, the findings clearly illustrate key developments in SI education, demonstrating how HEIs actively shape their pedagogical approaches to foster social impact, collaboration, and innovation. By synthesizing empirical data with the initiatives in European HEIs presented above, we identify three central themes: (1) the importance of understanding SI from a practical and action-oriented perspective; (2) multistakeholder co-creation processes; and (3) technology as an enabler. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how SI is conceptualized within HEIs, highlighting key drivers, barriers, and institutional dynamics that influence the implementation of SI initiatives. They also point to the types of organizational changes needed to embed SI more meaningfully into higher education structures and practices.

Understanding SI from a Practical and Action-oriented Perspective

Across all informants from Finland, Spain, Ireland, and Romania, this study identified various perspectives on defining SI, reflecting the diverse interpretations and applications of the concept within HEIs in these contexts. This finding is consistent with the vast history of different perspectives on SI and the socio-cultural local contexts that drive both complex social challenges and innovative solutions. However, it was interesting to see that, regardless of whether

the interviews were carried out with entrepreneurs, government representatives, academics, or civil-society actors, SI is a concept that both shares some commonalities across Europe and also has different socio-cultural nuances and expectations. A good summary came from a professor and researcher specializing in social economy from Spain, who pointed out:

There is no single definition of what [SI] is; it depends on the glasses you wear to look at it. Within the development of [SI], we can distinguish three approaches: [SI] as social change, [SI] as a demand for [SI], and [SI] as a systemic change. (Interview 28)

In other words, SI must be acknowledged as a contested concept. It may be interpreted differently depending on the context, country, region, and stakeholders' backgrounds. However, most interviewees pointed out that the definition of SI was too academic or abstract and that they needed it to remain practical. This was clearly outlined by the vice president of a social finance association in Romania who explained:

[SI] is essentially the development of ideas, services, or models that better address social challenges, involving both public and private actors to solve those community and societal issues where local or national public authorities lack solutions. (Interview 2)

In other words, SI should be considered from a functional, hands-on, pragmatic, or action-oriented perspective. This pragmatic approach is essential for understanding how HEIs and the private sector, both integral to the SI ecosystem, can collaborate and gradually adapt their practices to effectively implement SI over time. Integrating a functional, pragmatic, and action-oriented perspective of SI into education is essential for ensuring that pedagogical frameworks are theoretically grounded and responsive to practical, context-specific needs and broader societal demands. This alignment enhances both the relevance and impact of SI education. The DiakHub initiative, for instance, not only showcases university-led support for human-centered service innovation but also illustrates how structured engagement with external stakeholders can institutionalize SI within academic settings (Perikangas et al., 2022). Rather than isolated activities, the pedagogical approaches discussed earlier, such as project-based learning, community-driven hackathons, the Student Enterprise program, and Jovesólides, can be seen as strategic efforts to bridge classroom learning with societal needs. These initiatives do more than exemplify experiential learning; they reflect a broader institutional commitment to fostering students' capacity to navigate complexity, build cross-sectoral partnerships, and co-create value in diverse contexts. Taken together, these examples signal a transition in SI education toward deeply embedded, action-oriented learning models that respond to the dynamic challenges of contemporary society (Păunescu et al., 2022).

Moreover, while acknowledging that socio-cultural and local contexts shape definitions, interpretations, and applications of SI within HEIs, our findings identify key commonalities across cases. Specifically, two recognized characteristics emerge: first, SI is inherently oriented toward generating social impact, and, second, multistakeholder collaboration is essential for its successful implementation in HEIs. These insights reinforce previous studies emphasizing the relational and impact-driven nature of SI in education, where engagement with diverse actors—such as policymakers, civil society organizations, and industry representatives—enhances both the relevance and effectiveness of SI initiatives (McDonnell-Naughton & Păunescu, 2022).

One of the Finnish entrepreneurs interviewed explained how SI adapts to societal needs, either through incremental or revolutionary adaptations, implying the need for stakeholders implementing the innovation to adapt over time:

I see [SI] as a new idea that solves a social need, builds social relationships or collaboration... [SIs] are, perhaps, in a certain way, leaps and bounds or, at once, possibly more giant development steps, adaptation steps. (Interview 21)

SI thus holds the potential to transform society and provide real social impact, and insights from a CEO of an Irish support body note that SI is more about a solution-oriented process (rather than an outcomes-focused organization), that targets social issues and remains open to combining various pathways to social impact:

[SI] is about trying to identify a particular challenge that society faces and trying to combine innovative approaches in achieving a better outcome for those societal aims. (Interview 9)

In essence, the interviewees agree upon (at least) two characteristics of SI. On the one hand, [SI] focuses on social impact or is impact-driven, as explained by a director of a Finnish cultural and well-being organization:

The key is that from the point of view of innovation, it is not the innovation's revenue potential but precisely the impact potential. (Interview 22)

On the other hand, multistakeholder collaboration is essential for HEIs to engage diverse actors in co-creation processes, gain an understanding of real-world challenges, and provide students with solutions, which leads us to the following key theme.

Multistakeholder Co-creation Processes

Collaboration with public, private, and civil society actors is fundamental to advancing HEIs' third mission and ensuring that SI initiatives generate tangible societal impact. Establishing a strong network with diverse stakeholders enables HEIs to bridge academic knowledge with real-world challenges, fostering the practical application of SI principles through community-driven projects or university-led initiatives.

On the other hand, multistakeholder collaboration is not only a structural necessity. It is also a philosophical and pedagogical imperative for SI education. Such collaboration allows HEIs to engage diverse actors in co-creation processes, understand real-world challenges, and prepare students to develop context-specific solutions. As one executive VP and CEO of an educational cooperative noted:

[SI] is inherently a collaborative process involving stakeholders from various sectors. Keywords such as networking, cooperation, interpersonal relationships, or public-private partnerships are crucial here. (Interview 26)

Another Finnish specialist in SI reinforced the need for this collaborative ethos, stating:

Innovations are not created within walls or in one person's head but always between organizations and people. (Interview 1)

These insights reinforce the idea that collaboration is central to HEIs' ability to cultivate SI. By engaging external stakeholders, HEIs enhance both the relevance and impact of their pedagogical strategies.

Integrating perspectives beyond academia is crucial in preparing graduates to tackle complex societal issues. Policymakers, civil society organizations, industry representatives, and labor-market actors bring valuable insights that enhance the relevance and applicability of SI education. Their involvement supports inclusive and multidimensional problem-solving processes and ensures that educational approaches remain adaptive, impact-driven, and aligned with societal needs. By actively engaging external stakeholders, HEIs can equip students with the competencies required to navigate and contribute effectively to multisectoral environments, thereby maximizing the transformative potential of SI in education.

This was echoed by another Finnish entrepreneur:

I believe in open network cooperation, that is, cooperation where we have a mission or a vision that we want to achieve together. (Interview 20)

As mentioned earlier, this mission holds both a problem-solving and future-oriented dimension. For example, insights from Finnish and Romanian respondents indicate that:

[SI] plays a crucial role in solving these challenges ... [It] is usually a solution to an existing problem. Moreover, to be an [SI], the way of working must be related to these people-related matters, i.e., relations between people ... I would very much link [SI] to the social economy in the first phase ... After a few years, perhaps, we could extend the concept to other areas, such as medicine or engineering, to make products as innovative and socially responsive as possible. (Interview 1)

Informants' reflections, combined with the diverse university initiatives across Europe presented above, illustrate the critical role of multistakeholder collaboration in advancing SI education. These cases highlight how partnerships between academia, policymakers, civil society organizations, and industry actors create synergies that enhance the educational experience and real-world impact of SI initiatives.

A recurring theme across the cases is the significance of co-creation and cross-sectoral collaboration in fostering SI education. In Finland, the DiakHub exemplifies a quadruple helix model, where students, academics, practitioners, and community members collaboratively develop human-centered service innovation (Perikangas et al., 2022). Similarly, in Estonia, Tallinn University's Social Entrepreneurship master's program integrates stakeholders into project-based learning and community-driven hackathons, ensuring that SI solutions directly address local needs (Lepik & Urmanavičienė, 2022). The role of service-learning networks in promoting SI education is evident in Ireland. The Flemish Network for Service-Learning supports inter-university collaboration, tailoring service-learning approaches to local educational contexts (Somers, 2024). Likewise, Ireland's Campus Engage fosters student engagement in civic initiatives, forging partnerships with community organizations to enhance social responsibility and professional development (McDonnell-Naughton & Păunescu, 2022). These cases illustrate how structured networks create sustainable large-scale impacts by embedding SI into institutional frameworks.

Entrepreneurship-driven SI education also relies on cross-sectoral collaboration. At USN, the Student Enterprise program, facilitated by Junior Achievement, connects students with industry partners and social entrepreneurs, equipping them with hands-on experience in

developing social ventures (USN, 2022). Similarly, Romanian HEIs are increasingly incorporating entrepreneurial competencies into their curricula, aligning with the EntreComp framework to strengthen students' innovation skills (OECD, 2019). Finally, despite institutional barriers, SI education is gaining traction in Spain, where individual faculty-led initiatives, such as Jovesólides at UPV, demonstrate the potential of SI education when aligned with regional and interdisciplinary collaboration (Monteiro et al., 2021). However, the lack of formal support structures and dedicated funding underscores the need for a more substantial institutional commitment to SI education.

These cases underscore the growing reliance on networks, co-creation, and multistakeholder engagement as fundamental drivers of SI education in European HEIs. By fostering cross-sectoral partnerships, universities can better prepare students to navigate complex societal challenges, ensuring that SI education remains adaptive, impactful, and responsive to real-world needs. Strengthening institutional support, expanding funding mechanisms, and deepening regional collaboration will be fundamental for further embedding SI education within HEIs across Europe.

Technology as an Important Enabler of SI

The findings of this chapter reinforce the notion that technology plays a crucial role in enabling SI within HEIs. As previously highlighted, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the adoption of digital tools in HEIs, underscoring their transformative potential in educational models (Păunescu et al., 2022). This digital shift has expanded access to SI education and enhanced how universities engage with local communities and address societal challenges in alignment with the 2030 Agenda and SDG 4.

Integrating digital platforms, online collaboration tools, and blended learning environments enables HEIs to create more flexible and inclusive learning spaces. These technologies support knowledge transfer, multistakeholder engagement, and co-creation processes, which are fundamental to SI. The significance of technology in scaling and disseminating SI efforts was emphasized by a Finnish researcher, who noted:

Social innovators increasingly leverage the latest technologies, including digital tools and platforms, to enhance their efforts. These technological advancements ... allow SIs to reach more people and communities, facilitating the dissemination and adoption of innovative solutions. (Interview 15)

This is supported by Perikangas, Kostilainen, and Kainulainen (2024), who also identified technology-mediated SI. Indeed, digitalization facilitates joint curriculum development, interdisciplinary collaborations, and real-time engagement with external stakeholders. Technology-enhanced SI education enables HEIs to bridge geographical barriers, expand their reach, and strengthen partnerships across sectors. Moreover, open-access platforms, digital repositories, and virtual co-creation spaces support the collaborative development of SI initiatives, allowing students, educators, and external partners to share expertise and co-design solutions more effectively.

While the rapid digital transformation of HEIs has created new opportunities for SI, challenges remain in ensuring equitable access to technology and maintaining pedagogical coherence. The fragmented nature of SI education, as noted earlier (McDonnell-Naughton & Păunescu, 2022; Kaputa et al., 2022; Yeratziotis et al., 2022; Dryjanska et al., 2022; Perikangas

et al., 2024), highlights the need for a more structured and unified approach to integrating technology in SI teaching and learning. It is essential to develop strategic frameworks and institutional support mechanisms that foster technology-enhanced, impact-driven SI education while addressing digital accessibility and inclusion.

DISCUSSION

Stakeholders across the European HEI landscape understand SI as a multidimensional and evolving concept, often shaped by institutional roles, policy contexts, and societal needs. While definitions vary, there is a common emphasis on action-oriented approaches, collaboration across sectors, and addressing real-world challenges through education.

Across the cases and interview data, three interlinked dynamics emerged: first, the importance of understanding SI from a practical and action-oriented perspective; second, the centrality of multistakeholder co-creation processes; and, third, the role of technology as an enabler of SI.

The finding that SI must be understood from a practical and action-oriented perspective connects directly to how SI is conceptualized. Stakeholders emphasize that abstract or overly academic definitions risk losing relevance; instead, SI should be grounded in functional, hands-on approaches that generated tangible societal impact. This reflects the need for HEIs to frame SI not only as a theoretical construct but also as a pragmatic, impact-driven practice, which supports curricular integration and enhances the employability of graduates.

The second finding, multistakeholder co-creation processes, highlights collaboration as both a driver and a potential barrier to SI implementation. On the one hand, collaboration with civil society, policymakers, and industry actors enhances the relevance and societal impact of SI education. On the other, institutional silos, lack of faculty training, and uneven policy support may hinder such co-creation. Thus, co-creation should be understood as a central mechanism that both drives SI forward and exposes the institutional gaps that must be addressed.

Finally, the identification of technology as an enabler links directly to the institutional changes required to further embed SI in HEIs. Digital platforms, blended learning, and online collaboration tools facilitate co-creation, broaden access, and allow SI education to scale. However, this potential can only be realized if institutions invest in digital infrastructure, support faculty digital competencies, and address risks of exclusion caused by digital divides. In this way, technology becomes not only an enabler but also a test case for how structural support and curricular integration can foster SI more systematically. Furthermore, integrating digital tools into SI education not only enhances the possibility of the scalability and impact of social initiatives but also fosters more inclusive, efficient, and adaptive learning environments.

However, while digital technology presents significant opportunities for SI education, it also poses challenges and cannot be regarded as an unequivocal enabler in all contexts. Its effectiveness is contingent upon factors such as institutional readiness, access to digital infrastructure, and digital literacy among educators and students. Moreover, the reliance on technology risks reinforcing digital divides, where resource-constrained HEIs or students with limited access to technological tools may face barriers to participation. Additionally, while technology facilitates new modes of collaboration and knowledge dissemination, it does not inherently guarantee deeper engagement with SI principles. Given the growing intersection between technology and SI, further research and pedagogical practices should critically

explore this relationship, balancing the benefits of digital innovation with an awareness of its potential limitations and unintended consequences.

The findings show that while some HEIs (e.g., in Finland and Ireland) have developed formal structures and networks for SI education, others (e.g., in Spain and Romania) rely on isolated or grassroots initiatives. This reflects broader disparities in national policy frameworks, funding, and institutional readiness. These insights respond directly to our research question by illustrating how HEIs across Europe are adapting and organizing their educational practices for SI.

Moreover, integrating sustainability and community engagement into SI curricula presents considerable challenges (Goggins & Hajdukiewicz, 2022). HEIs operate within distinct regulatory and cultural frameworks that shape the extent of institutional commitment to SI education. While some countries have developed policies supporting SI integration, others lack coherent national strategies, leading to fragmented efforts across institutions. Addressing these disparities requires the development of comprehensive policy frameworks that foster a more unified approach to SI education while allowing for flexibility in local implementation. By recognizing both the commonalities and divergences in SI adoption across HEIs, this study highlights the need for tailored yet coordinated strategies to enhance the impact and sustainability of SI education across Europe.

As discussed, a fundamental principle of SI education is multistakeholder collaboration, which enables the co-creation of solutions to complex societal challenges. Theoretical frameworks, such as systems thinking and the ecosystem perspective, offer valuable analytical lenses for understanding and fostering SI and should be systematically integrated into pedagogical practices. However, effectively implementing cross-sector collaboration within HEIs requires specific competencies that are not yet widely embedded into faculty training and academic development programs. To enhance the capacity of HEIs to contribute to SI meaningfully, a paradigm shift is necessary, one that includes strategic investments in faculty training, targeted resource allocation, and a redefinition of institutional roles and responsibilities. Developing faculty expertise in stakeholder engagement, interdisciplinary collaboration, and impact-driven pedagogical approaches is crucial for embedding SI into higher education curricula. Without these structural and institutional commitments, the potential of HEIs to function as key actors in the SI ecosystem remains constrained.

CONCLUSION

Growing societal challenges, such as labor-skill shortages and high youth unemployment, have increased emphasis on SI as a potential solution or means to mitigate the problems. Although SI is not a recent phenomenon, it emphasizes innovative approaches that prioritize grassroots initiatives and socially oriented perspectives, moving away from traditional, market-driven paradigms.

SI in HEIs is deeply connected to the evolution of European social systems, education structures, and policy frameworks. As HEIs increasingly focus on fulfilling their third mission, they are integrating SI into their educational practices. This shift is evident in the growing emphasis on fostering the competencies and mindsets necessary for engaging in SI efforts.

In particular, and as identified by Păunescu, Lepik, and Spencer (2022), the evolution of SI education in HEIs reflects a movement away from traditional pedagogical models and

awareness-raising initiatives toward more experimental, participatory, and interdisciplinary approaches. Early initiatives were theoretical, but recent trends emphasize hands-on learning, problem solving, and project-based, cross-sector collaboration. Examples from HEIs in Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Norway, and Romania illustrate how these institutions empower students by involving them in real-world projects, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration, and cultivating critical thinking and entrepreneurial skills.

Our interviews further highlight the varied interpretation of SI, particularly regarding its collaborative dimensions and the perceived role of technology as a catalyst for societal change. Despite these efforts, challenges persist. HEIs must continue to address gaps in academic staff competencies, integrate essential theoretical frameworks, and invest in experiential, interdisciplinary, and participatory pedagogical practices. By doing so, HEIs can contribute to systemic change and enhance the impact of SI education, ensuring it plays a key role in addressing global societal challenges.

This chapter has explored the educational practices employed by European HEIs to integrate SI education. By capturing a range of perspectives, practices, and contextual specificities, it contributes to a broader understanding of how SI capacities are cultivated to address complex societal challenges across diverse European settings. Through an analysis of university-led initiatives and empirical interview data, this chapter has examined how HEIs integrate SI into their educational frameworks by employing action-oriented pedagogies, fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration, and adapting to digital transformation. These insights contribute to a nuanced understanding of how pedagogical practices are evolving to cultivate SI capacities and address societal challenges across diverse European contexts. Our findings also highlight the need for further institutional support to enhance the integration of SI education within HEIs, particularly regarding faculty training, resource allocation, and the development of coherent policy frameworks. By synthesizing insights from diverse institutional settings, this chapter contributes to the broader discourse on SI education, offering valuable perspectives for policymakers, educators, and researchers interested in fostering socially engaged learning environments. Despite these contributions, our study has certain limitations. First, the sample mainly includes key stakeholders from the broader SI ecosystem, such as policymakers, educators, social entrepreneurs, and network organizations, while wider involvement of students, faculty, deans, and rectors from the HEIs could have offered a more comprehensive perspective on SI education. Second, while our findings illustrate different ways in which SI is integrated into HEI curricula and practices, they do not present a linear trajectory of the pedagogical evolution of SI in higher education. Further research could explore this aspect in greater depth to map the progression of SI education more systematically. Third, although this study focused on themes related to SI education, a more detailed examination of specific pedagogical methods and strategies was beyond its scope. Further research on these aspects could offer insights into how SI education can be more effectively designed and implemented.

Recognizing these limitations, we encourage future studies to build upon our findings by expanding the empirical scope and investigating how different pedagogical approaches impact students' learning outcomes and engagement in SI. Strengthening SI education in HEIs requires ongoing efforts to bridge institutional gaps, foster cross-sector collaboration, and leverage technological advancements to create inclusive and impactful learning environments.

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APPENDIX 6A

Table 6A.1 *Roles and pseudonyms of the study participants*

<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Field</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Interview duration</i>
1	Senior mobility policymaker	Public authority	Romania	28 min
2	Coordinator of an accelerator	Network organization	Romania	38 min
3	Finance association leader	Network organization	Romania	38 min
4	Founder of a social enterprise	Private company	Romania	36 min
5	Employment agency director	Public authority	Romania	65 min
6	Dean of Faculty of Economics	Education	Romania	57 min
7	Associate Professor	Education	Romania	53 min
8	Chamber of Commerce representative	Public authority	Romania	61 min
9	Social enterprise network leader	Network organization	Ireland	52 min
10	Associate Professor of Entrepreneurship and Innovation	Education	Ireland	41 min
11	(Retired) civil servant working in various departments of government	Public authority	Ireland	61 min
12	Founder and director of a social enterprise	Private company	Ireland	46 min
13	CEO of a social enterprise	Private company	Ireland	45 min
14	Director of development and member services	Network organization	Ireland	51 min
15	University specialist on social economy	Education	Finland	61 min
16	Head of financial unit under Ministry of Economic Affairs	Public authority	Finland	52 min
17	Social enterprise association leader	Network organization	Finland	64 min
18	PhD student in public management and sustainable entrepreneurship	Education	Finland	73 min
19	Former social policy advisor	Public authority	Finland	60 min
20	Social enterprise executive	Private company	Finland	118 min
21	Impact investing project lead	Private company	Finland	126 min
22	Director of cultural and social initiatives	Network organization	Finland	110 min
23	University researcher and professor specializing in business and organization	Education	Spain	35 min

<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Field</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Interview duration</i>
24	University researcher and professor	Education	Spain	28 min
25	Vocational education director	Network organization	Spain	36 min
26	Executive Vice-President of an educational cooperative	Public authority	Spain	62 min
27	Social economy business leader	Private company	Spain	54 min
28	University researcher in social economy	Education	Spain	51 min