Journal of Intercultural Management
Vol. **17** | No. **1** | **2025**
pp. **109–137**
DOI **10.2478/joim-2025-0004**

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Embedding Inclusive Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship in Higher Education

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to lay the foundation for design and delivery of educational programs in the field of Inclusive Innovation (II) and Social Entrepreneurship (SE) at a tertiary level.

Methodology: The study adopted a multi-phase methodology to develop a comprehensive Toolkit for designing and delivering educational programs in II&SE. Firstly, a systematic literature review was conducted to clarify conceptual frameworks and identify best practices. This was followed by an empirical analysis of 25 existing II&SE study programs and courses offered at a tertiary level in Europe, which helped identify effective pedagogical and curricular approaches. The third phase involved categorizing best practices based on thematic relevance. Finally, stakeholder engagement panels were conducted in four EU countries (Bulgaria, Italy, Lithuania, and Poland) to gather practical feedback.

Findings: The analysis revealed that II&SE education is being integrated through various models in HEIs, including stand-alone programs, embedded modules, and extracurricular initiatives. Experiential and practice-based learning methods proved more effective than traditional lectures. Stakeholders are vital in enriching II&SE education by offering real-world collaboration opportunities. The impact was identified at three levels: individual (skills development), economic (entrepreneurial activity and employability), and societal (community development and inclusion).

Value Added: This study contributes to the growing field of II&SE by providing a structured, evidence-based Toolkit adaptable for diverse educational contexts. The present study also brings to light the importance of incorporating II&SE education in response to global development challenges, providing validated impact indicators and assessment tools to use for curriculum development and accountability.

Recommendations: Curricular integration in terms of II&SE content across disciplines is recommended for HEIs, prioritizing experiential learning relying on community-engaged teaching methods. Establishing multi-stakeholder ecosystems involving NGOs, public bodies and private sector actors for co-creation and mentorship also emerged from the findings as a suggestion. Finally, investing in faculty development through targeted training in innovative, competency-based pedagogical strategies can significantly enrich the learning experience and institutional capacity for delivering impactful II&SE education.

Key words: Inclusive innovation, social entrepreneurship, curriculum development, social innovation, competency based education.

JEL codes: O35, I23

Introduction

Inclusive Innovation (II) and Social Entrepreneurship (SE) have gained significant relevance as frameworks for addressing the complex, interdependent challenges of contemporary societies. Rooted in principles of equity, participation, and sustainability, these concepts align with broader shifts in global policy agendas – most notably the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals – toward inclusive and socially embedded forms of development. As frameworks for sustainable development, they emphasize the co-creation of solutions that empower marginalized communities, foster social value, and promote inclusive economic participation. In this context, higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly seen not only as centers of knowledge production but also as agents of societal transformation, tasked with preparing graduates to contribute meaningfully to inclusive innovation ecosystems.

While the academic literature offers growing insight into the conceptual foundations of II and SE, there remains a notable lack of empirical evidence

and actionable guidance on how to embed these paradigms effectively within university curricula. In particular, limited attention has been paid to the pedagogical strategies, curriculum structures, and stakeholder engagement models that can enable II&SE education to deliver measurable impact across individual, institutional, and societal levels.

This article addresses that gap by presenting the outcomes of the Inno-Social Mainstreaming Inclusive Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship in Higher Education project implemented under the framework of the Erasmus+ program, which aimed to develop a comprehensive Toolkit to support the implementation of II&SE programs in higher education. The research followed a multi-stage methodology, incorporating a systematic literature review, analysis of 25 II&SE study programs in Europe, and participatory consultations with stakeholders across four countries. The resulting Toolkit identifies best practices and practical frameworks that can be adapted to a variety of educational and cultural contexts. It synthesizes best practices and offers adaptable models for HEIs aiming to implement or enhance II&SE education in diverse institutional contexts.

By positioning II&SE education as a strategic response to both global development challenges and evolving demands within higher education, this study contributes not only to pedagogical innovation but also to the broader goal of aligning academic learning with societal transformation. It offers valuable insights for academic leaders, educators, and policymakers seeking to enhance institutional capacity for inclusive, practice-oriented, and socially impactful educational pathways.

The following sections of this article present the methodological foundations of the research, a review of the conceptual and theoretical literature on II and SE, the findings from the course and program analysis, stakeholder engagement outcomes, and a discussion on teaching and learning approaches. The article concludes with recommendations for integrating II&SE into higher education in ways that are context-sensitive, pedagogically sound, and socially transformative.

Methodology

The methodological approach of this study was structured to support the development of a comprehensive Toolkit aimed at guiding the design and delivery of educational programs in the fields of Inclusive Innovation (II) and Social Entrepreneurship (SE). This methodology involved a multi-step process, including a systematic literature review, the analysis of existing study programs and courses, the identification and documentation of good practices, and validation through stakeholder engagement.

First, the literature review was conducted with the primary aim of enhancing the understanding of the concepts of Inclusive Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship, as well as informing the development of the Toolkit. Specifically, the review sought to: (1) establish the conceptual scope of II and SE, (2) collect content-relevant information for the Toolkit's structure, and (3) identify and document exemplary practices in II&SE education. In line with extant research, we adopted a systematic literature review (Rohayati et al., 2023; Tian et al., 2018), covering the analysis of a wide range of sources, ranging from peer-reviewed academic papers, policy frameworks at national, European, and international levels, and relevant publications from businesses and social economy actors actively involved in II&SE (Paez, 2017). Selection criteria for the literature emphasized recency (not older than ten years unless representing landmark works still in use) and contextual relevance to EU countries.

Second, in line with previous research (Carroll, 1980) and to complement the literature review, an empirical analysis of existing study programs and courses in II&SE was carried out by each author by identifying and analyzing curricula and syllabi from a variety of educational and training providers. These included universities, vocational and adult education institutions, business incubators, entrepreneurship centers, NGOs, foundations, and other stakeholder organizations, both within and outside higher education frameworks. The objective of this analysis was twofold: to gain insight into the current landscape of II&SE education and to uncover effective practices in the design and delivery of such programs.

Third, good practices emerging from both the literature review and the course analysis were categorized according to the Toolkit's thematic areas:

the institutional positioning of II&SE programs, content and curricular design, intended learning outcomes, pedagogical approaches, stakeholder involvement, and impact assessment methods. At least one exemplary practice was documented per section, ensuring a holistic and actionable resource.

Fourth, following the development of the initial version of the Toolkit, each partner organized a stakeholder discussion panel. These panels served to engage both internal and external stakeholders, map their interests, explore potential collaboration in II&SE education, and collect feedback on the Toolkit. This participatory process was essential for validating the Toolkit's content and ensuring its relevance and applicability across contexts. Detailed guidelines, including evaluation forms and reporting templates, were provided to standardize panel implementation and reporting.

Finally, informed by the insights and recommendations from the stakeholder panels, the Toolkit was refined.

Literature Review

Defining Social Innovation

Ayob et al. (2016) observed that earlier literature categorized social innovation under various themes, including social relations, societal impact, a combination of both, and the intersection of technological innovation with social dynamics. The *Green Paper on Innovation* emphasized that innovation should not be viewed solely as an economic tool or a technical process, but fundamentally as a social phenomenon. It underscored the importance of considering the social conditions in which innovation arises, especially in addressing societal challenges such as poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, and healthcare disparities. In fact, Herrera (2015) highlights the increasing significance of social innovation not only in creating social value but also in advancing corporate social responsibility. As social concerns become central to global strategic priorities, social innovation is emerging as a key tool for engaging stakeholders and aligning business practices with societal needs.

Literature has been dedicated to defining social innovation before. According to Phills et al. (2008), social innovation represents a deliberate effort by innovators to create social change by meeting various societal needs, with a focus on generating social value rather than economic profit. Gatens and Lloyd (1999) argued that social innovation, particularly when led by committed entrepreneurs, can establish new spaces of responsibility that contribute to the renewal of disadvantaged communities. Murray et al. (2010) described social innovation as the development of new ideas that not only meet social needs but also strengthen social relationships, thereby improving society's capacity for collective action. Supporting this view, Moulaert et al. (2010) highlighted the transformative potential of grassroots collaborations in reshaping social relations and enhancing governance systems, particularly in urban contexts.

More specifically, social innovation can be captured in different ways, aiming at tackling specific social challenges involving technology, social change and political science (Ayob et al., 2016). For instance, service innovation emerges as designing new or improved services to boost accessibility and effectiveness, while technological innovation uses technology to address social and environmental issues. Policy innovation, on the other hand, introduces new laws, regulations, or frameworks that support social advancement, explaining the policy emphasis emerging from collaborations between government, social enterprises, and other third sector organizations in the creation of social innovation (Ayob et al., 2016). Lastly, community-based innovations empower local groups to co-create grassroots solutions tailored to their specific needs, improving their quality of life through social innovation and impact (Moulaert et al., 2010; Pol & Ville, 2009).

Two perspectives of social innovation were identified by Cajaiba-Santana (2014) to explain how social innovation develops. From an institutional view, social innovation happens when people and organizations share knowledge and resources, supported by efforts to gain recognition and support. From a structural view, social innovation is built through people working together, taking intentional actions, and reflecting on the results. In fact, social innovation involves the restructuring of social relations at the ideational stage and during the delivery stage of the innovation (Ayob et al., 2016).

Inclusive Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship (II&SE)

Inclusion has emerged as one of the most pressing political and social challenges of our time (George, 2019). Reflecting these needs, the United Nations' 2015 Sustainable Development Goals place social inclusion at the heart of their agenda, emphasizing that sustainable prosperity must be shared by all people globally. In response to these demands, the concept of inclusive innovation (II) has been widely explored in academic literature, with numerous scholars offering diverse definitions. A summary of these key definitions is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Key Definitions of II (authors' compilation)

Authors	Definition of inclusive innovation
Heeks et al., 2013	"Inclusive Innovation is the means by which new goods and services are developed for and/or by those who have been excluded from the development mainstream; particularly the billions living on lowest incomes".
Foster and Heeks, 2013	"Inclusive Innovation explicitly conceives development in terms of active inclusion of those who are excluded from the mainstream of development. Differing in its foundational view of development, inclusive innovation therefore refers to the inclusion within some aspect of innovation of groups who are currently marginalised".
Johnson and Andersen, 2012	"In the context of Inclusive Innovation, the narrow understanding of inclusion is "reducing income inequality and bringing the poor out of poverty through raising their income"; the broad definition is "giving rights, voice, capabilities and incentives for the excluded to become active participants in processes of development and innovation".
George et al., 2012	"Inclusive growth can be viewed as a desired outcome of innovative initiatives that target individuals in disenfranchised sectors of society as well as, at the same time, a characteristic of the processes by which such innovative initiatives occur".
Glennie et al., 2020 (UNDP)	Inclusive Innovation – "a type of innovation that fosters inclusion and reinforces the SDGs", "a means of addressing societal challenges and fostering more inclusive ecosystems". "Inclusive innovation describes the pursuit of innovation that has social aims, and local context, at its heart. One can think of it as either – and both – a more inclusive approach to innovation or a more innovative approach to driving social inclusion".
Klingler-Vidra et al., 2022	"Innovation offers potential: to cure diseases, to better connect people, and to make the way we live and work more efficient and enjoyable. At the same time, innovation can fuel inequality, decimate livelihoods, and harm mental health. Inclusive innovation – innovation motivated by environmental and social aims – is able to uplift the benefits of innovation while reducing its harms".

Taking this into consideration, we can assume II is defined as the grassroots efforts at innovation in which driving innovation may target the excluded or underrepresented populations and aim to improve their quality of life or seek to provide opportunities through these specific efforts. In particular, it aims to expand their access to education, health care, employment, environmentally-friendly services, and affordable technology, among others. Thus, II implies addressing social needs of these population groups through innovation and involving them in the innovation process (Goel, 2011).

Several levels of involvement of these groups in II reflect the depth and strength of inclusion of the targeted society members in the innovation process, as implied by Heeks et al. (2013):

- **Level of intention**: motivation to address the needs and wants of excluded groups;
- **Level of consumption**: adoption, use and absorption of innovation by excluded groups;
- **Level of impact**: achievement of positive economic, social, and/or environmental impact on excluded groups through wide dissemination and diffusion of innovation;
- **Level of process**: participation of representatives of excluded groups in different stages of the innovation process – invention, design, development, prototyping, production, marketing and distribution of innovation;
- **Levels of structure and post-structure**: where the whole innovation system and the discourse are inclusive.

UNCTAD (2014) identified several key characteristics of II, including its social orientation, affordability, accessibility, potential for impact, participatory approach, and relevance to marginalized communities. These attributes are essential for effective implementation of inclusive innovation, as genuine social inclusion cannot be achieved without actively involving the target communities in both the decision-making and development phases of innovation projects. Indeed, inclusive transformation is more likely to succeed when these communities participate as co-creators in the design and implementation of innovative solutions

(Patnaik & Bhowmic, 2020), through social innovation systems created to jointly address social issues and shaping society and innovation (Phillips et al., 2014).

II can provide a business opportunity for SE, in fact these two terms share common overlaps in literature mainly in the way their processes tend to identify and solve diverse societal issues (Phillips et al., 2014). SE is an area of civic activity that brings about both economic and public benefits. Yunus (2011) defined social entrepreneurship as a "not-for-profit" and "not-for-loss" business dedicated to solving social issues. SE can be understood in two main dimensions: the entrepreneurial and the social. The entrepreneurial aspect highlights the business-oriented nature of social enterprises, which function in the marketplace and often compete with traditional businesses. The social aspect defines that their primary goal is not profit maximization for owners, but rather the pursuit of a social mission and the promotion of values that benefit the broader community. SEs are increasingly seen as alternatives to traditional market-driven models, offering ways to address social challenges by reinvesting profits into initiatives that benefit communities and stakeholder groups (Phillips et al., 2014).

According to the European Commission, social enterprises operate across diverse sectors aimed at addressing societal challenges, particularly through the integration and support of disadvantaged groups. Their activities commonly include delivering social services such as healthcare, education, and childcare to vulnerable populations; promoting local development in underserved rural and urban areas; and engaging in fields like environmental protection, cultural heritage preservation, innovation, and consumer protection. Complementing this, Pearce (2003) identified several market opportunities within disadvantaged communities that social enterprises often support. These include initiatives in local development and regeneration, such as business incubation, enterprise training, and infrastructure projects, alongside the delivery of services traditionally provided by the state. Additionally, social enterprises may complement unmet community demands or compete directly with public and private providers while offering their goods and services to the market.

Previous research by Haugh (2005) concluded that environmental context, referring to political, economical, social, cultural, and technological trends might influence social entrepreneurship. Adding to this, research from Omorede (2014)

proposed that some of the motivations or drivers for starting social enterprises are also local conditions, international mindset but more specifically social network support, as this last driver was described as fundamental for entrepreneurs to persist.

Knowledge areas and skills developed through II&SE education within HEIs

While II&SE have been increasingly receiving attention, research on how to foster inclusive entrepreneurship remains at a very early stage (Vargas-Zeledon et al., 2024). Consequently, these concepts remain inadequately defined within the realm of higher education (Schmitz, 2015), particularly in relation to their influence on pedagogical practice (Phillips et al., 2014). Recent research emphasizes the importance of accounting for social norms and cultural factors, as they significantly shape and sustain inclusive entrepreneurship education and training (Vargas-Zeledón et al., 2024).

The analysis of literature, study programs, and stakeholder consultations conducted within the InnoSocial project has led to a comprehensive identification of the knowledge areas and skill sets that should be developed through II&SE education at the university level. Findings reveal a strong complementarity between II & SE, and support the integration of both within a single, coherent course or program. While II emphasizes the development of solutions for and with disadvantaged or marginalized groups, SE mainly focuses on creating sustainable ventures that address social and environmental challenges. Together, they form a powerful educational foundation for preparing students to become socially responsible innovators and change agents.

Within the literature review – particularly the definitions and frameworks offered by different researchers – six essential themes have been highlighted that recur across recognized definitions of SE: (1) addressing a social need or problem, (2) recognizing and acting on opportunities, (3) fostering innovation, (4) achieving scalability and impact, (5) mobilizing and managing resources, and (6) creating sustainable business models (Austin et al., 2006; Bornstein, 2004; Dees et al., 2001; Heeks et al., 2013). In parallel, the conceptual analysis of II yielded four key dimensions: (1) contributing to social development by improving

access to quality products and services, (2) enabling social inclusion through participation in innovation processes, (3) supporting industrial and territorial inclusion (especially microenterprises and underserved regions), and (4) ensuring wide accessibility and diffusion of innovation.

Based on a detailed content review of 25 university-level courses and programs and stakeholder inputs across consortium countries, a core content structure for II&SE education has been proposed. This includes foundational modules on the principles and types of inclusive and social innovation, the societal and environmental challenges targeted by these approaches, and tools such as design thinking to develop impactful solutions. Additional modules focus on identifying business opportunities from social innovations, selecting suitable legal and organizational forms, applying models like the Social Business Model Canvas, designing business plans, accessing funding, and measuring social impact. The content of these modules encourages learners to work closely with stakeholders, in particular NGOs, social enterprises, and community groups.

Two main structuring models emerged for course delivery. The first model is a sequential format where theoretical instruction is followed by a project-based practicum. While the second one is an integrated format where each thematic unit combines theoretical background with practical assignments. Both modules aim to embed experiential learning and encourage students to apply their knowledge to real-life situations, providing a more hands-on approach.

In terms of competencies, the findings suggest that the contemporary educational trends emphasize competence-based learning. Courses promoting II&SE education, like InnoSocial, target not only cognitive knowledge but also practical skills and attitudes critical to employability. These findings are strongly aligned with the European Commission's EntreComp framework, which defines 15 entrepreneurship competencies across three dimensions: Ideas and Opportunities, Resources, and Into Action.

A good example of good practice is the Bachelor's program in Responsible Entrepreneurship and Management offered by Tomorrow University of Applied Sciences (Germany). This online program follows a challenge-based approach and it is structured into four progressive phases: orientation, calibration, elevation and activation. In each phase, learners engage in real-world challenges linked to

address the SDGs, while collaborating with mentors and diverse organizations. This program exemplifies how learning can be effectively applied and developed into entrepreneurial activities relevant to II&SE learning.

Findings

Strategies for II&SE education delivery

The analysis conducted on the integration of II&SE education in HEIs identified a wide range of curricular and extracurricular strategies currently adopted by European universities. Current findings show that universities can implement II&SE education through dedicated stand-alone programs, particularly at the master level. These programs are characterized by a specialized curriculum aimed at developing essential managerial, design, and evaluation skills needed to operate in the field of social innovation. Examples include the Master in Social Entrepreneurship offered by New Bulgarian University (Bulgaria) and the Executive Master in Third Sector and Social Enterprise at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart (Italy), which feature modules on legal frameworks, impact management, strategic financing, and cross-sector collaboration.

A second model involves the delivery of single courses or modules within broader degree programs, including non-business disciplines such as engineering, social sciences, or the arts. This approach includes both standardized courses, offered across faculties, and contextualized courses, tailored to the disciplinary context. The contextualized model is particularly effective for II&SE as it enables students to link their specialized training with entrepreneurial tools and mindsets, fostering a deeper understanding of social innovation dynamics in specific fields. For instance, the Social Entrepreneurship course at the University of Regensburg (Germany) incorporates modules on start-up development and scaling, impact analysis, and non-monetary human resource management.

Another identified curricular model is the implicit integration of II&SE education into existing disciplines through teaching approaches focused on entrepreneurial

competency development. In this case, II&SE is not taught through dedicated modules, but embedded in pedagogy through project-based learning, self-directed activities, presentations of innovative ideas, and guest lectures from social entrepreneurs. This model is evident at the University of National and World Economy (UNWE) in Sofia (Bulgaria), where II&SE-related content is embedded in courses such as Development Economics, Innovation, Human Resource Management, and Corporate Social Responsibility.

On the extracurricular side, findings suggested a growing interest of university-based incubators, enterprise centers, and international programs such as Enactus in offering experiential learning opportunities for the development of socially impactful ventures. These structures provide environments where students can transform early-stage ideas into viable business models, supported by mentoring, workshops, and competitions. The Start-Up Hub at UNWE, for example, guides students through idea generation, planning, and launching of social enterprises via mentoring cafés, role-play simulations, and annual pitch competitions.

Furthermore, qualitative insights from interviews with academic and professional stakeholders helped with the identification of complementary strategies to enhance II&SE pedagogical implementation within universities. Including the active involvement of public policy advocacy for SE, the promotion of interdisciplinary, problem-solving research, the creation of partnerships with NGOs and SE for internships and collaborative projects, and the establishment of funds and awards for II. Finally, best practices in assessing the social impact of student-led activities were also noted, emphasizing the integration of the evaluation frameworks into curricular activities.

Stakeholder-led II&SE initiatives

The analysis of stakeholder-led initiatives in the field of II&SE and their integration into higher education revealed a diverse set of approaches and programs that can be adapted, embedded, or co-created by universities. The findings indicate that external factors, such as local businesses, social entrepreneurs, NGOs, foundations, local governments, incubators, and funding agencies, have developed effective educational initiatives, many of which are transferable to

academic contexts. These initiatives contribute to building collaborative learning ecosystems that combine academic knowledge with real-world practice and social impact.

Among the successful school-level initiatives are those implemented by the Junior Achievement Foundation, such as *"Open a Company"* and *Social Innovation Relay*. These programs engage primary, secondary, and vocational students in experiential learning activities co-developed with local entrepreneurs. They promote entrepreneurial thinking and practical skills through classroom activities, mentorship, and business simulations. *Social Innovation Relay*, in particular, offers an online platform and project-based structure where students develop solutions to real social problems, using entrepreneurial tools and receiving guidance from mentors. These programs are closely aligned with the core principles of II&SE education and can serve as scalable models for university-level courses.

Within the higher education sector, examples of university-led projects co-funded by public or European institutions demonstrate the feasibility of scaling II&SE education through targeted interventions. One such initiative is the *Mazovia Youth University*, implemented by the University of Warsaw (Poland). Through a series of structured training modules in financial literacy, critical thinking, and entrepreneurship, the program equipped students with key transversal skills demanded by the labor market. The program's success highlights the potential of public-private-academic partnerships in delivering future-oriented educational content.

Local authorities also have a strategic role in II&SE education. The *Social Innovation Lab* (SIL) in the City of Gdynia (Poland) is a municipal unit dedicated to developing and supporting innovative solutions for social inclusion. In collaboration with foundations like *Stocznia*, SIL runs incubation cycles that include open calls for ideas, mentoring, prototyping, and evaluation of social innovations. Over 100 projects have been supported, 52 tested, and 10 selected for wider dissemination. This model illustrates how municipal programs can be integrated into academic learning, allowing students to test and refine real-world solutions while engaging with civic actors.

Academic Business Incubators (AIP) represent another model of effective collaboration between universities and external stakeholders. Operated across

Polish higher education institutions, AIPs offer students and young people under 30 the opportunity to test business ideas without the need to formally register a company. The incubators provide legal status, accounting services, expert mentoring, office space, and access to training and funding. With over 10,000 businesses launched and 17,000 individuals supported, AIPs demonstrate how practical entrepreneurship training can be institutionalized within universities and foster inclusive business development.

Insights from the InnoSocial stakeholder consultations emphasized the importance of viewing II&SE education within the broader innovation ecosystem framework, defined as a community of interconnected actors whose activities influence one another. Universities are key players in this ecosystem and can leverage their institutional role to facilitate co-creation and multi--stakeholder engagement through:

- Consulting stakeholders (e.g., employers, NGOs) on skills and curricular design;
- Inviting guest speakers (e.g., social entrepreneurs) to share real-world experiences;
- Co-organizing mentorship programs, student challenges, and social innovation labs;
- Establishing dedicated centers for social entrepreneurship and innovation support;
- Partnering with public bodies and civil society organizations to address local challenges through applied research and student-led initiatives.

Results highlight that structured cooperation with external stakeholders enriches the learning experience and expands the potential impact of II&SE education within the higher education sector. These partnerships bridge the gap between theory and practice, enhance curriculum relevance, and promote the development of socially driven, innovative mindsets. The case studies reviewed offer scalable and adaptable models for HEIs seeking to co-create transformative II&SE pathways that are deeply rooted in their local ecosystems.

Teaching and learning approaches in II&SE education and training

The review of teaching and learning methodologies for II&SE education revealed a broad spectrum of pedagogical approaches, each offering different advantages depending on the desired outcomes, available resources, and institutional context. Based on the literature review, existing university programs, and stakeholder consultations, findings clearly emphasize the superior efficacy of experiential and practice-based methods over traditional lecture-based approaches when it comes to fostering II&SE-related competencies.

Traditional teaching methodologies are still widely used, especially to provide theoretical grounding and raise awareness about II&SE concepts. However, their primary function remains "teaching about" II&SE, rather than equipping students to act within it. These methods are best suited for introducing fundamental concepts such as definitions, historical development, legal frameworks, and theoretical models. Nonetheless, case study discussions and role plays offer more interactive and skill-oriented learning experiences for the students, helping them develop teamwork skills, strategic thinking, and collaborative problem-solving. These two methods help bridge the gap between theory and application but limitations for their application might be present with large and heterogeneous classes.

Moreover, a significant shift in II&SE education is seen in the implementation of experiential learning approaches, which are classified into simulated and real-life environments. Simulations defined as educational tools with which learners interact to mimic real life scenarios (Cook et al., 2013) were considered effective within classroom settings, in accordance with previous research conducted (Laverie et al., 2020). The types of simulations considered for this research were mainly real life experiential learning such as internships, apprenticeships, and "live" social innovation projects. These formats immerse students in dynamic settings where they must mobilize resources, address stakeholder needs, and confront operational challenges. Projects such as income-generating initiatives or social enterprise start-up simulations help students foster not only hard skills but also develop resilience, adaptability and initiative.

Findings indicated that service learning (SL) also offers a synergy between academic learning and community service. SL projects allow students to work directly with communities, engage in reflective practice, and apply classroom knowledge to co-create solutions with a social impact. SL also contributes to core entrepreneurial competencies such as opportunity recognition, project management, and self-efficacy, while enhancing communication and teamwork, perceived as key attributes for future social innovators. In addition, the integration of guest speakers from the SE sector is another pedagogical tool commonly used in II&SE education. Findings demonstrated that sessions with guest speakers were shown to have an impact on student's participation and engagement, contributing to an enriching learning experiences for students.

Finally, the InnoSocial stakeholder consultations enriched previous academic findings by Sinha et al. (2014), highlighting practical examples of II&SE education from ongoing programs. Experts and educators agreed that there is a necessity of blending different learning methodologies, particularly taking into consideration experiential learning. Some of the preferred mentioned teaching strategies included:

- A learning-by-doing approach complemented by lectures for foundational knowledge;
- Use of case studies and field visits to social enterprises;
- Inclusion of guest speakers and alumni from the social entrepreneurship ecosystem;
- Development of student-led innovation and business projects, culminating in public presentations or pitches.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that mainstreaming Inclusive Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship is increasingly urgent in higher education contexts. The findings reinforce the need of embedding II&SE in university curricula not only as

a response to global development agendas, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, but also as a strategic investment in preparing socially responsible, entrepreneurial graduates who can drive inclusive societal change. However, in order to fully understand and enhance the contribution of II&SE education to positive societal change, it is essential to address the issue of impact assessment and develop robust methods for evaluating its outcomes.

II&SE education has the potential to produce a significant positive change across multiple levels – individual, economic, and societal. These three levels are interdependent and reinforce each other:

- *At the individual level*, II&SE education fosters the development of critical skills and attitudes among learners and educators.
- *At the economic level*, it contributes to increased employability, entrepreneurial activity, and business innovation.
- *At the societal level*, it advances social inclusion and promotes the development of solutions to complex social challenges.

Understanding and measuring these impacts is essential for improving the quality and relevance of II&SE programs and for demonstrating their value to stakeholders.

Impact on Skills Development and Measurement Methods

At the core of II&SE education is the development of learners' competencies. The primary goal at the individual level is to cultivate entrepreneurial mindsets, problem-solving abilities, and innovation-related skills among students. There are plenty of studies that report positive effects of entrepreneurship education on students' business knowledge and financial literacy (Tucker, 2011), persistence and self-organization, team-working, problem-solving, decision-making, and leadership skills (Volery & Mueller, 2013), as well as the ability to identify opportunities and develop innovative business ideas (Athayde, 2012). Furthermore, students exposed to entrepreneurship education often demonstrate higher levels of self-efficacy and locus of control – both of which are strongly correlated with entrepreneurial intent and success (Caird, 2023).

II&SE education also influences students' perceptions and motivations. Learners are more likely to consider entrepreneurship a viable career path, particularly when social value creation is emphasized (Johansen, 2007; Volery & Mueller, 2013). This is especially important in the context of inclusive innovation, which positions marginalized communities as active agents in the innovation process. As a result, learners develop not only technical competencies but also empathy, systems thinking, and social responsibility.

Educators benefit as well. Exposure to II&SE frameworks enhances faculty members' pedagogical capacities, encouraging them to adopt innovative teaching methods such as participatory learning, project-based assignments, role-playing, and community-based projects. These approaches, in turn, support the development of entrepreneurial competencies in learners and increase teachers' confidence in delivering impactful education (Zaidatol & Bagheri, 2011). This change at the faculty level has broader institutional implications, contributing to mainstreaming of II&SE education.

To assess individual-level impacts, a range of quantitative and qualitative methods can be applied. The most common tool is the questionnaire or survey, which can be designed to measure changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors pre- and post-program. Quantitative indicators may include Likert scale items on entrepreneurial self-efficacy, while qualitative insights may be drawn from open-ended questions. Such surveys may be based on established educational frameworks such as Bloom's or Biggs's taxonomies of learning outcomes. Other tools include (European Commission, 2015):

- *Interviews* with learners, teachers, and other stakeholders (the interviewees should be asked questions allowing them to reflect on the subject of assessment/measurement);
- *Observation* of learners (incidental observation of how they perform at regular classes and planned observation of how they manage to implement an assignment given specifically for the purpose of assessment/measurement);
- *Analysis of learners' portfolios* (evidence of learning), or diaries or journals (reflection on learning experience);

- *Applying "thinking aloud protocol"* (asking learners to verbalize everything that goes through their mind while implementing a task; this method is used to understand learners' reasoning behind the decisions they make in the process of task implementation).

To capture longitudinal outcomes, institutions may conduct follow-up surveys several months or even years after course completion to assess lasting changes in skills and professional trajectories.

Impact on the Economy and Measurement Methods

At the economic level, the impact of II&SE education is often evaluated in terms of increased entrepreneurial activity, business creation, and employability of graduates. A key reason for integrating II&SE education into higher education curricula is to foster an entrepreneurial ecosystem where graduates are more likely to start their own businesses or become valuable employees in innovation--driven sectors.

Empirical evidence supports the idea that graduates of entrepreneurship programs are more inclined to launch businesses and are more successful when doing so, compared to peers without such training (European Commission, 2015). These graduates also tend to enter the workforce with a more developed skill set, leading to better employment opportunities, higher salaries, and improved job readiness.

Innovation, particularly inclusive innovation, is pivotal in shaping economic outcomes. Innovative skills are seen as "antecedents of employability", particularly in the context of evolving labor market demands (Singh et al., 2017). For start-ups, the integration of innovation capabilities increases the likelihood of business survival, growth, and differentiation in competitive markets (Fiorentino et al., 2021; Sevilla-Bernardo et al., 2022).

Measuring economic impact, however, presents methodological challenges. Attribution is a central concern, since it is difficult to establish direct causal links between educational programs and macroeconomic indicators. Nevertheless, several methods are explored in scientific literature:

- *Graduate tracer studies*: These studies track alumni career paths to assess the influence of entrepreneurship education on employment outcomes, such as founding a business or getting gainfully employed. For instance, Csákné Filep et al. (2025) analyzed the impact of entrepreneurship education on early-stage entrepreneurship in Central and Eastern Europe, utilizing graduate surveys to gather data on employment status and entrepreneurial activities.
- *Start-up tracking*: Collecting data on the number of student or alumni-founded enterprises and their performance indicators provides insights into the practical application of entrepreneurial skills. For example, Baltador et al. (2024) evaluated the effectiveness of a social entrepreneurship program by tracking student-founded ventures and assessing their sustainability and impact.
- *Innovation metrics*: This method suggests measuring the number of graduates involved in product or service innovation, or in roles that require creative problem-solving and design thinking (Todorov et al., 2024).

To strengthen reliability, it is important to use a combination of methods, including comparison with control groups (e.g., graduates who did not participate in II&SE education), as well as longitudinal data collection to capture delayed impacts (Lackéus, 2020).

Impact on Society and Measurement Methods

The societal impact of II&SE education is arguably the most profound, yet also the most difficult to measure. II&SE aim to address pressing social issues such as poverty, inequality, exclusion, and environmental sustainability. II&SE education supports this mission by preparing students to create or participate in ventures that have a meaningful impact on communities.

Inclusive innovation emphasizes the co-creation of solutions with marginalized groups, leading to products and services that are better tailored to local needs. As a result, II&SE education contributes to a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, fostering better quality of life and community well-being.

Measuring the societal impact of II&SE education encompasses understanding how educational programs contribute to social inclusion, community development, and the resolution of societal challenges. The following methods have been identified in academic literature:

- *Case studies*: In-depth analyses of specific social entrepreneurial projects or social enterprises launched by students can provide insights into their societal impact. This method was employed by several studies. For example, a case study of the Social Innovation Academy (2024) in Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrated how its educational model empowered marginalized youth to establish over 80 social enterprises, generating 973 jobs.
- *Cost-benefit analysis*: This method is used to quantify social returns of educational programs, such as reduced reliance on welfare services or improved public health metrics, although these are often difficult to measure accurately. For instance, Florio et al. (2015) applied such an analysis to assess the Large Hadron Collider's broader societal impacts, demonstrating the methodology's applicability beyond traditional economic evaluations.
- *Stakeholder feedback*: Gathering testimonies from beneficiaries, community partners, and policy actors who have collaborated with II&SE graduates in social II&SE projects can provide valuable information on societal impact. The effectiveness of this method is evidenced in the research of Rusydiana et al. (2023) assessing the social and economic impact of a scholarship program using stakeholder interviews and Social Return on Investment analysis.

Indicators for Impact Measurement

Higher education institutions implementing II&SE courses and programs, or mainstreaming II&SE through extracurricular activities, can use the following indicators to assess the impact of II&SE education (InnoSocial Project, 2023):

- *Student outcomes*: Number of students completing II&SE courses; Number of students founding social enterprises within 2 years of graduation; Number of graduates employed in innovative or social-impact roles;

- *Institutional engagement*: Number of faculty involved in II&SE research or teaching; Number of II&SE-related publications or funded projects; Frequency of II&SE-related events (e.g., hackathons, forums);
- *Social outcomes*: Number of community members involved in student-led projects; Impact metrics of student-founded social ventures (e.g., service reach, social issue addressed); Improvements in community access to education, services, or economic opportunities.

These indicators offer a foundation upon which institutions can build customized evaluation systems suited to their context and strategic objectives.

The impact of Inclusive Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship education in higher education is multifaceted and far-reaching. Effective impact measurement is essential not only for demonstrating II&SE education value but also for informing continuous improvement of the curricula. A mix of methodologies – surveys, interviews, observations, case studies, and statistical analyses – should be employed in alignment with the specific goals of the II&SE program and its intended beneficiaries.

Conclusions

This article underscores the growing importance of integrating Inclusive Innovation (II) and Social Entrepreneurship (SE) into higher education as a means of addressing urgent societal challenges and preparing students for transformative leadership roles. The development of a comprehensive Toolkit, informed by rigorous literature review, program analysis, and stakeholder engagement, offers practical guidance for universities aiming to embed II&SE into curricula and institutional strategy.

Findings reveal that experiential, community-engaged, and competency--based approaches are key to effective II&SE education. Moreover, strong collaboration with external stakeholders – such as NGOs, social enterprises, and public institutions – enhances the relevance and societal impact of academic programs.

Ultimately, the study contributes to advancing II&SE as both a pedagogical field and a strategic priority for higher education institutions. By adopting the recommendations and practices outlined in the Toolkit, universities can be pivotal in fostering inclusive growth, social innovation, and sustainable development.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. The research focused primarily on higher education programs and stakeholder input from four European countries, which may limit the applicability of results to other cultural and institutional contexts. With a sample of only 25 programs, the analysis may not fully reflect the diversity of approaches to II&SE education across Europe or globally. These factors suggest the need for further research to expand and deepen the evidence base in this emerging field.

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