

Percepciones sobre el emprendimiento social entre estudiantes de educación superior: una perspectiva internacional

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ES Resumen. El emprendimiento social constituye un ámbito de acción que propone un enfoque innovador para afrontar los desafíos sociales. Aunque existen diversas interpretaciones del concepto, hay cierto consenso en que este campo se centra en generar soluciones a problemáticas sociales mediante estrategias emprendedoras.

A pesar del creciente reconocimiento de su relevancia en los últimos años, el conocimiento profundo sobre las distintas dimensiones del emprendimiento social sigue siendo limitado, especialmente entre los jóvenes. Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar las percepciones de estudiantes de educación superior sobre el emprendimiento social desde una perspectiva internacional. Se empleó una metodología cuantitativa, a través de una encuesta aplicada a estudiantes de diversas instituciones de educación superior en distintos países, obteniéndose un total de 434 respuestas válidas.

Los resultados revelan que, en general, los participantes comprenden los principios fundamentales del emprendimiento social, en particular su papel en la resolución de retos sociales y medioambientales mediante enfoques innovadores y sostenibles. No obstante, persisten ciertos conceptos erróneos, ya que algunos estudiantes perciben las empresas sociales como negocios con fines de lucro similares a las empresas tradicionales.

Asimismo, los hallazgos destacan el papel de la educación en la formación de las percepciones estudiantiles: aquellos que habían recibido formación en emprendimiento mostraron una mayor capacidad para distinguir con precisión las características distintivas del emprendimiento social frente a los modelos de negocio convencionales.

Estos resultados subrayan la importancia de integrar la educación en emprendimiento social en los planes de estudio de la educación superior, con el fin de mejorar la comprensión de los estudiantes y fomentar una participación más activa en iniciativas emprendedoras con impacto social.

Palabras clave. Emprendimiento social, percepciones de los estudiantes, instituciones de educación superior, economía social, innovación social.

Claves Econlit. L31, I26, O35.

ENG Perceptions of social entrepreneurship among higher education students: an international perspective

ENG Abstract. Social entrepreneurship refers to a field of action that proposes an innovative approach to solving social challenges. Although there are different interpretations of the concept, there is some consensus that the field of social entrepreneurship focuses on creating solutions to social problems through entrepreneurial strategies. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of social entrepreneurship in recent years, in-depth knowledge of the different dimensions of this concept remains limited, especially among younger people.

This article aims to analyse higher education students' perceptions of social entrepreneurship from an international perspective. A quantitative methodology was employed through a questionnaire survey administered to students from various higher education institutions across different countries. A total of 434 valid responses were collected. The results indicate that the participants generally demonstrate an understanding of the core principles of social entrepreneurship, particularly its role in addressing social and environmental challenges through innovative and sustainable approaches. However, some misconceptions persist, with a proportion of students perceiving social enterprises as profit-driven businesses similar to traditional enterprises. The results also highlight the role of education in shaping students' perceptions, as those with entrepreneurship training were more likely to accurately distinguish some distinctive characteristics of social entrepreneurship from conventional business models. These findings underscore the importance of integrating social entrepreneurship education into higher education curricula.

to enhance students' understanding and encourage greater engagement in entrepreneurial initiatives with a social impact.

Keywords. Social Entrepreneurship, students' perceptions, higher education institutions, social economy, social innovation.

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. Theoretical framework. 3. Methodology. 4. Results. 5. Conclusions. 6. References.

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1. Introduction

Given the economic, social, and environmental challenges facing the world today, where social inequalities, climate change, sustainability imperatives, and economic pressures demand innovative and sustainable solutions (Langer, 2024; Yunus, 2010), Social Entrepreneurship (SE) stands as one of the most notable innovations of global civil society in recent times (Nicholls & Collavo, 2019). Bataineh et al. (2023) point out that linking social entrepreneurship and sustainable development is presented as a process that seeks sustainable solutions to social, economic, and environmental challenges, through the continuous enhancement of operational effectiveness. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM, 2015) has defined SE as any initiative, activity, or organisation that has a social, environmental, or community-based objective. Although there is no single and globally accepted concept of SE, the literature analysis indicates a certain convergence that SE represents an innovative approach combining business practices to create value and development by solving complex social problems (Canestrino et al., 2020; Zahra et al., 2009; Dees, 2012). Recently Gintere and Licite-Kurbe (2022) studies point to a definition of SE as a fusion of social purposes and business practices with a focus on solving social issues and problems while using market-based strategies.

Unlike traditional entrepreneurship, which aims to generate profit, the gains and results of SE are measured by the number of people these initiatives can reach and positively impact. According to Saebi et al. (2019) social entrepreneurship integrates a social mission into its business model to generate sustainable positive impact. In fact, SE has been considered as a catalyst for economic growth and societal progress, particularly in regions where state mechanisms are ineffective in addressing social needs (Popov, 2018). According to research by Zhang et al (2022) on the impact that SE has on the sustainable development of rural areas, SE has made a significant contribution to poverty reduction. This study concludes that traditional methods of poverty reduction - such as government support and corporate social responsibility - are often insufficient due to their intrinsic limitations, such as insufficient capital and a lack of motivation among local actors. Thus SE, defined as an innovative approach that aligns economic efficiency with social objectives, presents itself as a fundamental process for involving local communities in economic activities, while addressing their social, economic and ecological challenges.

Due to its enormous potential, SE has become increasingly important, in both academic and professional contexts (Canestrino et al., 2020; Nicholls, 2010). However, despite the strong social impact that entrepreneurship can have, as well as its role in growth and job creation, data from GEM (2015) suggests that levels of SE are much lower than those observed in profit-driven entrepreneurship. In a recent report, GEM (2024) warns that more action from policymakers and other stakeholders is needed since entrepreneurial education continues to be rated low in most economies. One of the challenges faced by SE is the need for specific training for social entrepreneurs (Chang et al., 2022). Therefore, policies for entrepreneurial education and specific training programs in the field of the social economy must be developed, as they are tools capable of promoting the capacity for action and the development of new social projects and organisations (Meira et al., 2020; Melian et al., 2017; Parente et al., 2014).

This work is being developed with the primary objective of conducting a diagnostic to understand the perceptions of students from the five higher education institutions involved in the study in relation to social entrepreneurship.

Given the growing international relevance of social entrepreneurship as a tool to address global challenges and recognizing that students' awareness and understanding of social entrepreneurship is crucial to fostering future social innovation, this study seeks to identify not only their perceptions, knowledge and attitudes towards SE, but also other dimensions of SE arising from their countries' socio-economic contexts.

To this end, section 2 presents the theoretical framework by reviewing the concept of SE and its evolution. Section 3 describes the methodology used in the research, followed by the presentation of the results of the exploratory phase in section 4. Finally, the main conclusions are presented.

2. Theoretical framework

The study of SE as an autonomous field of research emerged mainly in the 1990s with the work of Dees (1998). Indeed, the author was one of the first to present a formal conceptualisation of its representation by defining the social entrepreneur as an agent of change who, similarly to traditional entrepreneurs, identifies opportunities and applies innovative solutions. However, the key difference lies in the fact that their primary goal is not to make a profit but rather to create impact and drive social change. Social entrepreneurs are, therefore, change agents who apply the principles and strategies of entrepreneurship, and develop innovative

solutions to the challenges faced by society.

Younis et al. (2021) state that the definition of SE includes meeting social needs. The concept also includes promoting social change through innovative ideas (Nicholls, 2008), responding to situations of instability (Thompson et al., 2000), and implementing market-driven actions aimed at creating social value (Bacq & Janssen, 2011).

In fact, the phenomenon of SE is multifaceted, as it encompasses different contexts, approaches, and objectives (Mair & Marti, 2006). The authors argue that the concept should be seen as a multidisciplinary field of research, incorporating elements from economics, management, social innovation, and public policy. Nicholls (2008) reinforces this view, highlighting that social entrepreneurship can take various forms, ranging from nonprofit organisations to hybrid enterprises that combine social and economic objectives. Douglas and Prentice (2019) explore the multifaceted nature of SE, highlighting its fundamental pillars: pro-social motivation, innovation and profit-making. This study argues that although the main motivation of social entrepreneurs is usually the provision of social benefits, many also seek to make profits as a secondary objective in order to attract investment and promote growth, thus positioning themselves as 'hybrid' social entrepreneurs. Therefore, the author emphasises the complexity and heterogeneity of the motivations and paths to SE, suggesting that different individuals may seek similar opportunities based on different attitudes, expectations and efficiencies.

Despite its broad scope, multifaceted nature, and the existence of different interpretations of the concept of SE, there is some consensus that this field of activity involves creating responses to social challenges or problems through entrepreneurial approaches. Indeed, there is some convergence in the literature on the understanding that SE involves business activities and entrepreneurial behaviour with the aim of creating social value and solving existing social problems (Austin et al., 2006; Dees, 2012). Leadbeater (1997) presents the social entrepreneur as an entrepreneurial, innovative, and transformative individual who, having identified a social problem, organises, creates, and manages a venture to drive social change. In turn, seeking to integrate the key factors of social entrepreneurship, Abu-Saifan (2012, p. 25) defines the social entrepreneur as "a mission-driven individual who uses a set of entrepreneurial behaviours to deliver a social value to the less privileged, all through an entrepreneurially oriented entity that is financially independent, self-sufficient, or sustainable." According to Zahra et al. (2009), SE involves the development of activities and processes aimed at exploring opportunities to enhance social wealth by creating new ventures or managing existing organisations in an innovative way. Santos (2012) argues that SE should be understood as a model of institutional innovation capable of transforming systems and generating structural changes in society. Similarly, Bernardino and Freitas Santos (2023) state that SE is a highly complex phenomenon, reflecting the application of the entrepreneurship concept to the social sector or, more broadly, to the provision of products or services with a social purpose.

Although social entrepreneurship is not easy to define and describe - as its nature requires a combination of logics and activities typical of the social economy and the public sectors with those associated with the business sector (Nicholls & Collavo, 2019) - it represents one of the most remarkable innovations of global civil society in recent times (Nicholls & Collavo, 2019).

In recent decades, SE has become increasingly important and plays an ever more relevant role in both academic and professional spheres (Nicholls, 2010). This development reflects its importance and ability to find innovative and sustainable solutions to complex social challenges (Asma et al., 2019; Neumann, 2020; Mohammadi et al., 2024; Zahra et al., 2008). This growing interest stems from the recognition that entrepreneurial initiatives, when directed toward the common good, can significantly contribute to improving the living conditions of communities and addressing issues such as poverty, social exclusion, economic inequalities, environmental concerns, and sustainability (Bornstein & Davis, 2010; Mair & Marti, 2006, Zhang et al., 2022).

The emergence and consolidation of SE reflect a paradigm shift in how social problems are addressed, prioritising creative, sustainable solutions with long-term impact. The literature has highlighted the role of social entrepreneurs in developing innovative business models that combine economic efficiency with positive social impact (Kickul et al., 2022). These change agents employ adaptable and sustainable strategies to address unmet needs that are not met by traditional public and private sectors (Dees, 1998; Zaremohzzabieh et al., 2019). SE values innovation and creative market-based solutions that contribute to the common good—a characteristic that attracts change agents from all sectors of society (Addae & Ellenwood, 2022).

Neumann (2020) and Chen et al. (2017) recognise the relevance of entrepreneurship to a wide range of social issues, from economic development to solving social problems and improving societal well-being. This relevance has contributed to a growing interest among researchers in understanding the factors and processes underlying entrepreneurial behaviours (Chang et al., 2022). Authors such as Bernardino and Freitas Santos (2015) and Braga (2013) argue that various factors may influence an individual or group of individuals to initiate a SE venture and become social entrepreneurs. Also, other authors argue that innovation involves risk-taking, as it requires venturing into uncertain areas where results are not guaranteed. In this context, their research defends that motivations for innovation can vary among social entrepreneurs, emphasising that it is a continuous variable. Thus, the interaction of personal and social motivations can produce varied innovative results in business models, emphasising the importance of understanding individual differences (Douglas & Prentice, 2019). According to GEM (2024), entrepreneurial education in most economies continues to be rated as low, requiring further action by policymakers and other stakeholders. Regarding the role of higher education, Chang et al. (2022) suggest that recent research on SE has not yet clarified how social entrepreneurship intentions are shaped and promoted by higher education. The authors argue that governments and universities

should develop policies and pedagogical guidelines for entrepreneurial education. Similarly, authors such as Meira et al. (2020), Melian et al. (2017), and Parente et al. (2014) consider that it is necessary to develop specialised training programs in the field of social economy, as these programs can serve as effective tools to promote capacity-building and the development of new social projects and organisations. In 2023, a study carried out by El-Gohary et al. addresses the significant relationship between entrepreneurial education and the entrepreneurial intentions of students in developing countries, particularly in Pakistan, where the research was conducted. This research emphasises the importance of social media and several technological advances in cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset among management graduates. Therefore, the study points to the need for business schools to invest in social media resources and create entrepreneurial spaces, arguing that these measures increase student confidence and generate interest in sustainable entrepreneurship.

While Minga-López et al. (2024) analysed the factors influencing SE among young university students, highlighting the importance of support policies and academic training as key elements in promoting an entrepreneurial mindset geared towards social impact, in a research that complements the work of Bel Durán et al. (2023), who, for their part, propose new formulas for promoting university SE, with a special focus on start-ups created by students. Bataineh et al. (2023), in turn, address the relationship between SE and sustainability, focusing on social enterprises in the renewable energy sector. This study demonstrates how these organisations create socio-economic value while promoting environmentally responsible practices.

In a 2022 study, Murillo Pérez makes an important methodological contribution by proposing a model for identifying and analysing good practices in social and labour inclusion initiatives, showing that SE not only generates economic impact but also strengthens social cohesion. Also, in the context of education, García-González et al. (2020) developed and validated an instrument to measure SE skills in the university environment, reinforcing the idea that these skills are essential as a cross-cutting element in higher education. Ramón et al. (2024) argue that incorporating collective education focused on social and environmental responsibility—alongside specialized career training—enhances individuals' social entrepreneurship capabilities.

Back in 2021, a survey conducted in the Basque Country, analysed how SE was integrated into vocational training and how it contributed to strengthening employability and social innovation (Monzón Campos & Torres-Ortega, 2021). Additionally, research from Wang (2022) shows that innovation is a key driver of economic growth, especially in the context of SE. In other words, by identifying gaps in the market and developing new solutions, social entrepreneurs promote social improvements and economic developments. Thus, governments and organisations should be encouraged to create favourable conditions for social entrepreneurs by implementing supportive policies that stimulate innovation and promote social welfare. Not least because the strong connection between collaborative entrepreneurship and social innovation performance requires the influence of institutional support and social legitimacy. Collaborative entrepreneurship is increasingly recognised for its role in facilitating innovation and economic growth, integrating various stakeholders, including companies, communities and institutions, to pool resources, skills and knowledge (Adomako & Nguyen, 2024). Therefore, and still according to Adomako's work, the way in which institutional support, which refers to favourable government policies and resources, moderates this connection, highlights the role that these stronger institutional environments have in supporting collaborative efforts and promoting superior social innovation outcomes.

Given that the university environment is a privileged space for fostering the development of entrepreneurial skills and social awareness (Nabi et al., 2018), and that social entrepreneurship is a hybrid field with a broad scope and multifaceted nature (Douglas & Prentice, 2019), it is essential to design specific and integrated strategies and training programmes to effectively motivate and empower individuals to act.

3. Methodology

Given the aim of the study, a quantitative methodological approach was adopted. A structured questionnaire was designed to assess the knowledge and perspectives of university students on social entrepreneurship, under the project "Erasmus + School for Social Entrepreneurship" (EEE3S+), an Erasmus+ initiative under *Partenariats de coopération dans l'enseignement supérieur*. This project involves the Université de Bretagne Occidentale (France), Instituto Politécnico do Porto/ISCAP (Portugal), Universidad Complutense de Madrid and Universitat de Valencia (Spain), Universidad de Santiago de Chile (Chile), and Scuola Superiore di Studi Universitari e di Perfezionamento Sant'Anna (Italy).

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section included questions focused on gathering demographic and personal information to characterise the respondents. In the second section, the questionnaire assessed the respondents' previous exposure to the topic of entrepreneurship and their current professional circumstances. The third section aimed to assess the respondents' understanding of several dimensions of social entrepreneurship.

The questionnaire was administered online in the higher educational institutions of the partners of the project through official offices and during classes, resulting in 434 valid responses.

The combination of descriptive statistics and inferential tests was used to provide a comprehensive analysis of the data, providing insights into the students' engagement with and understanding of social entrepreneurship. The descriptive statistics summarise and present the key characteristics of the sample. Cross-tabulations were also used to analyse the relationships between variables, aiming to identify patterns, associations, and proportional differences. In addition, the Chi-square test was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant association between the perceptions of the respondents to several statements related to social entrepreneurship and several socio-demographic characteristics, family and

friends' background in entrepreneurship, and training and experiences with entrepreneurship, among others. The test was conducted under the condition that all expected frequencies in the contingency table were greater than five to ensure the validity of the results. The hypotheses included the null hypothesis, stating that there is no association between the variables, and the alternative hypothesis, stating that there is an association. The Fisher's or the Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test (depending on the number of categories in the contingency table) was used as an alternative when the expected frequencies in some contingency table cells were less than five. To investigate which groups are significantly different, post hoc analyses were performed using standardised residuals and pairwise Chi-square tests or Fisher's exact tests with Bonferroni Correction. All analyses were conducted using a 5% significance level. The data was processed and analysed using version 29 of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

4. Results

4.1. Socio-demographic and educational characteristics of the student sample

The gender distribution reveals a predominance of female students, with 264 women (60,8%) compared to 170 men (39,2%). In terms of age, the majority of students are young adults (Table 1). A combined total of 339 students (78,2%) are aged between 18 and 23 age, with 176 respondents aged between 18 and 20 and 163 aged between 21 and 23. The remaining respondents are older, with smaller groups in the categories 24 to 26, 27 to 39 and 40 and over. This indicates that the institution mainly caters for traditional students of university age.

In terms of qualifications, a significant 86,6% of respondents are enrolled in undergraduate programmes, while 9,4% are pursuing a master's degree. Only 3,9% belong to other categories.

Table 1. Characterisation of respondents.

	n	%
Sex		
Female	264	60.8%
Male	170	39.2%
Age		
18 a 20	176	40.6%
21 a 23	163	37.6%
24 a 26	32	7.4%
27 a 39	32	7.4%
40 and over	31	7.1%
Enrolled degree programs		
Master's degree	41	9.4%
Grade	376	86.6%
Other	17	3.9%

Source: Own elaboration.

Regarding the field of study, 426 students answered this question and as expected, they come from different fields of knowledge. Focusing on the courses with the most number of participants, the largest enrollment is in Business Administration and Management, with 23,5% students, followed by Public Administration, with 11,5%. Other areas such as Psychology (8,9%), Tourism (8,2%), International Trade (7,7%), Finance, Accounting and Administration (7,0%) and Marketing (6,3%) also contribute to the overall diversity. Students taking courses in the field of social economy represent only 1,6% of the sample which confirms the predominance of business-related disciplines.

4.2. Involvement in entrepreneurial projects and future professional perspectives

This section assessed respondents' participation in entrepreneurial projects, their training in this area, family and social influences, as well as their future perspectives regarding employment.

The results reveal that only a small percentage of students (14.1%) are involved in any entrepreneurship project (Table 2). This low level of direct participation may be related to the fact that most respondents are relatively young and currently enrolled in undergraduate programs and focusing on academic success. Furthermore, younger students may have less exposure to entrepreneurial opportunities and fewer practical skills or experiences that could motivate their active involvement in such activities.

Nevertheless, more than one-third of students (37.8%) have received entrepreneurship training, suggesting an interest in or recognition of the importance of entrepreneurship education. However, this interest has not

yet translated into active involvement in entrepreneurial projects. On the other hand, most students have not received any formal training, suggesting a gap in entrepreneurial education. Expanding training opportunities could foster greater awareness and participation in entrepreneurial activities (Hatak et al., 2015) and, as Neck et al. (2009) point out, university education can strongly influence individuals' motivation to get involved in social entrepreneurship by cultivating their entrepreneurial cognition.

The majority of students (55.9%) have family members or friends with entrepreneurial experience, which might serve as a source of support. Despite this, direct involvement in projects remains low, as only 15.3% of respondents with family and social ties to entrepreneurs engage in entrepreneurial initiatives. Inferential statistical analysis indicates no evidence of an association between respondents' participation in entrepreneurial initiatives and their family and social background ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 0.943, p = 0.331, N = 433$).

The respondents involved in entrepreneurial projects are predominantly male (60.9%) and young adults between the ages of 21 and 23 years old (44.3%) and between 18 and 20 years old (24.6%). In addition, a significant proportion (72.1%) of those involved in entrepreneurship have received relevant training, and 61.7% of respondents reported that their family members or friends were involved in entrepreneurial initiatives. The results of the chi-square test of independence suggested a significant statistical association between education in entrepreneurship and participation in entrepreneurial initiatives ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 35.609, p < 0.001, N = 434$) and post hoc tests indicate that respondents with entrepreneurship training are significantly more likely to participate in an entrepreneurship project than expected. This finding suggests that formal education plays a critical role in fostering entrepreneurship among individuals.

Table 2. Entrepreneurship initiatives, training and family/friends background.

	Yes		No	
	N	%	N	%
I am part of an entrepreneurship project	61	14.1%	373	85.9%
I have had training in entrepreneurship	164	37.8%	270	62.2%
My family members or networks of friends have developed/participated in an entrepreneurial project	242	55.9%	191	44.1%

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 3 displays the multiple responses analysis of students' perspectives on their professional future. The respondents have diverse career aspirations, with a preference for working as an employee (30.0%) but also a considerable interest in entrepreneurship (29.6%). The overlap between categories suggests that many students are considering multiple career options rather than a single fixed path. The relatively high percentage of students considering self-employment or civil service highlights both autonomy-driven and stability-seeking tendencies within the sample.

Table 3. Future career prospects.

	N	%	% of cases
Employed person	162	30.0%	37.8%
Creating my own job, individually or collectively	145	29.6%	33.8%
Self-employed (self-employed)	118	21.9%	27.5%
Civil servant	115	21.3%	26.8%
Total	540	100%	125.9%

Source: Own elaboration.

There is an observed association between the intention to create one's own employment, either individually or collectively, and current participation in an entrepreneurial initiative ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 6.370, p = 0.012, N = 434$). Similarly, this association extends to having friends or family members who have been involved in entrepreneurial projects ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 5.053, p = 0.025, N = 433$). Participation in entrepreneurial projects and family and social ties with entrepreneurs seem to be associated with a greater intention to create one's own job individually or collectively. The literature presents debates regarding the impact of a family's business background on motivating the desire or involvement in entrepreneurial activity (Van Auken et al., 2006; Tong et al., 2011; Aldrich & Yang, 2014; Ibarra-Vazquez et al., 2023). Tong et al. (2011) also found that a family background in entrepreneurship significantly influences university students' intentions to pursue entrepreneurial ventures. Ibarra-Vazquez et al. (2023) highlighted that prior family experiences do not directly influence the development of thinking skills for social entrepreneurship. However, according to the authors, such experiences play an important role in exposing students to entrepreneurship-related topics and increasing their familiarity with them.

In the sample, there is no statistically significant association between their training in entrepreneurship and the desire to create their own job ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 1.195, p = 0.274, N = 433$), contrary to Hatak et al. (2015) who found that education matters for the entrepreneurial intention. Also, although some studies present evidence that gender (Dickel & Eckardt, 2020; Hatak et al., 2015; Maes et al., 2014) is related to entrepreneurial intentions,

the inferential analysis in the sample didn't support this position ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 3.681, p = 0.055, N = 433$).

These results suggest that, although all students recognize the importance of social entrepreneurship, their involvement remains relatively limited, revealing a gap between awareness and action. This may reflect structural and contextual factors such as limited institutional support or the early academic stage in which most respondents find themselves. The finding that entrepreneurship education significantly affects participation highlights the role of universities as catalysts for entrepreneurial behaviour, as proposed by Nabi et al. (2018). The lack of a significant association between gender and entrepreneurial intention suggests that exposure to entrepreneurship and educational opportunities may be more decisive than cultural and social barriers.

4.3. Perceptions of social entrepreneurship

In this section, in the initial phase, the aim was to understand the students' perceptions regarding activities related to the concept of social entrepreneurship and the legal forms linked to it (Tables 4 and 5). In a subsequent phase, students were asked about their understanding of social entrepreneurship through a set of statements that they were required to classify as true or false. These questions were later grouped into different dimensions: organisational forms compatible with social entrepreneurship, purposes of social entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship and outcomes, sustainability and funding models, the importance of innovation in social entrepreneurship, and community involvement and promotion of local development (Tables 6 to 11).

Using the Chi-square test for independence or Fisher's exact test when the conditions for the Chi-square test were not met, most responses did not reveal statistically significant differences based on gender, age group, academic level, involvement in any entrepreneurial initiative, whether the students had received training in entrepreneurship or family and social ties with entrepreneurs. Only the results of the tests that show statistically significant associations will be referred to in the following points.

4.3.1. Activities and legal structures

Regarding respondents' perceptions of activities related to the concept of social entrepreneurship (Table 4), the options selected by more than half of the respondents were: Social inclusion of disadvantaged groups (70,7%); Integration of people with disabilities into the labour market (62,4%); Improvement of the environment, renewable energy production and circular economy (69,1%); Local development (63,0%); Development cooperation (57,5%); Creation of stable jobs (58,7%); Education and training (55%); Human rights and migration (51.5%).

These results suggest that respondents recognise that social entrepreneurship initiatives are primarily aimed at the inclusion of disadvantaged groups and the integration of people with disabilities into the labour market. They also highlight the importance of social entrepreneurship in promoting environmental sustainability, eco-friendly practices, and the circular economy. For respondents, social entrepreneurship initiatives are still strongly associated with local development and development cooperation initiatives, as well as with the creation of stable jobs. Additionally, education and training, as well as human rights, emerge as relevant areas. According to respondents' perceptions, the sectors that least associated with the concept of social entrepreneurship are culture and sports, tourism, and agriculture.

Table 5 reports the legal forms that can be associated with social entrepreneurship. Although the legal systems of the project partners' countries are very similar, some specificities can be observed concerning the classification of legal forms and/or statutes. Cooperatives, associations, foundations, societies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are common to the legal systems analysed. However, Mercy and Private Institutions for Social Solidarity (IPSS) are exclusive to the Portuguese legal system, where no provision for labour societies was identified. We have included the two types of companies in the legal form of mercantile society: share companies and limited liability companies and, in the case of Portugal, commercial companies have not been broken down by type of company. Also, in the Portuguese case, mutual associations were included in the more general legal form of associations.

The most frequently mentioned legal forms are associations (19.0%), foundations (18.7%), NGOs (17.7%), and cooperatives (17.4%), all of which are linked to a high percentage of cases (over 60%). This suggests that these forms are widely recognised as vehicles for social entrepreneurship.

As the respondents could select multiple legal forms, the total percentage of cases (359.0%) suggests that respondents perceive that social entrepreneurship to operate through different organisational models rather than a single dominant structure.

Table 5. Legal forms associated with social entrepreneurship.

	N	%	% of cases
Association	294	19.0%	68.1%
Foundation	290	18.7%	67.1%
NGO	275	17.7%	63.7%
Cooperatives	270	17.4%	62.5%
Trading company	147	9.5%	34.0%
Labour companies and subsidiaries	130	8.4%	30.1%
Private Institution for Social Solidarity (IPSS)*	82	5.3%	19.0%
Mercy*	56	3.6%	13.0%
Other	7	0.5%	1.6%
Total	1551	100%	359.0%

Note: * Only applied to Portugal
Source: Own elaboration.

4.3.2. Organisational forms

Table 6 presents the results of the university students' perceptions regarding the organisational forms compatible with social entrepreneurship. The majority of students recognise that social entrepreneurship can be pursued through different organisational forms, including enterprises and NGOs. These perceptions are in line with the main research on social entrepreneurship, which emphasises the diversity of organisational models (European Commission, 2020; Defourny & Nyssens, 2010; Meira & Ramos, 2019a).

Table 6. Organisational forms compatible with social entrepreneurship.

	True		False	
	N	%	n	%
Social entrepreneurship is carried out only by social economy organisations/NGOs.	15	3.5%	419	96.5%
Social entrepreneurship is carried out only by an enterprise.	23	5.3%	411	94.7%

Source: Own elaboration.

4.3.3. Scope of social entrepreneurship

Regarding the objectives of social entrepreneurship initiatives (Table 7), the results strongly indicate that it is widely perceived as a model that is primarily focused on creating sustainable social value (95.6%) and directly or indirectly serving the general interest (92.4%). Furthermore, most respondents (90.6%) acknowledge social entrepreneurship as a means to address social issues through sustainable business efforts. Likewise, 90.3% affirm that social entrepreneurship aims to create a beneficial social effect while ensuring financial sustainability, emphasising that financial viability is a means rather than an objective.

There is also a clear consensus that social entrepreneurship prioritises people over capital (84.3%) and operates within a participatory and democratic framework (88.7%). These perceptions are in line with the definitions of social entrepreneurship by Meira and Ramos (2019b).

In addition, a considerable majority (94.5%) perceive social entrepreneurs to be driven primarily by a strong desire to address social or environmental challenges.

In contrast, claims linking social entrepreneurship to profit maximisation were largely rejected. Only 6.2% think it is solely a business venture focused on making a profit, and 12.7% agree that its primary aim is to enhance shareholder returns. This reinforces the difference between social entrepreneurship and traditional for-profit businesses.

The data presented indicates that the emphasis of social entrepreneurship for the participants is on social benefit, long-term social change, participatory management, and the prioritisation of people. Additionally, it highlights the importance of financial, social, and environmental sustainability while rejecting profit as the sole objective.

Table 7. Aims of social entrepreneurship.

	True		False	
	N	%	N	%
Social entrepreneurship aims to create sustainable social value.	415	95.6%	19	4.4%
Social entrepreneurship directly or indirectly pursues the general interest.	401	92.4%	33	7.6%
Social entrepreneurship is the practice of solving social problems through sustainable business initiatives.	393	90.6%	40	9.2%
The goal of social entrepreneurship is to create positive social impact while being financially sustainable.	392	90.3%	42	9.7%
Social entrepreneurship is a participatory and democratic formula	383	88.7%	49	11.3%
In social entrepreneurship, people take precedence over capital	366	84.3%	68	15.7%
A social entrepreneur must have a strong motivation to solve social or environmental problems.	409	94.5%	24	5.5%
Social entrepreneurship is the act of undertaking a business solely to generate profit.	27	6.2%	406	93.8%
The goal of social entrepreneurship is to maximise profits for shareholders.	55	12.7%	378	87.3%

Source: Own elaboration.

There are, however, some significant differences in the students' perception of some of the objectives of social entrepreneurship. Although the majority considers that social entrepreneurship involves solving social problems through sustainable business initiatives, there is a statistically significant difference between the genders, with women demonstrating greater agreement with this idea, while men tend to express more disagreement ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 6.318, p = 0.012, N = 433$).

The perception that the goal of social entrepreneurship is to maximise profits for shareholders is also statistically different between respondents in different age groups (*Fisher – Freeman – Halton exact test* ($FFH_{(4)} = 17.286, p = 0.001, N = 433$)). Respondents aged 21-23 are significantly less likely to agree that social entrepreneurship aims to maximise profits for shareholders, disagreeing more than expected, while respondents aged 18-20 are significantly more likely to agree with this statement (as participants aged 27-39 and more than 40, but in a small proportion), suggesting they are more inclined to associate social entrepreneurship with profit maximisation. This suggests that younger respondents (18-20) may have a more traditional business-oriented view of social entrepreneurship, while those aged 21-23 are more likely to reject this perspective.

Furthermore, respondents enrolled in a bachelor's degree agree to a greater extent than expected with the statement that the goal of social entrepreneurship is to generate positive social impact while being financially sustainable, while those pursuing a master's degree agree less than expected ($FFH_{(2)} = 14.279, p < 0.001, N = 434$).

The association between age and the perception of profit orientation highlights a generational learning process regarding the concept of social entrepreneurship. While younger students appear to interpret entrepreneurship with a more traditional economic perspective, more maturity and exposure to higher education appear to foster a more accurate understanding of the social and sustainable nature of these initiatives. This result suggests that experience and practice are important for a deeper understanding of social entrepreneurship. It is also suggested by the results that the specificities of social entrepreneurship are not exploited by the curricula in different student courses.

4.3.4. Defining success and results

The overwhelming majority (96.8%) recognise that the success of social entrepreneurship is primarily assessed measured by its social impact and improvements in quality of life (Table 8). Most respondents (91.2%) reject the idea that social entrepreneurship should avoid collaborating with other organisations to prevent profit sharing, demonstrating an understanding that collaboration is essential in social entrepreneurship. Over 83% of respondents disagree that financial success is the main criterion for the success of social entrepreneurship, and around three-quarters perceived that social entrepreneurship is not focused on economic profit, unlike

traditional businesses. However, a significant minority (26.9%) considers social enterprises to be profit-oriented businesses.

The majority (82.4%) also disagreed that social entrepreneurship should avoid open innovation and collaboration with communities and other sectors, recognizing the importance of open innovation and partnerships.

Table 8. Social entrepreneurship and results.

	True		False	
	n	%	n	%
The success of social entrepreneurship is measured by its social impact and improvement in the quality of life of the community.	419	96.8%	14	3.2%
Social entrepreneurship should seek to avoid collaboration with other organisations so that profits are not shared.	38	8.8%	395	91.2%
The success of social entrepreneurship is measured by the level of income and economic benefits.	71	16.4%	362	83.6%
Social entrepreneurship should seek to avoid open innovation and collaboration with communities and other sectors.	76	17.6%	356	82.4%
A distinctive feature of social enterprises, as opposed to traditional enterprises, is the pursuit of economic profit.	116	26.9%	316	73.1%

Source: Own elaboration.

If the results indicate a strong consensus that the success of social entrepreneurship is measured by social impact and community well-being, however, there are differences in this perception according to whether participants are involved in entrepreneurship projects or not (*Fisher exact test with $p = 0.034$*). Individuals who are actively involved in entrepreneurial initiatives are slightly more likely to question this idea, possibly due to their exposure to additional success metrics.

Although the majority of the participants disagree with the statement that social entrepreneurship should avoid open innovation and collaboration with communities, there are associations with gender ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 4.584, p = 0.038, N = 432$), involvement in entrepreneurial initiatives ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 5.545, p = 0.019, N = 432$), and family and social ties ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 4.790, p = 0.029, N = 432$). Support for open innovation and collaboration with communities in social entrepreneurship is higher among women, participants involved in entrepreneurial projects, and those with entrepreneurial networks. This suggests that exposure to entrepreneurship through personal experience or family and social networks is important in fostering openness to collaboration and innovation in the field.

Entrepreneurship training has a significant statistical association with the participants' perceptions that the distinctive characteristic of social enterprises compared to traditional businesses is the pursuit of economic profit ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 4.538, p = 0.033, N = 432$). Participants with training are more likely to recognise that social enterprises are not primarily driven by economic profit, thus distinguishing them more clearly from traditional businesses. This suggests that entrepreneurship education reinforces a deeper understanding of the nature of the mission of social enterprises and highlights the need for a more profound comprehension of this concept. This finding calls for capacity-building efforts to clarify the differences between the objectives and business models of social entrepreneurship initiatives compared to traditional enterprises to enhance a more informed view of the various dimensions of social entrepreneurship.

Overall, the results indicate that participants perceive that the focus of social initiatives to be on social impact and collaboration rather than simply measuring success through economic indicators. They highlight the importance of open innovation and interaction with different communities and sectors as critical components for the success of social entrepreneurship initiatives.

4.3.5. Sustainability and Financing Models

Concerning the sustainability and forms of financing of social entrepreneurship initiatives, the results are shown in Table 9. An overwhelming majority consider the importance of social enterprises for long-term sustainability, with since 93.3% agreeing that social entrepreneurship seeks solutions that are sustainable both socially and environmentally in the long term. The majority (85.3%) disagreed with the idea that sustainability is a secondary concern for social entrepreneurship, indicating that most respondents believe that sustainability plays a more central role. Furthermore, the majority (94.2%) supported the view that social entrepreneurship is sustainable itself through a business model that balances financial sustainability and social impact.

On the sources of funding for social enterprises, the large majority of the respondents (95.1%) agreed that social entrepreneurship can combine different sources of funding, including donations, investments, and reinvestment of profits, and that it is not exclusively dependent on donations (88.0%). This highlights a broad recognition of the financial sustainability model within social entrepreneurship, where hybrid funding strategies play a crucial role in ensuring long-term viability and impact. Their perceptions also focus on long-term

sustainability, recognising the importance of balancing social, environmental, and financial sustainability.

Table 9. Sustainability and funding sources.

	True		False	
	N	%	n	%
Social entrepreneurship can combine different funding sources such as donations, investments and reinvestment of profits to achieve its social objectives.	411	95.1%	21	4.9%
Social entrepreneurship is sustainable in the long term through a business model that balances financial sustainability with social impact.	407	94.2%	25	5.8%
Sustainability is fundamental in social entrepreneurship, which seeks solutions that are viable in the long term, both socially and environmentally.	403	93.3%	29	6.7%
Social entrepreneurship is financed entirely by donations.	52	12.0%	380	88.0%
Sustainability is a secondary aspect of social entrepreneurship that is considered after profitability.	63	14.7%	367	85.3%

Source: Own elaboration.

4.3.6. Innovation

Regarding the relevance of innovation (Table 10), there is a clear recognition (94.9%) of the importance of innovation in social entrepreneurship, especially in the development of social entrepreneurship to develop creative solutions to complex social problems. Similarly, participants consider innovation to be important throughout the project's lifecycle and not just in its early stages, as 89.6% disagree that innovation is only important in the initial phase of the project. The vast majority of respondents (91.2%) reject the notion that innovation is unimportant in social entrepreneurship, suggesting that innovation is widely recognised as crucial and not dependent on traditional business models.

Table 10. Importance of innovation in social entrepreneurship.

	True		False	
	N	%	N	%
Innovation is key to the development of social entrepreneurship to develop creative solutions to complex social problems.	408	94.9%	22	5.1%
Innovation is only important in the early stages of the project.	45	10.4%	387	89.6%
Innovation is not important in social entrepreneurship because it is based on traditional business models.	38	8.8%	394	91.2%

Source: Own elaboration.

There are statistical differences between genders in the perception of the importance of innovation in social entrepreneurship. Although both genders predominantly reject the idea that innovation is not important in social entrepreneurship but only in traditional business models, women are slightly more convinced of the importance of innovation in social entrepreneurship than men ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 4.420, p = 0.036, N = 432$). There is also a strong consensus that innovation is essential for social entrepreneurship to create solutions for complex social problems, with women showing stronger agreement than men ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 5.755, p = 0.016, N = 430$).

Respondents generally perceive innovation as a crucial aspect of social entrepreneurship, not limited to traditional business models or limited to the project's early stages, but rather as a continuous process that is essential to effectively and sustainably address and solve social challenges.

4.3.7. Community involvement and local development

Table 11 provides insights into how social enterprises contribute to community involvement and local development. Participants perceive social enterprises as making a significant contribution by creating job and developing local skills (95.6%). This highlights the strong perception of these enterprises as catalysts for local economic growth and development. They also agree that social enterprises actively involve the community in problem-solving and decision-making (95.4%), and work closely with communities to address their specific needs (95.4%), reinforcing that these organisations emphasise participatory development practices. A strong majority (73.8%) perceive social enterprises as engaging with the community mainly through the recruitment of volunteers, showing a common understanding of the role of volunteering. The majority of the respondents

(70.5%) reject the idea that social enterprises reduce costs by importing foreign products, implying that social enterprises are perceived to prioritise local resources over imports. Nevertheless, there is no clear consensus on whether social entrepreneurship primarily focuses on solving social problems through its operations and profits.

Table 11. Community participation and promotion of local development.

	True		False	
	n	%	n	%
Social entrepreneurship contributes to the development of the local economy by generating employment and fostering the development of local skills.	414	95.6%	19	4.4%
Social ventures actively involve the community in identifying problems and solutions.	411	95.4%	20	4.6%
Social enterprises work closely with communities to understand and address their needs.	412	95.4%	20	4.6%
Social enterprises involve the community into their operations mainly through the recruitment of volunteers.	318	73.8%	113	26.2%
Social entrepreneurship seeks to solve social problems through its operations and profits.	213	49.5%	217	50.5%
Social entrepreneurship contributes to the development of the local economy by importing foreign products to reduce costs	127	29.5%	304	70.5%

Source: Own elaboration.

There are differences in participants' perceptions according to their level of education regarding the role of social entrepreneurship in local development about importing products to reduce costs ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 6.462, p = 0.04, N = 431$). Participants enrolled in master's degrees are more likely to reject the idea that importing products helps local economic development in social entrepreneurship than students enrolled in "Other" courses.

Overall, respondents perceive social enterprises as key drivers of community participation and local development, emphasising their role in promoting participatory practices, creating job, and enhancing local skills. There is also a strong recognition of the importance of volunteer engagement and a preference for using local rather than imported resources in their operations. Students perceive cooperation, involvement, and local development as essential components of social enterprises, aligning with the definitions of Meira and Ramos (2019b) and the European Commission (2020). Despite their lack of real-world experience, students' emphasis on sustainable practices and community involvement indicates that they have a socially conscious understanding of entrepreneurship that puts impact above profit. Higher education institutions can develop pedagogical strategies that convert awareness into concrete social innovation initiatives.

5. Conclusions

Social entrepreneurship is increasingly recognised as a way to address societal problems through innovative and sustainable business approaches accelerating the progress towards the sustainable development goals (GEM, 2024).

Although social entrepreneurship has the potential to provide social benefits and create employment opportunities, the rates of social entrepreneurship are quite low, significantly lower than those found in the field of traditional profit-driven entrepreneurship.

In this context, the aim of this research was to understand higher education students' perceptions of social entrepreneurship, namely, how do they perceive the concept of social entrepreneurship, their involvement in entrepreneurial activities and the extent to which this is influenced by their personal characteristics and backgrounds.

Overall, the study conducted in different countries reveal that, most of the higher education students have a conceptual understanding of social entrepreneurship and the nature of this field of activity, despite their low involvement in entrepreneurial activities.

Higher education students perceive social entrepreneurship as a model primarily focused on creating sustainable social value, addressing social and environmental challenges, pursuing the general interest, and operating within a participatory and democratic framework. They typically link social entrepreneurship with activities focused on social inclusion, especially the integration of disadvantaged groups and individuals with disabilities into the labour market. The role of social entrepreneurship in environmental sustainability, local development, cooperation and stable job creation is also widely recognized by higher education students.

The investigation also reveals the perception of higher education students on the role of the financial dimension in social entrepreneurship. This dimension is seen as a means to ensure sustainability, rather than an end in itself, as in the case of profit-focused business models. Social entrepreneurship is also seen as an activity where people take precedence over capital and whose success is mainly analysed according to social

impact and improvement in the community quality of life as well, as collaboration with the community rather than economic and financial indicators such as profits. Innovation and community involvement are also part of higher education students' understanding of social entrepreneurship.

Personal characteristics are just slightly able to condition the way higher education students perceive the concept of social entrepreneurship.

The research shows that there are some gender differences in interpreting the concept of social entrepreneurship, with women attaching greater importance to the social, sustainability, innovation and community related dimensions of the concept.

The role attributed to community connection in the concept of social entrepreneurship is also positively influenced by students' previous entrepreneurial experience.

Although some misunderstandings still are found on the interpretation of the concept of social entrepreneurship, as a noticeable proportion of students perceive social entrepreneurial initiatives as businesses driven by profits, overall the perceptions found are in line with the main definitions of social entrepreneurship in the literature.

The investigation developed also find a significant presence of students who have already been exposed to entrepreneurship education and the positive way in which it can shape their perceptions and engagement in entrepreneurial initiatives.

The findings suggest that Universities can have an important role in training students on entrepreneurship and specifically on social entrepreneurship, and help translate knowledge into concrete social entrepreneurial initiatives. Recognising the nature of social problems means that higher education can be crucial in empowering students with the necessary critical thinking skills and leadership while improving their awareness of social challenges. The creation of specific training programs for higher education students can be valuable in bridging this gap, by creating a training program for skills development and collaborative learning experiences.

Future research should investigate the impact of specific educational methods on students' on engagement in social entrepreneurship initiatives and the development of social entrepreneurship initiatives.

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Data availability

Access upon request (restricted)

The data underlying the findings of this study are restricted and are not publicly available. However, the authors will provide the data to interested readers upon request.

Statement on the Use of Generative AI:

While preparing this paper, the authors used DeepL to check spelling and grammar. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as necessary, assuming full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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