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Building a better tomorrow – Bridging the disconnect between policy, practice, education and research in social enterprise

EDITORIAL

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The importance of social enterprise is becoming increasingly evident across societies, economies and local communities, and 'the past decade has witnessed a surge of research interest in social entrepreneurship' (Saebi, Foss and Linder, 2019, p.70). In Ireland, the development of the social enterprise policy in 2019 was welcomed as an important indicator of the growth and importance of this sector. Furthermore, burgeoning networks, ecosystems and research all indicate the widespread development of this sector across many towns, cities and villages nationally. Fundamental to social enterprise is social impact, and at a time when the world is facing significant global challenges Halsall, Oberoi and Snowden (2020, p. 80) note that 'social enterprise is a key player in societal changes'. Given the potential impact of social enterprises, there are many benefits in exploring how they can play a vital role in creating a sustainable, inclusive and resilient future by addressing the significant local and global challenges of the sustainable development goals.

While the field of study on social entrepreneurship has progressed at the researcher, educator, practitioner and policy perspectives, it is still somewhat fragmented and lacks a cohesive integrated perspective. This individual stakeholder approach has left work on social entrepreneurship a loosely connected domain of issues often resulting in singular representation of endeavors. Social entrepreneurship when viewed as a multidisciplinary and collaborative partnership approach presents a rich environment for practical knowledge exchange and co-creation and the development of support infrastructures to advance theory, practice, policy and competency development interventions (educational and training). This special issue provides a vehicle for one of many such potential co-creations and collaborations.

The call for papers for this issue arose from cross institutional collaboration between the editors who have been working in the social enterprise space and wanted to provide a forum for scholars, practitioners and policy makers to come together to explore key issues of concern. In the first instance we ran a Social Enterprise Symposium at the annual Irish Academy of Management conference in 2021 and launched an open call for this special edition. We had great interest from the academic and researcher community to share their research in this growing and important topic, which has resulted in seven papers which will be showcased across two issues in the *Irish Journal of Management* (this issue and the forthcoming next issue). The papers come from policy makers and researchers and cover a wide range of topics, and perspectives which demonstrate the knowledge and expertise that exists among this embryonic research community. An overview of the papers which are in this special issue will now be outlined, which is supplemented with a summary of a book chapter, which further identifies the future potential for research is this field.

COLLECTION OF PAPERS

The first paper from Forde provides a contextual analysis of the evolution of the social enterprise sector presenting an insider's insight into the process of developing Ireland's first ever Social Enterprise Policy in 2019, where the theme

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of collaboration and co-creation was central. Forde highlights the emphasis on co-creation and multistakeholder engagement in the development of this policy to ensure an inclusive approach for what is a very diverse and heterogeneous sector with definitional variations.

This paper demonstrates how the policy has provided a strong foundational framework for growth of the sector with progress made in mainstreaming social enterprise, raising awareness, and promoting discussion about the place of social enterprise as part of a diversified, and increasingly green, national economy. In a critical analysis of the policy, Forde indicates that there is still much for policy to do and concludes by offering perspectives on some of the prerequisites for an ambitious and impactful successor policy in 2023 to leverage the tremendous potential of the social enterprise sector in Ireland.

Ó Broin and Doyle's paper explores the development of the national social enterprise policy, focusing on the role of stakeholders in the process. As they note, social enterprise manifests differently in different policy ecosystems and so Ireland is an interesting case to explore given its strong cooperative and credit union tradition. They distinguish between these and the new style social enterprises and note how the former don't appear to have engaged with the social enterprise policy ecosystem at all. Furthermore, they highlight important issues such as how responsibility for the policy moved to different government departments, the strong influencing role that some stakeholders played and the fact that Scotland was identified as the example of best practice to be followed. The paper is important as it provides a detailed insight into how the policy was formed, situated and influenced in a complex fluid environment and as such is an important record of this process with the capacity to influence future policy developments.

In their paper Cannon, Byrne, Donnelly-Cox and Rhodes address the gap in theorizing between institutional influences on approaches to and typologies of social enterprise (SE), asking what types of SEs exist in the specific institutional context of Ireland and why, and developing an embedded model of types of social enterprise. This study provides a historically based narrative to show that in Ireland while the founding influence of the community and voluntary sector was the church, the prevailing influence today is a combination of the free market and the welfare state, which has led to the emergence and growing trend of social enterprise and social entrepreneurship. On the basis of their findings the authors call for a shift towards thinking of the social entrepreneurship process as a socially constructed phenomenon.

The internationally co-authored paper by Taylor, Loukopoulos, Sotiropoulou, Hvalic Erzetic, Mikolič, Slavič and Manti offers the benefits of a cross-cultural collaboration from the EU-funded programme, the 'SocialB' (Social Business Educational Ecosystem for Sustainability and Growth) project. The paper presents the results of a four-country social enterprise skills assessment in areas critical for the development, sustainability and expansion of the SE sector. The innovative pedagogical approach incorporates action and experiential learning, e-learning, problem-based learning and gamification delivery techniques. This initiative is an example of a programmme that shows good practice in social enterprise competency enhancement, and one that has transferability and accessibility as training material is available EU-wide to higher education institutions (HEIs) and vocational education and training (VET) providers.

Hofmayer's paper explores the need, potential and benefits of a legal status for Irish social enterprises that shows increased clarity, awareness and transparency of the sector. Further she argues that a dedicated legal status will provide a framework for governance, as well as providing social enterprises with an appropriate business model accommodating their unique nature. In addition to the results of an empirical study, the design of her proposed legal status is based on detailed benchmarking analysis of legal frameworks in a selection of relevant EU countries. Hofmayer concludes that the creation of a usable legal status requires a tailored, country-specific approach to accommodate the diversity of the type of social enterprises operating in the broader social economy ecosystem.

Together these papers provide insights from policy, research and the educator/training perspectives with a common theme on the importance of collaboration and engaging the social enterprise in the study. Meaningful and appropriate learning results when the social entrepreneur's lived experience is understood and used as a means of learning from and with to inform more targeted policy, education and research outputs. The benefits of doing this is very much demonstrated from the rich and varied selection of social enterprises as is summarized in a forthcoming chapter reviewed by O'Brien[1] below which gives recognition to the heterogeneity of the social entrepreneur sector and provides a useful lived context for the series of papers included in this special edition.

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The chapter 'Stories of an evolving social enterprise ecosystem' helps to dispel any residual ambiguity around the concept of social enterprise, its multi-faceted dimensions, and the benefits it offers society. The approach adopted by the five authors (Kelliher, F., Cook, S., O'Higgins, S., Kent, N., and Riches, L., 2023) draws on their collective knowledge and experiences and is supplemented by their personal stories of, and involvement with social enterprise over many years.

The authors have focussed explicitly on the experiences of the social enterprise community of Waterford City and the authors explore and extract one city's long experience of social enterprise, including its progression and its assimilation into the city's fabric over time. The chapter is a rich and layered exploration of how and why Waterford became a mainstay for social enterprise: 'the capital of social enterprise in Ireland' (Cooke, 2018). The rich social enterprise ecosystem and its various actors are explained and the complexities of building resilient grassroots social enterprises embedded in communities are explored. This gives rise to several important themes identified by the authors, including lapses in 'joined up thinking' and failures by policy makers in understanding the practical reality of establishing and maintaining successful social enterprises.

The idea of a tapestry of networks to support social enterprise is discussed and suggests the patchwork, artisan, organic, and community aspects to social enterprise. While social enterprise is clearly a business model, we learn that it is also akin to a community movement "leaving no one behind" (p.14) This brings to light a Janus face dimension to social enterprise. Social enterprise is broad, deep, and nuanced, it is at once a business model designed to produce profit and a community-led endeavour towards shared prosperity. This chapter is engaging and enlightening and most importantly it is a critical repository of knowledge detailing the hard work and everyday actions by actors working in and supporting social enterprise.

The last two papers of this special edition deal with very significant issues in relation to social enterprises and will appear as a special issue section in the next issue of the *Irish Journal of Management*. We introduce these here. O'Shaughnessy's paper explores different elements of the Irish social enterprise ecosystem and O'Reilly, Walsh and Mottiar explore the scaling of social enterprises.

CONCLUSION

This special edition is timely, marking a point where the importance of social enterprise in Ireland has been clearly identified in terms of developments in the sector, a policy framework and research. These papers show the breadth of issues of concern, both conceptually and practically. The rich multidisciplinary and collaborative approaches that the sharing of knowledge of those interested in social enterprise from different spheres (e.g. the sector, policy-makers and research) can create is evidenced in this special issue and this symbolises the future potential to bridge the current disconnect to build a better and more sustainable future for the sector, country and communities.

BIO NOTES

Professor Felicity Kelliher is Professor of Management Practice, South East Technological University and Professor of Innovation and Entrepreneurship Shanghai University China. An experienced principal investigator (PI), research supervisor and mentor, she specialises in action research and longitudinal interpretive case methods. Her main area of study is management capability development in small and medium sized enterprise (SME) with a particular interest in rural business and she has engaged with over 1200 SMEs through her research. As chair of the RIKON research group and a Fulbright alumna, she works closely with colleagues in Ireland, UK, Canada and USA on a number of funded research projects. She regularly contributes to management theory through publication in top tier international journals and contributes to the wider academic and practice communities.

Dr. Briga Hynes is Senior Lecturer in Entrepreneurship in the Kemmy Business School at the University of Limerick. Briga's teaching, research, and enterprise engagement roles focus on embedding entrepreneurial and innovative mindsets, entrepreneurial leadership, social innovation and impact for sustainable futures, scaling enterprises, commercialization of research to spin out and innovation in healthcare. She has successfully secured €475,000 in EU and National funding for international collaborative projects such as Innovation in HealthCare, EntreSTEAM

competency development, Bridging the impact divide between Social and Commercial Enterprises, Digital Technologies/ICT adoption in female enterprises and the Design and Delivery of Entrepreneurial and Innovative Thinking Educational programmes. She is actively engaged with the broader network of students, entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs, community groups and professional organisations through the provision of mentoring, delivery of training and membership of advisory boards.

Dr. Ziene Mottiar is a researcher and senior lecturer in the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management in Technological University Dublin. She is an active researcher with more than 30 peer reviewed articles in journals such as Annals of Tourism Research, International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management and Journal of Sustainable Tourism. She has also been involved in national and European funded research projects and supervises a number of PhD students. Her key areas of research interest are Entrepreneurship and Destination Development and recently she has had papers published highlighting the importance of social enterprises in tourism, exploring the motivations of tourism social entrepreneurs and in a cross national study identified key roles social entrepreneurs play in developing destinations.

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