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Social entrepreneurship education enhancement through innovative training pedagogies across Europe

Research Article

Argyrios Loukopoulos[1], Marie Taylor[2]*, Aikaterini Sotiropoulou[1], Barbara Hvalic Erzetic[3], Sara Mikolič[4], Irma Potočnik Slavič[4], Arianna Manti[5]

1 Department of Business Administration, School of Economics and Business, University of Patras, Patras, Greece
2 Development Unit, Technological University Shannon, Ireland
3 Academic Unit for Entrepreneurship, School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
4 Department of Geography, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
5 University of Milan-Bicocca, Italy

Abstract: Social Enterprises (SEs) have become the focus of increased policy attention internationally and at the EU level in recent years. Not as much attention, however, has been given to identifying and eliminating their skills gaps and training needs. Following the principles of the Training Needs Analysis (TNA) methodology and collecting data from different stakeholders on the social entrepreneurship sector of four EU countries (Italy, Ireland, Greece, and Slovenia) participating in the EU project 'SocialB', this paper examines the development of its training content, and how this addresses the SEs' training challenges regarding management, sustainability and growth issues. This paper outlines the steps this project followed in tackling these issues through developing innovative learning content and training delivery methodology.

Keywords: *social enterprise; skills training; social entrepreneurship needs; action and experiential learning; practice-based pedagogy*

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INTRODUCTION

Social Enterprises (SEs) have played an essential role in coping with social problems that existed or were created by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Loukopoulos & Papadimitriou, 2022). However, there are many crucial challenges that these hybrid organisations still have to face to achieve growth and long-term sustainability, such as resource scarcity and the detection of the most appropriate technique for managing and leveraging their social and economic nature (Saebi et al., 2019). According to Hockerts (2018), following well-developed social entrepreneurship educational curricula, individuals could address these SEs' challenges before becoming social entrepreneurs and after the foundation of their SEs. That's why there is an immense need to develop a wide-ranging educational curriculum that could fill these gaps, especially in a digital form, allowing social entrepreneurs worldwide access to it. Reflecting on this requirement and emerging from an EU-funded programme, the 'SocialB' project was launched in January 2020 and focuses more on SEs across Europe.

The SocialB project seeks to enhance sustainability and employability within the social economy sector by empowering existing and future social entrepreneurs with critical competencies and skills, promoting and imparting entrepreneurial and transversal skills to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)/Vocational Education and Training (VET) students, and enhancing the practical and operational knowledge base and learning of HEIs/VET staff. According to Corvo et al.'s (2022) work, the project team confirms the lack of substantial evidence-based knowledge about the appropriate learning theories and pedagogies in social entrepreneurship education. It also highlights the

* *E-mail: Marie.Taylor@tus.ie*

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need for a balanced educational programme to be developed that blends theory and practice using different and innovative teaching methods suitable for them (Corvo et al., 2022; Worsham, 2012).

Given that there is a need for the enhancement of social entrepreneurship education, this paper aims to explore and identify the current training needs of SEs, in particular, to their management, sustainability and growth issues and according to those needs to develop SocialB's training content. Based on the principles of the Training Needs Analysis (TNA) methodology, this paper includes explorative research, which was undertaken between SEs, SEs' advisors/advisory organisations, and SEs' collaborators/partners. The results revealed that any training programme for SEs must adopt specific blended methodologies and appropriate techniques that harmonise well with the pedagogies in social entrepreneurship. In particular, this study developed training/learning content suitable for social entrepreneurs, SEs' students, HEIs' and VET educators and SEs' support agencies, based on innovative, collaborative and multidisciplinary approaches (i.e. action and experiential learning ethos) and incorporating work-based learning, e-learning, problem-based learning and gamification approaches.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A three-level analysis of SEs' mission

SEs and the ways they manage to sustain their hybrid nature and achieve both their economic and social goals have attracted an enormous amount of interest from policymakers, practitioners and researchers (Loukopoulos & Papadimitriou, 2022; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2020; Stam et al., 2014; Urban & Gaffurini, 2018). The accomplishment of a SE's social and economic aims could be analysed into three distinctive levels: intra-organisational, extra-organisational and individual. Firstly, from an intra-organisational perspective, many scholars have pointed out that a developed organisational learning process within a SE constitutes a critical way to efficient fulfilling of both its economic and social objectives (e.g., Tandon & Nair, 2020; Urban & Gaffurini, 2018), evolving and finally achieving organisational scaling (Loukopoulos & Papadimitriou, 2022; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2020). Thus, there is a need for the development of specific organisational learning capabilities among a SE's members, such as '*elements relating to continuous learning, inquiry and dialogue, empowerment, strategic leadership, managerial commitment, openness and experimentation, knowledge transfer and integration, risk management and interaction with the environment*' (Urban & Gaffurini, 2018, pp. 120–121), as they have been found crucial for a SE to innovate, be sustainable and grow.

Secondly, from an extra-organisational viewpoint, SEs' hybrid form makes them less recognisable and less familiar to outside observers, including potential funders, contractors and customers (Saebi et al., 2019). Indeed, a large number of scholars studying the social entrepreneurship field have claimed that SEs creating partnerships with other organisations and exchanging ideas, practices, methodologies, and tools between different stakeholders could help them achieve legitimacy among their stakeholders and long-term sustainability (Folmer et al., 2018; Loukopoulos & Papadimitriou, 2022; Stam et al., 2014). Therefore, a demand for a well-developed network between SEs and their stakeholders arises when finding the necessary resources for their survival, sustainability and organisational growth.

Finally, the appropriate entrepreneurial skills should be cultivated on an individual level before one collaborates with others and becomes a social entrepreneur. For example, according to Hockerts (2018), '*social entrepreneurial empathy*', '*moral obligation*', '*perceived social support*' and '*social entrepreneurial self-efficacy*' constitute some of the most fundamental skills with which a potential social entrepreneur should be equipped. The existing social entrepreneurship educational programmes in learning units such as universities and colleges could provide all these elements to prospective social entrepreneurs (Hockerts, 2018). However, many learning institutions have bolstered social entrepreneurship education by creating mostly academic offerings that emphasise business, social impact, and innovation issues rather than the cultivation of practical skills and competencies relevant to the day-to-day operations, constraints and challenges of SEs (Addae & Ellenwood, 2021). Hands-on experience and stimulation of creative solutions than traditional exclusively classroom-based learning techniques are also vital for thinkable social entrepreneurs (Kickul et al., 2021). Thus, the next section of the paper focuses on analysing the training challenges that social entrepreneurs face and proposes innovative solutions.

SEs' training challenges and innovative solutions

The complexity of social entrepreneurial activity striving for the balance between social and commercial goals and its frequently consequent identity confusion raises concerns about the suitable application of social learning theories in SEs (Tracey & Phillips, 2018). On the one hand, social entrepreneurs require more vital transversal soft skills, which can be fostered more effectively through practical training. On the other hand, social entrepreneurship educators rely on their networks and previous subjective experiences while struggling to develop syllabi, pedagogic materials, and teaching approaches toward theory or practical competencies (Addae & Ellenwood, 2021). Nevertheless, nowadays, the core training in SEs has shifted from the information process to the active participation and integration of learners that provides a sustainable and natural context for learning and active involvement in the real social world and the community (Addae & Ellenwood, 2021; Kickul et al., 2021). Under this scope, action learning, experiential learning, reflective thinking, and active engagement in real-world activities are identified to play pivotal roles in the pedagogies proposed in the field of social entrepreneurship education.

Action learning is the implementation of learning within groups and is conducted by reflecting on learners' experiences (Hoes et al., 2008). It follows the same cyclic process as experiential learning, as proposed by Kolb (1984), where learning follows the stages of experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and new experience through experimentation. The difference between action and experiential learning is that the latter can be more passive (Simpson & Bourner, 2007). Action learning promotes the '*learning by doing something different*' rather than just '*learning by doing*' (Olsson et al., 2010) facilitated by experiential learning. According to Revans (1982), action learning includes creating a problem-solving strategy, its realisation and its relation to the learning process. In action learning, learners participate equally in their learning groups and are asked to solve problems where no right solution is given (Marsick & O'Neil, 1999). In this process, groups of equals are encouraged to develop questions and utilise critical thinking to solve problems. In this way, it encourages participants' interactions and the development of mutual support, providing a safe environment for participants to be inspired, form ideas, frame problems, take action and reframe (Pedler, 2020).

Action and experiential learning approaches fit well in social entrepreneurship education since they can facilitate the co-creation of shared communities of practice and contribute to the increment of self-efficacy and social entrepreneurial intentions (Hockerts, 2018). They constitute potent forms of learning since they involve the direct experience of the phenomenon being studied or problem-solving rather than simply reading or thinking about it. Previous research has shown that experiential learning learners can better understand SEs' diverse stakeholder environment, market needs, logic, mobilisation of resources, and measurement of performance. Additionally, learners are reinforced to develop skills related to reflection, self-awareness, communication, empathy and ideas generation, which are also crucial in the social entrepreneurship field (Chang et al., 2014). Furthermore, pedagogies that combine formal and experiential learning methods can be used to bring three logics associated with social entrepreneurial actions such as social welfare, commercial and public-sector logic (Pache & Chowdhury, 2012). Even though being limited, research in the social entrepreneurship field has also shown that action learning is not only an appropriate method to cultivate the ability of the potential learners to respond to the problem-centred needs of the potential entrepreneurs but also provides additional value to the learners because it can create a safe place where they can work on real-life issues, and develop mutual support and empathy (Smith & Smith, 2017).

Based on the above, the following gaps in the relevant literature are worth mentioning. Firstly, from an intra and extra-organisational angle, there is still a gap in the social entrepreneurship field to what extent SEs realise their social and economic mission (Stevens et al., 2015). Secondly, in the realm of the individual aspect, well-developed social entrepreneurial skills, before becoming a social entrepreneur, constitute the cornerstone of a SE's survival and scaling social impact (Hockerts, 2018; Loukopoulos & Papadimitriou, 2022). Finally, training programmes and innovative learning resources, having as their primary purpose the enhancement of the required entrepreneurial skills for achieving SEs' sustainability, are still undeveloped for both existing and new social entrepreneurs (Kickul et al., 2021). Thus, the following section of the paper presents the SocialB project, whose primary aim is to fulfil the above gaps.

SOCIALB PROJECT

Overview

SocialB (Social Business Educational Ecosystem for Sustainability and Growth) is an innovative, multidisciplinary Erasmus+ Knowledge Alliance project with collaboration between eight partners from the SE-focussed Business Development, VET and Higher Education sectors of four countries – Ireland, Greece, Italy and Slovenia. This project ran from January 2020 until December 2022. The project partners bring direct and varied academic and practitioner skills, expertise, and knowledge relevance to the project's scope. The project team collaborates on all elements of the project design, delivery and dissemination, facilitating the exchange and co-creation of practice-oriented learning to enhance the social entrepreneurial skills of students and social entrepreneurs and the entrepreneurial skills and teaching approaches of HEIs/VET staff. In doing so, SocialB strengthens the innovation potential and skillsets of HEIs/VET and SE sectors and extends the fabric of vital social economy ecosystems.

Objectives

Social entrepreneurship is acknowledged as '*a key driver of economic and social development in Europe*', according to the European Commission (2015, p.3). However, SEs' policy and legislative support levels vary within the four participating EU countries. For example, Italy, with a burgeoning social economy sector, provides a legislative framework for SEs. Similarly, Ireland, although lacking until now a legislative framework specifically for SEs, has a strong tradition and practice of SE, particularly in rural areas (Government of Ireland, 2019).

Extending previous EU-supported projects (SESeu, SETTLE, SESBA), SocialB aligns with the European Economic and Social Committee recommendations on SEs, encouraging the '*launch [of] capacity-building programmes to support and facilitate social innovation'* (European Commission, 2014, p.2). It responds to the Commission's Expert Group on Social Entrepreneurship (GECES, 2016) request to include SE-related topics in curricula, from primary education to university. It also realises the EU Commission's recommendation to '*foster entrepreneurial skills through new and creative ways of teaching and learning*', in tandem with a focus on '*real-world experience, through problem-based learning and enterprise links*' (European Commission, 2021). In particular, it fosters a conducive ecosystem by improving the training and learning environment and strengthening links between HEIs/VET and SEs' sectors in the four participating countries.

Additionally, the project aims to design, develop and pilot an accessible suite of educational resources to support individual and organisational learning and network development in SEs. The resulting Learning Units aim to stimulate significant changes in HEIs' curricula and VET programmes by integrating a learner-centred approach oriented to real, problem-based learning and skills acquisition in social entrepreneurship. Among the above, the project objectives are:

a) To build the social entrepreneurial mindset and competencies of students interested in social entrepreneurship and employment within the social economy sector by bringing real-world social entrepreneurial practice into their learning environments;

b) To develop a replicable partnership model between SEs and VET institutions/HEIs and to inform them about the development of state-of-the-art learning and educational resources and materials;

c) To raise awareness and exploit SocialB's learning material beyond the project's lifetime, strengthening the social economy ecosystems within the EU. Thus, this paper presents in the following section the steps undertaken for SocialB's training content development by implementing the innovative methodology TNA.

METHODOLOGY

TNA: Steps for the development of the SocialB's training content

The TNA methodology was used on different stakeholders related to the social entrepreneurship field from four European countries (Italy, Greece, Slovenia and Ireland), following the recommendations for training content development by Gupta et al. (2007). More specifically, this method was chosen for the following three reasons: to identify common training and learning gaps in the current social entrepreneurs' skills repository, to fulfil these needs, and finally, to extrapolate and compile a clear picture of the current challenges in the SE sector relating to management, growth and sustainability issues.

This research relied on a three-phase multiple data collection based on the TNA model proposed by Gupta et al. (2007). Firstly, comprehensive desk research was carried out on existing HEIs/VET programmes/courses for training and education on SEs focused on the four countries (55 of total 98 surveyed courses/programmes), with selected input from other EU countries (20 countries, usually two courses/programmes per country). Data was primarily compiled from existing web pages systematically. Based on the first phase results analysis, a group of training courses was chosen for in-depth analysis.

Secondly, a qualitative approach was adopted using semi-structured interviews (online calls) with providers to verify the gathered data and extend the data with additional information. Fifty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted with lecturers, professors, directors and managers from universities and VET organisations. This led to a more in-depth exploration of issues related to the content, training approaches and difficulties usually faced by SEs.

Lastly, for validation reasons and to provide a much more robust picture of the social entrepreneurs' training challenges and skills gaps, a quantitative method was followed based on the above two-phase survey results, extending further Corvo et al.'s (2022) work and achieving triangulation (Heath, 2015). Between mid-May and mid-July 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, an online questionnaire (a minimum of 15 per country) was administered through MS Forms to the SEs, SEs' advisors, and SEs' partners in all partner countries to obtain insights about education and training providers across the EU. In particular, the questionnaire was sent to the following stakeholders associated with the social entrepreneurship field and grouped into three cohorts:

- Cohort 1 – SEs: 19 to 25 SEs (board members and managers) per partner country to investigate operational protocols, constraints, challenges and needs.
- Cohort 2 – SEs' advisors: 5 SE advisors/advisor organisations from each partner country to assess their perceptions and experiences about social entrepreneurs' skills deficits and needs.
- Cohort 3 – SEs' partners: 4 to 7 SEs' collaborators/partners that support social economy and entrepreneurship in each partner country.

Likert and ranking scales were used accordingly to assess the perceptions of the sampled stakeholders regarding the challenges that SEs in the four SocialB's partner countries face on issues related to management, sustainability, growth and training, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. A summary of the survey's key topics

Survey's key issues
1. Challenges in SEs' Management Function
2. Perceptions in SEs' Sustainability
3. Perceptions in SEs' Growth
4. Perceptions in SEs' Skills and Expertise Areas
5. SEs' Training Preferences and Challenges

After collecting the questionnaires' data, the SocialB project partners provided an English translation and uploaded them all to a master file. A lengthy exercise was also undertaken to standardise the data capture format across all responses. A few completed surveys had one or more blank responses, which necessitated further contact with the respondents for clarity. A detailed analysis of each questionnaire's answers was undertaken, and analysis reports were compiled for each cohort. The survey enabled comparison and analysis of like-for-like data and identification issues relevant to specific countries. The final number of received responses was 134, including 94 from SEs, 20 from SEs' advisors, and 20 from SEs' partners. Table 2 presents the relevant sample per country.

In summary, the TNA was composed of three phases, each with its specific goal, as displayed in Table 3. This paper focuses on the third phase of the TNA as the results of the other two have already been exhaustively presented in Corvo et al.'s (2022) work.

Table 2. A summary of the respondents' origin.

Country	SEs	SEs' advisors	SEs' partners
Greece	25	5	5
Ireland	25	5	4
Italy	25	5	4
Slovenia	19	5	7
Total	94	20	20

Table 3. The phases of the study.

Phases	Goals
Phase 1 (desk research: existing data collection)	Compile data about the respondents' organisations, board structure, operational structure, and training needs
Phase 2 (qualitative: semi-structured interviews)	Identify key challenges in the SE field of management, growth and sustainability
Phase 3 (quantitative: quastionnaire)	Identify appropriate learning and training needs and associated access pathways for SEs relating to management, growth and sustainability issues

Measurement scales development

Challenges in SEs' Management Function

SEs were presented with 13 operational aspects of their management function. The SEs' cohort was asked to assess each according to the degree of challenge they face in their organisations on a 4-point Likert scale of (1=a huge challenge, 2=somewhat challenging, 3=a little challenging, 4=not a challenge at present). SEs' advisors and partners were also asked to assess each, according to the degree of challenge they believe they are for the SEs they support and/or collaborate with, on the same scale. The 13 operational aspects of the SEs' management function are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. The operational aspects of SEs' management function.

Operational aspects of SEs' management function
Insufficient paid staff resources & funding to recruit required staff
Meeting/responding to increased demand for services/goods they provide
Unsustainability due to low level of income generated for services/goods we provide
Lack of marketing expertise, to connect with customers/target group
Over-reliance on statutory funding (grants, state funding programmes, etc.)
Availability of appropriate, accessible training for staff
Lack of skills and experience within the organisation to develop and expand services and income
Lack of opportunities for networking with critical stakeholders and other SE organisations that share the same social vision
Limited involvement in the development of future direction and planning
Lack of market knowledge and competitiveness
Quality management procedures
Speed of decision-making
Over-reliance on volunteers

SEs' sustainability

Respondents were asked to answer two questions suitably designed to assess their perceptions of the SEs' sustainability. Firstly, all three cohorts were asked to choose the most appropriate for SEs among the existing definitions of sustainability found in the relevant literature (Hynes, 2009; Mohd Zawawi & Abd Wahab, 2019; Sharir et al., 2009). Secondly, only the SEs' cohort was asked to select which challenges are considered more vital for them to become and stay sustainable. Table 5 presents proposed definitions and challenges of SEs' sustainability.

Table 5. SEs' sustainability: definitions and challenges.

SEs' sustainability
Definitions (SEs are sustainable when they […])
Can be financially viable and serve their social objectives
Make a profit, or break even, at a minimum, without support from external funding and grants
Retain ongoing support from the community for their mission
Do no harm to the environment
Challenges
Not enough strategic expertise on how to become sustainable
Not enough personnel with the right skills
Not enough demand for our services/products
The costs of running our organisation are too high
Over-reliance on statutory funding - grants, state funding programmes, etc.
Other

SEs' growth

Two questions were posed about the type of SEs' strategic growth. In the first question, the three cohorts were asked to rank on an 8-point Likert scale (from 1=least important to 8=most important) the following eight growth areas, as displayed in Table 6.

Table 6. SEs' growth areas.

SEs' growth areas
Employing more paid staff
Generating more income through securing grants/government funding
Expanding new products and services to the existing customer base
Growth of geographic spread of the organisation's services/goods
Generating more income through the trading of goods/services
Including new target groups and widening our customer base
Using resources innovatively to expand services/product range
Franchising strategy and/or operational partnerships

In the second question, a list of six potential growth challenges was provided to each cohort, as presented in Table 7. The SEs' cohort was asked to select from this list the two biggest growth challenges facing their organisations. SEs' advisors and partners were asked to choose what they perceive the two biggest growth challenges to be, based on their experience of working with and supporting SEs.

Table 7. SEs' growth challenges.

SEs' growth challenges
Not enough expertise on how to grow the business
Not enough personnel with the requisite skills and experience
Not enough money for investment in growth
Not enough demand for services/products
Not enough active commitment from board members
Other

SEs' skills and expertise areas

The three cohorts were asked, according to their experience, to prioritise the vital skills and expertise areas for SEs' staff, volunteers and board members on a 5-point Likert scale (1=critically important, 2=quite important, 3=important, 4=desirable but not essential, 5=not important). These fifteen skill areas are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Skill areas.

Skill areas
Expertise in how to maintain sustainability and growth
Financial planning and management, including risk management, internal auditing, etc.
Communication, sales & marketing skills
Soft skills, e.g. interpersonal skills, listening, etc.
Developing and motivating staff
Fundraising and funding from different resources
Business & Strategic Planning
Project Management skills
Procurement and how to win contracts
Skills to monitor & assess Social Impact
IT and online communications technology (ICT)
Governance and leadership for social enterprises
Networking with stakeholders, collaborative partnerships, and alliances
Gaining and sustaining community buy-in and market acceptance
Managing multiple bottom lines

SEs' training preferences and challenges

Firstly, all three cohorts were asked to select the most suitable and practical training and learning methods for SEs' staff and board members. Secondly, based on their knowledge and experience of working in/with SEs, all three cohorts were asked to assess the barriers SEs have concerning their staff and board members' training participation. Table 9 illustrates the provided training and learning methods and the obstacles that SEs' members/staff have regarding their training participation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study findings, as detailed below, reveal that a SE is a business model with many managerial, sustainability and growth issues that become more difficult due to the lack of the proper training skills of its board members and staff. An extensive discussion of the findings from each topic is included. The results from the three cohorts' responses gathered from all four partner countries are presented chiefly in an aggregate form, highlighting comparisons among them with specific percentages where necessary.

Table 9. Training and learning methods/Barriers to training participation.

Training and learning methods
In-class Training (face-to-face)
Work-based Learning
Online Training – own time
Online Training – class
Blended learning
Seminars – guest SEs
Shadowing SE staff
One-to-one Mentoring & Homework
Barriers to training participation
Lack of accessible/available training courses on relevant subjects
Lack of basic skills, training and knowledge in relevant subjects
Lack of staff capacity
Unavailability of funding to pay for further training
Lack of available time
Lack of learning culture

Challenges in SEs' Management Function

There was consensus between the three cohorts' responses (i.e., 85% of SEs, 60% of SEs' advisors, 60% of SEs' partners in all four countries) on only 1 of the 13 thematic areas regarding the most challenging task in SEs' management function: 'Insufficient paid staff resources & funding to recruit required staff'. Apart from this theme, it is difficult to identify a common set of priority challenges since there was a mismatch, to varying degrees, between the perceptions of each of the three cohorts. SEs, SEs' advisors and SEs' partners of all four countries agreed that 'Quality management procedures', 'Speed of decision-making' and 'Over-reliance on volunteers' did not currently constitute challenges within the sector. Table 10 summarises, with priority from 1 to 10, the most critical challenges for SEs' management function according to each cohort's opinion.

Table 10. Challenges' priority for SEs' management function per cohort.

Challenges for SEs' Management Function	Priority	
	SEs	SEs' advisors & partners*
Insufficient paid staff resources & funding to recruit required staff	1	1
Meeting/responding to increased demand for services/ goods they provide	2	6
Unsustainability due to low level of income generated for services/goods they provide	3	4
Lack of marketing expertise to connect with customers/target group	4	5
Over-reliance on statutory funding (grants, state funding programmes, etc.)	5	8
Availability of appropriate, accessible training for staff	6	10
Lack of skills and experience within the organisation to develop and expand services and income	7	2
Lack of opportunities for networking with critical stakeholders and other SE organisations that share the same social vision	8	9
Limited involvement in the development of future direction and planning	9	3
Lack of market knowledge and competitiveness	10	7

*Note: The responses from both SEs' advisors and partners (cohorts 1 and 2) were similar, so they are presented in the same column.

SEs' sustainability

All three cohorts agreed that the most appropriate definition of SEs' sustainability was when they can be financially viable and serve their social objectives (i.e. 90% of SEs, 75% of SEs' advisors and 75% of SEs' partners in all four countries agreed with the statement). Retaining ongoing support from the community for their mission was an additional important factor for SEs regarding their sustainability. In particular, this was a critical determinant for Irish (50% of SEs, 37.5% of SEs' advisors and 37.5% of SEs' partners) and Italian SEs (25% of SEs, 37.5% of SEs' advisors and 50% SEs' partners), likely due to the high number of community-based and community-led SEs.

Concerning SEs' challenges for their sustainability, almost 30% of SEs claimed 'Over-reliance on statutory funding programmes' as their most significant one, closely followed by 'Over-high costs of running their organisations' (i.e. 22%). More specifically, 'Over-reliance on statutory funding and grants' was identified as the biggest challenge to the sustainability of their organisations by 40% of Italian and 40% of Irish SEs, although less pronounced amongst Slovenian (21%) and Greek SEs (17%). 'Lack of personnel with the right skills' was identified as the most significant barrier to sustainability by 35% of Slovenian SEs, but only 8% by Italian ones. In particular, Spear et al. (2009) claimed that the areas of expertise that were perceived to be most commonly lacking are entrepreneurial ones: financial, business and strategic skills, which are likely to be particularly important in SEs. The high costs of running their organisations were considered the most significant challenge by almost 40% of Greek SEs, 20% of Italian SEs, and 10% of Irish and Slovenian SEs. Approximately 20% of Irish and Italian SEs believed they did not have enough expertise on how to become sustainable. At the same time, any Slovenian SE highlighted this as its primary challenge, while only one Greek did. Insufficient demand for goods/services did not appear to be a significant challenge amongst any respondent SEs; two SEs set this challenge in Greece, Slovenia and Italy, and one SE in Ireland. Figure 1 depicts a graph with the percentage of the SEs' responses.

Although many SEs aligned with the five key sustainability challenges offered, they also provided several other comments listed in Appendix A as they were delivered.

SEs' growth

According to SEs' responses (i.e. 100% of SEs in all four countries), the primary type of SEs' growth was 'Expanding new products and services to their existing customer bases'. 'Generating more income through the trading of goods/services' was the second most crucial growth area according to SEs' responses (i.e. 87.5% of SEs in all four countries). However, 87.5% of SEs' advisors and partners in all four countries advocated that 'generating more

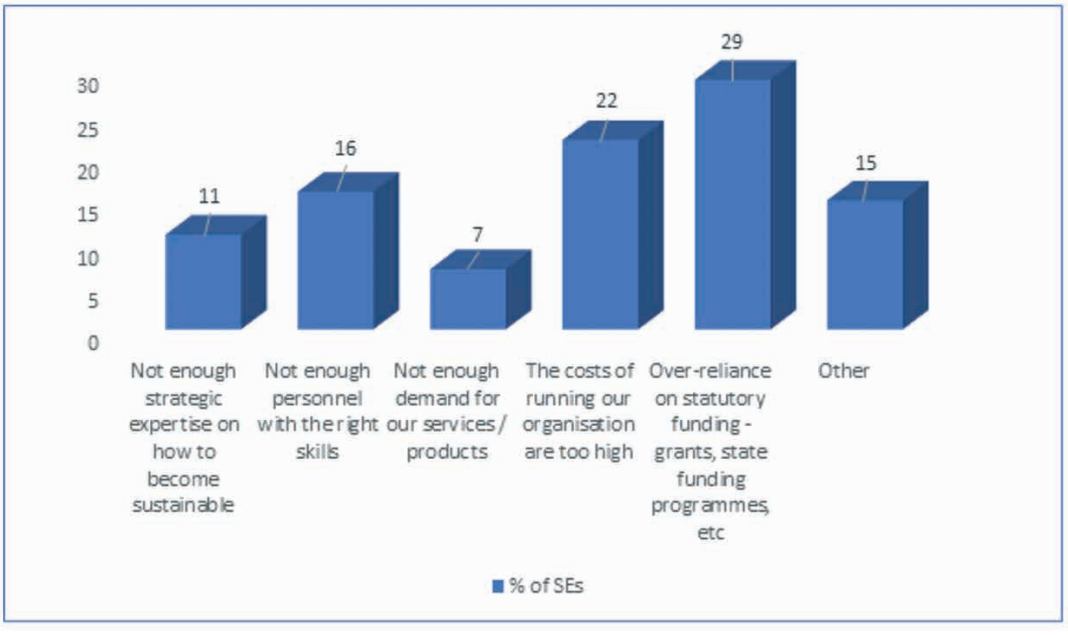


Figure 1: SEs' most crucial challenge for sustainability. (Source: SocialB Report O2.3, 2020)

Table 11. Aggregate ranking of growth areas amongst the three cohorts.

Growth areas	SEs	SEs' advisors	SEs' partners
Employing more paid staff	6	3	4
Generating more income through securing grants/government funding	3	1	1
Expanding new products and services to the existing customer base	1	2	3
Growth of geographic spread of the organisation's services/goods	5	5	7
Generating more income through the trading of goods/ services	2	4	2
Including new target groups and widening our customer base	4	6	5
Using resources innovatively to expand services/ product range	7	7	6
Franchising strategy and/or operational partnerships	8	8	8

income through securing grants/government funding' should be of utmost importance for SEs. Table 11 provides an overview of the above findings.

Regarding the SEs' growth challenges, insufficient funds to invest in growth was considered the most significant growth challenge for 90% of SEs. Demand for services/goods and active commitment from board members are not substantial challenges, based on analysis of the responses (i.e. 0% of SEs, 6.25% of SEs' advisors and 6.25% of SEs' partners in all four countries). Table 12 includes a summary of the three cohorts' responses.

Table 12. SEs' growth challenges.

Growth challenges	SEs	SEs' advisors	SEs' partners
Not enough expertise on how to grow the business	3	2	2
Not enough personnel with the requisite skills and experience	2	3	3
Not enough money for investment in growth	1	1	1
Not enough demand for services/products	4	4	4
Not enough active commitment from board members	5	5	5
Other			

SEs' skills and expertise areas

Of the 15 skills areas presented to the three cohorts, there was a significant variance only in 'Business & strategic planning'. While 75% of SEs nominated this area as being critically or quite important, 95% of the external stakeholders (SEs' advisors and partners) considered it to be critically or quite important, and over 50% of both stakeholder groups deemed it to be critical. However, understanding better the priority given by the three cohorts, the skill areas are collated into three distinctive ones as follows:

1. Priority 1 Skills & Expertise Needs: these skill areas are vital, with over 85% of respondents classifying them as critical.
2. Priority 2 Skills & Expertise Needs: these skills, although not as critical as those in the category above, are also vital, with between 70% and 85% of respondents classifying them as critically and quite significant, with a lean toward quite important.
3. Priority 3 Skills & Expertise Needs: 'Managing multiple bottom lines' is less important than the others for all three cohorts (over 50% of all three cohorts).

Table 13 indicates the list of skills and expertise needs according to the three cohorts' priorities.

Table 13. A priority list of skills and expertise needs for SEs.

Skills and expertise needs	Priority 1 Skills Needs	Priority 2 Skills Needs	Priority 3 Skills Needs
Expertise in how to maintain sustainability and growth	√		
Financial planning and management, including risk management, internal auditing, etc.	√		
Communication, sales & marketing skills	√		
Soft skills, e.g. interpersonal skills, listening, etc.	√		
Developing and motivating staff	√		
Fundraising and funding from different resources	√		
Business & Strategic Planning	√		
Project Management skills		√	
Procurement and how to win contracts		√	
Skills to monitor & assess Social Impact		√	
IT and online communications technology (ICT)		√	
Governance and leadership for SEs		√	
Networking with stakeholders, collaborative partnerships, and alliances		√	
Gaining and sustaining community buy-in and market acceptance		√	
Managing multiple bottom lines			√

SEs' training preferences and challenges

The preferred learning approaches across all three cohorts were 'Work-based learning', 'Blended Learning' and 'Seminars from successful SEs'. While SEs' advisors advocated that 'One-to-one mentoring' was a practical learning approach, it was ranked 6th of 8 by the SEs' cohort. All three cohorts asserted that online training was the least practical learning approach, whether conducted in a class or in an individual's own time. Figure 2 depicts a graph with the percentage of the three cohorts' responses.

'Unavailability of funding to pay for further training' and 'Lack of available time' were the two factors that appeared to be the most critical barriers for SEs, from all three cohorts, regarding their participation opportunities in training. 'Lack of accessible/available training courses on relevant subjects' was reflected in the SEs' cohort's response in <15%. 'Lack of staff capacity' and 'Lack of basic skills, training & knowledge in relevant subjects' did not appear to be a barrier to training participation, nor did the 'Lack of learning culture' seem significant amongst those surveyed. Figure 3 depicts a graph with the percentage of the responses.

In summary, given the above analysis of the three SEs' stakeholders' responses regarding the difficulties in management, sustainability, growth and training issues that SEs face and the scarcity of a blended learning material combining theory and practice suitable for SEs (Addae & Ellenwood, 2021; Worsham, 2012), the following section focuses on addressing these challenges by developing an innovative training platform friendly for SEs.

Social B's training content development

The above analysis of the current European SEs' management, sustainability, growth and training challenges identifies that training options must adopt specific blended methodologies and appropriate techniques that harmonise well with the pedagogies in social entrepreneurship. To respond to the learning needs of each of the three target cohorts and facilitate action and experiential learning, the training content delivered by SocialB was designed with the following pedagogical approaches illustrated in Figure 4.

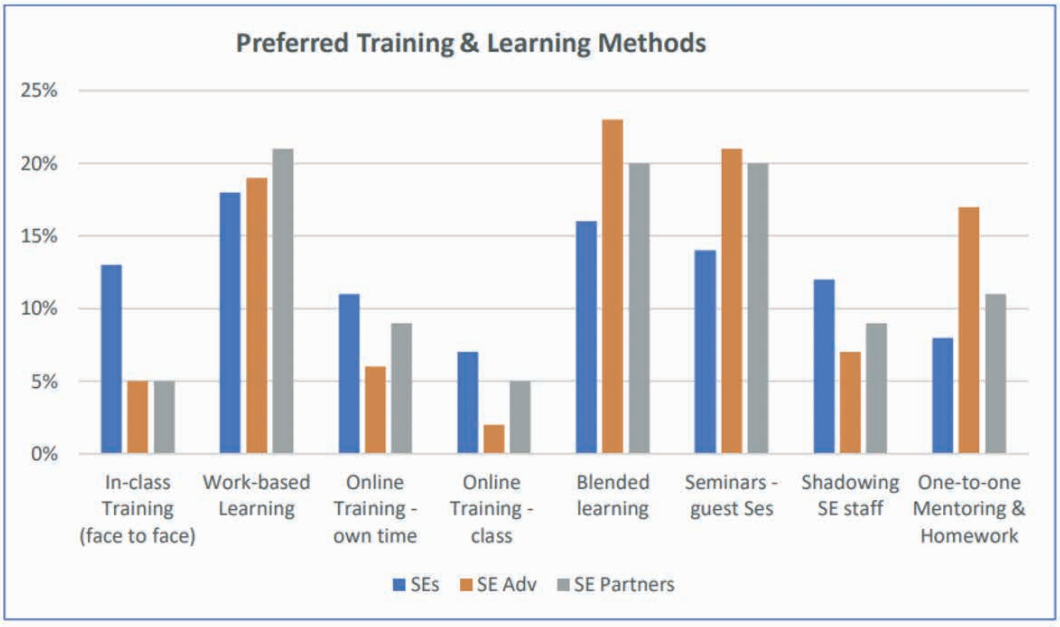


Figure 2: SEs' most preferred training and learning methods. (Source: SocialB Report O2.3, 2020)

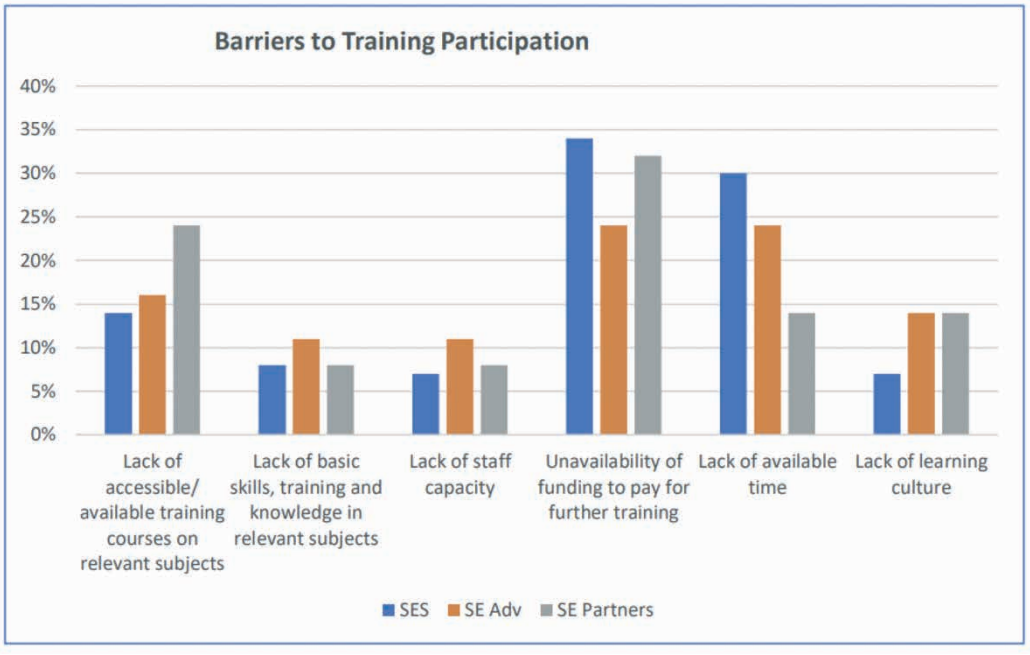


Figure 3: SEs' most crucial challenges for training participation. (Source: SocialB Report O2.3, 2020)

More specifically in SocialB:

1. Learning material is optimised in an e-Learning Repository platform, enabling online (synchronous or asynchronous) and blended learning delivery modes and ensuring accessibility to students, trainers, HEIs, VET and SEs' practitioners. The content is available as Open Educational Resources (OERs) with Creative Commons licenses.
2. Practice-Based pedagogies [introduced by (Neck & Greene, 2011)] are utilised so that '*teaching entrepreneurship*' is replaced by '*doing entrepreneurship*', where practice prevails (Fayolle, 2005).

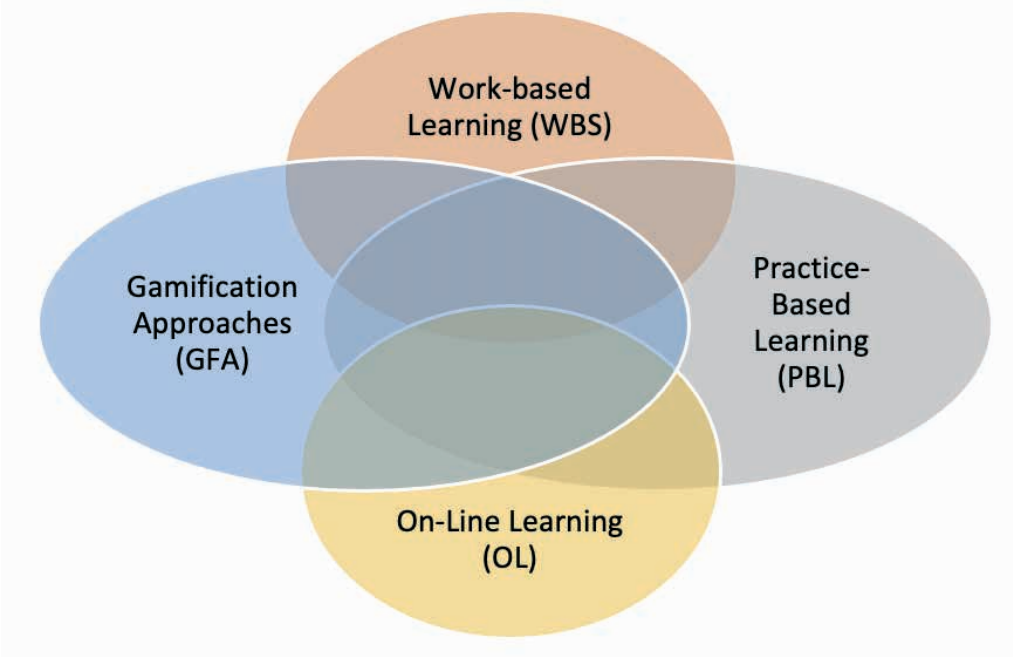


Figure 4: SocialB's pedagogical approaches.

SocialB uses process-oriented rather than content-oriented teaching; problem-based teaching instead of conceptual learning; practical delivery methods such as group projects and business plan development; practical experience in producing and selling products and services; learning from mistakes (Oyelola et al., 2013); and draws on principles from practice-based wisdom (Zhu et al., 2016). This approach to problem-based learning ensures student-centred active learning in work contexts directly relevant to study SEs' field.

3. Work-Based Learning (WBL) approaches are utilised where appropriate, focused on SE practitioners and students, where they can apply to learn in natural SE work environments.
4. Gamification techniques and approaches are explored to engage students and social entrepreneurs, motivate and facilitate participation and engagement, promote peer learning, and encourage situational problem-solving. Gamification is increasingly regarded as an effective teaching methodology to positively influence learners' attention and commitment, leading to the practical acquisition of targeted skills, knowledge and competencies (Kapp, 2012).

Even though online and blended learning is becoming a more common educational tool, international collaboration in course design and development in tandem with the exchange of good sectoral practice/s is not standard yet. However, these tools are believed to be highly beneficial for the progression of knowledge within this field (EUA, 2018; Henderikx & Jansen, 2018). Therefore, the SocialB project approach of co-creating and co-delivering innovative learning materials between HEIs/VET, SEs and SEs' business support agencies enables not only the exchange of knowledge and experience between these sectors, but also provides tests of the project outputs in four countries with differing but complementary policies and practical experiences in SEs' sectoral development.

Moreover, the overall training methodology approach of SocialB introduces innovative training techniques and recommendations for their application to the SEs' education context under specific criteria. In particular, it presents practical and creative training/learning techniques based on various methodologies employed in traditional entrepreneurship training, counselling practice, social sciences, humanitarian studies and ICT, grounded in practice and activity-based pedagogies. These innovative training practices can support providers and trainers in providing adequate training to SEs and students. They can also assist potential and existing social entrepreneurs to improve their work practice skills and to fully exploit the economic, social and cultural potential and possibilities afforded by the SE model.

The SocialB's learning content is divided into six Modules, each composed of four Learning Units, as displayed in Table 14. They are designed in such a way as to address identified skills gaps and training needs in key areas critical for the SE sector development, sustainability and expansion. In particular, these 24 Learning Units enhance

essential skills and competencies of existing and future practitioners currently involved with SEs through effective pedagogies for action and experiential learning targeted at social entrepreneurs.

Table 14. An overview of SocialB's Modules and Learning Units.

Modules	Learning Units
1. Introduction to SE	Unit 1 – History and evolution of SE in Europe Unit 2 – Reshape business value chain into social value chain Unit 3 – Introduction to Social Innovation Unit 4 – Public/Private partnerships in the field of SE
2. Project Design and Management	Unit 5 – EU projects – EU opportunities for the development and funding of SEs Unit 6 – Procurements processes, funding applications and proposals writing Unit 7 – Project Management Unit 8 – Soft Skills
3. Human resources	Unit 9 – The role of human resource management Unit 10 – Recruitment and selection of employees and volunteers Unit 11 – Managing employee performance Unit 12 – Leadership and communication for maximum impact
4. Social impact assessment	Unit 13 – Introduction to Social Impact Assessment Unit 14 – Methodology and tools to assess social impact Unit 15 – Data analysis and visualization Unit 16 – The importance of communicating social impact to key stakeholders
5. Financial and Sustainability for SE	Unit 17 – Strategic planning and the life cycle of SEs Unit 18 – How to build a business plan Unit 19 – Financial planning and cash flow constraints Unit 20 – Credit access and opportunities for SEs: Social Finance and Social Impact Finance
6. Growth Strategies, Marketing and Fundraising for SE	Unit 21 – Growth strategies and long-term profitability of SE projects Unit 22 – Market evaluation and competitiveness assessment Unit 23 – Fundraising and diverse fundings for SE Unit 24 – Marketing, Sales and Networking skills

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

This paper contributes to the literature on social entrepreneurship education by placing a new blended and innovative learning approach which is more attractive and fitting for social entrepreneurs. In particular, this study is the first systematic attempt, reflecting on Addae & Ellenwood's call (2021), which stresses the need to bring closer the workforce with theory-driven experiential and action learning experiences. The end result of this study is to introduce a new learning platform which is launched by an EU-funded programme (i.e. SocialB). Other theoretically sound elements of this study are: firstly, the engagement of different SEs' stakeholders from four EU countries, Italy, Slovenia, Greece and Ireland, in identifying the training gaps, shedding light to contemporary needs of SEs, regarding management, sustainability and growth issues. This approach offers a multifaceted and multidisciplinary angle to social entrepreneurship education. Secondly, according to the SEs' stakeholders' experiences in all four countries, the results highlight that work-based and blended learning techniques are crucial for social entrepreneurs. Thus, this study stresses that social entrepreneurship educators can eliminate '*entrepreneurship education's dark side theory*' by implementing innovative experiential learning methods (Talmage & Gassert, 2021). Following this pathway, SEs' trainers can provoke their students to critically analyse the different theoretical and practical aspects of social entrepreneurship and thus deter existing or prospective social entrepreneurs from business failure. Finally, from a broader theoretical standpoint, the present study contributes to social entrepreneurship theory by illuminating its myriad dynamics in the business world through promoting blended learning techniques and changing the SEs' educational system (Kickul et al., 2021).

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This paper also has practical implications as it outlines the development of the SocialB's training/learning modules and learning units. In particular, based on innovative pedagogical approaches (action and experiential learning, e-learning, work-based learning, problem-based learning and gamification approaches and techniques), the SocialB project enables SEs' stakeholders and students to have widespread accessibility to a training material and practice toolkit and to learn about the SEs' world, growth and sustainability. This project also brings together varied academic and practitioners' skills, expertise and knowledge that led to the design of an innovative learning/training platform consisting of 24 Learning Units in 6 Modules. Finally, these Learning Units' material and methodologies form the basis of a common EU-wide HEIs/VET approach to education and training in the SE field and allow a range of HEIs and VET providers to adopt them fully or partially across the EU or worldwide.

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This research has been carried out within the framework of the European project *Social Business Educational Ecosystem for Sustainability and Growth (SocialB).* SocialB is a collaboration between 8 partners from the social enterprise, training and Higher Education sectors in 4 countries – Ireland, Greece, Italy and Slovenia. This project is funded by the Erasmus+ Knowledge Alliance programme. SocialB aims to design, develop and pilot an accessible suite of learning resources to support individual learning, organizational learning and network development in the field of social enterprise. The result of the project is learning resources presented in the framework of blended learning materials in 24 Learning Units and designed to address identified skills gaps and training needs in key areas critical for the development, sustainability and expansion of the Social Enterprise sector.

The project ran from January 2020 until December 2022. The resulting Learning Units will aim to stimulate significant changes in HEI curricula and VET training programmes by integrating a learner-centred approach oriented to real, problem-based learning and skills acquisition in the field of social entrepreneurship.

AUTHOR BIOS

Argyrios Loukopoulos is a PhD Candidate in Social Entrepreneurship and Organizational Behavior in the Department of Business Administration of the University of Patras. He also holds an MBA in New Principles of Business Management and a Bachelor in Economic Science from the Department of Economics of the University of Patras. His research focuses on organizational growth, social capital and social impact assessment of social enterprises. He has been an HR Manager in the Hellenic Air Force for 12 years.

Marie Taylor currently works as a Senior Project Officer in the Development Unit, Technological University Shannon (TUS) across a number of project areas. Her focus is on social enterprise, community development, sutainability, multi-functional agriculture, heritage, tourism and rural development. She has taught at second level and at third level in the University of Limerick and Mary Immaculate College in Geography Pedagogy for Primary and Second Level, and in Human Geography.

Aikaterini Sotiropoulou is a PhD candidate in social entrepreneurship and organizational behaviour at the University of Patras at the Department of Business Administration. She holds an MSc in Adult Education and Banking and a bachelor's in international and European Economics. Her research focuses on motivation, personal values, organizational commitment, individual performance, and work engagement. She is currently working as a Researcher at the University of Patras and a Business Consultant. She has been an adjunct lecturer at the Technological Educational Institute of Western Greece for ten years, teaching finance and economics and VET Training Director for eight years. She has a 20-year of experience in the design, coordination and evaluation of national & EU projects (Interreg, Erasmus+, AMIF etc.) on a wide variety of subjects (social entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship, rural development, adult education, social inclusion, migration etc.).

Barbara Hvalic Erzetic is a teaching assistant at the Academic Unit for Entrepreneurship (School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana). She received her PhD with the thesis The Impact of Education and Training on Entrepreneurial Success and her Master of Science in Interpersonal Relations in Small Business in Slovenia. Her research and pedagogical work focuses on entrepreneurship. She has lectured on entrepreneurship at various universities, colleges, workshops, and programs, and has advised entrepreneurs on starting a business.

Sara Mikolič is a PhD candidate, a young researcher and assistant in the field of Geography at the University of Ljubljana. Her PhD research interest is new entrants into agriculture (newcomers and young farmers). As a geographer, she participates in international and national research and applicative projects, addressing rural development (new entrants in agriculture, rural community resilience, social entrepreneurship, gender equality) and environmental topics (water democracy). She has been strongly involved in local development (employed at rural municipality), prepared projects for EU level and for LEADER/CLLD measure.

Irma Potočnik Slavič is full professor and her research and pedagogical work focuses on rural development in Slovenia and abroad, development inequalities and endogenous development approach. She was the main organizer or member of the organizing committee of several international conferences and has led workshops and thematic sections and has been a visiting professor (Saarbruecken, Liege, Olomouc, Sarajevo, Tartu, Soest). She participates in international (DERREG, TELI2, NEWBIE, SocialB) and national projects (agritourism, supplementary activities on farms, conflicts in rural areas).

Arianna Manti is post-doc fellow at the University of Milan Bicocca, for a project on social impact assessment metrics. She holds a PhD in Public Management and Governance at the University of Rome Tor Vergata. She graduated in International Cooperation and Development and after work experience in England, she enrolled in a Master's in Business Administration to acquire managerial skills. During the second year of her BA Master, she had the opportunity to work for 4 months in Tanzania in a social enterprise, where she conducted a study on income generating activities for the sustainability of Social Enterprises.

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APPENDIX A

- Small compensation for the services we provide.
- Unforeseen events and costs and low capital base.
- The problems that arise from the horizontal governance model.
- We have low margins and we sell only Slovenian ECO food - which results in lower turnaround and lower income/profit.
- Delays in payments due.
- Lack of support/investment in SE as a whole and expectation to deliver more impact/reach/scale/services with grants etc. as opposed to building a sustainable business with capacity for growth the in the medium to long term - also over-reliance on corporate funding/partnerships and a complete undervaluing by the private sector of the Third Sector's professionalism and impact.
- A steady stream of revenue from a specific product / service.
- No valid information from official bodies about the operation of the SE.
- To set up excellent sustainable service in a way that will function on the market.
- We employ people who are hard to employ, they are ambitious but under-educated with many shortcomings.
- Slovenian market specifics and not being able to sell our products to educational institutions because they prefer buying new equipment - national politics is not social enterprise friendly.
- COVID-19.
- Not being in business due to lack of time from our founders - time is for us biggest challenge at the moment.
- Size.