



Barriers of Social Innovation in Academic Curricula

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Abstract

The growing interest on social innovation as a viable approach to address research and development across the education is spreading from the social sciences and humanities to several domains of studies. Social innovation as a key domain of study is also challenging higher education institutions (HEIs) to develop and incorporate new methods and educational approaches that qualify individuals to develop innovative solutions to contemporary social issues. The importance of social innovation in academia is therefore associated with its role for enabling citizens to embrace the potential for the social changes. This is patent in European policy agendas as well as in other contexts such as Latin America, attracting the interest from researchers, stakeholders and policy makers around the world. In academics this is translated into a growing concern with the development of adequate methodologies to teach social innovation visions and practices, in order to qualify the students across different disciplines. To this end, this article sets up to explore the barriers faced by universities in Latin America when developing an academic curriculum for qualifying students for social innovation and social entrepreneurship. The work builds on the collection of data on the state of the art of education and training for social innovation across a sample of 10 Latin American universities, that took place in the context of the Erasmus+ project Students4Change. The aim of the project is contribute to the integration of teaching and learning approaches that promote the development of social innovation and social entrepreneurship competences in the curricula of universities in Latin America, aiming for the qualification of students for addressing social problems. This research offers an overview and an analysis of the existing barriers and needs, as expressed by university representatives. Overall, the results suggest that many of the HEIs have already advanced with some educational initiatives to this end, yet they often resort to occasional activities and training, therefore raising the calls for the development and formalization of more structures programs that are designed to promote social innovation, both in content and methods, in order to qualify students for social innovation.

Keywords: social innovation, universities, Latin America, barriers.

1. Introduction

The concept of social innovation is gaining momentum across HEIs, including many with substantial influence in the debate and agendas at the political, philosophical, economic and scientific domains [1]. The historical evolution of the role of universities in society has been approaching the so-called “ivory tower” closer to the society, under the designation of HE’s third mission, and progressively leading to breaking barriers across universities and society and changing paradigms [2]. This fact has attracted the attention of many scholars and researchers who stand for the role of universities at regional level [3]–[6]. Many studies focus on the importance, benefits and barriers of this relationship. This movement evidences not only the role of HEIs in research and development domains but also as a key actor for addressing social issues. Aligned with this view of the role of HEIs in transforming society, this study explores the experiences of 10 Latin America universities in embedding social innovation in their academic programmes, namely in the teaching and learning approaches and practices.

According to [7]–[9], social innovation became a key perspective in Latin America. Notwithstanding some barriers to its practice persist and challenge the necessary systemic transitions of traditional disciplines and areas of studies to a more innovative curricula, that can qualify individuals to social innovation initiative. As [1] claims the research on social innovation is a core matter in social science and humanities, along with evolution of the social innovation in academia. This result was supported by the evidences gathered from the data collected on the first-year of the Students4Change project (www.uestudents4change.org/) concerning the approaches and practices embedded in academic programmes as reported by Latin America universities. However, social innovation is a

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multidisciplinary field whose activities often build on very diverse activities including nonprofit and social entrepreneurship ventures, social economy initiatives, as well as the services sector, and corporate social responsibility practices. This calls for the development of specific personal and managerial competences in order to support their promoters in the challenging task of setting up sustainable models that guarantee the continuous engagement of communities and the change that is needed.

Aligned with these concerns the project Students4Change involved the development of a programme aimed at contributing to the qualification of professors for the integration of social innovation competences in the academic curricula – Teachers Training Course. The course was targeted to HE professors in Latin American countries, and engaged over 50 academic programmes, who will embed social innovation learning approaches in their curricula, including the experimentation of innovative active learning methodologies. Ultimately the qualification of professors is expected to impact the teaching and learning experience offered to the HE students, and consequently contribute to alleviate some existing barriers to the development of social innovation initiatives in that region.

2. Study scope, data and methods

The study builds on data collected across ten Latin America universities employing a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed, piloted and addressed to a selected sample of representatives from partner universities involved in the Students4Change project, covering in five countries (Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica and Mexico). The sample included two institutions from each country, and a balance between privates (PUC-Rio, PUCRS, PUCV, UNIMINUTO and ITESM) and public institutions (UCALDAS, ITCR, UCR, UTALCA and UCOL). In the questionnaire the representatives were asked about the relevance of several barriers for social innovation initiatives, resorting to an ordinal scale ranging from 1 to 5 ('strongly disagree -1' and 'strongly agree - 5'). The seven barriers included in the study were derived from literature review and from exploratory preliminary interviews with university representatives and social innovation stakeholders, and are listed below:

- 1- Lack of managerial experience;
- 2- Lack of understanding about the concept of social entrepreneurship;
- 3- Aversion to Risk;
- 4- Lack of technical knowledge about product processes, etc.;
- 5- Lack of knowledge about financing instruments and sources;
- 6- Lack of qualified and motivated staff and volunteers;
- 7- Contextual resistance and barriers (e.g. law, culture, etc.)

3. Barriers for social innovation in Latin America and Europe

At the heart of the social innovation and entrepreneurship movement in Europe, many initiatives took place, some of them as a response to the pressures of youth unemployment [10]. Social economy approaches are considered as a key pillar of societies, regarding their importance to achieve the wellbeing of individuals and communities.

Individuals and organizations that propose innovative solutions to societal challenges typically promote social entrepreneurship. Usually this type of entrepreneurs are highly motivated towards addressing community problems and lead to the identification of several possible answers [12]. Simultaneously, social entrepreneurs accept risks and actively seek for the necessary resources and partners to undertake their barriers and start-up their projects [13].

Social innovation in Latin America have different approaches to face and minimize social problems within a modern economic development given that there are less incentives addressed by government for a sustainable welfare and quality of life [7]. The economic crisis has caused a growing on the number of innovative initiatives in Latin America. Additionally particular importance is recognized to the role of universities concerning the embedding of social innovation and entrepreneurship on their curricula. Therefore, this process may contribute to fulfill the gaps between theoretical and practical absence of this topic in academic curriculum. The obstacles identified on this research concerns the reality in Latin America and the process to implement social innovation, namely as an opportunity for youth employability. The following figure 1 presents the barriers identified by the ten universities. ng one more expressive barrier for social innovation and social entrepreneurship succeed in the reported universities contexts.



BARRIERS FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

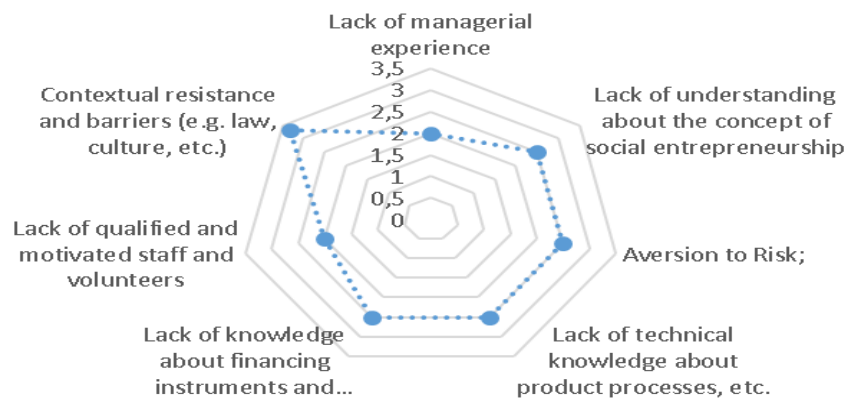


Figure 1 - Barriers for social innovation in Latin America universities

The barriers for social innovation and social entrepreneurship inclusion to succeed in the reported universities contexts is "Contextual Resistance and Barriers (e.g. laws, culture, etc.)". This may be a sensible obstacle, which lead us to understand the main influence of cultural thinking about the social innovation applicability in Latin America. The lack of feasibility and resilience attached to the change needed for finding solutions for social problems. This is one of the missions of universities in embedding the social entrepreneurship concepts in their "ratio studiorum".

BARRIERS COMPARISON

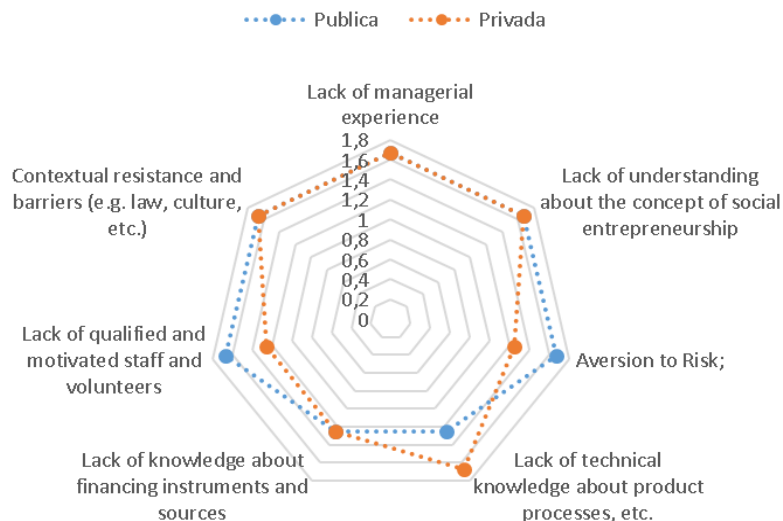


Figure 2 - Comparison between private and public university about the barriers of social innovation in Latin America

When comparing the answers of public and private universities on the barriers the gaps are relevant in three dimensions. The lack of qualified and motivated staff and volunteers is particularly important for public universities and brings many discussions on this topic; The aversion to risk is also a sensitive dimension for public universities due to the economic crisis those institutions have been prudent in taking risks. Finally, the Lack of technical knowledge about product processes is less important for representatives in public HEIs, but this indicator in private institutions is.

Latin America universities report a total of 45 bachelor courses, where they offer, both compulsory and optional, courses that set in social innovation methodologies. The courses are divided in six main areas of studies: arts and humanities (3), social sciences (27), engineering and technological

sciences (4), health sciences (3), natural sciences (6) and transversal (2). Expressively, social sciences integrate the central area of studies. Such area represents an important base for present and further projects to be developed.

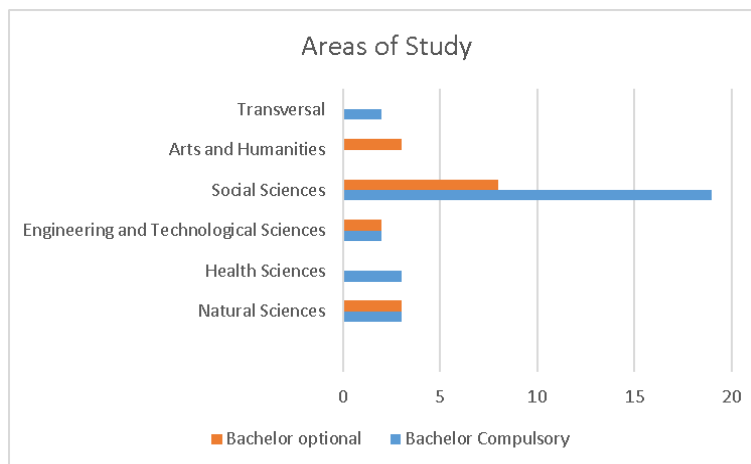


Figure 3 - Overview of areas of study offered by Latin America universities

4. Conclusions

The present hegemony of social sciences for academic development of social innovation may be seen as a path claimed by [1] to focus on developing studies in the social sciences to overcome the barriers to social innovation. The role of universities represent a core set arising innovation systems [6], in both private and public contexts in Latin America universities, not only regarding their social relevance or academic merits, but successfully addressing solutions to social issues, denouncing the inequality of the welfare state and low quality of life. Further research and studies will be developing to clarify the obstacles in these contexts and to try to overcome them in order to include the appropriate methods to develop competences for social innovation in HEI.

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