

Students' Social Initiatives as A Prerequisite for Sustainable Development of Social Entrepreneurship: A Case Study in Bulgaria

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ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurship is an important source of economic growth and a driver of the social economy. An important condition for its development and the creation of a business in this sphere is the participation of the individual in social initiatives. Summarizing the scientific ideas shows that the issue of social entrepreneurship is relatively well understood, while that of social initiatives is very poorly addressed. Considering this fact, the authors seek to obtain more information regarding the essence of social initiatives and the readiness of students to participate in its. The aim of the present study is to determine the desire and opportunities among students for their involvement in social initiatives and their attitudes towards starting a social entrepreneurial business. To achieve the goal, students from Bulgarian higher education institutions were surveyed using the respondent method. The application of this method is appropriate because of its adequacy in terms of the specificity of both the subjects studied and the data to be obtained. The survey used in the study contains close-ended questions aimed at ascertaining students' participation in social initiatives, as well as their views on starting a social entrepreneurial business. The findings of the study show that there are certain problems related to the organization of social initiatives and in terms of starting a social entrepreneurial business. A significant result of the study is that the enabling environment for the development of social entrepreneurship significantly influences the possibility of creating student social initiatives at the university. The study can be used as a model for analysis of the relationship between social entrepreneurship and students' social initiatives.

Keywords: social entrepreneurship, social initiatives, students, Bulgaria

1. Introduction

One of the challenges facing the modern economy is the search for an adequate answer to the question of creating appropriate conditions for the sustainable development of social entrepreneurship. Moreover, social entrepreneurship is one of the prerequisites for the sustainable development of the economy of any country, including in the social sphere. In addition, the potential of social entrepreneurship could be considered as one of the main drivers for the socio-economic development of society. It is a fact that more and more researchers and business representatives are turning their attention to social entrepreneurship. Their main objective is to achieve comprehensive and sustainable development, based on innovations and responsive changes (Suresh & Simon, 2023). At the same time, social entrepreneurship is seen not only as a new transformation of the market and society, but also as a major rearrangement in running a business (Sekliuckienė & Kisielius, 2015). Moreover, the stimulation of social entrepreneurship is among the main

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priorities of the European Commission and is a key element of the European Social Model (Rinkova, 2014). At the same time, an important emphasis that Sekliuckiene and Kisielius (2015) put is that social entrepreneurship is an important tool that social entrepreneurs use to address social challenges. It is no coincidence that social entrepreneurs are defined as the "new engines of reform" (Dees, 2007) who focus on creating initiatives to solve social problems.

An important resource for the development of social entrepreneurship and the implementation of social causes is the implementation of social initiatives by businesses, educational institutions and individuals. Moreover, it is necessary for educational institutions to give students space and time to make the right career choices (Pruett *et al.*, 2009). Although, a small part of them are aware of their professional choice, they often reconsider this choice as they develop (Dvorský *et al.*, 2019). In addition, individuals implementing social initiatives are able to apply previous experience and knowledge (Nsereko *et al.*, 2018). It is necessary to consider that entrepreneurs taking initiatives are capable of creating social businesses (Frese, 2015; Parker *et al.*, 2010). This allows some authors to conclude that initiative drives entrepreneurial behaviour (Frese, 2015; Parker *et al.*, 2010). In addition, the formation of social initiatives is one of the most important conditions for the development of an individual's career (Savchenko, Vovk & Pravdyuk, 2021) and for the acquisition of knowledge, skills and experience among students for the creation and development of a social entrepreneurial business. The implementation of social initiatives in higher education institutions is essential for the formation of future specialists in social entrepreneurship. As the main task of universities, Andrushchenko and Khvorostyanko (2022) define the development of certain social skills of students, mainly related to active social behaviour, communication and leadership skills, organizational skills, skills to deal with conflict situations. In our opinion, the possession of such skills by the students as the ability to work in a team and self-initiative in work should be added to them.

To understand the current state of research in social entrepreneurship and students' social initiatives, a comprehensive analysis is needed. The scientific literature review shows that whereas the issue of social entrepreneurship is relatively well understood, on the other hand that of social initiatives is very poorly addressed. Therefore, the aim of the study is to determine the desire and opportunities among students for their involvement in social initiatives and their attitudes towards starting a social entrepreneurial business.

The sources that were used include a questionnaire survey. The analysis and evaluation are based on statistical methods - table method, linear regression and correlation analysis. The first section of the article provides background information on the essence and specifics of social initiatives, including those relating to the students. The second section describes the methodology used for the comprehensive analysis, including the sources of data and the methods of analysis. The third section presents the results of the analysis. Finally, the conclusion section summarizes the findings of the literature review and the results of the study.

2. Literature review

One of the important issues related to the sustainable development of social

entrepreneurship as an opportunity for progress in the modern social economy is that of the implementation of social initiatives by various entities. In this context, the need to clarify the problem related to the definition of social initiatives arises. The analysis of literary sources shows that this issue has not been studied to a sufficient extent. In support of this is the opinion of a number of researchers who claim that there is a lack of research regarding the development of social initiatives, as well as the process of social entrepreneurship (Sundaramurthy *et al.*, 2013; Weerawardena & Mort, 2012; Mair & Martí, 2006; Santos, 2012). Therefore, there is a need for a more thorough clarification of this issue by the authors.

In the scientific literature, social initiative is considered from the position of communication. In this regard, Larson (2000) emphasizes that the formation of the social initiative is impossible without the process of communication. In turn, Nsereko *et al.* (2018) believe that taking initiative is the key to becoming a successful social entrepreneur.

Andrushchenko and Khvorostyanko have a more specific view on the problem. They consider social initiative from different aspects - as an inseparable quality of the modern competitive personality, as a type of initiative and a prerequisite for social activity of the individual and as a phenomenon that includes social attitudes, social thinking, self-determination, independence, responsibility, goal setting, self-affirmation, well-being, motivation to succeed, ability to cooperate with others, readiness for social activity, communicative behaviour and leadership (Andrushchenko & Khvorostyanko, 2022). Of interest is the view of Savchenko *et al.* about the essence of the students' social initiatives. The authors claim that the students' social initiative represents "a systemic quality of a personality based on the ability to put forward original and meaningful socially useful ideas, disseminate them in the course of independent and responsible activities and implement them in order to achieve self-realization and a constructive shift in the surrounding reality" (Savchenko *et al.*, 2021).

Special attention deserves the interpretation of Makhinin *et al.*, who consider the social initiative from different perspectives. For example, they associate social initiative on the one hand with the ability for conscious, purposeful and active social work, and on the other with a form of expression of social and cultural personal needs (Makhinin *et al.*, 2018). They complement the understanding of social initiative as a subjective and socially significant basis of personal realization and initiative work. In our view, the opinion of these authors about the social initiative is correct, but at the same time we believe that it also applies to students' social initiatives. With regard to students' social initiatives, it is necessary to consider that they are not only a form of manifestation of social activity through the satisfaction of personal needs, but also a way of interacting with the reality of social life (Makhinin *et al.*, 2018). At the same time, the more the students themselves are involved in social initiatives, the more they acquire greater practical experience, which in turn contributes to the active exercise of sustainable social entrepreneurship activities. This also allows them to be more confident in their capabilities, which is important for the creation and development of a successful social entrepreneurial business. In this regard, it is necessary to emphasize that the development of social entrepreneurship initiatives should be seen as a process in which social entrepreneurs seek to create social value (Adomaviciute *et al.*, 2012). At the same time, the environment in which this specific type of entrepreneurship is manifested, on the one hand, influences the development of social

initiatives, and on the other hand, the stimulation of social entrepreneurs to take actions related to the organization of such initiatives (Oana & Shahrazad, 2013). Other authors consider that social initiatives are necessary to include sponsorships, promotions and partnerships (Basheka & Serugo, 2011).

In our opinion, student social initiatives can be considered as a phenomenon based on the individual's need for recognition, the readiness for social interaction with other individuals and the possibility of realization as a successful social entrepreneur. They are also an important way to ensure the social activity of the student, improving their self-realization and expressing their social and cultural needs.

3. Research methods

This study represents the results of a case study which was conducted among 102 students from higher education institutions in southwest region in Bulgaria. It should be noted that the sampling method was used to collect the information for these students due to the possibility of field work and obtaining adequate data about them.

Its goal is to determine the desire and opportunities for students' involvement in social initiatives and their attitudes towards starting a social entrepreneurial business. This, however, is a complex issue related on the one hand to the insufficient number of studies of this type in Bulgaria and on the other hand – to the insufficient clarification of the issues regarding the relationship between social entrepreneurship and students' social initiatives in the scientific literature. Considering this fact, the authors seek to obtain information regarding the readiness of students to participate in social initiatives and their attitudes towards starting and developing a social entrepreneurial business.

This study has used primary data, collected through a survey, which was distributed to 102 students from Bulgarian higher education institutions. The study was limited in time and place. The survey was conducted between November and December 2022. Using a questionnaire as a research instrument enabled the collection and analysis of quantitative data by using descriptive statistics. Data was collected from 102 students using a questionnaire with close-ended questions.

The enabling environment for development of social entrepreneurship and creation of students' social initiatives in the country's higher education institutions is assessed by the respondents on a 5-point Likert scale, including ratings from 1 (low) to 5 (excellent).

Linear regression and correlation analysis were used to examine the relationship between the opportunities that the environment provides for the development of social entrepreneurship and the possibility of creating students' social initiatives.

The presence or absence of dependence between the enabling environment for social entrepreneurship and the possibility of creating students' social initiatives is established using dispersion analysis. The following hypotheses are formulated:

- H_0 - between the differences in the value of the assessments of the environment for social entrepreneurship and the possibility of creating students' social initiatives in the university, there is no statistically significant influence;
- H_1 - differences in the value of assessments of the environment for social entrepreneurship significantly affect the assessments of the possibility of creating student social initiatives at the university.

A single factor regression analysis was conducted to test the relationship between the enabling environment for social entrepreneurship, the factor (x_i), and the possibility of creating students' social initiatives in the university, the result (y_i).

A correlation analysis was used to determine the strength of the relationship between the variables of the environment for social entrepreneurship and the creation of students' social initiatives in the university.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Sample Structure (Gender, Age, Level of education)

Directly related to the problem under consideration is the profile of the respondents according to three main criteria. In this regard, the results show that the share of female representatives prevails (76.5%). It is noteworthy that the share of male respondents (23.5%) is also not small. It is just over three times smaller than that of women. Regarding the age structure of the respondents, it was found that the majority of them (72.5%) are under 25 years of age, followed by those (19.6%) between 31 and 40 years of age. The share of students (5.9%) from the age group of 26 to 30 years is relatively low. It is interesting to note that the lowest share of respondents (2.0%) who claim to be 50 years old or older and who need to acquire additional qualifications in the field of higher economic education due to specific circumstances is the lowest. The characteristics of the surveyed students are complemented by the degree they have acquired. More than half of them have acquired secondary education (66.7%). The share of those who have acquired a higher education, educational and qualification degree "bachelor" is significantly lower (23.5%). In a comparative aspect, the smallest share of students who claim to have a higher education with a master degree is the smallest (9.8%).

4.2. Social entrepreneurship and social initiatives

The sound knowledge of the wishes and opportunities of the student community, both for their inclusion in social initiatives and for the implementation of such, helps to gain an idea about the knowledge, skills, competences and experience that students have in relation to the implementation of social activities. Bearing in mind that the implementation of social activities is the basis of social entrepreneurship, the students' abilities to participate and initiate social initiatives are important. On the other hand, it will give them confidence in creating and developing a social entrepreneurial business. The need to establish the wishes and opportunities of the students for the implementation of social initiatives and business development in this area is obvious. In this context, our research is aimed at investigating the desire and opportunities among students from Bulgarian higher education institutions for their involvement in social initiatives and their attitudes towards starting a social entrepreneurial business. In this context, it is necessary to bear in mind this type of research has not been carried out regarding the universities in Bulgaria as one of the important training centers in the field of social entrepreneurship.

One of the important aspects revealing the students' desire is their involvement in social initiatives. In this regard, the majority of respondents (62.7%) stated that they took part in the implementation of such initiatives. Regardless of this, however, the share of students (37.3%) who were not interested in and involved in the implementation of social initiatives

is not small. At the same time, it is of interest to clarify the issue of the diversity of social initiatives in which the students took part. In this context, the results of the survey on this issue, presented in table 1, show that the majority of the respondents (47.1%) declared participation in social initiatives, mainly related to the implementation of volunteer activities. At the same time, they also direct their efforts towards their implementation, both in social projects (34.5%) and in activities directly related to the protection, conservation and sustainable development of the environment (31.2%). Regardless of the fact that one of the main activities inherent in social entrepreneurship is the support of vulnerable groups, it is observed that not such a large part of students (22.6%) direct their attention to the inclusion of such. It is noteworthy that the least attractive for students (15.7%) are the activities related to health prevention.

Table 1. Social initiatives in which students have participated

Social initiatives (%)	Share
Implementation of volunteer activities	47.1
Support for vulnerable groups	22.6
Implementation of social projects	34.5
Activities related to the protection, conservation and sustainable development of the environment	31.2
Activities related to health prevention	15.7
Activities related to the preservation of traditions, lifestyle and culture	21.6
Activities related to the holding of sports events	21.4

Source: Authors' survey.

It is also interesting to identify the reasons why the students were involved in social initiatives (table 2). In this regard, the results of the survey show that a significant part of the respondents (49.0%) indicated personal interest and initiative as the main reason for participation. As important reasons for involvement in social initiatives, the respondents point out the organization and implementation of causes important to society (34.4%) and the opportunity to exchange experience (29.4%). It is noteworthy that the students highlight the experience of preparing their own proposals for social initiatives as the most insignificant reasons for involvement in social initiatives.

Table 2. Reasons for students' involvement in social initiatives

Reasons (%)	Share
Acquisition of additional knowledge, skills and competences in the sphere of social entrepreneurship	27.5
Gaining experience in their own proposals for social initiatives	4.8
Personal interest and initiative	49.0
Public cause	34.4
Exchange of experience	29.4
Opportunity for finding a job	3.9
	17.6

Establishing contacts with other participants, business, and academia

11.8

Making use of their leisure time

Source: Authors' survey.

Given that the conduct of student social initiatives is an important prerequisite for the accumulation of experience and confidence among students for the creation and development of a social entrepreneurial business, the fact that a significant share of them (69.4%) claim that they have no information about the conduct of such type of initiatives at the university where they are studying is alarming. At the same time, more than a third of the respondents are familiar not only with the conduct, but also with the frequency of such type of initiatives. In this regard, 24.3% of them state that social initiatives are held once a year, and 6.3% - once every few months.

Knowledge of EU policies and programs is also important for starting and developing a social entrepreneurial business and getting involved in social initiatives. It is noteworthy, however, that a small proportion of students (31.4%) have information about these policies and programs. The fact that a significant part of the respondents (68.6%) stated that they were not familiar with them testifies to the still unrealized important opportunity that they provide not only for starting a social entrepreneurial business, but also for the realization of social initiatives. This is confirmed by the results of the survey, which show that a significant part of the students (41.2%) did not study the possibility of creating and developing a social entrepreneurial business.

At the same time, almost half of the surveyed students (41.2%) feel hesitant when planning to start a social entrepreneurial business. The share of those (33.3%) who firmly emphasize that they do not intend to start a social entrepreneurial business is also not small. Nevertheless, over a quarter are firmly convinced (25.5%) of their capabilities and have plans to start and develop such a business.

Marques et al. (2018) state that entrepreneurial education, including the social one, generally have a more significant impact on business and social sciences students. Possessing knowledge, skills and competencies in the field of social entrepreneurship is an important prerequisite for involving students in social initiatives with a view to gaining practical experience. This fact is confirmed by the opinion of the majority of students (89.9%) regarding the need to study social entrepreneurship as a subject at universities. As a justification of this need, they mainly emphasize the presence of symbiosis between social entrepreneurship and social initiatives (table 3). They mainly focus on the opportunities for acquiring the knowledge, skills and competencies necessary for managing a successful social entrepreneurial business (58.9%) and on knowing the main steps, challenges and goals in the process of developing, launching and implementing successful social entrepreneurial initiatives (35.5%).

Table 3. Reasons for studying Social Entrepreneurship at university

Reasons	Share (%)
Practical preparation for starting a social entrepreneurial business	15.7
Acquiring the knowledge, skills and competencies necessary to run a successful social entrepreneurial business	58.9

Learning basic steps, challenges and goals in the process of developing, launching and implementing successful social entrepreneurial initiatives	35.5
Becoming familiar with the main strategies and risks associated with starting and managing a social entrepreneurial business	17.6

Source: Authors' survey.

4.3. Influence of the educational environment for the development of social entrepreneurship at the university on the possibility of creating student social initiatives

The obtained results of a variance analysis regarding the influence of the enabling environment for the development of social entrepreneurship on the possibility of creating student social initiatives at the university allow to establish whether the influence is significant or insignificant. The relationship between the environment for social entrepreneurship and the possibility of creating students' social initiatives in the university was empirically investigated. The results from the ANOVA-test estimations are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Results from ANOVA-test estimations

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value
Between Groups	54.97	4	19.8	0.05	2.52
Within Groups	45.18	97			
Total	100.15	101			

Source: Authors' calculations.

The results of the T-test to reject or accept the null hypothesis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. T-test

If	Then
T-test < critics value (i.e. $F < F_{crit}$)	The null hypothesis is accepted
T-test > critics value (i.e. $F > F_{crit}$)	The null hypothesis is rejected
$19.8 > 2.52$	The null hypothesis is rejected

Source: Authors' calculations.

The results from Table 5 show it is necessary to accept the alternative hypothesis that the enabling environment for the development of social entrepreneurship significantly influences the possibility of creating student social initiatives at the university.

Table 6 presents the correlation dependence between the environment for social entrepreneurship and the possibility of creating students' social initiatives.

Table 6. Correlation Matrix

	Environment for social entrepreneurship	Creating students' social initiatives
Environment for social entrepreneurship	1.0000	0.6325
Creating students' social initiatives	0.6325	1.0000

Source: Authors' calculations.

The estimated value of the correlation coefficient shows that there is a significant relationship between the enabling environment for the development of social entrepreneurship and the possibility of creating student social initiatives at the university.

The resulting coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.3969$) indicated a substantial part (39.69%) of the total change in the result, „opportunity to create student social initiatives at the university“ was due to variations in the factor, „enabling environment for the development of social entrepreneurship“.

5. Conclusions

In today's dynamically changing conditions, the social economy, whose main subjects are social entrepreneurs, is increasingly important for the sustainable development of the economy of any country. The study of social entrepreneurship and student social initiatives is an important issue of scientific and practical importance. Their in-depth knowledge is an important prerequisite for establishing the attitudes of students for their involvement in social initiatives and for starting a social entrepreneurial business.

The theory proves that an important role in the development of social entrepreneurship is played by social initiatives carried out by various entities. These initiatives are also an important condition, allowing both the formation and development of social skills among students and the acquisition of knowledge and experience for the development of a social entrepreneurial business. At the same time, social initiatives are the basis for satisfying the socio-cultural personal needs of students and for building them as specialists in social entrepreneurship.

The results of this study confirm some of the assumptions of the authors, that not a small part of the students were neither interested or involved in the realization of social initiatives. In addition, it was found that supporting vulnerable groups and activities related to health prevention were the least preferred initiatives by students. This research shows that among the reasons for involvement in social initiatives, students point out the experience of preparing their own proposals for social initiatives as the most insignificant. The analysis of the results of this study reveals that there is a lack of awareness about the social initiatives carried out in universities among most students. At the same time, the lack of sufficient awareness regarding such important tools for starting and developing a social entrepreneurial business and inclusion in social initiatives such as EU policies and programs is also identified. At the same time, the results of the survey show that relatively few students have explored the opportunities and intend to start a social entrepreneurial business. It is not by chance that the students suggest that, in order to gain practical

experience and the acquisition of knowledge and skills, social entrepreneurship should be studied as a mandatory discipline at universities. A categorical finding of the study is that the enabling environment for the development of social entrepreneurship significantly influences the possibility of creating student social initiatives at the university. Bearing in mind that this type of research has not been conducted in Bulgaria, we believe the results obtained could be used as a basis for further studies of this type. In addition, these results enrich scientific knowledge and simultaneously enable the formation of strategic guidelines for training in this field. In conclusion, this study confirms the importance of the discussion about social entrepreneurship and social initiatives in universities in Bulgaria.

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