

Bridging Universities and Communities through Social Innovation: A Case Study of the Erasmus + project DigiFunCollab

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Abstract

A "third mission" that goes beyond teaching and research is becoming increasingly anticipated in modern higher education institutions: encouraging active, mutually beneficial partnerships with their local communities. In this context, social entrepreneurship becomes vital for tackling societal issues with creative, neighbourhood-focused solutions. To promote civic participation, community partnerships, and social innovation capacity, this article uses the Erasmus+ project DigiFunCollab as a case study of integrating social entrepreneurship into university practice.

The initiative's main focus is on creating student-led social entrepreneurship projects, which work as both tools for societal impact and conduits for hands-on learning. These initiatives, which are rooted in community needs, were co-developed by students and university staff who served as mentors. In cooperation with HE institutions from Slovenia, Italy, and Romania, and German NGO, more than 50 social entrepreneurship projects were conceptualised and designed. These projects include a wide range of socially conscious topics, such as youth empowerment, environmental awareness, cultural inclusion, and rural revitalisation.

The project-based approach was supported by a formal framework, particularly through the use of the Social Business Model Canvas, which made it possible to design social value generation, stakeholder involvement, and sustainability mechanisms methodically. Although the project featured open-access digital modules for mentors and students, the co-creative process gives it academic value, as universities serve as social change agents integrated into local ecosystems and are knowledge facilitators.

Higher education institutions can institutionalise social entrepreneurship as a teaching activity and societal purpose by following the example of DigiFunCollab. This case emphasises how strategically valuable it is to combine entrepreneurial activity with community-engaged learning in order to promote creativity, inclusivity, and a renewed role for universities as drivers of social change.

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