

Training and development of social entrepreneurs in Romania. The impact of DigiFunCollab project implementation

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Abstract

The paper discusses the case of DigiFunCollab project implementation and impact in Romania; the project aims to develop an innovative digital self-learning course in social entrepreneurship for students and higher education staff. The approach provides a brief overview of social entrepreneurship in Romania, highlighting its relatively recent legal definition and the recent status of social enterprises in the country. As a general overview, a SWOT analysis is presented showing the status social entrepreneurship in Romania. Furthermore, aspects regarding the DigiFunCollab project implementation at Politehnica University of Timisoara (Romania) and the results obtained by students and mentors are discussed. A key conclusion of the research is that integrating social entrepreneurship education into university programs can play a fundamental role in addressing the knowledge gap and stimulating sustainable economic growth.

Keywords: Social entrepreneurship, higher education institutions, mentoring, DigiFunCollab.

INTRODUCTION

The DigiFunCollab (<https://digifuncollab.eu/>) project aims to develop an innovative digital self-learning course in social entrepreneurship for students and staff in higher education (HE), strengthening universities' civic engagement and participation in their regional communities. This goal is aligned with the EU Agenda for Higher Education (priority 2), "enhancing the social activity of universities in the community". In the implementation phase of the project, participants from the target group (students) develop social entrepreneurship projects that tackle real-world problems with the support of university mentors.

The paper aims to present the context of implementing social entrepreneurship education in the higher education curriculum through an EU-funded project (DigiFunCollab) and its impact. Furthermore, the authors set the loop on the implementation of the DigiFunCollab project by Politehnica University of Timisoara, a Romanian HE institution that is part of the project consortium. This case study reveals the effectiveness of the methodological approach proposed by this project and the possibility of further extending it in other universities.

Social entrepreneurship education is a powerful tool for implementing and accelerating innovation, sustainability and social impact of universities. By integrating entrepreneurial principles with social and environmental goals, social entrepreneurship education provides the skills, knowledge and mindset necessary for entrepreneurs to integrate solutions to complex societal problems in their businesses (Ahmed et al., 2024). One of its most significant outcomes is the impact on students and learners. Research indicates that it enhances a range of competencies, including leadership, empathy, problem-solving, and teamwork (Sardi et al., 2024). In addition to skill development, social entrepreneurship education has been shown to influence students' career aspirations and intentions. Lee et al. (2024) proved that this influence is attributed to the development of psychological factors such as learning goal orientation and a sense of meaning at work. Furthermore, the implementation of social entrepreneurship education in the undergraduate and graduate programs curriculum extends beyond the classroom, yielding positive outcomes for communities and the economy, harmonizing social, educational, and economic activities, thereby contributing to community development (Darmanto et al., 2021).

The article is structured as follows: (1) a brief overview of social entrepreneurship in Romania; (2) social entrepreneurship skills development – case study of Politehnica University of Timisoara, Romania.; (3) conclusions and final remarks.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP STATUS QUO

Social entrepreneurship education – a brief literature review

Research and educational programs play a pivotal role in advancing the institutionalization of social enterprises in Romania (EC, 2019). Since the EU accession of Romania in 2007, research endeavors have transitioned the focus from the third sector towards European Union paradigms of social economy and social enterprise. These frameworks have attracted the attention of Romanian decision makers, practitioners, and researchers alike. The significance of research and educational programs remains paramount (Capella-Peris et al., 2023); they have facilitated a deeper understanding of the role of social enterprise, delineated the sector's profile and characteristics, and furnished data on diverse organizations

meeting the criteria for social enterprises (Chui et al., 2023). Interest in social enterprises has been further propelled by the availability of funding from the European Social Fund (ESF).

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have started to show increased interest in the field of social economics and entrepreneurship. Among the outcomes of implementing social entrepreneurship education are improved sustainability and social impact, increased desirability and feasibility of pro-social behaviors (Kedmenec et al., 2017), harmonized social, educational, and economic activities (Darmanto et al., 2021), increased focus on quality of life and participatory design (Dupret, 2023), significant improvement in sociality, innovation, and market orientation (Hamid et al., 2024), learning orientation and meaningful work increase intentions (Lee et al., 2024), enhanced CSR perceptions and sustainable behavior (Ahmed et al., 2024), and enriched career aspirations and social impact intentions (Mooney & Cockburn, 2023).

The increasing cultural diversity and blending resulting from intercultural exchange in higher education necessitates skills that equip social entrepreneurs with sociocultural abilities for the future (Sharifi, Khoshnevisan, 2025). Executive managers find empirical value in addressing the overlooked gap within the higher education system (Liu et al., 2024). Sociocultural competencies hold appeal in preparing future higher education leaders to benefit society and humanity beyond political and cultural divides (Nguyen et al., 2024, Almeida, Sousa-Filho, 2023). Additionally, universities play a vital role in fostering social entrepreneurship initiatives by implementing tactics that promote such endeavors among their students.

The surge in social enterprise research is evidenced by the proliferation of studies and research initiatives undertaken by experts from both public and private institutions. This field has captured the interest of scholars from various disciplines, including sociology, management, and social work. While publications on social economy or social enterprises were scarce prior to 2010, there was a notable uptick in research between 2010 and 2013. A comprehensive literature review performed by Stanescu (2013) identified 107 studies focusing on social economy, social enterprise, and disadvantaged groups. Additionally, numerous social science journals have dedicated issues to topics such as social economy, social enterprises, and social entrepreneurship (EU, 2019).

Social entrepreneurship in Romania

The history of social entrepreneurship in Romania is relatively recent, as this concept was legally defined in 2015 with the adoption of Law no. 219/2015 regarding social economy. Before this point in time there were some legal provisions distributed among various laws that provided some benefits for employers who employed certain categories of people who were considered in need of special support, like disabled people (see Law 57/1992 on the employment of people with disabilities). Beginning with 1990, there was a surge in the establishment of mutual aid organizations, new cooperatives, and numerous NGOs. These entities adopted various principles characteristic to the social economy, including solidarity, collective responsibility, alignment between member interests and community or general interests, democratic oversight of activities by members, voluntary and free participation in social economy-specific organizational structures, distinct legal identity, managerial autonomy, and independence from government authorities (see art. 4 of Law 215/2015. Also, more on the history of social enterprises in EC, 2019). Since 2015, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has considered that in Romania there is a “moderate level of recognition” for the concept of social economy (EESC, 2016).

Political Context

Public policies aimed at supporting social enterprises are few and do not form a framework. The sole public institution addressing this issue to some extent is the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, specifically through the National Employment Agency. The most notable effort to promote social enterprise was the inclusion of 'social entrepreneur' as a recognized professional occupation on the Romanian Occupation Classification Index (COR) in 2012. Romania's Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) enacted as part of the EU provides, in component 13 - Social, an allocation of € 80 million dedicated to the social economy (grants of € 200 000 / enterprise). The expected results of these grants are minimum 350 newly established social economy structures (875 green jobs, 875 NEETS youth employed), 175 social enterprises in rural areas (with employment integration of NEETS youth), 175 social enterprises in the green and/or digital economy area, and at least 50 social economy enterprises supported to scale up with at least 350 new jobs created.

Business Context

Social businesses in Romania can be, as specified by Law 219/2015, cooperative societies, credit cooperatives, associations and foundations, mutual benefit societies for employees, pensioners' mutual benefit societies, agricultural companies, agricultural any other categories of legal persons, regardless of the field of activity, which comply, according to the definition and principles of the social economy provided for in the law. A social enterprise certificate can be obtained on request of the organizations if they comply with the following criteria (art. 8 para. 4 of Law 219/2015):

- They operate with a community-focused or societal benefit objective;
- Dedicate a minimum of 90% of their earnings or excess funds to social causes and statutory reserves;
- Upon dissolution, transfer remaining assets to one or more socially-oriented enterprises;
- Uphold the principle of social fairness for staff and leadership, ensuring that wage and compensation levels do not exceed a 1:8 ratio difference.

The certificate is valid for a period of 5 years, with the possibility of extension.

Social integration

Organizations qualify as social enterprises when at least 30% of their workforce or collaborative members come from vulnerable populations, with their work hours constituting no less than 30% of the total employee work time. A subset of these, known as social integration social enterprises, specifically focus on employing individuals from vulnerable groups. To be recognized as a social integration enterprise, an organization must obtain a social label certification, which remains valid for a period of three years. Both social and insertion social enterprises have a series of obligations to communicate and present their activity to the County Employment Agencies, which are the county branches of the National Employment Agency.

Preliminary conclusion: SWOT analysis of social entrepreneurship in Romania

Table 1 presents a brief overview of the analysis of social entrepreneurship in Romania; conclusions were considered for the DigiFunCollab training program development (based on the developing

curriculum for digital self-learning and non-formal courses for social entrepreneurship for university-community collaboration, done in collaboration by all partners) together with the developing of the social entrepreneurship projects for university-community collaboration (done by each partner).

Considering these findings of the social entrepreneurship development in Romania, the authors focused on improving the education in the field at the HEIs level, by integrating the open education resources created in the context of the DigiFunCollab project implementation (thus, addressing the weaknesses identified and included in Table 1). The SWOT synthesis was a good start for starting the training program in the field of social entrepreneurship and which was supported based on the DigiFunCollab training program. Furthermore, at Politehnica University of Timisoara, the project implementation is supported by the SUSRURAL (<https://susrural.upt.ro/>) previous project (funded by the European Social Fund through the Human Capital Operational Program 2014-2020) dedicated to the development of social entrepreneurship in the West Region of Romania. The SUSRURAL project identified great potential for the development of social businesses, and UPT demonstrated its capacity for training and support (mentoring) for entrepreneurs. This capital of knowledge and experience was used to develop the DigiFunCollab training program and then implement it in an e-learning system and offer mentoring (offline and online) to students.

Table 1: The SWOT analysis of social entrepreneurship in Romania

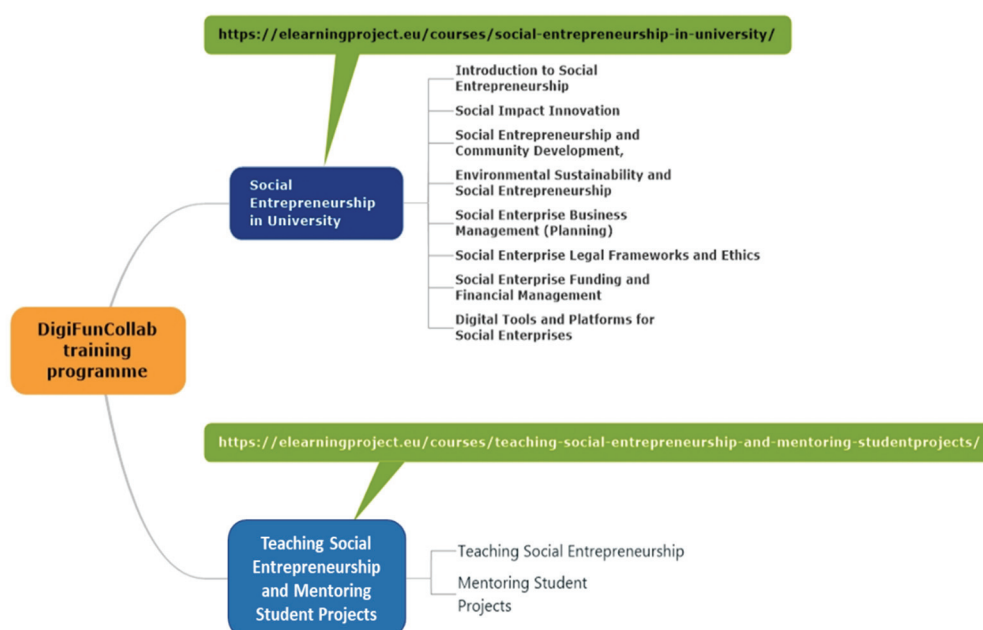
Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The number and diversity of successful creative social enterprise practices is increasing in the latest years • The general awareness of the necessity to support social entrepreneurship is growing in all relevant dimensions: social, political, economic, higher education, local and central authorities, etc. • Constant improving political, financial and legislative framework for supporting the social entrepreneurship at national scale 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inconsistent business and management mid- and long-term abilities within most of the developed social enterprises • Large scale inclusive issues towards the target categories of social entrepreneurship: people with disabilities, ethnic minorities (like gypsies), etc. • Reduced participation of higher education (HE) resources (groups, entities, promotion and methodologies etc.) in national social entrepreneurship development • Difficult financial gaining for social entrepreneurship
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The European Community (EC) encourages the development and strengthen of social enterprises (social economy) by its specific means: policies, financial support, projects platforms, etc. • The national policies and strategies dynamics become aligned with the European ones, increasing the support and the allowance of valuable resources towards the social economy (The national strategy regarding social inclusion and poverty reduction for the period 2022—2027, The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), etc.) • The nowadays governments have increased considerably the initiatives towards the social economy and social entrepreneurship (financing, legislation, mentoring, implementing, etc.) • Higher education and associated research involvement in the social economy and social entrepreneurship have increased in the last years, with overall positive effects; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The risk of opportunistic exploitation of opportunities of specific project calls related to social entrepreneurship and the resulting potential compromising the reputation such initiatives • The high risk of failure of the programs dedicated to social entrepreneurship, in the long term, once the specific consulting and mentoring period granted to the beneficiaries ends and due to lack of consistent business and management skills in newly established social enterprises • Bureaucratic barriers and lacks knowledge of local officials • The local market for products and services delivered by social enterprises is still quite limited and constraining • Reduced co-financing availability from banks and other systems towards the social enterprises or associated entrepreneurial business plans, especially after the end of the initial support framing (e.g., financed programs for the social economy), potentially generating their collapse • Lack of a clear framework to address the financial and support needs during the start-up, development, and growth phases of social enterprises.

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP SKILLS DEVELOPMENT – CASE STUDY

The DigiFunCollab project and the training program

This project's main goal is to provide a cutting-edge online self-study course on social entrepreneurship with an emphasis on students and interested HEIs personnel. The initiative is in line with the European Union's Higher Education Agenda, which places a strong emphasis on enhancing institutions' civic engagement and active involvement in local communities. Participants will work with mentors from the institution to build social entrepreneurship initiatives. By addressing the competence needs of HEIs staff and students, this program aims to promote community engagement and social innovation.

Figure 1: DigiFunCollab training program.



To accomplish its goals, DigiFunCollab initiative will develop and implement several activities related to five work packages: WP1 Project Management; WP2 National report on competences for digital self-learning courses and social entrepreneurship in the HEIs; WP3 Developing curriculum for digital self-learning and non-formal courses for social entrepreneurship for university-community collaboration; WP4 Developing social entrepreneurship projects for university-community collaboration; WP5 Dissemination and Sustainability. As can be seen, the first entails creating policy suggestions and compiling an extensive report on social entrepreneurship learning abilities. A digital self-learning course on social entrepreneurship will then be created, complete with gamification features and digital badges or certificates of accomplishment (description in Picture 1). To improve the relationships between HEIs and their communities, students, as participants in the project implementation, will collaborate on social entrepreneurship initiatives, developing projects, and case studies. Multiplier Events and dissemination activities will be used to spread the projects results in different other communities of HEIs.

The case study of Politehnica University of Timisoara, Romania

The implementation of the DigiFunCollab training program was carried out with students from the Master in Entrepreneurial Management for Business Administration, 1st year of studies, within the

discipline of Engineering and Management of Investments (which aims to support students in establishing and starting a business). Thus, in the period 1 Oct. 2024 - 17 Jan. 2025, the master's students took online courses by accessing the e-learning platform (<https://elearningproject.eu/courses/social-entrepreneurship-in-university/>) and developed business plans (mostly individual) that had a pronounced social dimension. Table 2 summarizes the social fields of the students' business plans. The total number of projects that have been finalized by students was 34 and they cover a large variety of topics and business fields demonstrating creativity and social innovation. The success rate was calculated based on the individual evaluations of the mentors who attended the presentation of each project/case study. This success indicator shows the number of projects selected to participate in the international DigiFunCollab competition.

Table 2: Short description of the UPT students and their success rate.

#	Project social field of the project	No. of projects	Valid projects for the national competition	Success rate
1	Sustainability and environmental protection (supporting the transition to a low-carbon and resource-efficient economy); green tourism services	12	3	1
2	Equal rights and inclusion (social insertion enterprises) and the employed people come from vulnerable groups	10	4	0
3	Elderly care and social assistance	2	2	0
4	Services for children; afterschool and kindergarten	3	3	1
5	Nutrition and healthy eating	2	2	1
6	Digitalization and social innovation	5	4	2
	TOTAL	34	20	5

Analysis of students' perception on DigiFunCollab mentoring program

The success of a mentoring program should be measured from both the perspective of the course providers and the trainees. Therefore, the authors (who were also mentors in the DigiFunCollab project) conducted a questionnaire-based study for feedback collection. The questionnaire was distributed online to the students who participated in the mentoring program of DigiFunCollab project.

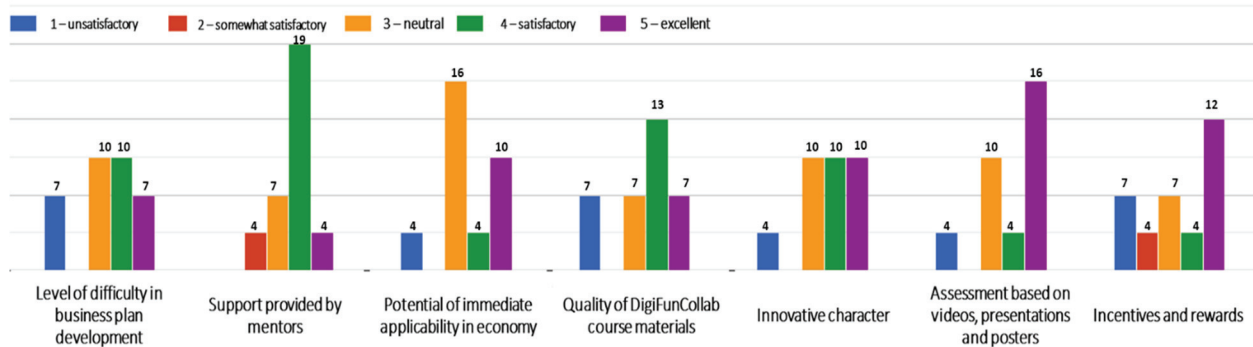
The questionnaire contained questions related to the following parameters: difficulty in elaborating the business plan, the level of support received from mentors, the potential immediate applicability of the developed business plans, how innovative the program is, assessment method, and incentives and rewards. Also, the students were asked to provide suggestions and key takeaways, as well as a general rating on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest value. These parameters were considered of great relevance for the quality and significance of the program. Figure 2 includes key results of the questionnaire.

All 34 students were asked to complete the online questionnaire, which was developed using Google Forms. According to the results, 60% of the students were satisfied with the level of support provided by the mentors. Further, 50% of student appreciated the difficulty level of the business plan as either satisfactory or excellent, while 30% provided 'neutral' ranking.

A surprising outcome was that 50% of respondents rated the potential applicability of their business plans in a real market environment. This can be linked to the self-perception of their entrepreneurial skills (which are currently under development considering that this is one of the first courses they take

during the master's program), as well as too ambitious plans, which contrast with low funding opportunities. This was one of the criteria used to select business plans for national and international competition.

Figure 2: UPT students' perception of the DigiFunCollab training program.



Nonetheless, students were generally satisfied with the assessment method (based on face-to-face presentations in front of a jury, business pitch videos and printed posters), along with the incentives and rewards they were offered during the course. Furthermore, the students rated the whole experience as 3.8/5 stars, reflecting an overall good perception of the course and the integration of DigiFunCollab mentoring, challenges, and educational materials into the curriculum. Finally, some of the respondents provided detailed insights into a specially dedicated section (which was not mandatory to fill in). The students reported the following: (a) complex and challenging project with an accelerated learning curve; (b) useful course in the long-term perspective, with diverse applications in entrepreneurial endeavours; (c) very interesting challenge, with high satisfaction if successfully completed.

Moreover, the sole downside highlighted by students referred to the perceived high workload in the context of numerous other projects that need to be delivered throughout the semester. Considering that this is an objective factor, independent from the specifics of the course and the DigiFunCollab program, the case of Politehnica University of Timisoara is a successful example of social entrepreneurship education in Romania.

CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REMARKS

Conclusions

In Romania, social enterprises, while still relatively new, face numerous constraints. First, there is limited comprehension of the concept, inadequate and ineffective targeted support from public authorities, and generally restricted administrative and policy capacity within the government to formulate and execute well-tailored policy measures for social enterprises. The legislative framework, exemplified by Law 219/2015, provides a relatively narrow perspective on sustainable development. Although there is a genuine need for social services and creative approaches to address ongoing challenges in Romanian society, government funding for social enterprises remains minimal, even though it serves as the primary source of financing for these organizations. The financial tools available to social enterprises are limited and often misunderstood, both by the entrepreneurs running these ventures and the government officials responsible for implementing them (see also EC, 2019).

The sector of social economy itself is still emerging as in other countries in the region. Civil society awareness and initiatives at the level of private organizations such as NGOs is not high, and there are few signs of coordinated actions to support social enterprise. A strategic and integrated approach is needed that includes stronger and more concrete state support (EC, 2019, Dorneanu, 2023). Of course, as with all state or EU funding, there is a risk of a dependence upon such financing methods which can be ultimately detrimental to social enterprises initiatives in the long term.

Advancing the growth of social enterprises in Romania requires taking risks. Acquiring accelerated and sustained development requires strategic foresight and effective management, along with political dedication to foster equal opportunities for all economic and social stakeholders. The traditional skepticism towards the associative sector also extends to social enterprises. The lack of dedication from political figures leads to sluggish institutional reforms, consequently constraining the environment for social enterprises to thrive. Moreover, the social enterprise sector in Romania remains unfamiliar to policy makers and the wider public, operating on the periphery of the welfare state. The concept of investing in social enterprises and opening the public market to all social-economy entities is currently both novel and challenging for public policy decision-makers in Romania. (EC, 2019). It is at this very point that education would be set as a beneficial factor, thus a more preeminent role of HEIs and other training providers would contribute towards the creation of a true working social economy that would be able to function largely by itself with few state interventions and even less funding.

Challenges and limitations of the study

While the outcomes of social entrepreneurship education are largely positive, there are challenges and limitations to its implementation. On the one hand, education insulated from the practice of entrepreneurial skills is faulty and proves insufficient for fostering an entrepreneurial mindset. Therefore, integrated programs are a better option. The legal support and infrastructure available can limit or ignite development of social businesses in a specific country, thus posing potential challenges when considering the possibility of implementing the DigiFunCollab methodology (including the mentoring program) in a certain country. At institutional level, the organizational culture and policy frameworks of each university can also influence the effectiveness of the DigiFunCollab program, if considered for implementation. Nonetheless, the results presented in this paper should be treated with caution, as their extrapolation can be done solely by considering the specifics of the Romanian context and the particularities of implementation in the case of Politehnica University of Timisoara. All in all, the paper aims to provide insights on the successful implementation of the project in the case of Politehnica University of Timisoara, demonstrating the success of the educational program combined with mentoring activities that conducted to development of 34 valuable social business ideas aimed at solving social and environmental problems particular to the Romanian context.

The DigiFunCollab mentoring program proved its efficiency, based on the results obtained by UPT mentors and their students. Therefore, the learning materials, which are open educational resources (OERs), will be integrated in the Engineering and Management of Investments discipline for the entrepreneurial master's degree program and will also be provided as an optional course for all undergraduate and graduate students in UPT. The social impact of educating young people on social entrepreneurship is further enhanced by the economic and social context of Romania, including the fact that it is a developing economy and beneficiary of the EU Just Transition Plan to clean energy.

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