

The Dictatorship of No Alternative

Mark Andreson 01 October 2019

Executive Summary

Glasgow Caledonian University in Scotland has become increasingly recognized as a leader in the field of social innovation for its pioneering work in embedding international social innovation networks in universities. The Southeast Asian Social Innovation Network (SEASIN) (<http://www.seasin-eu.org/>) has been established between eight higher education institutions (HEIs) in Thailand, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Cambodia along with four non-HEI social innovation organizations and three European universities. The approach argues that universities should support social innovation in a systematic way beyond ad hoc initiatives and sporadic activism. All these projects seek to demonstrate the potential of universities to use their knowledge by developing new paradigms and tools for targeted exchange between actors from all societal sectors. At the same time, they have demonstrated how universities can learn from other organizations with more experience in supporting social innovation.

Context

A primary challenge for higher education is to prepare our students for a world that is very different from our own. Throughout history there have been seismic societal shifts that force the new generation to recalibrate accepted truths and structures. The difference is that today, the changes that await young people are both global and existential -- for the first time since civilizations established themselves across the planet there is a real and imminent threat to the continued survival of humanity itself. In part because of this, a fundamental skill for the new generation is that it must be proactive rather than reactive. We are conditioned to resolving problems as they manifest themselves and become tangible but in order to prepare for the world of tomorrow, we need to pre-empt problems that are intangible with solutions whose impact may not be immediately apparent.

One of the key aspects of the younger generation is their greater awareness of the world around them. Because technology has armed them with the means to access information from anywhere at any time, they have a more empathetic understanding of challenges even though they may not be facing these challenges themselves, while also feeling more acutely the need to make change happen. In this context, it is increasingly essential that universities not only offer environments in which new knowledge is created but also help to instill an ability in students to harness that knowledge in order to effect real change in our societies. With the recent crises in

democracy, the seemingly inexorable increase in inequalities, and the rise of populism, the need to understand the processes involved in transforming society at a systemic level is more urgent than ever. This transformative movement, usually referred to as social innovation, though often misunderstood and misrepresented, is in a sense the only viable response to what Roberto Ungar described as a "dictatorship of no alternative." It is precisely the failure of economies, bureaucracies, and ideologies to offer a viable solution to our myriad problems that has led to the emergence of a movement that is defined by its search for alternative solutions.

If universities are to serve their societies and their students as they should, it is essential that they create environments which encourage and nurture this drive for change, supporting social innovation just as it supports technological and scientific innovation.

Meeting Social Innovation Needs

Back in 2010, the study on social innovation prepared by SIX and the Young Foundation for the Bureau of European Policy Advisors underlined the problem, "Civil society and the grant economy have long been rich sources of social innovation, but they are not well-placed to develop rigorous methods for innovation, lack R&D capacity, and find it hard to spread risk." The report categorized four key barriers to social innovation: Access to finance; Scaling

models; Skills and formation; and Networks and intermediaries. Clearly, universities represent ideal partners to help break down or at least mitigate against many of these barriers.

As the global mapping of the SI-DRIVE project (<https://www.si-drive.eu/>) has shown, knowledge gaps represent one of the biggest barriers for successful development of social innovations, especially leading to a limited transfer and diffusion. Often, social innovators are lacking capabilities and skills (especially, business and managerial skills, staff training and personnel development skills, and networking and communication skills) as well as professional knowledge (e.g., information technology and recruiting staff). In addition, they have difficulties accessing required information and therefore external expert knowledge is needed in some areas.

Against this background, social innovators who participated in the survey expressed the need for building up skills and capabilities (upskilling and training, workshops, learning etc.) as well as providing managerial training (e.g., administration procedures, business plan design etc.). They also stressed the need for more and better knowledge exchange, connections with other organizations, collaborative learning opportunities, bought-in knowledge, and external expertise for specific purposes. Universities can provide appropriate R&D for robust, empirical evaluations of the effectiveness of social innovation, offering an understanding of what can

accelerate and scale-up, beyond the anecdotal.

Currently, while social innovation is becoming increasingly recognized and rewarded as a relevant discipline within social sciences (just as other forms of innovation research became more prevalent in the 80's and 90's), it remains siloed within that narrow discipline. Social innovation needs to be supported across thematic areas, in health, engineering, sciences, and humanities; the whole portfolio of knowledge produced by universities needs to be put at the disposal of social innovators for them to grow and flourish to their true potential.

Another area that is already demonstrating its effectiveness in providing instruments to help effect change is design, and, in particular, the emergence of techniques of ideation, design thinking, and service design as a way of approaching so-called "wicked problems" -- apparently unsolvable and intrinsic to the "dictatorship of no alternatives."

As policymakers become more convinced of the effectiveness of social innovation, universities will be given more opportunities to establish effective support in other areas. Just as technical expertise in specialized areas can support commercial businesses and give them the means to help grow and expand, the same technical expertise can be offered to social innovators. But in addition to this, universities are providers of a range of logistical support to their community that can provide real

added value to social innovation: through the exploitation of their tacit and codified knowledge; through capacity building, mentoring and training; the use of specialized equipment; the provision of real and virtual spaces for networking, hot-desking or more formal incubation facilities; selection and evaluation expertise; and lobbying.

While social innovation has existed as an ill-defined, undervalued phenomenon for decades, universities have likewise always supported civil society through a variety of activities without necessarily being able to categorize them under a unified terminology. However, there are two interrelated, fundamental characteristics of university support for social innovation that need to change: i) social innovation support activities tend to be ad hoc and largely altruistic, universities have not recognized or systemized a process to measure the social return on investment; ii) as a result, while commercial innovation is recognized and institutionally supported by well-established knowledge exchange offices, there is no professional support function or physical space within universities for supporting social innovation. This function needs to understand the dynamics of the process and the challenges that social innovators and communities face in order to drive social change. And social innovators need to recognize the potential of universities as partners and facilitators for social innovation.

University Social Innovation Networks

Glasgow Caledonian University in Scotland has become increasingly recognized as a leader in this field for its pioneering work in embedding international social innovation networks in universities. Its' core mission is to be internationally recognized as a "socially innovative university" reflecting its institutional motto "For the Common Good." The focus of the University's Strategy 2020 is upon transforming lives, enriching cities and communities, and creating societal benefit by engaging globally. Its approach involves working closely with civic society, not only within Scotland but also beyond, engaging with partners across the world to support and develop local solutions to the challenges they are facing, and utilizing its capacity as a university to bring specialized knowledge and attract investment.

A particular strength of the University is its experience in international projects, particularly under the Erasmus+ CBHE Programme, as the leading UK beneficiary with 20 projects (eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/). At the core of this international activity, the University has established regional networks for building support for social enterprise and innovation. Intrinsic to all the projects is the establishment of incubation and knowledge exchange facilities that explicitly support social innovation amongst students, academics, and external stakeholders. Complementary to this, the projects have also developed

curricular academic programs as well as non-curricular training programs:

The **Latin American Social Innovation Network**

<http://www.lasin-eu.org/> has established eight fully equipped Social Innovation Support Units (SISUs) in universities in Chile, Colombia, Panama, and Brazil. As well as the incubation/co-working spaces, the project has developed a post graduate program in social innovation.

In the **Common Good First** project

(<https://www.commongoodfirst.com/>), similar units have been established through which academics and practitioners are developing digital storytelling techniques and an online directory to showcase social innovation projects in South Africa.

Social Innovation through Knowledge Exchange

(<https://sike-eu.org/>) is a network of HEI and non-HEI partners in Scotland, the Basque Country, Croatia, Germany, and Portugal. In each region a "Social Innovation through Knowledge Exchange (SIKE) Unit" has been established which combines incubation, training, and knowledge in an exchange specifically aimed at supporting the social innovation ecosystem.

Strategy for Change

(<http://strategy4change.eu/institutional>) has created a European network of universities and student associations which aim to embed social innovation within university

curricular and extracurricular programs.

Social Innovation Support in Southeast Asia

In the same way, the **Southeast Asian Social Innovation Network (SEASIN)** (<http://www.seasin-eu.org/>) has been established between eight HEIs in Thailand, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Cambodia along with four non-HEI social innovation organizations and three European universities.

The four Southeast Asian partner countries present very different socioeconomic realities: Malaysia and Thailand have undergone major industrial and social transformation amid rapid economic growth and development over several decades; Cambodia, on the other hand, still has a large proportion of the population living below the poverty-line despite emerging as one of the highest growing economies in the world (7.7 percent between 1995 and 2018); the new Myanmar Government is committed to equitable development and has enjoyed recent growth of about 6.5 percent, but most of its institutions and public administration are still weak and the pace of the reform process is slowing down. In this context, the precise role of social innovation within each country also varies, from an intrinsic element in the equitable development of an emerging economy to a counterbalance to the inevitable consequences of rapid growth -- increasing wealth inequalities and political challenges to fragile democracies. As such, universities play a particularly important role as the intermediaries

between the often subversive nature of social innovation initiatives and an honest broker for governments -- often fledgling democracies -- trying to tackle increasing societal challenges in an effective but equitable way.

Despite the different national challenges, the SEASIN project has identified common ground in terms of the kinds of support social innovators might seek from partner universities. The Network conducted a survey among those involved in the Southeast Asian ecosystem, identifying 115 organizations across nine countries and selecting 60 social innovation projects in the partner countries, monitoring 10 of them as case studies on the effectiveness of HEI support. 11.1 percent of respondents to the SEASIN survey felt that mentoring from industry experts would help build their capacities while 10.7 percent identified workshops, 9.7 percent identified funding and investment, and 9.5 percent of them zeroed in on experiential training programs as the support initiatives that could help improve the social innovation ecosystem in their region. In addition to this, the respondents also identified social innovation support units and networking events as relevant resources to help them implement their projects. 81 percent of the intermediaries on the other hand, have identified promotion of social innovation across universities and knowledge sharing as the most effective initiative for building capacities followed by, policies that promote social innovation (78 percent), skill-building programs (63 percent), and

providing fiscal incentives such as tax incentives (56 percent).

The SEASIN State of the Art survey concluded with four recommendations to create a thriving social innovation eco-system:

- Government as both the facilitator and enabler: streamlining policymaking to support social innovation;
- Institutionalize social innovation by transforming education: capacity-building to support social innovation;
- Social impact/benefit bonds: financial innovation to support social innovation; and
- Catalyse civic participation and democratise information: create an environment that facilitates collaborations.

In response to these recommendations, the Network has established eight incubation Units (Social Innovation Support Units) each of which include fully equipped makers' spaces, co-working, and incubation spaces as well as training programs for students.

Myanmar

While the universities in Myanmar (Cooperative University Thanlyin and Yangon University of Economics) were clearly committed to embedding social innovation within

their institutions, and enjoyed the support of regional stakeholders thanks largely to the awareness raising initiatives carried out by organizations such as the British Council, the challenges of their unique socioeconomics meant that much of the support offered by their units were different from other partners. For instance, the 3D printers that had been installed within other universities were not practical since they had neither the expertise nor the resources to ensure their long-term usage by staff and students.



Students from the SISU in Myanmar

Source: SEASIN

Cambodia

The two Cambodian universities, National University of Management (NUM) and the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), take very different approaches, largely due to the priorities of the faculties involved. NUM is extremely entrepreneurial and created a very dynamic and extremely well-equipped space for students, staff, and external stakeholders. Much of this is thanks to private matching funds which allowed them to offer state-of-the-art facilities. RUPP, through the Faculty of Development Studies, used the space for more curricular activities and centered it around creating a bank of virtual and physical learning resources to raise awareness. The participation of the Cambodian branch of the French organization, Friends International, has ensured that the Universities' activities are well integrated within the Cambodian social innovation ecosystem, introducing a local network of stakeholders.

Thailand

In Thailand, Thammasat University already had a degree of social innovation experience through its School of Global Studies and had even developed a makerspace. Kasetsart University, on the other hand, enjoyed more limited experience within the field and much of their activities are focused around awareness raising. Their SISU has been established as part of the Faculty of Social Sciences but is located as a part of the Center for International Affairs and International Studies Management. Both Universities have been directly

supported by Ashoka Thailand which has wide experience of working in the Higher Education social innovation space, especially through its Changemakers program.

Malaysia

In Malaysia, the two partner universities are also very different: Sunway University is a young, private university, emerging from the Bandar Sunway district while University Teknologi Mara (UiTM) is Malaysia's largest public university in terms of size and student population. Sunway's mission is very much based around the SDGs and already had a recently established i-Lab to encourage entrepreneurship among students. In UiTM, the project is based within the Education faculty but involves students and staff from across the University. The two HEIs are supported in their activities by Mission & Co (previously the Scope Group) whose mission is to magnify social good by mobilizing capital.



Malaysian Human Library. One of the projects being supported by SEASIN

Source: SEASIN

Each partner has developed a series of social entrepreneurship training workshops -- Impact Connect -- in collaboration with Mission & Co and the UK-based global platform, Social Innovation Exchange. These workshops have been replicated by local partners during the course of the project. The project is currently also developing a doctoral program in collaboration with the University of Aveiro (Portugal) and the Asian partners. In October 2018, the first SEASIN Conference, SI-LIVE ASIA, was held in Malaysia, with more than 150 participants and a second conference will be held on October 8-9 in Bangkok.

All these projects seek to demonstrate the potential of universities to use their knowledge by developing new paradigms and tools for targeted exchange between actors from all societal sectors. At the same time, they have demonstrated how universities can learn from other organizations with more experience in supporting social innovation. The projects are forging alliances between universities and stakeholders across the social innovation ecosystem including business, local government, civil society organizations, and community groups in order to develop a new concept for knowledge exchange, informed by a needs analysis and monitoring of local social innovations. By combining the different experiences from universities and non-HEI practitioners, a blueprint for a social innovation support unit has been developed that can be adapted by other institutions wishing to join the Network and emulate the experience of SEASIN partners, creating a physical space to bring together different stakeholders in order to support social innovation processes.

The Units offer training, policy-briefings, and online tools as part of a suite of incubation and knowledge exchange services applying specialist research, equipment, outreach programs, and existing business support tailor-made to meet the needs of social innovators, whether they be students, academics, or external stakeholders. A series of strategic recommendations and case studies, as well as online tools and teaching materials, are being

produced to help other HEIs wishing to create similar units for driving social innovation through knowledge exchange.

Conclusion

The rationale behind all the projects is that to successfully support social innovation, it is not enough to rely on traditional methods and processes for knowledge exchange. A university needs to establish a specialized unit that is specifically geared towards the needs of social innovators. The approach argues that universities should support social innovation in a systematic way beyond ad hoc initiatives and sporadic activism. A Unit is the next step towards institutionalisation of social innovation through universities. Moreover, the explicit notion of this form of knowledge exchange clearly places universities as conscious actors within the social innovation ecosystem: they proactively assume the task of facilitating the exchange, flow, and co-creation of knowledge.

The ultimate goal of all these projects is to create a global network for supporting social innovation within universities, to embed a culture of changemaking as a fundamental part of higher education, to be able to tackle the pervasive challenges of our age, and combat the "Dictatorship of no alternative."

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Author bio



Mark Majewsky Anderson is the Director of Research and Innovation at Glasgow Caledonian University and has helped to embed social innovation as a core part of the University's mission. As well as overseeing the University's

research and innovation portfolio, he leads several international cooperation projects around the world, in Latin America, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Central Asia. One of his main focal areas is setting up community-facing "Social Innovation Support Units," specifically dedicated to helping universities engage with their local stakeholders in order to confront societal challenges. He has established 16 of these units in Chile, Colombia, Brazil, Panama, Myanmar, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Thailand. He also coordinates SIKE, Social Innovation through Knowledge Exchange, establishing similar units in UK, Spain, Portugal, Croatia, and Germany. Other projects have focused on areas such as research, innovation, internationalization, disability support, female entrepreneurship, etc., in a range of countries including Indonesia, Iran, India, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, among others.