Chapter 1
Introduction: An Overview of the Research

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Abstract The ambition for this book is to demonstrate how higher education institutions (HEIs) can respond to societal challenges, support positive social change and influence the international public discourse on social innovation. It attempts to answer the question, 'how does the present higher education system, in different countries, promote social innovation and create social change and impact'. In answering this question, the book identifies factors driving success as well as obstacles. The book offers suggestions about how the present system can be improved both based on existing data and international literature on social innovation in higher education. The book presents a selected set of peer reviewed chapters presenting different perspectives against which relevant actors can identify and analyse social innovation in HEIs.

Keywords Societal challenges · Higher education innovation · Context · Third mission · Higher education institutions

1 Introduction

Social innovation has been receiving growing attention from policy makers, international institutions, non-governmental organizations, researchers and the business sector around the world. Despite a growing belief that social innovation represents

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one of the key solutions to solving current societal problems, the field of social innovation research in higher education institutions (HEIs) provides disparate discussions of this phenomenon. This situation severely impedes the advancement of social innovation practice and research in its policy area. A macro-lens regarding the awareness of relevant actors about the social innovation landscape in academia, and connectivity with the reality of today, is needed. The book's ambition is to demonstrate how HEIs in the different countries promote social innovation and contribute to creation of positive social change. It also aims to discuss success driving factors and obstacles, if any, that influence generation of social innovations. The book seeks to present the perspectives against which relevant actor personnel should identify and analyse social innovation in HEIs. Also, it examines how higher education innovation assists societal challenges and investigates the benefits of effective social innovation engagement by HEIs. Moreover, the book contributes to understanding about how to further develop the third mission of the universities and enhance their role as a driver of social change towards the paradigm of purpose-driven universities (Haski-Leventhal, 2020). The discussion held in the book is meant to explore the common ground where more actors can sustain social innovation.

2   Context and Goal

In recent years, sharing knowledge and know-how between science and society through a consistent dialogue and open collaboration between researchers and societal actors became critical for developing products, services and processes that are useful, sustainable and ethically acceptable (Morrison et al., 2020). Continuous experimentation and learning exchanges according to an open innovation community model (Zhou & Qi, 2018) must be a priority for generating concrete solutions to sustainability problems in real-world settings (Trencher et al., 2014). Usually, higher education institutions do not have an agenda for capitalizing on the local assets and knowledge that surrounds them in the community environment where they are embedded. Communities are expecting the HEIs to actively engage with them and take responsibility by transferring their competence to the direct local context to stimulate social innovation and sustainable development (Westley et al., 2014; Jordaan & Mennega, 2021). Universities can help communities by channelling the expertise, skills and work of their academics and students to critical problems and opportunities facing communities (Schlossberg et al., 2018).

One of the greatest challenges faced by higher education institutions is the effective management of their efforts to solving societal problems, such as the sustainable development goals (SDGs), in an increasingly complex and competitive global environment. This environment evolved dynamically to include numerous aspects that HEIs should carefully consider (Whittle & Rampton, 2020):

– Cooperation with actors from surrounding ecosystem for the transfer of knowledge and talents.

- Cooperation on research and innovation agendas on an international, multi-disciplinary and intersectoral basis.
- Cooperation on innovative pedagogies that empower academics and students as social innovators and change makers.
- Uptake of digitalisation, empowering the further transition to knowledge- and digitally driven universities; and
- Development of digital and entrepreneurial skills among academics, researchers and students.

HEIs, particularly in Inclusiveness Target Countries (COST–European Cooperation in Science and Technology, n.d.), lack the ability to exploit effectively their innovation capabilities for the benefit of the communities in which they are embedded. Also, there are a lack of systemic approaches to involving stakeholders in the HEIs' innovation ecosystems. The overall change from Triple Helix to Quadruple Helix philosophy includes focus on smarter use of resources and demands greater inclusiveness of different actors and stakeholders. Therefore, HEIs need to partner with other institutions and organizations, and demonstrate research impact, efficiency, and innovation throughout. Academics and business representatives should work together to achieve sustainable development goals in an integrated way. Also, students, along with teachers, have an important role in adopting social and environmental elements through interdisciplinarity, with an impact on daily life. Therefore, the development of constant societal dialogue and targeted communication between HEIs, government, the private sector and civil society plays a key role in achieving greater social impact.

Scope The current book is an opportunity for HEIs to boost the collaboration in sustainable social innovation and learn from each other. The current crisis offers an opportunity to better prepare HEIs around the world to deal with society and sustainability challenges. Also, it raised the need to look for more effective interlinkages that would connect their talents, spread best practice, increase their interoperability and encourage a higher degree of coordination in their efforts to solving societal problems.

Aims The book ambition is to demonstrate how HEIs can respond to societal challenges, support positive social change and contribute to the development of international public policy discourse. It seeks to present the perspectives against which relevant actor personnel should identify and analyse social innovations in HEIs. Also, the book ambition is to inform interested actors how to further develop the third mission of the universities and enhance their role as a driver of social change.

Core Arguments, Themes, and Issues Addressed In an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world, discussions about how best to educate and prepare graduates for the new challenges of the twenty-first century abound. Knowledge Alliances between HEIs and businesses which aim to foster innovation, entrepreneurship, creativity, employability, knowledge exchange and/or multi-disciplinary teaching, learning and research are therefore becoming increasingly necessary and relevant.

The changing nature of contemporary society highlights that social issues are often highly complex and multi-faceted. As we enter an era where cooperative and creative skills, competencies and attitudes are recognized as significant in responding to societal challenges, developing graduates capable of operating effectively in multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary environments is critical. The challenge of equipping students with relevant skills and knowledge in the future employment markets can only be achieved by working globally and collaboratively and learning from the wide variety of partners and their networks about the various ways to prepare graduates across disciplines. Higher education includes a set of systematized knowledge and practical skills, which allow to solve theoretical and practical problems on a professional profile, using and creatively developing modern achievements of science, technology and culture. Consequently, higher education aims to ensure that their graduates, by realizing their acquired knowledge in the process of working life, benefit society and the State as a whole, ensuring its constant development.

To draw possible solutions to the complex challenges mentioned above, the core themes discussed in the book include:

– Introduction of the spheres of influence for enhancing social innovation in higher education and the varied facets of social innovation in HEIs.
– Contribution of the higher education institutions in fostering the development of the social innovation ecosystem.
– Uptake of digitalisation in higher education institutions as a driver of social oriented innovations.
– Development of a social innovation competence framework meant to educate entrepreneurs to go internationally.
– Discussion of higher education practices for social innovation and sustainable development.
– Introduction of a higher education social enterprise program that advances understanding of social entrepreneurship and social enterprise development in higher education.
– Discussion of the dimensions of societal impact of research produced by HEIs and introduction of a framework for managing research with societal impact in HEIs.
– Discussion of the role of HEIs in creating socially responsible innovations.
– Analysis of how responsible research and innovation activities are understood by regional stakeholders, particularly regarding how the roles of different actors are constituted, and how different actors facilitate social innovation.
– Introduction of a co-creation platform developed on a quadruple helix framework for solving week social challenges.
– Analysis of social innovations emerging from academic nursing-community partnerships.
– Discussion of social innovation in HEIs from a Disability Studies perspective.
– Analysis of the possibilities of using financial instruments such as social impact bonds for additional funding of higher education institutions.

Questions Raised by the Book and Solutions Provided Following aims of the Cost Action 18,236 Multi-Disciplinary Innovation for Social Change the following research questions emerge:

– How to develop students to become the next generation of 'innovators' prepared to create, collaborate and navigate the world's complexities (Der Zwaan, 2017)?
– How can HEIs equip their students (and other learners) with the knowledge and skills necessary to engage with and respond to twenty-first century challenges and opportunities?
– How can various stakeholders (academia, private and public sector institutions and end-users) be more actively engaged in developing changes in education to support multi-disciplinary education?
– How to boost the HEIs' ability to translate research results into the economy and civil society?
– How to foster digitally facilitated social innovation collaboration?

The overall research questions that incorporate the above are two-fold: What is the HEIs' role in creating social change, transformation and impact? And how to strengthen the HEIs' social innovation efforts in order to be sustainable? Answers provided in the book include:

– Identifying conditions for innovation in academic settings to produce socially relevant outcomes.
– Insights about how HEIs promote social innovation and suggests how the present system can be improved.
– Understanding the capacity of the HEIs in fostering community-based learning that leads to social change and inclusion.
– Exploring digital challenges in HEIs and social innovation opportunities from digital transformation in HEIs.
– Highlighting the key role that the HEIs play in production of research with societal impact.
– Discussing higher education practices for social innovation and development, stressing the importance of a multidisciplinary approach.
– Presenting innovative pedagogies that empower students as social innovators and change makers.
– Debating the potential of social innovation in higher education from a user-led, inclusive and participatory perspective related to disability studies.
– Examining the co-creation platform concept aimed at improving the wellbeing of those in the most vulnerable positions through co-creating societal innovations, services, and capacity building.
– Outlining the crossing points of the quadruple-helix model and the priority guidelines for the development of scientific research and innovations with societal impact.
– Exploring the peculiarities of social impact bonds and the possibilities of their application in higher education for additional funding of HEIs.

3   Distinctiveness and Primary Contributions

Distinctiveness The book offers unique and novel discussions of social innovation landscape, tools, practices, pedagogies and research with impact in the context of higher education. It brings together international, multi-disciplinary academic and industry leaders in the respective fields of social economy, community development, public health, governance and public policy, to inform the development of social innovation in HEIs. This work supports the sharing of international research evidence and practice expertise across academic and professional disciplines and multi-countries in Europe.

Primary Contributions to the Field The most compelling and provocative contributions of the book are:

– Demonstration of how HEIs can respond to societal challenges and support positive social change, by firstly identifying spheres of influence for enhancing social innovation, continuously fostering the development of the social innovation ecosystem, successively collaborating through co-creation platforms in the quadruple helix framework and ensuring delivery of social innovation competences and outputs.
– Sharing of best practices of how the present higher education institutions in different countries promote social innovation and create social change and impact.
– Information of interested actors about how to further develop the third mission of the universities and enhance their role as a driver of social change towards the paradigm of purpose-driven universities.
– Overview over the assessment of the societal impact of research in HEIs, meant to explore the common ground where more actors can sustain the social innovation.

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