

This dissertation investigates the evolving role of universities within ecosystems that support social entrepreneurs, highlighting how academic institutions can strategically engage with and enable the development of social ventures. Recognizing the increasing global emphasis on addressing grand societal challenges, this study explores the university's potential not only as a knowledge producer but also as an ecosystem actor that can cultivate social entrepreneurship through embedded support structures, strategic partnerships, and boundary-spanning initiatives.

The research adopts a mixed-method design focused on university-led initiatives in Europe and South America. Through 43 semi-structured interviews with program leaders, university staff, and social entrepreneurs and 210 surveys with students, the study maps the diverse mechanisms by which universities contribute to the social entrepreneurial ecosystem. The analysis reveals four primary university support roles: embedded, opportunity-driven, auxiliary, and boundary-spanning. Each role reflects different levels of institutional commitment, resource allocation, and integration into the wider entrepreneurial ecosystem. Embedded support refers to initiatives deeply integrated within the university's core structures and aligned with long-term institutional strategies. Opportunity-driven support is characterized by time-bound or project-based engagements, often reliant on external funding and individual champions. Auxiliary support represents efforts that, while beneficial, remain peripheral to the university's primary functions, such as isolated events or informal mentoring. Finally, boundary-spanning support includes partnerships that extend beyond university boundaries to connect students and social entrepreneurs with civic actors, government, and industry stakeholders. A key contribution of this study is a support framework that synthesizes these roles into an integrated model of university engagement in social entrepreneurship ecosystems. Drawing on theories of dynamic capabilities, technology transfer, and experiential learning, the framework emphasizes the importance of strategic alignment, institutional flexibility, and cross-sector collaboration. The findings underscore that successful university contributions are not only the result of resource availability but also of intentional design, leadership commitment, and the ability to bridge institutional silos.

This dissertation offers practical recommendations for university leaders, policymakers, and ecosystem builders to foster institutional cultures that embrace social innovation, promote interdisciplinary collaboration, and develop long-term partnerships with societal actors. For social entrepreneurs, this study offers practical insights into how universities can serve not only as training grounds but as strategic allies in advancing socially impactful ventures. Understanding the typology of university support roles enables social entrepreneurs to more effectively identify and engage with institutional partners aligned to their specific stage of development and needs. Moreover, the research highlights the importance of proactive engagement: social entrepreneurs can play an active role in co-creating university support mechanisms by participating in co-design processes, contributing to experiential learning environments, and helping shape a more inclusive and impact-oriented academic culture. In contexts where institutional resources are scarce, particularly in transitional economies, the findings emphasize the value of informal networks and entrepreneurial individuals within universities as key entry points for collaboration and long-term relationship-

building. Ultimately, the study reimagines the university as an anchor institution—one that mobilizes knowledge, infrastructure, and networks to co-create inclusive, sustainable futures.