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Khan, R. & Suonpää, M. 2023. PROMOTING SOCIAL COOPERATIVE ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A PRACTICAL CASE OF AN INTERNATIONAL JOINT EDUCATION PROJECT. Teoksessa Gómez Chova, L., González Martínez, C. & Lees, J. (toim.). INTED2023 Proceedings, s. 7195–7202. <https://doi.org/10.21125/inted.2023.1971>.

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Please cite the original version:

Khan, R. & Suonpää, M. 2023. PROMOTING SOCIAL COOPERATIVE ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A PRACTICAL CASE OF AN INTERNATIONAL JOINT EDUCATION PROJECT. In Gómez Chova, L., González Martínez, C. & Lees, J. (eds.). INTED2023 Proceedings, pp. 7195–7202. <https://doi.org/10.21125/inted.2023.1971>.

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# PROMOTING SOCIAL COOPERATIVE ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A PRACTICAL CASE OF AN INTERNATIONAL JOINT EDUCATION PROJECT

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## Abstract

Social entrepreneurship education has gained momentum in the last few decades, but it still remains a least understood concept. Social cooperative entrepreneurship leads to the establishment of organisations that promote well-being of employees, develop the local economy and pay special attention to those belonging to vulnerable groups. The importance of social cooperative organisations is increasing as such organisations have the potential to decrease social inequality. Therefore, promoting social entrepreneurship education becomes ever more important in higher education (HE). HE institutions must inculcate the ability to recognise social value-creating opportunities among their students. This paper seeks to discuss a joint education project called MyDigiCoop, which aims to promote social-cooperative entrepreneurship in HE. This international project is funded by Erasmus + and it aims to equip HE professionals with innovative online tools and competencies to foster social-cooperative entrepreneurship among their students. This paper also presents primary aspects of the project like the establishment of interactive virtual platform and personalised learning paths for the learners that enhance their social cooperative entrepreneurial mindset and competencies. Furthermore, the preliminary results of the validation of the virtual platform are also presented. The future implications of the project are to strengthen synergies and cooperation among HE institutions, companies, and associations by means of including their needs in the training course developed in this project.

Keywords: social-cooperative entrepreneurship, interactive virtual platform, learning paths, higher education.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on MyDigiCoop, which aims to promote social-cooperative entrepreneurship in Higher Education (HE). This international project is funded by EU Erasmus+ and it aims to equip HE professionals with innovative online tools and competencies to foster social-cooperative entrepreneurship among their students.

According to Doherty et al. (2014), the most difficult challenges of social entrepreneurs are the recruitment, motivation, retainment and training of the trustees, employees and volunteers, therefore, it is vital that higher education institutions (HEIs) train learners to be better equipped with knowledge, skills and competencies to become social entrepreneurs or work for social enterprises [1]. A considerable amount of literature has been published on social entrepreneurship (SE) and the organisations that engage in this practice since the 1950s. However, SE has attracted more interest in recent years both in public and private spheres to better address major social challenges in the context of declining governments' welfare budgets and increasing inequality [2]. Moreover, societal calls have intensified demanding businesses to look beyond pure profit maximization in their operations [3].

The literature shows no consensus for the universal definition of SE. Mair and Marti (2006) describe SE as a process where individuals identify social challenges, combine resources in new ways, evaluate and exploit resources to produce social value and simulate social change or meet social needs [4]. Therefore, the focus of SE is on individuals who create social value for unprivileged groups with the aim of creating social impact e.g., in education, poverty reduction, women empowerment, fair trade and human rights.

Next, we will describe a social enterprise and cooperative enterprise as one form of a social enterprise. Social enterprises consist of a complex set of organisations, both legally and in terms of ownership. The objectives and ways of operating do not follow a single model or pattern [1]. Although social enterprises focus on social value creation and they are not set up to maximise returns for their owners, they do pursue economic efficiency in their operations. This combination of efficiency and social purpose make social enterprises a hybrid that does not fit well with traditional business thinking. Successfully combining

profit-making with the promotion of a social mission is likely to be a combination that requires new ways of doing things for entrepreneurs, employees and stakeholders alike. The success of a social enterprise is based on the ability to create a business model which combines both social benefit and financial viability. The aim of a social enterprise is to reduce its reliance on donations and government funding for its survival. The Grameen Bank is a well-known example of a social enterprise [5], [6].

Researchers note that cooperative enterprise model contains elements of SE and social enterprise [1]. The international Cooperative Alliance (ICA) defines a cooperative as “*an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise*” [7]. A collective can take different forms. It can be owned by workers or workers and suppliers. In this study, we follow Kannampuzha and Hockerts (2019) description of a social enterprise as “*the actions of organisations aimed primarily at creating social impact for beneficiaries by engaging in commercial activity while using cooperative governance mechanisms that uphold the primacy of the beneficiary*” [8].

HEIs have an important role to play in training future social entrepreneurs. The three broad objectives of entrepreneurship education combine entrepreneurship and education [9]. *Education about entrepreneurship* includes educational activities such as lectures and seminars to support learners in becoming aware of the importance of SE for societies, and economic and social change [9]. They need to learn about the specific characteristics of social cooperative enterprises discussed earlier. Pache and Chowdhury (2012) stress the importance of learners becoming aware of the different and competing logics of society, business and government as they identify social opportunities and create solutions to social problems [10].

*Education through entrepreneurship* uses a student-centred pedagogical style and real-world projects to enhance the educational process itself. The aim is to learn how to create entrepreneurial mindsets and behaviours in order to be active and responsible for one's life and career. [9.] The design thinking approach is an example of an effective way to learn and practice skills and abilities to identify social opportunities, create social innovations and understand social impact, sustainability and scale [10].

*Education for entrepreneurship* focuses on learners to create new ventures [9]. They are taught the knowledge, skills and competencies needed to set up and run a social enterprise. For example, they need the skills to create both economic and social value [11], business models and the abilities to build bridges between the three institutional logics discussed earlier [10]. Service-learning is an effective approach for learners who aspire to become social entrepreneurs. In this approach, learners engage in “an organised service activity that responds to identified community needs and reflect on the service activity” [12].

In MyDigiCoop project, the main learning objective is to create a digital learning platform to promote social cooperative entrepreneurship and provide learners with the knowledge and skills to become aware of the opportunities that social cooperative entrepreneurship can offer.

The remaining sections of the study will discuss the methods used in the methodology sub-section, followed by results and conclusion.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Quantitative research methods**

#### *2.1.1 Questionnaires*

Multiple questionnaires were designed during this project while creating the personalised digital learning paths for students in HE. First, social entrepreneurs' profiles were created, where partners defined nine profiles and, in this regard, designed the first questionnaire for the profiles. As the learning platform was designed to offer personalised learning path to each student according to their entrepreneur profile, students registered on the platform and answered the questionnaire. Six learning modules were created by the partners and uploaded to the platform. Digital tests based on gamification methodologies were designed to generate student's engagement. After the student completed the path, they were required to carry out the final evaluation test to check their knowledge and monitor their progress. In addition, two questionnaires: platform evaluation questionnaire and content evaluation questionnaire were created during the content and platform validation phase. Altogether, the project partners validated the content and platform with fifteen students and nine educators in Spain, Romania and Finland. The respondents had to complete the questionnaires after going through the contents on the platform and providing feedback regarding both the contents as well as the platform. Finally, another questionnaire was administered for the next phase of the project, which was guideline creation. Guidelines were

created with pedagogical tips for each module. In this regard, a questionnaire was designed and later validated by sixteen respondents across all partner groups.

## 2.2 Qualitative research methods

### 2.2.1 Focus groups

Focus groups interviews were conducted with the students and educators, who tested the learning platform and its contents. The first focus group sessions, which were in fact three independent sessions were conducted online in Spain, Romania and Finland and altogether included fifteen students and nine educators. Each online focus group had a moderator who led the group discussion. The sessions were recorded, and the feedback was utilised to finalise the platform and its contents. The second focus group sessions concerned the guidelines for the learning modules. They were organised with four educators and four experts on social-cooperative entrepreneurship in four partner countries namely Spain, Finland, Germany and Romania. Altogether, 48 experts from all partner countries participated in these focus groups to check the appropriateness of the guidelines. Unlike the first focus group sessions, these sessions were held face-to-face or in some cases, in hybrid format. Ethical issues and gender balance were also considered during the validation process.

### 2.2.2 Interviews and qualitative feedback techniques

In addition to the above-mentioned focus groups, other qualitative validation techniques were also used during this project. Once the first questionnaire was created, it was translated into four languages namely Basque, Finnish, Romanian and Spanish. In order to check the appropriateness of the language, the questionnaires were validated by native speakers in each partner country. Each partner involved six students and three educators, who gave their written feedback about the translated questionnaires. In some cases, the project leaders conducted face-to-face interviews with the respondents as well to gather the feedback. The feedback was collected and later incorporated into the questionnaires in order to improve their language and readability.

Table 1. Deliverables, Methods and Project Results

<i>Deliverables</i>	<i>Research Methods</i>	<i>Results</i>
Intellectual Output 1	Questionnaires Algorithmic Model Gamification Focus Group Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social entrepreneurs' profiles</li> <li>• Interactive European map of social entrepreneurs</li> <li>• Supportive platform to foster SE among young people</li> </ul>
Intellectual Output 2	Questionnaires Focus Group Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guidelines to foster social entrepreneurship in higher education</li> </ul>
Other activities	Design Thinking Cooperative Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiplier Event</li> <li>• Learning/ Teaching/ Training Activities</li> </ul>

## 3 RESULTS

MyDigiCoop project involved six partners (three universities and three SMEs) from four different EU countries. Together all the partners have been working towards achieving specific objectives. Following are some results that MyDigiCoop has achieved so far:

### 3.1 Learning platform to foster SE

MyDigiCoop project created an open iterative platform to equip education professionals in empowering social-cooperative entrepreneurs. This learning platform was established in order to provide material and basic content to HE educators for fostering students' socio-cooperative entrepreneurial competence. The modules created during this project were uploaded to this platform together with other educational tools.

This platform was designed in order to consider the TPACK framework (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge) developed using HTML 5 allowing responsible design access from computers and mobile phones. All participants need to register in the system before they can operate it, after that they

get access to the questionnaire. The learning platform has been designed to offer personalized learning paths to students based on the results obtained from the questionnaire. These paths consist of interactive and gamified training. Figure 1. is a snapshot of the MyDigiCoop learning platform [13].

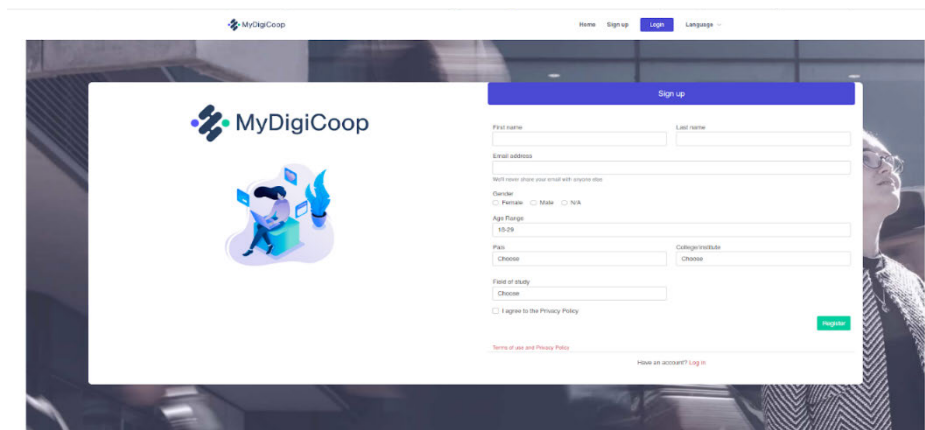


Figure 1. MyDigiCoop Learning Platform

### 3.2 Social entrepreneurs' profiles and module creation

In this project, the partners mapped HE students' entrepreneur and cooperative profiles. Mapping the social entrepreneurs' profiles was a novel concept that MyDigiCoop addressed as the socio-cooperative entrepreneurship competence was hardly considered in HE in Europe prior to this project. First, extensive literature was explored concerning cooperative competence and entrepreneurial competence. The partners set limits and conducted an extensive literature review. They also conducted focus groups with different social agents in order to define the abilities and skills of a socio-cooperative entrepreneur. This was followed by defining nine social entrepreneurs' profiles. After this, a questionnaire was designed to measure the social-cooperative entrepreneurial competence of HE students, which allowed the project members to map HE students' entrepreneur and cooperative profiles in several European countries.

Three university partners from Spain, Finland and Romania developed the modules based on the previously created nine social entrepreneur profiles. A conceptual model of social-cooperative entrepreneurship was developed, which examines the social-cooperative entrepreneurial profile for its developmental attributes. HE students can develop along three dimensions, intrapersonal, social, and cognitive, that together create a unified self. MyDigiCoop partners developed a framework that includes measurable aspects of each dimension which relate to SE and cooperativism. The objective of this framework is to provide a broad view of factors that can contribute to promoting social-cooperative entrepreneurial behaviours in educational settings. Figure 2. displays the six modules developed in MyDigiCoop project [13].

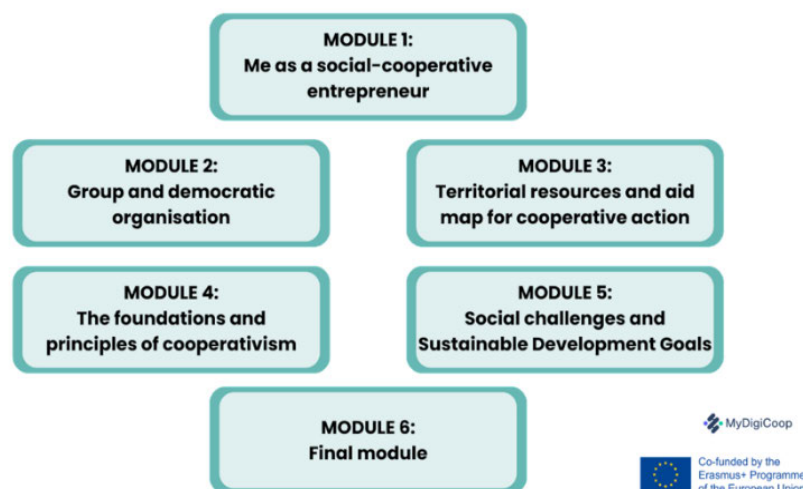


Figure 2. Six Modules created for social-cooperative entrepreneurship

Table 2 shows the designed modules as well as their different levels. Each topic was divided into grades (low, medium and high) regarding difficulty covering different dimensions (intrapersonal, social and cognitive), and two organisation levels (entrepreneur and cooperative).

**Intrapersonal** dimension included digital content creation, safety and problem solving and had three modules (low, medium, advanced) for both entrepreneur and cooperative level. **Social** dimension included, “Women empowerment in socio-cooperative entrepreneurship” (low-cooperative), “Entrepreneurship and sustainable business” (low-entrepreneur), “Group organisation in cooperativism” (medium-cooperative) and “Resources for entrepreneurship and sustainable business” (medium-entrepreneur) and “Democratic organisation and leadership in cooperativism” (advanced - cooperative) and “Entrepreneurship and sustainable business across EU” (advanced - entrepreneur). **Cognitive** dimension included, “What is a cooperative? Self-organisation and different legal formulas (low-cooperative) and “How to detect challenges that may be answered from a social-cooperative entrepreneurship view” (low-entrepreneur), “Approach to social and cooperative economy (medium-cooperative) and Market analysis for digital innovation and SDGs (medium- entrepreneur) and “How to measure socio economic impact of socio cooperative entity (advanced - cooperative) and E-Commerce and social cooperative, SDGs for SE (advanced-entrepreneur). **Final** module included “Procedures and tools to launch a cooperative initiative”. Contents were supported with practical tools to reinforce the ability of education and training in distance learning [13].

Table 2: Designed Modules with Dimensions and Organisation Levels

		<b>Cooperative</b>	<b>Entrepreneur</b>
<b>Intrapersonal</b>	<b>Module</b>	<b>Me as a social-cooperative entrepreneur (self-knowledge)</b>	
	Content low	Digital content creation, safety and problem solving for social-cooperative entrepreneurship	
	Content medium	Digital content creation, safety and problem solving for social-cooperative entrepreneurship	
	Content advanced	Digital content creation, safety and problem solving for social-cooperative entrepreneurship	
<b>Social</b>	<b>Module</b>	<b>Group and democratic organisation (gender perspective, leadership, group dynamic, me and the group)</b>	<b>Territorial resources and aid map for cooperative action</b>
	Content low	Women empowerment in socio-cooperative entrepreneurship	- Entrepreneurship and sustainable business
	Content medium	Group organisation in cooperativism	- Resources for entrepreneurship and sustainable business
	Content advanced	Democratic organisation and leadership in cooperativism	- Entrepreneurship and sustainable business across Europe
<b>Cognitive</b>	<b>Module</b>	<b>The foundations and principles of cooperativism</b>	<b>Social challenges and Sustainable Development Goals</b>
	Content low	What is a cooperative? Self-organisation and different legal formulas	- How to detect challenges that may be answered from a social-cooperative entrepreneurship view
	Content medium	An approach to social and cooperative economy	- Market analysis for digital innovation -Sustainable development goals to overcome social challenges
	Content advanced	How to measure the socio-economic impact of socio-cooperative entity	E-commerce in social-cooperative > sustainable development goals for SE
<b>Final module</b> Procedures and tools to launch a cooperative initiative			

### 3.3 Interactive European map of social entrepreneurs

MyDigiCoop platform aimed at establishing an interactive digital map to represent the overview of social cooperative entrepreneurs' competencies and skills at EU level. Partners in MyDigiCoop defined the structure and design of the interactive map through an animation. An algorithmic model was created based on cooperative and entrepreneur profile, country, age, and gender. In the menu, map of Europe gets displayed with three selected countries: Finland, Romania and Spain. When a country is selected, a statistics graph of the cooperative-entrepreneur profiles gets displayed (see Fig.3). The graph shows the number of institutions that have participated, percentage of users for each competency of the profile (each with a section of different colors that indicate the number of users according to the level of development of the competency [blue: high / grey: medium / green: low]): Intrapersonal, Social-Cooperative, Social-Entrepreneur, Cognitive-Cooperative, Cognitive-Entrepreneur [13].

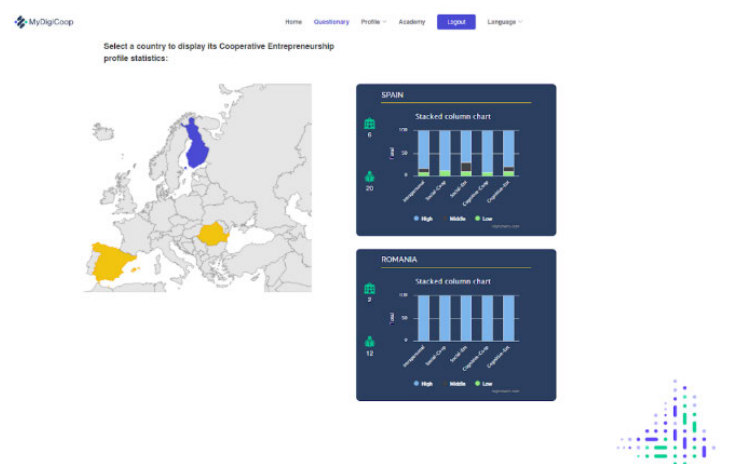


Figure 3. Interactive European Map of Social Entrepreneurs

### 3.4 Guidelines to foster social entrepreneurship in HE

MyDigiCoop project created guidelines for educators to foster social-cooperative entrepreneurship among their students. These guidelines concretely provided techno-pedagogical tips based on educational innovation, active methodologies, and distance/blended learning. These guidelines are of utmost importance to educational professionals as they offer support regarding the use of the platform, activities, and other significant information concerning the module contents. They offer teachers a new approach on active methodologies such as challenge-based learning or problem-based learning, resources and examples from various knowledge areas where social-cooperative entrepreneurship could be developed. These guidelines reinforce the ability of educators to provide high-quality training in digital environments. HE educators could improve their learning techniques and methodology to conduct online or blended learning using innovative and digital tools by using these guidelines. Furthermore, these guidelines were also translated into Spanish, German, Finnish, Romanian and Basque languages in order to facilitate knowledge exchange and allow multiple HE educators from different EU countries to use them with ease [13].

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to discuss a joint education project called MyDigiCoop, which aims to promote social-cooperative entrepreneurship in HE. MyDigiCoop is an international project funded by Erasmus +, which aims to equip HE professionals with innovative online tools and competencies to foster social-cooperative entrepreneurship among students.

This paper presents primary results achieved during this project. This includes the establishment of a virtual learning platform to foster SE. This learning platform was established in order to provide material and basic content to HE educators for fostering students' socio-cooperative entrepreneurial competence. An interactive European map of social entrepreneurs was created during the project. An algorithmic model was created based on cooperative and entrepreneur profile, country, age, and gender. Mapping the social entrepreneurs' profiles was a novel concept produced during MyDigiCoop project. Six modules were established at different levels. Each topic was divided in grades (low, medium and

high) regarding difficulty covering different dimensions (intrapersonal, social and cognitive), and two organisation levels (entrepreneur and cooperative). MyDigiCoop project also created guidelines for educators to foster social-cooperative entrepreneurship among their students. These guidelines concretely provided techno-pedagogical tips based on educational innovation, active methodologies, and distance/blended learning and are of utmost importance to the educational professionals as they offer support regarding the use of the platform, activities, and other significant information concerning the module contents.

MyDigiCoop project supports the entrepreneurship education goal of *learning about SE*. This project supports HE professionals with innovative online tools and competencies to foster social-cooperative entrepreneurship. The iterative digital platform includes multiple educational activities to support the learners to gain knowledge about SE. Learners learn to identify social opportunities and generate solutions for social problems.

The future implications of the project are to strengthen synergies and cooperation among HE institutions, companies, and associations by means of including their needs in the training course developed in this project.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to express their gratitude to EU Erasmus+ funded project MyDigiCoop for providing the valuable research material and opportunity to conduct the research.

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