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# SOCIAL INNOVATION PRACTICES IN HEIS

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**ABSTRACT**
*The objective of this article is to describe the Social Innovation Practices (SIPs) developed by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). As a secondary objective, it identified Social Innovation (SI) trends based on the practices adopted by these institutions. The study mapped Social Innovation practices using the Web of Science platform, recruiting publications through the keywords "Higher Education Institution" and "Social Innovation." The search was conducted in the "affiliation – topic" field, resulting in 958 articles. For the analysis of the articles, Excel®, Mendeley®, and Atlas.ti® software were utilized. The results identified 40 SIPs, which demonstrated innovative actions across various fields of knowledge.*
**KEYWORDS:** *Social Innovation. Social Innovation Trends. Educational and Social Practices.*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years, higher education institutions have played an increasingly significant role in promoting Social Innovation Practices (SIP) through what can be defined as their educational and socially impactful mission. The search for more sustainable and innovative solutions to address complex social challenges has represented both a moral and intellectual imperative for researchers and academics.

Institutional theory, as presented by Bonno (2023), helps to understand how social innovation practices observed in European institutions become consolidated as permanent initiatives. Similarly, complex systems theory explains how the interconnections among different actors facilitate the implementation of these practices, particularly in contexts of resource scarcity, as observed in the analyzed studies.

Meanwhile, social network theory highlights the role of relationships by valuing social capital and emphasizing both weak and strong ties within a social network to reduce uncertainty and facilitate collaboration in social practices (Sonne, 2023; Ahmed et al., 2024; Barnikana & Padmaja, 2024; Silva et al., 2024; Kühl, 2020; García-González & Ramírez-Montoya, 2021; Donati & Wigren-Kristoferson, 2023).

In European countries, Social Innovation Practices (SIP) have been established as part of policy guidelines that encourage participation and the modernization of educational institutions in studies and innovative social solutions tailored to community problems and experiences (Monteiro et al., 2021a). The promotion of these policy guidelines within educational institutions calls upon Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to foster activities aimed at Social Innovation in alignment with their structure and educational missions.

In Latin American countries, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) focus on disseminating knowledge to the community and broader institutions through publications. However, there remains a shortage of practical activities in the context of Social Innovation (SI) (Adel, Zeinhom & Younis, 2022; Monteiro et al., 2021b; Schröder & Krüger, 2019). It is crucial to foster SI in higher education as a strategy for competitive differentiation, a practice of social responsibility, a means to unlock community engagement and development, and a way to establish and influence partnerships with other social actors from an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspective. This represents a valuable research opportunity.

In Brazil, Social Innovation is promoted by various sectors, particularly nonprofit organizations, universities, and local communities. These institutions implement innovative initiatives to address social inequality and improve living conditions, one of the country's main challenges (Lacerda et al., 2023). Nonprofit organizations seek creativity and experimentation in processes and services; universities focus on aligning academic knowledge with social demands; and communities emphasize the need for more formalized processes and reduced financial dependence on public institutions (Duarte & Silva, 2022).
In this context, the objective of this article is to describe the Social Innovation Practices (SIP) developed by higher education institutions, with a focus on identifying which practices are being explored and explained. As a secondary objective, the study aims to identify SI trends through the practices implemented by higher education institutions.

The rationale of the study contributes to the process of understanding and the development of adaptive and appropriate methodologies for individual training (Gómez Zermeño & Alemán De La Garza, 2021; Iqbal & Piwowar-Sulej, 2022). The practical and social perspective enables

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engagement with the community in gaining experience and collecting data to improve access to new information.

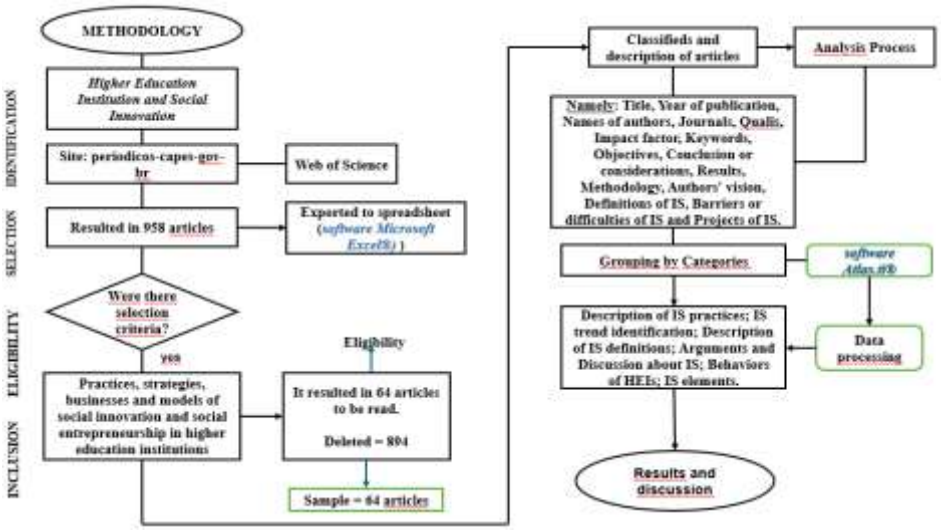
Collection Procedure, Criteria and Research Sample

The Web of Science platform was used to retrieve publications employing the following key terms: Higher Education Institution and Social Innovation. The search was conducted within the affiliation – topic field, yielding 958 articles.

After conducting systematic readings, 64 articles were selected to form the study sample. During the analysis, it was observed that social entrepreneurship projects in HEIs frequently mention social innovation actions. Although the two terms are distinct, they can complement each other, reinforcing social innovation practices in the context of entrepreneurship (Grinberga-Zalite & Mazure, 2017; Unceta, Guerra & Barandiaran, 2021).

To apply these criteria, Microsoft Excel® software was used to highlight the coherence of the terms, while Mendeley® was used to manage and organize the references. For interpretation, coding, and categorization of the data, Atlas.ti® software was applied.

**Figure1: Systematic Review Methodology**




Source: Author's own.

The coding of texts in the 68 selected articles allowed for a word frequency analysis, using Atlas.ti® software. This process highlighted the density of the most relevant concepts present in the documents, as illustrated in figure 2.

**Figure 2: Word cloud on social innovation practices.**




Source: Research Data

The word cloud allowed for the identification of a higher centrality in the terms 'innovation,' 'social,' 'project,' 'development,' and 'learning,' highlighting their high frequency in the analyzed documents. These aspects emphasize that, in the social context, it is essential to develop innovations that stimulate other activities, promoting local development in a strategic, resilient, and adaptable way to changes. In this way, a process of mutual learning is created among the actors involved in social innovation practices.

Furthermore, the words 'communities,' 'universities,' 'activities,' 'approach,' 'knowledge,' 'resources,' 'co-creation,' and 'needs' also emerged with significance. In this regard, it can be stated that the main message of the document aligns with the objective of the study, which is to describe and highlight Social

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Innovation Practices (SIP) in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The term 'community' stands out, highlighting the importance of the mission of universities to generate or enhance knowledge that allows for an approach adapted to the specific reality of that population

Although Social Innovation Practices (SIPs) in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) demonstrate transformative potential, they face significant barriers, such as a lack of funding, institutional resistance, and a lack of community involvement. As demonstrated by Monteiro et al. (2021), the absence of sustainable funding limits the scale of these initiatives, and the lack of a clear strategy to engage the community may reduce the expected social impact. Figure 3 shows examples of SIPs developed by some Higher Education Institutions in their projects.

**Figure 3: Description of Social Innovation Practices in HEIs.**




Source: Research Data.

Figure 3 highlights 40 Social Innovation Practices (SIPs) and the contexts in which these practices are being applied in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

1. The development of programs and new curricular activities involving students on the topic;
2. Social Innovation strategies for fundraising; short courses on citizen programs with student volunteers in various programs and partnerships; curriculum and pedagogy – which integrates a service-learning approach committed to improving the quality of life for various social groups;
3. Organization – refers to the management of the institution in terms of mission, vision, policy, strategic planning, organizational structure, processes, and the impact of Social Innovation (SI) actions; research, development, and innovation – includes the contribution of R&D to SI; relationship with the context – encompasses the links established by the university with social institutions and communities; environment – in terms of sustainable development through education and management policies; and internationalization – includes the integration of an international and intercultural dimension into the university's missions, practices, development plans, curricula, and policies;
4. Academic clinical center aimed at creating knowledge with immediate application to health and well-being;
5. Association created by the Faculty of Psychology and "CaMara Guimaraes" to promote psychological interventions for the development and empowerment of individuals, groups, and communities in one of the youngest and poorest regions of Europe;

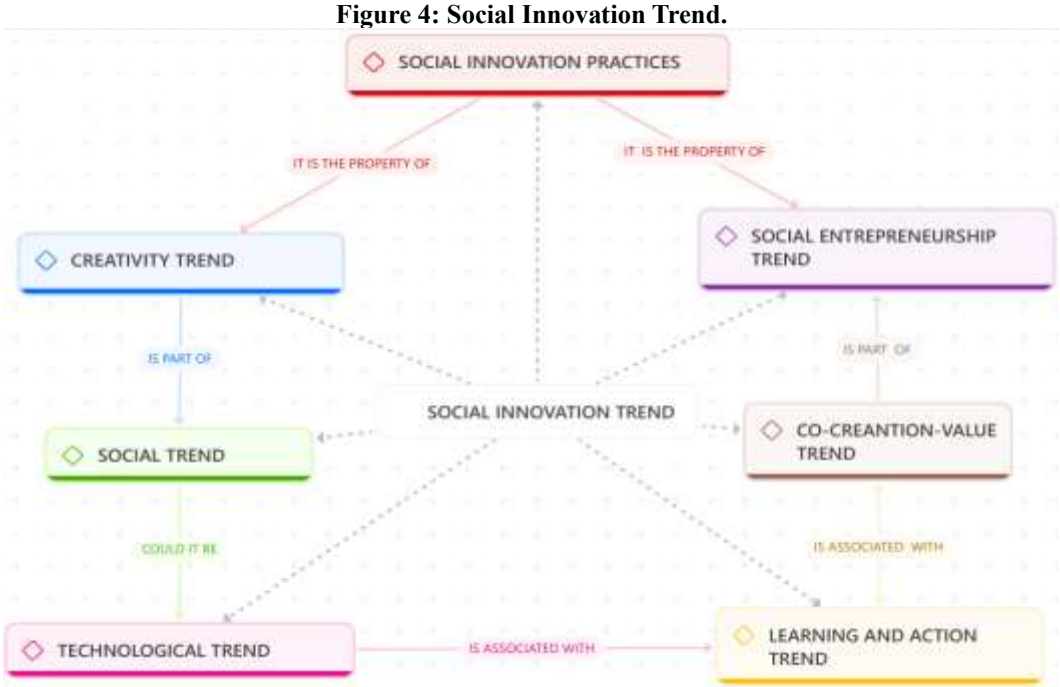
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6. Development of grassroots social innovation initiatives, uniting government programs, community experience, and university knowledge through learning projects;
Project "Engaging Society in Social Innovation to Provide Sustainable Development for Latvia (EKOSOC-LV)".
7. iCeSi University of Cali, which also developed a master's program in Social Innovation Practices Management;
8. Projects carried out by this institution related to social innovation include "OdontoClean," a project aimed at generating clinically and practically important information for patients and their families, and delivering it to those facing the greatest difficulties;
9. Projects linked to the programs "Open University for the Elderly" (UAPI). The objectives of UAPI are to establish connections between students, the institution, and the community, as well as to promote the education and socialization of individuals over 60 years of age, considered elderly by Brazilian legislation;
10. Thinking Studio in Social Innovation ("the Studio"), an immersive community engagement program lasting one semester, focused on developing design thinking (DT) skills to address social challenges in the local community;
11. Thinking Studio in Social Innovation ("the Studio"), an immersive community engagement program lasting one semester, focused on developing Design Thinking (DT) skills to address social challenges in the local community;
12. Ask A Nerd app, which uses technology to collect data from individuals and focuses on a platform that provides educational services. This digital social innovation project is an example in the area of Awareness Networks.

Although the benefits of Social Innovation Practices (SIPs) are evident, the literature highlights several challenges, such as the scarcity of financial resources, the lack of knowledge among faculty and students, the absence of specific resources like internet access, difficulties in adapting curricula, the lack of incentives from administrators, and the shortage of human resources, including the availability of scholarships.

The results of Social Innovation Practices (SIP) in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) highlight the perception of six trends (Figure 4) that facilitate knowledge transfer, learning, and experience-sharing. This contributes to emphasizing the role of the community and its way of life, as well as cultural aspects, in addition to shaping strategies, scientific research, and transformations in the educational, social, economic, health, and environmental sectors.

**Figure 4: Social Innovation Trend.**




Source: Research Data.

The development of Social Innovation Practices (SIP) over time allows us to observe the movements, changes, and services that increasingly require the exchange of knowledge and experiences to solve problems.

Creativity Trend – It is expanding across various domains, driven by technological advancements, educational reforms, and complex social and cultural changes. Recent research on creativity highlights an increasing focus on education, social issues in problem-solving, research methodologies, analytical thinking, and cognitive flexibility (Holinger; Boldt; Kaufman, 2024). However, exploring creativity comprehensively is not a simple task, as it involves considering individual, collective, and institutional or organizational aspects for a deeper analysis and future explorations. Creativity in Social Innovation provides various Scenarios aimed at improving society's quality of life.

Social Trend – It involves addressing issues of structural integration in modern societies, adapting to ever-evolving

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challenges, and incorporating user participation while maintaining the normative structure of the profession (Parpan-Blaser; Hüttemann, 2023). Working with Social Innovation without cultivating pro-social motivation is ineffective. According to the literature, a social trend may or may not involve technological aspects, as its central goal is to promote solutions and drive the evolution of a particular community or locality.

Technological Trend – Technological trends are rapidly evolving, significantly influencing various sectors. Technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and the Internet of Things (IoT) are transforming Social Innovation by offering effective solutions to complex social issues such as access to healthcare, education, and environmental sustainability (Matthias, 2023; Peterlin et al., 2020).

Social Entrepreneurship Trend – During the coding of the selected content, we observed that Social Innovation frequently emerged from social entrepreneurship projects. We identified, in this context, a significant trend towards the initiation of Social Innovation processes. Social entrepreneurship is intrinsically linked to a commitment to social change and systemic transformation, seeking sustainable solutions to social issues (Godwin; Crocker-Billingsley, 2024). Social Innovation, in turn, develops strategies based on collaborative efforts, integrating multiple actors with common purposes and adaptive intelligence. The goal is to strengthen social cohesion and promote environmental sustainability, while also generating, indirectly, positive impacts on the economic aspect (Zapata-Aguilar, 2024).

Value Co-Creation Trend – This refers to co-creating, meaning promoting accessible, assertive, and collaborative innovation that emphasizes interaction among various actors to address social, environmental, and economic issues. The selected articles addressed co-creation in a participatory manner to enhance democracy, involving stakeholders in the development and implementation of services, policies, and systems to solve complex problems (Melanie; Cian O'Donovan, 2023).

Learning and Action Trend – This trend emphasizes listening, retaining, practicing, and teaching and/or sharing. Some authors, such as Fortunato and Alter (2023), relate the learning and action trend to interactionist theory (although exploring this theory is not the aim of this study). This approach encourages not only observation and explanation but also shaping and managing strategic and collective actions, with the purpose of intentionally and deliberately promoting community development. This purpose drives Social Innovation Practice. Social Innovation Practices (SIP) foster creativity by exploring synergies and proposing an integrated framework for research, learning, and action.

Social innovation practices (SIPs) allowed us to observe and develop trends that provided opportunities for strategic actions and innovative solutions to emerging problems.

## CONCLUSION

Social innovation practices (SIPs) have demonstrated innovative actions across various fields of knowledge, particularly in the development of programs that strengthen the pedagogical curricula of higher education institutions, aiming to enhance this theme. Additionally, actions in the healthcare sector stand out, where technologies are utilized to expand access and achieve rapid results, as well as social entrepreneurship, used as a strategy to implement and consolidate social innovation in education.

In this context, SIPs have driven the development of trends aligned with activities carried out in higher education institutions (HEIs), requiring creativity and social cohesion. The focus has been on addressing public policies, technology (particularly the application of artificial intelligence in processes), and social entrepreneurship activities as a strategy for SIPs, while value co-creation has evoked the stakeholder model, bringing together actors with common interests in search of solutions that benefit all parties involved. Finally, learning and action were directed toward the creative development of knowledge, creating opportunities for everyone.

The limitation of this study was the difficulty in clearly and thoroughly identifying which SIPs were developed by the actors and the role of the community in this context, which resulted in the reduction of some data due to incomplete information.

For future research, it is recommended to adopt a more comprehensive approach that includes qualitative analyses of case studies, such os interviews with the actors involved in the SIPs, particularly community members. Additionally, it would be valuable to investigate pedagogical curricula adapted to the theme of Social Innovation, analyzing the implementation methods and the main outcomes achieved.

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