

Academic Social Innovation Centers: A Proposed Framework for a Theory of Change

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Abstract

Academia is poised to play a role in individuals' intellectual advancement and in addressing the broader goals of advancing sustainable development, equality, human rights, and poverty reduction while tackling social challenges. To this end, many universities worldwide have established "impact centers" or "social innovation centers." Although the centers share similar names, there is no uniformity among them in their agenda, strategy, and practice. This diversity limits our ability to understand the unique contribution of Academic Social Innovation (ASI) centers to research and practice on tackling social problems. To fill this gap, this paper has three objectives: 1) to describe the state of the art of existing ASIs, 2) to examine diverse and shared characteristics of the centers, and 3) to frame guiding principles that will support the refinement of the theory of change of ASIs. Based on our findings, we compiled a **typology consisting of 3*3 themes, the Academic Social Innovation Framework (ASI Framework)**. It consists of three main themes: actors, structure, and the main objective. Each theme is then divided into three sub-themes, serving as assessment criteria illustrating the tensions that characterize the diverse centers. The ASI Framework can help existing and emerging academic centers define, assess, and refine their theory of change for social innovation.

Introduction

In 1993, Harvard Business School established its Social Enterprise Initiative. The initiative's mission was to "drive sustained, high-impact social change," aiming to "educate, inspire, and support leaders across all sectors to tackle society's toughest challenges and make a difference in the world." Harvard's initiative was one of the first instances of a global phenomenon: the rise of academic social impact centers. By 2010, 17 years later, about 20 more of these centers appeared

in the US alone. Within seven years, 27 more academic social impact centers were created (McBeth, 2018), and almost half of the 50 top business schools worldwide had established similar initiatives (Kelley & Ditkoff, 2017).

The current literature offers a limited understanding of the nature, scope, and goals of Academic Social Innovation (ASI) initiatives (Alden Rivers et al., 2015). In late 2016, in collaboration with Oxford's Skoll Center for Social Entrepreneurship, the Stanford Social Innovation Review dedicated a series to the Future of Social Impact Education, coining the phrase 'academic impact center,' mainly as a development witnessed among leading business schools.

Traditionally, the term impact has referred to the "double bottom line" approach (Fairfax, 2003; Wilburn, 2014). Impact centers are part of a wider academic agenda aimed at leading social change. Over the years, social innovation approaches have been intertwined with the impact agenda (Elliott, 2013) and, in many cases, encompass it. To date, there are more than 100 centers around the globe. A superficial review of their web pages reveals a wide range of agendas, varied actors, and structures that lead different missions. Apparently, they are all part of the same discipline; however, an in-depth exploration of the phenomena called "ASI centers" is yet to be conducted.

This paper has three main objectives: 1) to describe the state of the art of existing ASI centers, 2) to examine diverse and shared characteristics of the centers, and 3) to frame guiding principles that will support the refinement of the theory of change of the ASIs. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to look at the phenomenon through a wide lens, beyond business schools and with a global perspective.

Methodology

With the support of the Edmond de Rothschild Foundation, we mapped out 107 wide-ranging social innovation programs within five continents, 29 countries, and across different disciplines (economics, public policy, business administration, social work, and design) while considering four representation and diversity criteria (geographical, disciplinary, main activities, and structure). We adhered to an inclusive approach, including all centers containing at least one of the following search terms in their titles: social innovation, impact, sustainability, social entrepreneurship, and sustainable development. The umbrella term chosen for those centers is Academic Social Innovation Centers (ASI Centers). Qualitative in-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted among 24 academic institutions and some additional ecosystem connectors (hub managers, facilitators) and educators who work closely with the academy but are not affiliated with one institution. A total of 31 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Figure 1 illustrates the geographical spread of the interviews and the different institutions covered (some institutions had multiple interviewees).

Figure 1: Interviews Conducted for this Research



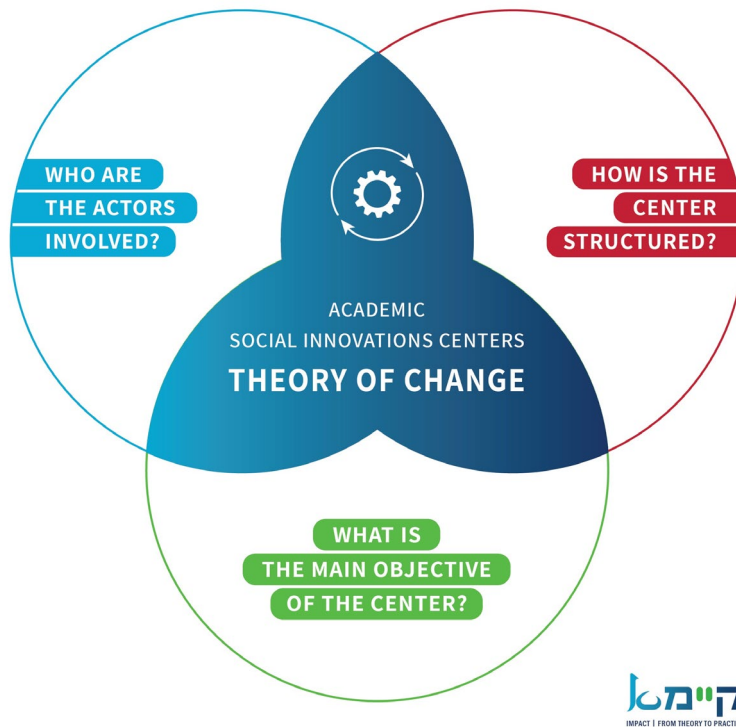
Findings

Although many universities around the world have established social innovation centers, there seems to be a great diversity among them in terms of the essence of the center and how they contribute to social impact at large.

Guided by the grounded theory of qualitative data collection and the emergence of the main ideas/concepts from the data itself (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), the research sought to conceptualize the latent patterns and structures of the ASI centers. We compiled a **typology consisting of 3*3 themes, namely the Academic Social Innovation Framework (ASI Framework)**. The Framework consists of three main themes: its actors, its structure, and its center's main objective. Each theme is divided into three sub-themes, serving as assessment criteria and illustrating the dichotomies and tensions that characterize the field.

Our analysis focuses on the centers' Theory of Change, defined as “the underlying rationale and assumptions in a change project, and using the desired outcomes of the project as a mechanism to guide project planning, implementation, and evaluation” (Reinholz & Andrews, 2020). We attempt to categorize the assumptions and logical sequence of steps leading to a desired outcome of ASI centers. The ASI Framework can help existing and emerging academic centers better define, assess, and refine their theory of change for social innovation and direct their desired course of action. Figure 2 illustrates the three main questions comprising the themes of the ASI Framework. The next section elaborates on each theme, outlining the different questions and tensions we identified.

Figure 2: Guiding Questions of ASI Framework



I. Who are the actors involved?

Deciding on the core actors (both leadership and students) is an integral part of the mission statement and yields different outputs and different outcomes within the theory of change of the centers.

1. Leadership: Academics vs. Practitioners. Although they are all exclusively academic initiatives within universities and colleges, the spectrum we have identified is between career academics and social leaders who introduce a more practical perspective. Some centers preferred the former (HSE in Russia) and others the latter at a senior level (Kellogg at Northwestern University and SMU in Singapore), while the majority sought a

mixture of both, creating the new jargon of “pracademics” (Dickinson et al., 2022). Some centers were co-led to benefit from both words (University of Cambridge).

2. Target Audience: Elites vs. Local Change Makers. Some established institutions focused on the classical top achievers’ students (LSE), while other institutions actively sought local community organizers from marginalized groups to participate in training led by the centers (Cambridge) or open-selected training to entire local communities. Rutgers University, for example, placed specific emphasis on diversifying its target audience (mostly low-income, first-generation).
3. Change Agents: Student-Focused vs. Ecosystem-Oriented. Many institutions saw their primary goal as meeting students’ needs and expectations (such as Northwestern and Hanoi Universities). Yet others looked to the outside community, creating programs to strengthen the entire social innovation ecosystem (Alden Rivers, Armellini, & Nie 2015). Those centers typically opened their programs to non-students and invited national practitioners to their training and programs. A strong example is that of ESSEC (France).

II. How is the center structured?

Impact initiatives can take a broad form, from one elective course to a university-wide initiative. This is not an administrative question, as there are clear implications in where the center is rooted in terms of its responsibilities, funding streams, target audiences, etc.

1. Disciplinary Focus: Specific Faculty vs. Interdisciplinary. Sometimes, incorporating under a particular school or faculty creates difficulties in fostering horizontal collaborations (Kellogg, for example). Yet it creates much more clarity, structure, and a stream of students. Although some centers were more focused on one discipline (like LSE or the University of Chicago), many were a priori interdisciplinary and had a wide approach to educators’ backgrounds – be it social work, community organizing, design, history, or others. Some centers put specific emphasis on transdisciplinary knowledge creation with wider communities and lived experience (Cambridge). A multidisciplinary approach indicates the critical perspectives one seeks to add to underlying theories supporting a center’s activities.
2. Academic Positioning: Structured Degrees vs. Practical Executive Education. Most institutions have not challenged the existing order within the university, staying within the familiar frame of undergraduate, graduate, and academic courses (such as in Hanoi, Berkeley, and LSE). Other institutions like Cambridge, UCL, and South Africa’s Bertha Center have focused on practical training and executive education courses. Though not always explicitly, some centers (Oxford, Berkley, and UCL) questioned the status quo of academic discourse by focusing more on systems analysis, power dynamics, and more democratized knowledge creation incorporating lived experiences (Burns, 2014).
3. Source of Funding: internal vs. Donors’ endowment. In some cases, like HSE in Moscow and the Hertie School in Berlin, public funding and intra-university sources provided most of the budget. In contrast, the bulk of the institutions were established as a result of a very large donation from philanthropic donors (SMU and Bertha Center) or an

endowment from the alum network (Gurin Center at NYU). Donations are traditional in some cultures more than others and sometimes can be seen as an unfair influence. However, obtaining public funding might be a lengthy and troublesome bureaucratic experience. Deciding on the source of funding impacts the center's theory of change (bearing on the sort of activities and organizational culture), as well as the independence level of the center.

III. What is the main objective of the center?

1. Modus operandi: Research vs. Teaching. Traditionally, the academy is viewed as a leading research and knowledge-generation institution. This approach is highly prevalent in some centers (HSE in Russia and Makerere in Uganda). In contrast, others, such as UC Berkeley, University of Cambridge, and AIT, were much more focused on teaching and capacity-building. This is not a stand-alone question: the modus operandi of the center should be heavily influenced by its theory of change and target audience (see Section 1 above).
2. Problematization Interplay: Solution-oriented vs. Problem-Focused. One significant dichotomy in approaches was found between focusing on practical tools for implementing solutions (financial, entrepreneurial, technological) and social challenges (i.e., Aspen Institute, FLASCO, and ESSEC). Other centers sought to move away from instant solutions and delve deeper into the scope of the problem – to map the structural factors and mental models that lead to the formation of the problem in the first place. Significant examples can be found at UCL, which emphasizes multi-sectoral collaboration in moonshot missions, and also at Oxford, which criticized the “Heropreneurship” culture and promoted systemic thinking (Papi-Thornton, 2016). Though many centers started as solution-focused, working on social entrepreneurship, we have identified a trend of moving away from quick fixes and emphasizing the importance of delving into the problem's systemic landscape, root cause analysis, and wide perspective problematization before even considering leverage points of interventions and solutions (Abson et al., 2017).
3. Grand strategy: Market-oriented vs. Mission-focused. This spectrum largely symbolizes a significant difference in the approach of impact centers in the field – whether it is a relatively narrow field looking at double/triple bottom line (business-social-environmental) and market solutions (as in Kellogs, Aspen, and LSE). The other side of the spectrum challenges the vision and the mere assumption that solutions will emerge from the business sector. Centers like Hertie and especially UCL challenge neo-capitalist assumptions and seek to give a much more central place to the public sector to define moonshot missions (Mazzucato, 2021). Such missions define collaborative public value and a multi-sectoral agenda, serving as somewhat of a North Star for societal challenges. Adhering to the mission-focused approach would entail cross-sectoral collaboration and viewing the center as a facilitator assisting in moving the needle for the entire ecosystem.

Concluding Remarks

Although the themes of the ASI Framework are sometimes described as tensions, in reality, most centers are somewhere on the continuum. Centers position themselves (aware or unaware) on different aspects of the axes presented, and their theories of change vary accordingly. The work presented in this article is meant to highlight the richness of the field and the various trends and dilemmas as social innovation education matures from a somewhat fad-stage into being an integral part of the global academic landscape.

Back in 2016, when SSIR and the Skoll Center first framed the impact of education and the role of academic institutions in driving change, it seemed like we were on the verge of a revolution that was about to transform the academic discourse on social change. Almost a decade later, our global analysis has demonstrated that the field is correlating more with the traditional Diffusion of Innovation theory (introduced by E.M. Rogers in the 1960s). As the centers peak number-wise, it is becoming evident that we are past the “early adopters” phase and are deep in the “early majority” period.

The diffusion theory, however, does not address the level of transformation within existing theories of change, revealing or challenging assumptions, beliefs, and values of ASI centers (Siddiqui & Adams, 2013). The widespread and expedited growth in numbers calls for a systematic review and understanding of the unique value proposition that centers want to bring to the table and additional research into their agendas, beliefs, strategy, scope, and results.

The evolutionary nature of the impact education field indicates that we now have enough global data to start formulating guiding principles and recommendations. The questions outlined in the ASI Framework could serve as a first step for the centers to articulate their own theory of change. The table below summarizes the main findings and characteristics among the diverse centers and can help define, assess, and refine their theory of change:

Who are the actors involved?	How is the center structured?	What is the main objective of the center?
<u>Leadership</u> : Academics vs. Practitioners in leadership	<u>Disciplinary Focus</u> : Specific Faculty vs. Inter-disciplinary	<u>Modus operandi</u> : Research vs. Teaching
<u>Target audience</u> : Elites vs. Local change makers	<u>Academic Positioning</u> : Structured degrees vs. Practical executive education	<u>Problematization Interplay</u> : Solution oriented vs. Problem focused
<u>Change Agents</u> : Students Focused vs. Ecosystem oriented	<u>Source of Funding</u> : Internal Funding vs. Donors' endowment	<u>Grand strategy</u> : Marked oriented vs. Mission focused

It is worth noting that no one-size-fits-all solution or concrete best-practice model exists for a successful social innovation center in an academic institution. Nor should there be, as they are rooted in their cultural and historical context, with diverse perspectives on various spectrums. As it becomes evident that ASI centers are more than a trend; they are here to stay – so it's imperative to be intentional and move away from a “let's have a new impact center” mindset into the strategic realm of “how do we do social innovation education better” in order to extend our effects on society.

It is worth noting that these findings represent preliminary results that require further empirical research and data to substantiate. Additional studies tracking the historical evolution and emerging trends of ASI centers over time across various institutional contexts are needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of their development, effectiveness, and best practices. Moreover, the relationships between the universities and the institutions, including budget, dependency, and power dynamics, deserve further exploration. Clarifying the theory of change through the ASI Framework is a welcome first step.

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