



Oxford's Global  
Innovation Consultancy

# Unlocking Universities for Social Innovation Playbook

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## About the Social Innovation Hub

The [Social Innovation Hub](#)<sup>1</sup> (SIH) at the University of Calgary is a membership-based initiative dedicated to providing wrap-around support for faculty, community members, and students to develop their social innovations, collaborate, and contribute to long-term solutions for complex social challenges. SIH is a University of Calgary initiative activated by Innovate Calgary.

Over the last several years, the Hub has sought to listen, learn, and experiment with different ways that university ecosystems, perceived as disconnected from communities and their challenges, can best support social innovation and benefit local communities. Through this work, the Hub identified a gap in practical examples, tools, and illustrations of what has been tried, learned, and made a difference in this space. To fill this gap, the SIH collaborated with Oxentia to develop a Playbook that other universities and related stakeholders could draw on to build stronger innovation ecosystems, and more sustainable community impact.

## About Oxentia

Oxentia Ltd is an innovation management and technology commercialisation consultancy that started in 2004 as an operating division within Oxford University Innovation Ltd, the world-leading technology transfer company of the University of Oxford. Oxentia's mission is to provide high quality innovation management consulting services and advice, derived directly from practitioners' perspectives, to organisations around the world, adding value and enabling economic growth at all levels. Since inception, Oxentia has engaged with large corporate businesses and SMEs, university spinouts, research organisations foundations, and governments as well as academics from research institutions and universities across most continents of the world.

## Disclaimer

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<sup>1</sup> This playbook reflects the models, partnerships, and practical learning developed through the first phase of programming at the Social Innovation Hub. As of April 2026, the Hub is entering a transition phase as its initial public programming concludes. While the physical space and offerings are evolving, the core models, relationships, and ecosystem insights described here continue to inform ongoing social innovation efforts and future directions.

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## ii. Key Concepts

**Ecosystem builders.** Ecosystem builders are key stakeholders who play a vital role in creating an environment where social innovation can thrive. In both the private and public sectors, several actors contribute to building innovation ecosystems: *funders*, who provide the necessary resources and financial support to innovators; *policymakers*, who establish policies that enable innovation; *investors*, who accelerate progress through strategic financing; and *coaches and mentors*, who offer guidance and support to innovators. Within the university ecosystem in particular, university leadership is essential, ensuring strategic alignment across various university units and setting clear, achievable goals and KPIs. Technology transfer officers, impact managers, and program leads play a critical role in fostering innovation. Community leaders also serve as vital connectors, bridging the gap between universities and local communities to foster collaboration and social impact.

**Knowledge Exchange (KE).** A process or activity by which knowledge is exchanged where: (a) the knowledge is connected to science, technology, humanities or new ideas (as the case may be), and (b) the exchange contributes, or is likely to contribute (directly or indirectly), to an economic or social benefit.<sup>2</sup>

University partners in Knowledge Exchange range from individuals who attend events organised by the institution, to a multinational company partnering to develop new medicines. KE activities can include public events, giving access to businesses to use specialized equipment or facilities, undertaking consultancy, or licensing intellectual property so others may use the information. Providers of higher education often also play important roles as anchor institutions for KE in their local area.

**Innovation.** An umbrella term that refers to the process of creating ideas, products, services, or methods that significantly improve upon existing ones, add value, and solve problems. Innovation can apply to any field (technology, business, healthcare, education, etc.) and does not necessarily address social issues. The focus of innovation is on novelty and improving efficiency, usability, or effectiveness. While the relevance of non-STEM disciplines to innovation is increasingly acknowledged,<sup>3</sup> innovation still predominantly refers to traditional (deep-) tech-based projects.

**Social enterprise.** A business that develops products and/or services that create economic value within local and international markets, while also addressing critical social and environmental challenges. Many are driven by accelerating progress towards the United Nations [Sustainable Development Goals](#)<sup>4</sup> (SDGs).<sup>5</sup> Social entrepreneurship is a subset of social innovation. Social enterprises are positioned on a spectrum between for-profit commercial businesses (such as spinouts and start-ups), and charities (where the primary driver is to achieve social value).

**Social innovation.** A subset of innovation that specifically focuses on addressing challenges in society, such as inequality, climate change, or poverty, in a novel way. It is an umbrella term which encompasses many different innovation initiatives, from entrepreneurship to community

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<sup>2</sup> <https://kef.ac.uk/about>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/this-is-shape/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_The\\_State\\_of\\_Social\\_Enterprise\\_2024.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_The_State_of_Social_Enterprise_2024.pdf)

engagement activities. The primary goal of social innovation is to improve well-being and quality of life for people, with a focus on specific communities or groups in need. It involves new methods, strategies, or practices that bring about positive social change<sup>6</sup>, and often broader systems change. Social innovation includes tech and non-tech-based projects.

The definition of social innovation is broad and evolving. The University of Calgary's Social Innovation Initiative released a definition for post-secondary institutions, which can be found [here](#)<sup>7</sup>. The Social Innovation Hub draws on that publication, as well as the definition from a seminal scholar of social innovation in Canada, Frances Westley, who describes social innovation as: "any initiative, product, program, or process that brings about significant changes in the routine, resources, authority flows, or beliefs of a social system, and it often has a broad and lasting impact."<sup>8</sup>

**Social innovators.** Individuals or groups who actively seek to address complex social challenges through creative and sustainable solutions. Social innovators can be researchers, students, community members, grassroots organizations, nonprofits, etc. Ecosystem builders and social innovators are not mutually exclusive. An ecosystem stakeholder could be both at the same time.

Universities serve many different social innovators. The primary focus of this Playbook is on *Researcher-Social Innovators*; academics whose research has the potential to be socially innovative, to significantly impact communities or systems, and/or has been conducted in collaboration with community members or organizations, and who are mobilizing their work outside of institutional structures. However, the Playbook also includes examples of community-led initiatives that have involved university researchers. Though most of the concepts, findings and examples in this document apply to social innovators more broadly, community innovators and student innovators will have additional and/or other needs that are not fully addressed. This is a first step focused on one key group, with the opportunity to expand and adapt these insights for others.

**University assets.** University assets in support of social innovation encompass both tangible and intangible resources. Tangible assets include people, spaces, funding, programs, and specialised resources such as researchers, students, faculty, and staff, all of whom contribute expertise, energy, and capacity to social innovation initiatives. Key physical spaces like labs, hubs, and meeting areas enable innovation activities. Additionally, funding from various sources, including government and donor-backed grants, support these initiatives, and programs, competitions, and awards further enhance the university's ability to foster social innovation. Intangible assets consist of the university's institutional identity and reputation, which provide a foundation for social innovation through legitimacy and influence. Social and community capital within universities fosters collaboration and access to networks, while institutional trust and public visibility bolster the impact of social innovation efforts. These intangible resources support an environment conducive to learning, collaboration, and the sharing of knowledge and resources across diverse stakeholders.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/experience/about/centers-institutes/csi/defining-social-innovation> & [https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/the\\_open\\_book\\_of\\_social\\_innovation.pdf](https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/the_open_book_of_social_innovation.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-024-03236-6>

<sup>8</sup> <https://thephilanthropist.ca/original-pdfs/Philanthropist-23-3-441.pdf#:~:text=Social%20innovation%20is%20an%20initiative%2C%20product%2C%20process%2C,contributor%20to%20overall%20social%20and%20ecological%20resilience.>

# 1 Foreword

Universities and research institutions are being called to play a more active role in addressing complex social, economic, and environmental challenges. Beyond creating knowledge, they must also translate it, and connect research, innovation, and community priorities in ways that create tangible public value. Bridging that gap, however, does not happen on its own. It requires purpose, coordination, and the right infrastructure.

At the Social Innovation Hub, our work sits at the intersection between the university and the community. Close enough to the research and infrastructure powering innovation, while also positioned to see where systems and incentives fall short of their potential for serving the public good.

That vantage point has shaped how we understand social innovation: not as a separate stream of activity within a university, but as a connective tissue that can link research, teaching, and community problem-solving in practical, enduring ways. When universities open their doors to social innovation, we do more than create new programs. We activate the knowledge, networks, and talent already within their walls to respond to the needs and amplify the strengths of the communities they exist to serve.

And yet, many institutions still struggle to realize that potential. The barriers are rarely about intent. Most institutions share a strong desire to translate research into real-world impact. The challenge lies in systems that have evolved to support certain pathways to innovation, often those rooted in science, technology, and commercialization. While pathways for ventures that centre both financial sustainability and transformative impact are still being built, they're evolving within institutional systems, funding models, and measures of success at varying speeds, across different contexts. Expanding these systems to intentionally include social innovation doesn't replace or compete with existing strengths; it builds on them. By integrating a broader range of innovation pathways, universities can extend the reach and relevance of their impact.

This Playbook grew out of a decade of work supporting founders, researchers, and community innovators who are re-imagining what innovation looks like, and who often find themselves navigating systems not designed with them in mind. It offers a practical framework for universities and ecosystem partners to intentionally support social innovation.

By mapping cultural, institutional, and individual enablers, and showing what it takes to mobilize university assets in new ways, this resource aims to help universities move from isolated initiatives to systemic approaches. It draws on examples from our experience in Calgary, and extends across Canada and beyond, highlighting where things have worked, what made them possible, and how others can adapt these lessons to their own context.

This Playbook is an invitation to do just that: to unlock what's already there, and to build systems that make social innovation a central, sustained part of how universities create long-term value and impact.

## 2 Introduction

### 2.1 Why a Playbook?

Universities and research institutions benefit greatly from being connected to the needs and challenges of their communities, and being integrated into their local ecosystems. By mobilising research outputs and existing university assets, social innovation can be a powerful pathway for knowledge exchange, and can bridge the gap between institutions and their communities to create tangible impact in collaboration with them. However, many universities are falling short of realising the full potential of social innovation due to the absence of a systemic and intentional approach to leveraging the innovation infrastructure that can support and enable social innovators.

The objective of this Playbook is to provide universities and ecosystem builders with guidance on how they can support social change and inclusive economic development through social innovation. This Playbook highlights the key ingredients – or ‘enablers’ – for social innovation, noting common challenges, along with examples and strategies for how to unlock a university’s existing assets to be inclusive of social innovation. By redirecting or adapting these assets – which are typically dedicated to STEM and deep tech innovations – universities can be better placed to address social challenges and create a more inclusive and impactful innovation ecosystem that is responsive to community needs.

### 2.2 What’s in the Playbook?

The playbook is structured around these two macro-sections:

- *Understanding social innovation*: the first section emphasises why social innovation matters, its commercialisation process and timeline, and how universities need to support it in a systemic way;
- *Social innovation enablers*: the second section analyses the cultural, institutional and individual enablers and barriers to social innovation (people, culture, and interconnected ecosystem), their key challenges and potential mitigations.

Each section includes case studies that detail replicable best practice and key learnings about what worked well and the circumstances that made possible to mobilise innovation infrastructure to support solutions to social problems that are rooted in community problems. In the Appendix we include a summary table of the case studies listed throughout the document and also links to references and further reading.

### 2.3 How was the Playbook developed?

The Social Innovation Hub team collaborated with Oxentia Ltd to develop the Playbook based on experience with innovation projects delivered by the University of Calgary and other institutions, and is designed to share learnings from the social innovation community.

The Playbook was co-created in a multi-step approach, starting with an analysis of existing learning materials programming produced by the Social Innovation Hub. This analysis has been complemented by conducting several workshops with core SIH team to gather insights on the key challenges and learnings gathered from supporting social innovation initiatives. These findings informed the Playbook's design, which has been organised around three social innovation enablers (Organization, Ecosystem, and Innovators). Each dimension has been examined through some sub-dimensions, highlighting the challenges faced, strategies for overcoming these obstacles, and key insights gained.

## 2.4 How to use the Playbook?

The primary audience of this Playbook are ecosystem builders who support innovators and communities to design and launch viable solutions that aim to solve social problems.

The Playbook can also be used a resource for other actors in the university innovation ecosystem (e.g. researchers, students, senior leadership, community leaders, investors) who are interested in learning about and adopting best practices for supporting social innovation. **Table 1** below provides readers guidance on how they might navigate different sections of the Playbook if they identify primarily as a social innovator (see pg. 6), or social innovation ecosystem builder (see pg. 5).

Table 1: How to navigate the different sections of this playbook based on your role in the ecosystem

Section	Social Innovators	Ecosystem Builders
Understanding Social Innovation		X
How does innovation typically happen in the university context?	X	X
The breadth of social innovation pathways	X	X
Social innovation journey	X	
Social Innovation enablers - Organization		X
Social Innovation enablers - Ecosystem		X
Social Innovation enablers - Innovators	X	X
Appendix- Additional Case Studies	X	X

## 3 Understanding Social Innovation

### 3.1 Why does social innovation matter?

Social innovation empowers universities to address complex social challenges through intentional, transdisciplinary action, and novel, evidence-based initiatives. It allows diverse groups, from researchers to community members, to come together to co-create solutions that are not only effective, but also fair and sustainable. The strength of social innovation lies in its ability to go beyond traditional vertical and one-off interventions, and to facilitate spaces for sustainable and inclusive participation and collaboration.

If systematised and fully embedded in the university's ecosystem, social innovation can provide opportunities to break down traditional boundaries between academic researchers and local communities to create collaborations that lead to positive systemic local change.

### 3.2 How does innovation (social or otherwise) typically happen in the university context?

Social innovation is a distinct form of innovation that focuses on addressing societal challenges, often in collaboration with communities, rather than solely advancing technology or generating commercial returns. Within university ecosystems, it stands apart from traditional research and innovation activities, typically driven by market incentives. Defining social innovation clearly is essential, as confusion often arises around what it entails and how it fits into academic agendas. Without this clarity, it can be difficult for university leadership and other stakeholders to understand its value, prioritise it strategically, and allocate resources effectively.

Historically, research commercialisation and technology transfer has been dominated by research outputs from the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines, with a much smaller focus on the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, Professional and Applied schools, and, more broadly, social innovation. STEM-based innovations typically share the following characteristics:

- IP is protected by patents;
- High costs involved (e.g. protecting IP, developing the technology);
- High financial return in the long term;
- Route to market decisions and pathways are clear;
- Likely to produce for-profit spinouts.

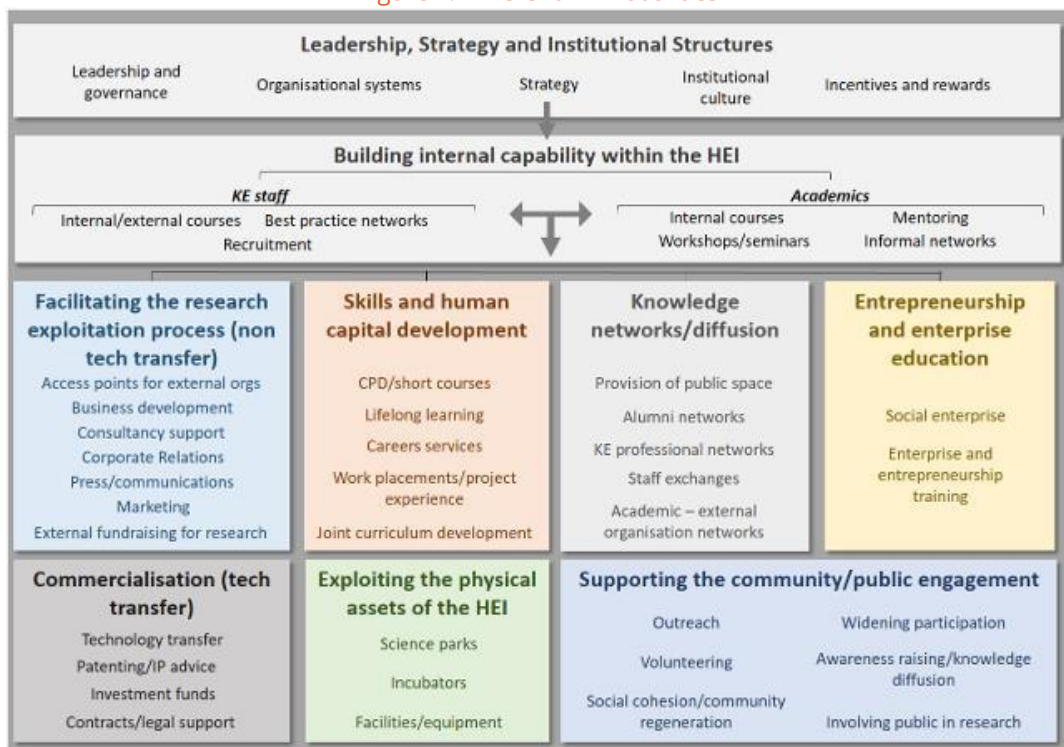
The journey for social innovation often diverges from commercial pathways, prioritising community needs, co-creation, and systemic change over large-scale profit. This section unpacks what makes social innovation distinct, outlines the contexts in which it typically emerges, and introduces the types of actors and processes involved. By understanding how the social innovation journey unfolds,

both within and beyond the university, we can begin to identify the kinds of support institutions must provide to make it happen.

### 3.2.1 The breadth of social innovation pathways

Knowledge Exchange (KE) refers to the sharing of ideas, research findings, experiences, and skills between academic institutions or researchers, and communities or research users. The goal of KE is to create a variety of impacts—societal, financial, and environmental—and it may do this through different pathways, such as business partnerships, entrepreneurship, commercialisation, and the exploitation of physical assets of the university. As sub-category of innovation, social innovation can be implemented through all of these different pathways, as long as the right enablers are in place. The Figure below illustrates the breadth of KE activities.

Figure 1: Different KE modalities<sup>9</sup>



### 3.2.2 Social innovation journey

The social innovation journey differs from ‘traditional’ innovation processes due to its emphasis on addressing social challenges through collaborative, transdisciplinary approaches. While being open to technological or market-driven outcomes, social innovation focuses on creating positive social impact that is sustainable, just, and inclusive. This journey is characterised by a deep engagement with community members, stakeholders, and diverse actors, including those from outside the

<sup>9</sup> T Ulrichsen, 2017, <https://www.ifm.eng.cam.ac.uk/research/uci-policy-unit/thematic-research-areas/understanding-knowledge-exchange/>

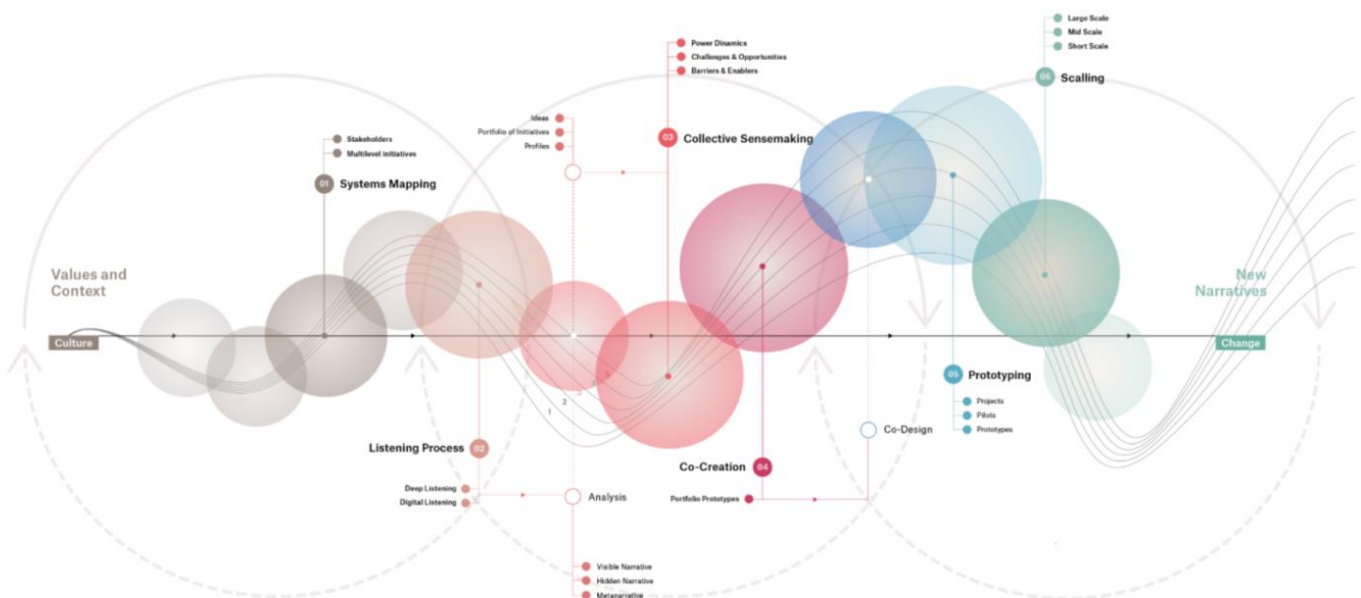
academic and business spheres. Social innovation initiatives often begin with identifying systemic problems, followed by a process of co-creation, where multiple perspectives are valued, and solutions are developed with a focus on equity and inclusivity. Social innovation measures success in terms of its ability to foster community development, social justice, and long-term societal change, rather than solely by financial returns or technological advancements (though these may occur as a result of the initiative). Moreover, social innovation requires overcoming challenges such as language barriers, different institutional priorities, and limited access to resources, which further distinguishes it from more conventional, commercialised innovation pathways.

NESTA *Open Book of Social Innovation* provides an example of the key stages of the social innovation journey<sup>10</sup>:

1. Problem diagnosis - place based approach
2. Idea generation
3. Testing and idea iteration
4. Sustaining
5. Scaling
6. Systemic Change

Another example of the social innovation journey is the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) *Social Innovation Platform* (SIP):

Figure 2: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Social Innovation Platform<sup>11</sup>



<sup>10</sup> [https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/the\\_open\\_book\\_of\\_social\\_innovation.pdf](https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/the_open_book_of_social_innovation.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/social-innovation-platforms/social-innovation-platform>

While numerous social innovation models exist, by working directly with social innovators, the Social Innovation Hub has identified **key insights** from the social innovation journey:

**Insight 1 - Non-linear approach:** Social innovation most often takes a place-based, collaborative, and iterative approach, rather than a linear, incremental approach.

### **Example: Community at the Core**

A university researcher in the Faculty of Arts has a close relative with a disability, and their lived experience sparks a passion for addressing the barriers the built environment presents for people living with visible and invisible disabilities.

Grounded in their local context, the researcher builds strong relationships with the disability community. Their work becomes increasingly collaborative: rooted in uncovering the experiences of people facing barriers and identifying their most pressing needs. Committed to training the next generation, the researcher works with many students, so best practices are integrated into systems in the future, and lasting positive change occurs for the disability community.

Over time, the researcher is sought out by public and private stakeholders across the country for input on accessibility. When the Social Innovation Hub connects with them, they initially resist framing their work as social innovation, viewing “commercialization” as separate from their community-driven goals. However, through a coaching program focused on sustainability and impact, the researcher begins to see themselves as a social innovator; someone mobilizing their knowledge in new ways to meet community and stakeholder needs.

By exploring sustainable pathways, the researcher is able to accelerate and extend the reach of their work, and create greater positive change for the disability community than ever before.

**Insight 2 - Specialized tools:** Exploring social innovation requires different, or adapted tools (e.g. social innovation canvas) that can address the specific challenges these innovators encounter.

### **Example: Expanding the Possibility Horizon**

A researcher in the Faculty of Medicine had worked alongside community for years to co-develop a more inclusive, bottom-up approach to evaluation involving program participants, particularly those with disabilities. They were interested in growing the reach and impact of their work by exploring new pathways for sustainability beyond research and grant writing, but were unsure how to approach this new path. The language in existing standard innovation tools and frameworks was too narrow for their inclusive training program, and they felt unsure of how to take a first step into venture-building and innovation.

Through the Social Innovation Incubator program, the team was introduced to business canvas models that balanced financial sustainability with impact, as well as human centered design tools that helped more deeply understand the real-world problems they were solving, and for whom. And critically – they were given the space, and developed trust with their coaches, advisors, and fellow researcher-innovators in the incubator cohort to ask questions about alignment, question assumptions, and broaden their understanding about what innovation is, how it scales, and who an

innovator can be. Through this work, the team was able to expand their horizon to consider alternative future paths to grow their work, and how commercialization could both sustain their venture, and their impact.

**Insight 3 - Impact matters:** Impact is multidimensional. Deep place-based change can begin locally, while generating ripple effects that extend far beyond the immediate context.

### **Example: Relational Approach**

A faculty member who is also an accomplished musician who writes songs about their Indigenous heritage. Their music informs listeners about colonial histories and shares Indigenous worldviews through accessible storytelling.

Educators frequently invite the faculty member to perform for young people, to teach content often missing from formal curricula. Eventually, the demand becomes more than can be met in person. To expand access, the faculty member records their songs and creates videos, building digital platform that can reach a wider audience, but finds it difficult to gain traction online.

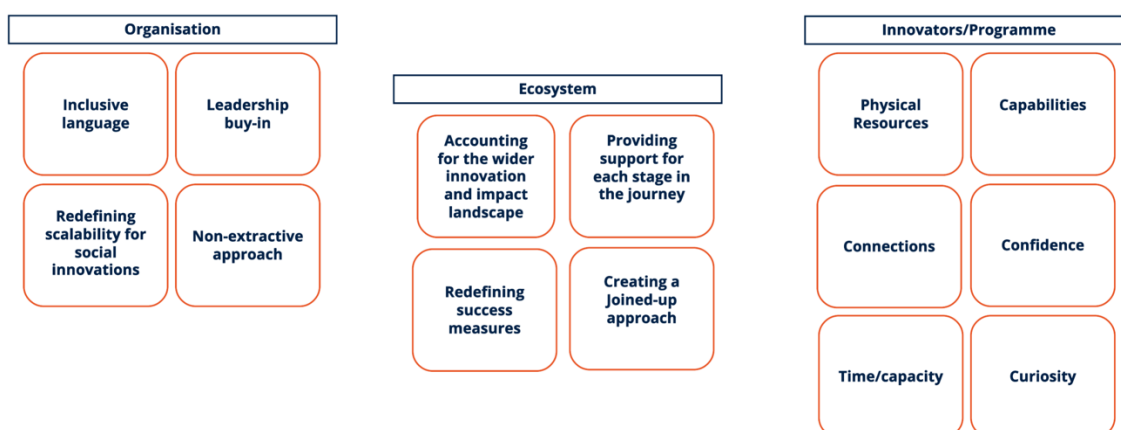
Returning to their relationships with schools, the faculty member asks educators what would help them most. With support from the Social Innovation Hub's Ignite Prize, and input from a colleague with skills in curriculum development, the faculty member creates a teaching guide linking the music and videos to curriculum outcomes. When they pilot the resource at two local schools, the response exceeds expectations: educators from multiple disciplines attend, eager to integrate Indigenous histories and knowledge into their classrooms.

Rooted in relationships, relevance, and community need, the faculty member's work demonstrates that deep place-based change can have ripple effects that begin locally, but extend far beyond.

## **4 Social Innovation Enablers**

This section explores the three critical dimensions that enable social innovation: culture, ecosystem, and people. Each dimension is examined through its sub-dimensions, highlighting the challenges faced, and strategies for overcoming these obstacles. This playbook challenges the assumption that social innovators should simply fit into existing structures or operate completely separately. Rather, existing innovation structures can be adapted to be more inclusive of social innovation. These enabling conditions must be intentionally created and cultivated to allow social innovators to thrive and reach their full potential. The response to individual challenges faced by social innovators often requires a shift in either the culture and/or the ecosystem in which they operate, ensuring that the broader environment actively supports their efforts rather than expecting them to adapt to pre-existing constraints.

Figure 3: The Social Innovation Ecosystem Map



## 4.1 Organization

*What does our organization need to have in place to encourage a culture of social innovation?*

Social innovation culture and leadership refer to the shared values, practices, and behaviours within an institution or community that support and encourage social change initiatives. A culture conducive to social innovation prioritises collaboration, inclusivity, and openness to diverse perspectives. It fosters an environment where experimentation and learning from failure are seen as essential parts of the process. Social innovation culture challenges traditional hierarchies and embraces transdisciplinary approaches, where various stakeholders, including academia, industry, and the community, work together to solve complex social issues. A strong culture of social innovation helps to overcome barriers such as silos and resistance to change by aligning the values of innovation with the broader mission of creating public good.

### 4.1.1 Inclusive language

**Context:** The right language in social innovation is critical because it ensures clarity, fosters inclusivity, and bridges gaps between different stakeholders, allowing for more effective collaboration and understanding. Language used can also have a profound impact on mindset shifts that enable social innovators to find their place in the broader innovation ecosystem.

**Challenge:** Knowledge and language barriers, such as unfamiliarity with a specific communities' terminology, can be a hindrance. In addition, the innovation lexicon (rooted in entrepreneurship and business) can create accessibility issues, especially for those working outside business or STEM fields, who may not initially identify themselves as innovators, or feel their values differ from traditional market-driven commercialization approaches.

**Mitigation:** When working on social impact initiatives and programming, it is important to ensure everyone involved has a shared understanding of the language being used. Create an environment of curiosity, where asking questions – including the definition of words or terms – is encouraged. To reach and engage social innovators, avoid jargon, acronyms, and discipline-specific words. Focus on impact, sustainability, and positive social change over revenue, profit, and commercialization.

**Key learning:** An inclusive and community-relevant language has to be used. This means moving away from traditional concepts in the innovation space to embrace an impact-oriented lexicon.

Box 1: Examples of inclusive language



**University of Kentucky (USA): Using the right “lens” in communications about social innovation**

University of Kentucky's Office of Technology Commercialization (UK Innovate) established a social innovation unit to more intentionally advance innovations and research that had the potential for positive social change. In her interview with the [Tech Transfer IP Forum](#)<sup>12</sup>, Dr Serenity Wright, Senior Executive Director for the unit, notes the importance of language when first setting a social innovation offering: *“Check your lens: Is it social innovation friendly? Is it friendly for your researchers who are coming from the social sciences, the humanities, the arts? Are the questions appropriate for what you are asking? Is everything listed as ‘technology’ [or] ‘invention’? If the language and the rhetoric that is being used isn’t likely to be what you see from those colleges, then change the rhetoric so it’s more inclusive, so it expands the opportunities that they can see available to them.”*



**Aspect Network (UK): Communicating with academics in ways that reflect their values**

The Aspect Network was established as a consortium of universities seeking to identify and disseminate best practice in social sciences commercialisation and to build a global network of institutions committed to the betterment of societies through social sciences research.

In its 2021 [Learning Report](#)<sup>13</sup>, communication and using the right language was highlighted as a critical success factor when seeking to attract more researchers from these disciplines to commercialization: *“If academics feel like the support team speaks their language, they are more likely to build long term relationships and establish trust.”*

Three recommendations in the report included:

- Using alternative terms that resonate with researcher’s values and experience, for example “impact through commercial markets” or “applying your research methods” (rather than “commercialization”).
- Highlighting social impact and social enterprise pathways rather than focussing purely on commercial or economic outcomes; and
- Showcasing the breadth of ways academics can engage in commercialisation to raise awareness of different opportunities and pathways that would be relevant to their research, for example through case studies of innovation projects from their discipline.



**University of Bristol (UK): Uncovering barriers and motivations for women founders**

With little growth in the percentage of women founders funded through [Bristol’s flagship start-up business plan competition](#)<sup>14</sup> and zero women founders funded in the 2018/19 academic year, the programming team at the University of Bristol launched a project to investigate the problem. After conducting roundtable sessions, the feedback showed that deterrents for prospective women entrepreneurs included language and terminology, risk averseness, confidence, and a desire for support other than just funding. Along with [several other changes](#)<sup>15</sup> to the programme, the team adapted their communications approach, using less competitive language and terminology (e.g. not “pitch”), and using more imagery of women. Following the changes, the number of women entrepreneurs funded by the programme increased the next year, growing from zero to seven out of 10.

<sup>12</sup> <https://techtransferipforum.com/enabling-sustained-social-impact-with-serenity-wright/>

<sup>13</sup> [https://aspect.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Aspect-Gain-Report\\_Sept-2021\\_FINAL-compressed.pdf](https://aspect.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Aspect-Gain-Report_Sept-2021_FINAL-compressed.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/careers/start-up/nec/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://aspect.ac.uk/resources/supporting-diversity-in-innovation-and-entrepreneurship/>

### 4.1.2 Leadership buy-in

**Context:** From a practical standpoint, leadership buy-in ensures that social innovators have access to the necessary assets, incentives (such as KPIs and success metrics), and support structures. Equally important, leadership support can foster a community of like-minded individuals, where social innovators feel validated and emotionally supported as well as resourced.

**Challenge:** University leadership often prioritises STEM-based, traditional forms of innovation, which are perceived as more tangible and financially sustainable. This aligns with increasing pressure on universities to deliver and demonstrate financial impact. STEM innovation is also more widely recognised and documented within the innovation ecosystem, and therefore its benefits are typically easier for senior leaders to grasp and relay to funders and other decision-makers. In contrast, a lack of understanding about the value and impact of social innovation may result in limited institutional support, making it harder for social innovators to secure approval or protected time for their projects. Leadership changes present an additional challenge, potentially undermining institutional continuity and damaging trust with community partners.

**Mitigation:** Efforts should be made to raise awareness of the unique benefits of social innovation, and to document and share success stories. Frequently linked to not-for-profit models, social innovation initiatives are generally more affordable and quicker to implement than deep-tech innovations, which tend to be capital-intensive and laboratory-based. While they may be less scalable, or harder to quantify in the traditional sense, social innovation projects can generate deep meaningful local and societal change, directly supporting the civic mission of universities. Embedding social innovation into institutional strategies and policies can help safeguard continuity, limiting the risks posed by changes in leadership and anchoring it within the university's long-term vision.

**Key learning:** University leadership may often lack the background or expertise to fully appreciate the benefits of social innovation. However, this can be addressed by first clearly communicating how social innovation is typically more cost-effective and quicker to implement than other forms of innovation, by demonstrating its alignment with the university's civic mission, and sharing examples of social innovation projects. Incorporating social innovation into core institutional strategies and policies also helps reduce the impact of leadership transitions, ensuring sustained support and integration into the broader innovation agenda.

## Box 2: Examples of approaches to building or demonstrating leadership buy-in



### Liverpool John Moores University (UK): A strategy focused on social value and civic impact<sup>16</sup>

Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) demonstrates high-level leadership commitment (from strategy to senior boards) and a culture that rewards socially impactful teaching and operations.

LJMU has embedded social innovation and social value into its core strategy as an *inclusive, civic university* committed to transforming lives. Its [2030 Strategy](#)<sup>17</sup> emphasizes being an *anchor institution* in Liverpool – working with local government, health partners, and industry to tackle socio-economic challenges. This university-wide effort includes initiatives like free campus menstrual products to fight period poverty, pro bono legal/ business clinics for the community, and industry partnerships for climate solutions. LJMU's Centre for Management Development and Innovation (in partnership with the regional hospital trust) drives these programs, integrating social value into management practices. Research and Innovation Services (RIS) professional service team supports knowledge exchange in all formats, and LMJU's [KEF submission](#)<sup>18</sup> highlights the importance placed on initiatives linked to public engagement and regeneration of the local economy.



### OECD Policy Framework: Building Local Ecosystems for Social Innovation<sup>19</sup>

This framework provides macro-level blueprint for place-based innovation policy that complements university initiatives by ensuring external enablers – from finance to networks – are in place to support university-driven social innovation.

An [OECD working paper](#) (2021) provides a methodological framework for strengthening local social innovation ecosystems. It highlights that beyond individual campus efforts, supportive public policy and multi-sector partnerships are crucial enablers for social innovation.

The report outlines how local governments, universities, businesses, and civil society can coordinate to create conditions where social innovations thrive. Key guidelines include: establishing collaborative governance structures, aligning funding streams and incentives for social impact, building capacity for social entrepreneurs, and integrating social innovation goals into regional development plans. For example, policies might embed universities as ecosystem “hubs” that connect community needs with research expertise and student innovators. The framework also emphasizes measuring social outcomes and knowledge sharing as part of the ecosystem.

## BABSON COLLEGE

### Babson College (US): Leadership Buy-In and Institutional Strategy<sup>20</sup>

Leadership can drive inclusion by aligning institutional policies (like admissions, funding, curricula) with social innovation goals.

Babson College is a leading US business school, with a focus on entrepreneurial education. According to an article from [Next Billion](#), around 2014, Babson College's administration broadened its entrepreneurship focus to include social value. Babson's leadership changed admissions criteria to seek students interested in starting social ventures, and implemented a first-year orientation program (“[From Day One: Making a Difference](#)”) introducing all students to social entrepreneurship. The university's proprietary methodology “[Entrepreneurial Thought in Action](#)” focusses not only on the potential for business generation, but also for creating social impact. The university's [Institute for Social Innovation](#) describes how this framework can be “mindset for creating positive disruption and activating change within individuals”, demonstrating how existing entrepreneurial tools can be leveraged to create social impact, when this is embedded within the organisational culture.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/about-us/ljmu-achievements-and-impact/economic-and-social-impact>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/about-us/our-vision-and-values/mission-and-strategy>

<sup>18</sup> <https://kef.ac.uk/data/10003957>

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/building-local-ecosystems-for-social-innovation\\_bef867cd-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/building-local-ecosystems-for-social-innovation_bef867cd-en.html)

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.babson.edu/about/babson-at-a-glance/strategic-vision/babsons-strategy-in-action/>

### 4.1.3 Redefining scalability for social innovations

**Context:** Successful startups are often judged by their potential to grow quickly, or to “scale-up.” The potential to scale-up is valued by both investors and government. For investors, it suggests a greater likelihood of financial returns. For government, scaleups have been recognised as contributing significantly to economic growth compared to other small and medium-sized enterprises, leading to many policies and initiatives targeted at ventures and innovations with high- and fast-growth potential.<sup>21</sup>

**Challenge:** For traditional deep-tech innovation, a successful scale-up is often equated with wider product/service adoption, leading to jobs and revenue. However, scaling social innovation often requires advancing large system changes, which implies transforming rules, resource flows, cultural norms, and relationships across different levels of society.

**Mitigation:** Scalability for social innovation needs to be redefined to reflect not only economic growth measures, but also the scale of the change and/or impact it can achieve. Universities supporting social innovators may need to shift how they treat concepts related to business and revenue models, what networks are needed to help promote social innovations, and where funding will come from.

**Key learning:** In the social innovation space, you cannot always just scale the product and service to make change; often the goal is to address a social problem at its root. In this context, “scaling-up” can mean making deeper change at the grassroots level, or broader change at the institutional or policy level. Universities need to use different approaches to evaluate what success looks like for a social venture, while also expanding how they help social innovators develop their networks and resource their work.

#### Box 3: Example of helping innovators to scale social impact in multiple dimensions

**McConnell**

**McConnell Foundation (CA): A framework for evaluating social innovation impact<sup>22</sup>**

Frameworks like the McConnell Foundation’s [Scaling Up, Scaling Out, Scaling Deep](#) model can be used to evaluate social innovation impact. This model distinguishes between **scaling out** (impacting greater numbers of people or communities), **scaling up** (influencing laws or policies for broader impact), and **scaling deep** (changing cultural values, relationships, and mindsets for lasting impact). By using such multidimensional lenses, institutions can assess, for example, not only how many students or citizens benefit from an innovation (scaling out), but also how that innovation changes institutional practices or policies (up) and how it transforms attitudes or community empowerment (deep). Such frameworks help universities demonstrate value for the community in rich ways, rather than relying on a single metric like number of startups or people reached.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.smf.co.uk/only-1-of-smes-are-scale-ups-yet-they-contribute-500bn-to-the-uk-economy/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.mcconnellfoundation.ca/>

#### Box 4: Example of helping innovators to scale social impact in multiple dimensions



#### The National TOMs Framework (UK): A formula to calculate the monetary value of social impact initiatives<sup>23</sup>

In 2012, the UK government passed the [Social Value Act](#) requiring those who commission public services to consider wider social, economic, and environmental benefits. This led to the development of [the National TOMs framework](#), which offers a way to measure social value. It is based on [30 curated, standardised measures](#) across four key themes: Work, Economy, Community, and Planet.

An open access version of the National TOMs framework is available on the [Social Value Portal](#) and be used by any organisation. The tool makes it easier for social innovators to demonstrate and report on the social capital generated, providing a monetary value for impact. Potential drawbacks of the model, however, are that it doesn't tell the full narrative story of *how* the impact is achieved, and there is some lack of transparency behind how the quantitative values are calculated. For a related summary, see [here](#).

#### 4.1.4 Non-extractive approach

**Context:** There is growing awareness in academia of the need for research to move towards care-driven, relational and non-extractive models. Traditional university practices often treated community knowledge as raw input to be analyzed for academic gain. Today, many institutions (especially those working with Indigenous communities or historically marginalized groups) are adopting principles like *OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access, Possession)* for research data and ensuring community consent and benefit in all projects. This shift is slowly transforming universities into true partners in social innovation rather than extractive “experts.”

**Challenge:** Historically, communities have perceived collaborations with universities as primarily serving research interests, often lacking reciprocity (such as follow-up or the sharing of capital, data and results). This extractive approach diminishes communities' agency, as they are positioned to play an instrumental role in advancing researchers' objectives, reinforcing a perceived hierarchy of knowledge.

**Mitigation:** Universities can address the challenge of avoiding a “parachute in, mine data, and leave” model by prioritizing communities' role and agency in research projects and social innovation initiatives. This could be achieved by structuring partnerships so that community stakeholders share ownership and benefit from research outputs/innovation.

**Key learning:** Make sure researchers, practitioners and innovators build a co-ownership and non-tokenistic/extractive approach into their innovation research project by providing a follow-up and tangible return for the involved communities.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://stroud.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s2055/Appendix%20B%20-%20National%20TOMs%20Framework.pdf>

## Box 5: Examples of non-extractive approaches



### University of Illinois Chicago (US): Equitable Engagement Frameworks

Formal frameworks (MOUs, guiding principles, advisory boards with community representation) help operationalize a non-extractive ethos.

At [UIC's 2022 Climate Hub forum](#)<sup>24</sup>, participants co-developed guidelines for equitable community-university engagement. They highlighted actions like compensating community members for their expertise, sharing ownership of data, and building relationships before formal agreements. These practices directly combat extractive tendencies by valuing community input and ensuring mutual benefit. UIC's effort, which brought once-siloed campus units together with residents, shows institutional willingness to confront power imbalances.

By clearly stating that projects must “demonstrate the community is valued and compensated” and that data and decisions are co-owned, universities can make inclusion a built-in requirement, not an afterthought.



### Glasgow Caledonian University (UK): Place-based Hubs

GCU has developed community-based hubs and projects explicitly designed for mutual benefit of both community members and the university.

The [Common Good Hub – Milton](#)<sup>25</sup> is a university outpost in a disadvantaged Glasgow neighborhood. This hub gives GCU students in fields like community nursing, law, and social work an opportunity to work with residents in deprived areas, delivering services and support *in situ* rather than treating the community as a research subject. In return, the local population gains access to university expertise and resources, and researchers gain insights from “place-based” projects that address real needs.

GCU's leadership emphasizes that such co-produced initiatives are not charity, but done “[for genuine mutual benefit](#)”<sup>26</sup> – a guiding principle to ensure the university's engagement isn't one-sided. This non-extractive approach extends to GCU's international work as well: the university has partnered with the Grameen network to transfer social business solutions from the Global South to Scotland (and vice versa) on terms that empower local stakeholders.

## 4.2 Ecosystem

*What ways of working will best support and nurture social innovation?*

### 4.2.1 Accounting for the wider innovation and impact landscape

**Context:** University innovation efforts do not exist in isolation—they flow within and are shaped by the broader impact ecosystem, which includes government funding and policy, community needs,

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.aashe.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/RESJ-Anthology-2022-Essay-4.pdf#:~:text=by%20the%20university,Open%20forum%20on%20paths%20toward>

<sup>25</sup> [https://www.britishcouncil.vn/sites/default/files/24.10\\_gcu\\_unique\\_approach\\_to\\_social\\_innovation\\_international\\_collaboration\\_and\\_sdgs.pdf#:~:text=%E2%80%A2%20Common%20Good%20Hub%20Milton,people%20living%20in%20deprived%20areas](https://www.britishcouncil.vn/sites/default/files/24.10_gcu_unique_approach_to_social_innovation_international_collaboration_and_sdgs.pdf#:~:text=%E2%80%A2%20Common%20Good%20Hub%20Milton,people%20living%20in%20deprived%20areas)

<sup>26</sup> [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/what\\_is\\_the\\_civic\\_university\\_for#:~:text=match%20at%20L261%20transferred%20to,we%20work%20in%20partnership%20to](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/what_is_the_civic_university_for#:~:text=match%20at%20L261%20transferred%20to,we%20work%20in%20partnership%20to)

incubators and other scaling opportunities. Recognising the nature of the landscape you operate in is a critical first step.

**Challenges:** Not all landscapes will be conducive to social innovation. And even when they are, policy and funding environments can shift rapidly, especially with changes in government. Failing to acknowledge these broader contexts risks decontextualizing the university's work and ignoring powerful enablers—or blockers—of social innovation. Static strategies built without this awareness are easily disrupted, leaving teams stranded when the tides turn.

**Mitigation:** Start by assessing the external environment: thinking about the realities of funding parameters and political contexts, how communities engage with university innovation, and where and how your projects will scale outwards beyond the university. In cases where the external environment is less favourable, look for opportunities to build momentum and support. This may mean starting with a small prototype to show how social innovation can work, focussing on knowledge generation and storytelling to raise awareness, or connecting with other campus groups like sustainability units or entrepreneurship centres to find opportunities for collaboration.

**Key Learning:** To be effective agents of social innovation, universities must be nimble, outward-looking, and embedded in their wider contexts. Cultivating “permeability” —a two-way openness between the university and its surrounding ecosystem—is key.

#### Box 6: Example of Social Innovation Ecosystem



#### British Council (South Africa): SHAPE ecosystem development

*The British Council South Africa<sup>27</sup> SHAPE ecosystem development project showcases an example of interconnected and organic ecosystem development.*

Between 2022 and 2024, the British Council, an UK charity with global presence, partnered with a network of South African universities and innovation agencies (USAf, Universities South Africa, and HSRC, the Human Sciences Research Council) to strengthen the SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy) ecosystem, which was recognised as a key driver for tackling unemployment and improving quality of life.

A key success factor of this partnership was the formation of a broad-based consortium. This enabled knowledge sharing across partners, avoided reliance on a single institution, and ensured long-term commitment to the programme's continuation. Another success factor was the three-pronged strategy the partners followed to support diverse ecosystem actors and address their specific needs. Key activities were:

1. Training & Mentoring: Upskilling tech transfer professionals, who could support future projects, and accelerating high-potential SHAPE innovations, which could be used to champion future commercialisation effort;
2. Institutional Partnerships between the UK and South Africa: Fostering strategic links between South African and UK universities, engaging universities' leadership and raising national and international visibility;
3. Open-Access Dissemination: Producing and sharing practical guidelines for TTOs and researchers, creating a lasting legacy and resource base for future collaboration within South Africa and beyond.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.org.za/>



Royal Academy  
of Engineering

### Leaders in Innovation Fellowships (Philippines): Insights from an innovation capacity building programme

*Demonstrating how change can happen from the ground up, when an innovation ecosystem is early in its maturity.*

The Royal Academy of Engineering's Leaders in Innovation Fellowships (LIF)<sup>28</sup> programme supports talented entrepreneurs from around the globe to turn their engineering innovations into impactful, sustainable businesses. The programme has been running since 2014 and has supported nearly alumni as of 2025. The Royal Academy of Engineering works in partnership with an innovation agency (or other organisation) in each of the countries it serves, to deliver the programme of networking and capacity building, targeted at researchers (or entrepreneurs) with innovations that have the potential for

In 2019 the in-country partner in the Philippines commissioned an [evaluation of the programme](#)<sup>29</sup>, to examine how it was contributing to building innovation capacity in the country and what future changes might further enhance the programme. Data was gathered through surveys and interviews with programme participants and other key stakeholders in the local innovation ecosystem.

The results of the evaluation found that the programme had had a transformative effect on the researchers who had participated, but that the researchers were being stalled in their journey because of gaps in their wider innovation ecosystem. Examples included policy and funding gaps, lack of industry who could adopt innovations from universities, gaps in the skills and knowledge amongst the university support staff, etc.

Despite this, the innovators from the programme were finding ways to make incremental changes from the ground up. Examples included an innovator who launched a new research department at his university, several researchers who moved into technology transfer roles and built out those departments at their university, and others who started teaching entrepreneurial skills to their students and were starting to observe a mindset change and shift.

Ultimately the evaluation showed the importance of considering the wider context and maturity of an innovation ecosystem when designing a capacity building programme, adapting the approach and expectations for the pace of change accordingly.

#### 4.2.2 Providing support for each stage in the journey (and identifying the transition points)

**Context:** While many universities invest significantly in early-stage innovation support, fewer have built the transition pieces needed to help social innovation initiatives move beyond campus and into real-world application. These transitions are critical moments where innovators either progress or stall.

**Challenges:** Innovation support within universities often concentrates on ideation, with the assumption that external partners will carry innovations forward once they leave campus. This model is not always effective for social innovators, who frequently require longer development timelines, different forms of support, and alternative measures of success. In some cases, this requires tailored programming specifically for social innovation; in others, it may be about clearly signposting existing supports so innovators can recognize their relevance.


<sup>28</sup> <https://raeng.org.uk/programmes-and-prizes/programmes/international-programmes/lif/>

<sup>29</sup> [https://www.oxentia.com/app/uploads/2019/12/LIF-Philippines-Impact-Assessment-2019\\_digital\\_v4-1.pdf](https://www.oxentia.com/app/uploads/2019/12/LIF-Philippines-Impact-Assessment-2019_digital_v4-1.pdf)

**Mitigation:** Begin by mapping the support that exists across all stages of the innovation journey: ideation, validation, launch, and scale. Identify gaps and determine who is best positioned to address them. In some cases, this may be the university; in others, external organizations may be better suited. Where support gaps exist within the university, focus on building the transition points that help social innovators prepare for their next steps beyond campus.

**Key Learning:** Universities do not need to offer support for every stage of the social innovation journey. What matters is recognizing where the institution can meaningfully contribute based on its strengths, and providing guidance or support at key transition points. A well-supported pathway, not just a promising idea, is what enables social innovators to grow, scale, and create lasting impact.

Box 8: Example of a key transition point in the innovation journey



**The University of Calgary's Social Innovation Hub:  
Strategically Positioned**

*The Social Innovation Hub bridges U Calgary innovators with the broader social innovation ecosystem*

Innovate Calgary<sup>30</sup> is the innovation transfer and business incubator associated with the University of Calgary. Its mandate is to enable the commercialization of research and build ventures that create economic and social value.

The Social Innovation Hub<sup>31</sup> (SIH) is one of Innovate Calgary's cornerstone initiatives. It is dedicated to advancing innovations that have a social mission, and supports founders, innovators and researchers launch and scale their solutions pressing social problems.

The Social Innovation Hub plays a key role as a transition point between the university, and the broader social innovation ecosystem, with information and access flowing in both directions. The SIH maintains strategic partnerships within both ecosystems to ensure that innovators can access the networks, programs and resources they need, at the right time as they build their venture.

\*Not comprehensive of entire ecosystem

<sup>30</sup> <https://innovatecalgary.com/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://innovatecalgary.com/social-innovation/>

### 4.2.3 Creating an integrated approach

**Context:** The social innovation pathways aren't paved as clearly for innovators to know what their next step could be.

**Challenges:** Supports for social innovators often operate in silos, putting the onus on the innovator to determine how to move through the ecosystem. Innovation is also non-linear; it may begin with research, a discovery, or community engagement, which creates multiple entry-points stewarded by different departments and leads. The innovator attends programs and workshops, but they don't move their work forward in a meaningful way.

**Mitigation:** Map existing ecosystem and supports, and bring together key leads and stakeholders. Open lines of communication and eliminate competition by creating a team mentality for supporting social innovators on their journey. Convene regularly to share resources, upcoming opportunities and individual cases, and ensure that regardless of their entry point, innovators are being guided along their journey.

**Key learning:** Non-linear innovation requires a flexible ecosystem. Those who are supporting social innovators have to know one another, understand what each is offering, and communicate to ensure that innovators get the right resource at the right time.

#### Box 9: Example of an integrated ecosystem supporting systems change

**COMMUNITY  
SOLUTIONS**

**Community Solutions and the Built for Zero model: Ending Homelessness<sup>32</sup>**

*Homelessness can be solved if ecosystems are designed to reduce and end it.*

Communities across the country have achieved a milestone for ending homelessness known as functional zero — simply put, this goal is to equip local support systems to always have a place for everyone at risk. Imagine a bucket with a drain spout on the bottom. Water from a faucet fills the bucket, and the drain allows the water to flow out. If the water enters too fast without draining quickly enough, the bucket overflows. If too much drains out too fast, the bucket runs empty. The goal is to keep a steady level — not too full, not too empty. That's the same concept as functional zero — it's a milestone that means that fewer people are experiencing homelessness than are exiting homelessness at any given time.

When communities work together, they can manage the flow of individuals and families needing housing at any time because they have adequate pathways to housing and support. Right now, fifteen communities around the country have achieved functional zero for at least one group of people. Thirty-nine communities working with our Built for Zero model have made a measurable reduction, which means their work is actually ensuring fewer people experience homelessness.

And while homelessness disproportionately and deeply damages the health of our cities and their citizens, we must remember that less than 1% of any city's population is experiencing homelessness at any time. This work is about coming together to take care of our friends and neighbors most in need.

That's what these cities and counties are proving — it's possible to close the gap to zero and leave no one behind. However, we must look at the problem differently. We must help teams work together to share responsibility and resources. By harnessing data and collaboration, communities are proving it is possible to build systems that can reduce and continuously end homelessness. We need systems built to end homelessness, not just manage it.

This fundamental shift begins with five changes: who is at the table, how those leaders define success, how communities understand the problem, how resources are spent, what we believe is possible.

<sup>32</sup> <https://community.solutions/built-for-zero/the-movement/>

#### 4.2.4 Redefining success measures

**Context:** Social innovators and ecosystem builders need appropriate metrics to showcase the societal impact of their social innovation activities.

**Challenge:** In standard innovation, success is typically measured in terms of scale, investment secured, jobs created, market share, and profit. These measures of success are not always suitable for assessing the impact of social innovation initiatives.

**Mitigation:** Complement statistical data with compelling narratives illustrating how social innovations tangibly benefit individuals and communities. Leverage the persuasive power of stories to engage a diverse audience, from the public to policymakers, highlighting the human element behind the numbers.

**Key learnings:** Recognise the limitations of conventional STEM project metrics when applied to social innovation and develop tailored measures that reflect the unique outcomes of social innovation. Adopt new methods that account for the broader societal impact, which may extend beyond immediate financial returns.

##### Box 10: Example of measuring impact from social innovation



##### In Place of War<sup>33</sup>:

##### Measuring Creativity, Catalyzing Change

###### *Impact Metrics for Social Innovation: Research Report*

In Place of War (IPoW) is a global organisation that uses artistic creativity in places of conflict as a tool for positive change. They enable grassroots change-makers in music, theatre and across the arts to transform cultures of violence and destruction into opportunities of hope and collective resilience. Their work is based upon creating cultural spaces in areas of upheaval and instability, providing education and training in artistic development and enterprise in the Global South, and enabling international artistic collaboration and mobilisation. In Place of War started in 2004 as a research project at the University of Manchester. Initial research findings spurred practical projects and programming. Twenty years later, In Place of War works with a change-maker network of 130 creative organisations across 30 countries, all making lasting change in their communities.

In 2020, IPoW began working with a research team to assess and better track their impact. To gather initial socio-economic data on long-term impact, the team was put in contact with several of IPoW's network of artists, social entrepreneurs, and community leaders known as 'change-makers'. In order to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, they designed a questionnaire that enabled the creation of six individual case studies, offering snapshots into the long-term work of IPoW, as well as summaries from two further potential future change-makers. The questionnaire itself was developed into a standalone systematic tracking tool or 'interface', which can be used and customised by IPoW in the future in order to track and measure the long-term impact of their work.

This pilot study was rooted in six case studies, which can be found summarized in an [Impact Report](#)<sup>34</sup>. Detailed analyses were done of each individual, and each organization's socio-economic statuses to ascertain whether this had changed since working with IPoW. Qualitative data informed the assessment of how the participants' lives, and those of their communities had changed since working with IPoW. Though this data varied significantly in detail and scope, in almost every case the research team was able to quantify the change in economic standing of the change-maker and/or their organisation.

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.inplaceofwar.net/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/601988a7d28b81040cddf82d/t/602ef5e6aabbab5f63d8de0d/1613690354646/Research+Report+22+Oct+20.pdf>

## 4.3 Innovators

*What support do social innovators need, and how is this different to other innovators?*

While many of the principles behind innovation and entrepreneurship are the same for social innovators, some parts of their journey may differ from “traditional” innovation pathways. In some cases, changes may be needed to make the university’s innovation infrastructure more inclusive and supportive. These can range from adjustments within existing programs and communications, to new offerings tailored to the needs of social innovators.

In addition to testing ways to make the infrastructure of supports more inclusive, programs must also focus on the desired outcomes, or changes, they are hoping to see among participating social innovators. Through our work with researcher-social innovators and founders at the Social Innovation Hub, we have identified four core competencies that successfully predict whether a social innovator will move along an innovation path: a strong sense of curiosity, towards a deepening level of confidence, strong entrepreneurial skills, and widening networks to unlock opportunity and provide a community of support. Even with these competencies in hand, social innovators also need time and capacity-building supports as well as physical resources. Taken together, these components build critical resilience needed for a social innovator to pursue, and keep moving along, the path of innovation.

### 4.3.1 Curiosity

#### **Example: The Researcher-Social Innovator**

**Context:** Most researchers are working on solving problems that could improve societal outcomes, whether directly or indirectly. Some have social impact as a central focus of their work, while others are aware of the potential for impact, and open to exploring what that may be.

**Challenge:** Researchers often don’t see the connection between their work and innovation, because of unfamiliar terminology (see 4.1.1), or because there is a general lack of access to relevant examples of success, as many social innovators emerge from the Humanities, Nursing, and other human-centered fields where innovation culture is often not as developed or spoken about. Researchers who are focused on social impact are often unable to see a viable means to support their work beyond grants. Finding alternative pathways to sustainability is challenging, so curiosity is a key motivator needed to take that first step.

**Mitigation:** Accessible programming to encourage curiosity to spark, bridge a lack of familiarity with the innovation space, and offer opportunities to connect with social innovators working across diverse fields.

**Key learning:** Not all researcher-social innovators see themselves and their work through the innovation lens at the outset. This can be true for all social innovators— not just researchers— as their work is often driven by their desire to create positive change, and emerging from community needs and grassroots interests. Sparking social innovators’ curiosity about alternative paths to

sustainability and impact through low-barrier programs where they can ask questions, test assumptions, and learn from others' journeys, opens their horizon of possibility.

Box 11: Example of an initiative to spark curiosity in social innovation



**Social Innovation Hub:**  
**Social Innovator Breakfast Club**

*The Social Innovation Hub hosts low-barrier events and programs for social innovators from the University of Calgary and beyond*

Innovate Calgary's Social Innovation Hub began the [Social Innovator Breakfast Club](#)<sup>35</sup> in spring, 2023 to bring together changemakers from campus and the community to connect, and build a network of like-minded people working towards positive social impact and systems change. Every month a new founder is spotlighted at The Breakfast Club, where they share their journey and answer questions about their project. Featured guests may be pursuing their first impact-oriented business, launching a social enterprise, leading an enterprising non-profit, or a serial social entrepreneur sharing their latest venture. The event showcases a broader definition of innovation, who is seen as an innovator, and offers real-world examples of social innovation pathways.

The Social Innovator Breakfast Club has become a lively staple of the Calgary innovation ecosystem. From students and researchers to entrepreneurs and interested community members, this free, accessible event offers an opportunity for curiosity to be sparked and cultivated.

### 4.3.2 Confidence

**Context:** Social innovators (and especially those working on their first initiative) need to have the confidence to action their curiosity into tangible steps forward for their project.

**Challenge:** Often, once curiosity is sparked about social innovation, and how it could assist in scaling the reach and impact of an innovator's work, they don't know how to begin. For some it might be uncertainty about their best next step, for others it may be a lack of familiarity with the concepts, models, and frameworks used in the innovation space, without a sense of where or who to turn to for help overcoming this gap. This lack of confidence often results in innovators not moving their work along the innovation path, and for academics, their innovative solutions remain within the research realm.

**Mitigation:** Programs and supports that connect founders with knowledgeable coaches to talk through questions about the entrepreneurial journey without judgement, and map out concrete pathways to move their work forward, can help move past indecision. Building a relationship through 1:1 meetings provides a safe sandbox to talk through different options. It also helps to surface strengths and weaknesses in their own skills set so the innovator is clearer about where they need to get additional support.

**Key learning:** A relational approach in this early stage is key to developing enough trust to surface assumptions and have honest conversations about where and why innovators are feeling stuck. This is particularly the case for researchers who haven't traditionally seen themselves as innovators or seen social innovation as a way to expand the reach of their work and impact. Working through

<sup>35</sup> <https://innovatecalgary.com/events/social-innovator-breakfast-club-5/>

these uncertainties is essential to building the confidence that innovators need to make an informed go-no go decision in moving along an innovation path. This confidence in their own identity as a social innovator also helps them more confidently and clearly tell the story of their work and its innovative potential, unlocking more opportunities.

Box 12: Example of an initiative to build confidence in social innovation



### **Social Innovation Hub & Social Innovation Initiative: Translating Research to Action (TR2A)**

*A partnered coaching service that ensures researchers build the confidence they need to action their work in the social innovation space*

Researchers, graduate students, and staff often stand at a crossroads between academia and societal impact. They possess valuable insights and expertise, yet may need help to navigate the intricate journey of translating their knowledge into solutions that benefit society. To address this gap, Innovate Calgary's Social Innovation Hub and U Calgary's [Social Innovation Initiative](#)<sup>36</sup> out of the VP Research office partnered to create TR2A, a supportive coaching service designed to guide individuals seeking to discover pathways for mobilizing their knowledge to create meaningful societal change beyond traditional research and publications.

TR2A understands that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to translating research to action. Participants are encouraged to explore their unique 'walking path' to moving their work beyond the confines of academia. This may include exploring a venture-building path such as a social enterprise business or non-profit with a revenue stream, including business models and digging deep into the problem-solution fit. Or a co-created solution with community in collaboration with key partners to address real-world challenges. For some, licensing may be the best pathway to maximizing the reach and impact of a researcher's work, and in other cases a hybrid approach that combines elements of each of these is the best strategy.

Participants are welcome to continue their coaching journey for as long as they need to lay the foundation for their next step.

### **4.3.3 Capabilities**

**Context:** A chief component of success for any innovation is the ability to make use of business tools and approaches. Innovators must leverage entrepreneurial skills (such as problem-solving, adaptability, resilience, relationship building and negotiation), to explore sustainable pathways forward. With social innovations it is also important to be able to use impact measurement tools to assess if the solution is working, and design thinking skills (such as empathy, rapid prototyping, systems thinking, storytelling) to ensure it is human-centered.

**Challenge:** Many social innovators are primarily motivated by the problem they are trying to solve, or the positive social change they are attempting to make within the community. They often do not have a business or entrepreneurial background, and therefore lack some of the essential knowledge and skills needed to sustainably build their initiative.

**Mitigation:** Programming and supports that go beyond information-sharing, providing entry-level access to core concepts and tools, and incorporate hands-on application to help translate ideas into real-world outcomes.

<sup>36</sup> <https://research.ucalgary.ca/social-innovation/social-innovation-home/social-innovation-initiative-about>

**Key learning:** Social innovators of all types—from researchers to community members—benefit from accessible action-oriented programs that support them to improve their skills, learn or revisit tools, and make space to take their work to the next level.

Box 13: Examples of tools and programs aimed at building capacity of social innovators



**Social Impact Starter Series & The Research to Social Innovation (R2SI) Incubator**

*Hands-on programs that support social innovators to learn the essentials and take their ventures to the next level*

Recognizing a mutual need for accessible, social innovator-friendly skills-building, Innovate Calgary's Social Innovation Hub partnered with the University of Calgary's [Social Innovation Initiative](#) and the [Health Systems Transformation Initiative](#) (HIVE)<sup>37</sup> out of the Faculty of Nursing to create the **Social Impact Starter Series**<sup>38</sup>. Five workshops are offered once a month, including: Storytelling, Crafting a Compelling Problem Statement, Public Speaking and Pitching, Transformational Connections, and Mastering Customer Discovery. Each session offers key business and entrepreneurial concepts explained through a social innovation lens, with time to complete practical exercises and utilize tools shared. Since its launch, the series has seen hundreds of attendees including undergraduate and graduate students, researchers, faculty members, community members, non-profit leaders, and those in intrapreneurial roles in the social impact space. Now in its third iteration, to increase accessibility, workshops are offered both in person and online.

The **Research to Social Innovation (R2SI) Incubator**<sup>39</sup> is a six-month program for early-stage social-impact founders who have an evidence-based solution and a tangible offering, but aren't yet sure how to bring it into the world sustainably. R2SI provides wrap-around supports, including dedicated coaching, expert advising, networks, and skills-building, to help founders move their work forward. The goal is to help ventures shift from having a promising solution to validating the viability of their model and potential market, laying the groundwork for early traction. R2SI fills a critical gap for founders who often feel isolated or overlooked in traditional innovation spaces by providing the supports needed to build core skills and confidence in their own abilities as a founder, and the foundations of their venture. It was launched by Innovate Calgary's Social Innovation Hub in 2022 and has supported over 30 social impact founders in building and scaling their initiatives.

*"The mentorship and resources I received through R2SI was invaluable -not just for growing [my venture], but for navigating the broader challenges of entrepreneurship and social impact. R2SI recognizes that a founder's journey is just as important as the venture's success and values the entrepreneur behind the business, which makes all the difference."*  
-R2SI Participant

#### 4.3.4 Connections

**Context:** Connections are important for the success of any venture or initiative, however the value of social capital for social innovators is even greater because their work is created with, and for the benefit of people and communities. If a pivot is needed throughout the venture-building process, social innovators will rely on the connections they have built to attempt to solve the social problem they are working on in a new way.

<sup>37</sup> <https://nursing.ucalgary.ca/HIVE>

<sup>38</sup> <https://research.ucalgary.ca/social-impact-starter-series>

<sup>39</sup> <https://innovatecalgary.com/programs-funding/r2si/>

**Challenge:** While for some innovators community is at the core of their social impact work, others may have not yet developed relationships with the people who are most impacted by their research or project. Innovators need opportunities to connect, and build support networks within their communities, as well as with the right people who can champion their work. For any initiative to gain traction, there must be buy-in from key decision-makers such as policy makers, industry leaders, and funders, but it is sometimes difficult to find and meet these individuals.

**Mitigation:** Outreach to diverse populations and creating meaningful opportunities to connect with key stakeholders and actors in the innovation space. Designing and hosting events that feature ecosystem partners and key players, and that attract diverse attendees, from community members to investment fund portfolio leads.

**Key Learning:** Social innovators require access to a diverse ecosystem, and relational support networks to access relevant resources to help them grow as a founder, and grow their initiative.

Box 14: Example of event supporting meaningful connection-building for social innovators



**Social Enterprise World Forum**  
**hosted by the Social Innovation Hub**

*Multi-day global conference focused on strengthening the social enterprise movement*

The **Social Enterprise World Forum (SEWF)**<sup>40</sup> is the leading global organisation dedicated to strengthening the social enterprise movement and to transition to the new economy. Through events, initiatives and partnerships, they connect and empower social enterprises, policymakers and purpose-driven organisations to build an inclusive, sustainable economy that puts people and planet first.

SEWF recognises that people living in the community have the best knowledge of their own local context, challenges and systems. They follow the ‘nothing about us without us’ principle. Any initiative in a particular geography is carried out through local partnerships and in a way that strengthens local networks and ecosystem builders.

To support connection-building and knowledge-sharing for members and community, the Social Innovation Hub was a local host for the 2025 Social Enterprise World Forum in Calgary. Attendees had the opportunity to meet new people working in the social innovation space, while learning new approaches and best practices from a global perspective.

#### 4.3.5 Time & Capacity

**Context:** Social innovation initiatives are relational, collaborative, and often centered on impacting large systems. As such, they require significant investment of time (to build and sustain relationships, understand communities and contexts), and often have longer timescales (navigating complexity, and slow-moving change).

**Challenge:** A challenge for researcher-innovators is their limited capacity due to teaching, research and other commitments; and many social innovators—who are working grassroots, in nonprofits or

<sup>40</sup> <https://sewfonline.com/about-sewf/>

bootstrapping their ventures—face similar limitations on their time and resources, preventing them from focusing on social innovation, and learning new capabilities. Entrepreneurial approaches to innovation also often focus on sprints, fast prototyping and (re)iteration, moving on quickly when failure occurs; a pacing that does not match the typical evolution and complexity of social innovation initiatives.

**Mitigation:** Offering social innovators resources (funds, skilled labour) to bolster their capacity to (re)iterate and action key social innovation goals, offers a critical push to help move their initiatives forward. This can be through specialized programs, unrestricted awards, or student employment placements that are stewarded to ensure innovators can access individuals who ‘fill the gaps’ in their own innovation and entrepreneurial knowledge. Offramps are just as important to ensure momentum builds.

**Key learning:** Without enough capacity, social innovations will stall or fail; funding and skilled labour provides critical momentum-generating support.

Box 15: Example of capacity-building initiative supporting researcher-social innovators



**Social Innovation Hub's  
Social Innovator Ignite Prize Pilot**

*A multifaceted capacity-building support for academic researchers pursuing social innovation initiatives*

In November 2024, the Social Innovation Hub launched a pilot initiative for University of Calgary researchers (faculty or teaching track) working to translate their research into social impact, and who were facing capacity-related barriers to doing so.

The **Social Innovator Ignite Prize**<sup>41</sup> invited applications from researchers in any discipline with projects focused on solving a social challenge or problem through an evidence-based solution. The project also had to involve meaningful community participation, and not be solely focused on research, but on a solution designed to reach broader audiences in a sustainable way.

Four researchers received a \$10,000 cash prize, support from Social Innovation Student Analysts stewarded by the Social Innovation Hub, 3-5 coaching sessions with SIH team, and a sponsored six-month Hub membership. Initiatives spanned Indigenous education, violence prevention, infant healthcare and epilepsy advocacy. One exceptional student was also selected for the prize, founder of a property maintenance social enterprise that supports community members with barriers to employment.

As a result of this strategic capacity-building support, recipients accomplished key milestones for their projects, from prototyping to validation, refining target markets and customers, and business plans.

*“The financial support significantly advanced our ability to move the project forward... It enabled us to successfully promote our program to schools across the Calgary region, expand the delivery of our educational sessions in multiple languages, and accelerate the translation of our patient-focused materials into Spanish, French, and German. These milestones enhanced both the reach and accessibility of our program, helping us build stronger connections with diverse communities and meet our core goals for this phase of development.” –Ignite Recipient*

*“Student support was invaluable—we would not have been able to scale our existing services or proceed with formalizing a licensing agreement for our new offerings without their contributions...This was our most successful and rewarding engagement with students in relation to our venture, and we are deeply grateful for their contributions.” – Ignite Recipient*

<sup>41</sup> <https://innovatecalgary.com/programs-funding/social-innovator-ignite-prize/>

### 4.3.6 Physical Resources

**Context:** Social innovation frequently emerges in close collaboration with community partners. These initiatives may originate from university research moving outward into the community, from community needs entering the university, or through partnerships developed between both. Because of this, physical spaces play an important role in enabling connection, trust-building, and the mobilization of ideas.

**Challenges:** University campuses are complex environments composed of many buildings spread across large or multiple sites. They can be difficult to navigate, particularly for community members or partners who are not regularly on campus. In addition, many campus spaces are not designed with the needs of social innovators in mind, such as collaborating with community organizations, mobilizing research for social impact, or developing early-stage ideas that require privacy and psychological safety.

**Mitigation:** Providing physical spaces that are welcoming, accessible, and aligned with the work of social innovators. Offering locations that are close to, but distinct from, the main university environment can give innovators breathing room while still ensuring proximity to academic resources. These off-campus or satellite spaces may support co-working, coaching, meetings, events, training, or early-stage idea development in ways traditional campus spaces cannot.

**Key learning:** Social innovators have diverse and community-rooted needs. Ensuring access to flexible, inclusive, and easily navigable physical spaces is essential to enabling collaboration and connection. A space that is tied to, yet separate from, the university can better support innovators by offering privacy, comfort, and the right environment to cultivate skills, build partnerships, and move ideas toward social impact.

#### Box 16: Example of university offering physical spaces for social innovation



#### Sam Ibrahim Centre for Inclusive Excellence in Entrepreneurship, Innovation & Leadership<sup>42</sup>

##### *Inclusive spaces for social innovators on and off campus*

The Sam Ibrahim Centre for Inclusive Excellence in Entrepreneurship, Innovation and Leadership is a cutting-edge hub that is fully accessible, and designed to inspire innovation and collaboration. Featuring state-of-the-art facilities, the space includes fully-equipped event and media space, modern co-working areas, and dedicated private offices tailored to the needs of early-stage ventures emerging from on and off-campus.

By locating the hub at the edge of the campus in the community, UTSC made it easier for local organizations and residents to walk in and collaborate.

The design and location of physical resources can reinforce inclusion, and offer alternatives to impact first researchers looking to mobilize their work outside of the university. A space that is physically accessible to partners (off-campus or in public venues) sends the message that the university is “open for collaboration.” Amenities like childcare corners, flexible hours, and welcoming signage in multiple languages can further ensure the space meets diverse needs. The investment in bricks-and-mortar for social innovation demonstrates long-term commitment, assuring partners that the work is not a fleeting initiative.

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/sicieeil/>

### 4.3.7 Funding & Capital

**Context:** The social innovation landscape is still in the process of developing in Canada, and there are not as many funding and investment opportunities for social innovators compared to ‘traditional’ innovation.

**Challenges:** Social innovation project timescales are longer, goals are more balanced between social and financial (vs. strictly financial), and occasions to showcase successes are fewer. This makes it more difficult to make a case for supporting and investing in social innovations.

**Mitigation:** Investment funds designed for social innovators that take into account the unique conditions and parameters of social impact projects and ventures, and offer alternative funding frameworks.

**Key learning:** Investors in social innovations must be values-aligned with the project and understand these initiatives as important contributors to overall social, ecological and economic resilience.

#### Box 17: Example of a social innovation-specific investment fund



#### University of Calgary

#### UCeed: Social Impact Fund<sup>43</sup>

*A unique partnership in social finance that supports a growing ecosystem of social purpose organizations focused on making positive changes in our communities.*

UCeed invests up to \$300,000 in social enterprises that are working to solve pressing social and human problems with innovative and tested solutions. This could include, but not limited to, poverty alleviation, education, financial inclusion, health and wellness, re-skilling and up-skilling the next generation workforce, innovation to promote social, gender and economic equity, and innovation in the arts and cultural sectors. Enterprises solving issues related to agriculture, finance, energy, and the environment may be eligible, but are most aligned to **UCeed Social Impact** if they are making a meaningful impact for populations with barriers to access.

As an early-stage investor, we are looking for evidence that your innovation and business model have been tested with the customers and beneficiaries you seek to serve. We are looking for social entrepreneurs who are using innovative approaches to solving pressing social issues and have a desire to measure and manage their intended social impact. We value social innovation, equity and inclusivity, collaboration, and those who bring perspective and a growth mindset to their approach.

The Social Impact Fund is powered by the collective commitment of changemakers: United Way of Calgary and Area, whose mission is to mobilize communities for lasting change; UCalgary alum Curtis Probst, BComm'89; and the Government of Alberta's Creative Partnerships, initiative strengthening the arts and social impact sectors through innovative investment.

<sup>43</sup> <https://ucalgary.ca/uceed/funds-and-programs/social-impact>

## 5 Appendix

### Additional Case Studies

The case studies featured in this Playbook were identified using desk research and examples known to the authors to illustrate and provide evidence that supports key learnings. They are therefore not intended to be comprehensive, but rather as a starting point to offer a sense of how the approaches outlined in the playbook might be applied in real-world situations.

In selecting case studies for the Playbook, we looked for examples that exemplified each of the different 'ecosystem enablers.' We sought to include examples from different continents, and different economies (e.g., not all from capital cities or leading innovation ecosystems). Where possible we looked for examples linked to social innovation directly, but in some cases, we have included examples where the theme or enabler was successfully applied in a different context that still offers valuable learnings.

The table on the next page lists some additional examples, and which enablers the case study demonstrates.

As stated in the Key Concepts section (ii), universities serve many different social innovators. The primary focus of this Playbook is on *Researcher-Social Innovators*; academics whose research has the potential to be socially innovative, to significantly impact communities or systems, and/or has been conducted in collaboration with community members or organizations, and who are mobilizing their work outside of institutional structures.

However, the Playbook also includes examples of community-led initiatives that have involved university researchers. Though most of the concepts and findings in this document apply to social innovators more broadly, community innovators and student innovators will have additional and/or other needs that are not fully addressed. We invite readers, innovators and ecosystem builders to contribute to this ongoing body of knowledge.

Case studies included in 'Boxes' in the pages above are marked with an 'X'. Each additional case study (below the table) is numbered. Numbers in the table relate to the number of the case study.

Name of Organisation (Country)	Inclusive Language	Leadership Buy-in	Redefining Scalability	Non-Extractive Approach	Success Measures	Support for each stage	Integrated Approach	Wider ecosystem	Curiosity	Capabilities	Connections	Confidence	Capacity	Funding	Spaces
University of Kentucky (USA), Box 1, pg. 15	X														
The Aspect Network (UK), Box 1, pg. 15	X														
University of Bristol (UK), Box 1, pg. 15	X														
Liverpool John Moores University (UK), Box 2, pg. 17		X													
OECD Policy Framework, Box 2, pg. 17		X													
Babson College (USA), Box 2, pg. 17		X													
McConnell Foundation (CAN), Box 3, pg. 18			X												
National TOMs Framework (UK), Box 4, pg. 19			X												
Glasgow Caledonian University (UK), Box 5, pg. 20		1		X											
University of Illinois Chicago (USA), Box 5, pg. 20				X			6								
British Council (South Africa), Box 6, Pg. 21						X		X							
Leaders in Innovation Fellowships (Philippines), Box 7, pg. 22						X		X							
University of Calgary Social Innovation Hub, Box 8, pg. 23															
Community Solutions and the Built for Zero model, Box 9, pg. 24							X								
In Place of War, Box 10, pg. 25					X										
University of Calgary Social Innovation Hub, Box 11, pg. 27									X						
University of Calgary Social Innovation Hub and Social Innovation Initiative, Box 12, pg. 28										X		X			
University of Calgary Social Innovation Hub, Box 13, pg. 29										X		X			
Social Enterprise World Forum, Box 14, pg. 30											X				
University of Calgary Social Innovation Hub, Box 15, pg. 31													X		
University of Toronto Sam Ibrahim Centre for Inclusive Excellence in Entrepreneurship, Innovation & Leadership, Box 16, pg. 32															X
University of Calgary UCEED Social Impact Fund Box 17, Pg. 33														X	
Arizona State University – Changemaker Central Hubs (USA)															9
B.C. Collaborative for Social Infrastructure (CAN)							7								
Melbourne Social Equity Institute (Australia)				5											
Ohio University (USA)			3		3										
Tulane University (USA)										10					10
University of Minnesota – Resilient Communities Project (USA)							8								
University of Tennessee, Knoxville (USA)				4											
University of Waterloo			2		2										

1. **Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) – Glasgow, UK:** *Leadership Buy-in & Vision* GCU styles itself as the “[University for the Common Good](#),” a vision set and promoted by its leadership. Institutional leadership has been **critical in shaping GCU’s goals**, embedding the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into the university’s strategy and research priorities. Notably, GCU’s leadership commitment goes beyond the principal’s office – it has

fostered a distributed leadership culture for social innovation. As an SSIR case study observes, leadership at GCU extends far beyond the Vice-Chancellor, engaging faculty and staff at all levels in co-produced initiatives for *mutual benefit*. This top-down and bottom-up alignment has enabled GCU to transform its curriculum and partnerships in line with social impact goals. Under the previous Principal's tenure, GCU became one of the first universities to adopt the SDGs as a framework for its research strategy, and this approach was later recognized by the United Nations as best practice.

2. **University of Waterloo – WISIR – Multidimensional Impact Metrics.** [The Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience](#) highlighted that traditional evaluation tools focus too narrowly on economic outcomes, whereas **social innovations generate social, environmental, and systemic impacts**. Waterloo researchers advocate for **developmental evaluation** approaches that capture complex change and learning, rather than simple financial ROI. For example, instead of just counting startups or dollars, developmental evaluation might track changes in community well-being, policy influence, or network capacity over time. *Lesson:* Embracing multidimensional metrics (beyond profit or enrollment numbers) is crucial. By acknowledging social innovation's "intended effects beyond economic and financial" measures, universities can better assess true impact. Tools like developmental evaluation or systems mapping help measure outcomes such as social inclusion, environmental resilience, and community empowerment. See the following reports:

[Impact Metrics for Social Innovation: Barriers or Bridges to Radical Change?](#) (2012)

[Social Impact Measurement: A Systematic Literature Review and Future Research Directions](#) (2023)

Social Innovation Lab Guide: [https://uwaterloo.ca/waterloo-institute-for-social-innovation-and-resilience/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/10\\_silabguide\\_final\\_0.pdf](https://uwaterloo.ca/waterloo-institute-for-social-innovation-and-resilience/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/10_silabguide_final_0.pdf)

3. **Ohio University – SROI Evaluation – Tools for Multi-faceted Impact.** Ohio University has adopted **Social Return on Investment (SROI)** methodology through its [Sugar Bush Foundation projects](#) to quantify social impact in economic terms. SROI assigns monetary value to social and environmental outcomes (like improved health or avoided costs) to complement traditional financial metrics. For instance, Ohio U can report that "for every \$1 invested, we generate \$X of social impact" in a community program. While not capturing all qualitative aspects, SROI provides a common yardstick to compare diverse impacts. *Lesson:* Using frameworks such as SROI or the UN SDG indicators can help universities communicate the broad value of social innovation initiatives in a language that funders and decision-makers understand. The key is balancing quantitative and qualitative evidence to reflect the full spectrum of change.
4. **University of Tennessee, Knoxville – Appalachian Justice Research Center – Non-Extractive, Community-Driven Research.** UTK's [Appalachian Justice Research Center \(AJRC\)](#) explicitly **follows a non-extractive, collaborative research model** with local Appalachian communities. Rather than doing research *on* communities, AJRC conducts research *with and for* communities [ajrc.utk.edu](http://ajrc.utk.edu). For example, community partners bring forward questions or needs, and AJRC faculty-student teams co-design projects to produce useful deliverables for

the community (such as legal research or data analysis to support local advocacy); [ajrc.utk.edu](http://ajrc.utk.edu). This approach ensures the community retains ownership of data and benefits from the results, addressing the historical problem of universities “extracting” knowledge without reciprocation. *Lesson:* Adopting community-driven research models (akin to “clinical” education or participatory action research) makes innovation work more equitable. By treating community members as co-researchers and prioritizing their needs, universities build trust and create solutions that are relevant and empowering to the community.

5. **Melbourne Social Equity Institute (Australia)** – *Non-Extractive Partnerships*. The University of Melbourne’s Social Equity Institute runs a flagship **Community Fellows Program** that inverts the usual dynamic: it brings in practitioners from community organizations as fellows, giving them time, support, and academic mentorship to pursue research *their* communities need. This acknowledges that grassroots organizations often have deep knowledge but lack capacity to “test, codify and share” their insights. Community Fellows work on self-chosen projects with university resources at their disposal. They also retain equal ownership of the outcomes. *Lesson:* Providing marginalized or community partners with seats at the table (and funding, access, and status within the university) is a powerful non-extractive practice. It shifts the relationship from “university as expert” to a two-way exchange. The **principle of reciprocity** – ensuring the community gets tangible value and shared authority – is key to inclusive innovation.
  
6. **University of Illinois Chicago (UIC)** – *Integrated Internal Collaboration*. UIC discovered that numerous departments had separate outreach and sustainability efforts that weren’t communicating. In response, the university formed **UIC-PACT (Partnerships for Antiracist Campus Transformation)**, a cross-campus collaboration to unify previously siloed units around equitable community engagement. By holding campus-wide forums (like the Climate Hub event in the Auburn Gresham neighborhood) and creating interdisciplinary working groups, UIC broke down internal silos and got faculty, staff, and even different administrative units working in sync toward common community partnership goals. *Lesson:* An “integrated” approach means aligning efforts across departments and roles, so the university presents a coherent, coordinated front to the community. UIC’s experience shows that convening stakeholders around shared values (e.g. antiracism and sustainability) can merge isolated initiatives into a synergistic, whole-campus strategy for social innovation.
  
7. **B.C. Collaborative for Social Infrastructure (Canada)** – *Integrated Across Institutions*. In British Columbia, several universities joined forces (Simon Fraser University, University of British Columbia, Vancouver Island University, and BCIT) to form a **collaborative network for social infrastructure**. Through this partnership, institutions share strategies and even co-develop programs to support community resilience, social equity, and sustainability. SFU, for instance, participates actively in joint experiments and learning exchanges via this network. The collaborative approach allows mid-sized universities to pool resources and amplify impact beyond what any single campus could do alone. *Lesson:* For challenges that span cities or regions, an integrated approach can extend beyond one campus – universities can act as a collective ecosystem. By collaborating rather than competing, institutions can tackle systemic issues (like rural development or climate adaptation) at scale, all while modeling the very cross-sector teamwork they wish to instill in students.

8. **University of Minnesota – Resilient Communities Project (RCP) – *University-Community Integrated Planning***. UMN's RCP is an **innovative model** that **strategically matches local government's needs with multidisciplinary university teams** through year-long partnerships. Rather than ad-hoc service-learning, RCP involves multiple departments and colleges working together on a city's priority projects (for example, one year partnering with a county on 14 coordinated projects in health, housing, environment, etc.). Students and faculty from planning, public health, engineering, and more collaborate, and local officials plus community stakeholders are directly involved throughout. This joined-up approach ensures academic efforts are aligned with community plans and that knowledge flows in both directions. *Lesson:* An "integrated" social innovation means **multiple disciplines and stakeholders are integrated for a shared mission**. RCP's success in advancing community sustainability while enriching student learning shows the power of coordination. It also underscores that tackling complex social problems (resilience, equity, climate) requires breaking out of departmental silos and forming cross-cutting teams.
  
9. **Arizona State University – Changemaker Central Hubs – *Physical Space for Social Innovation***. ASU invested in dedicated on-campus spaces called **Changemaker Central** – vibrant hubs where students from any discipline can gather to work on social entrepreneurship and community projects. These spaces (staffed and supported by the university) provide meeting rooms, co-working areas, and resource centers with information on funding, mentors, and events. By situating these hubs in central campus locations, ASU signaled that social innovation is for *everyone*, not hidden in a single department. *Lesson:* Physical infrastructure matters. Creating a visible home for social innovation lowers barriers to entry – students stumble upon opportunities, interdisciplinary mingling occurs naturally, and the community sees a tangible university commitment. A hub can become the "heart" of the changemaker ecosystem on campus, fostering serendipitous collaboration and a sense of belonging for innovators.
  
10. **Tulane University – Taylor Center for Social Innovation – *Dynamic Hub & Facilities***. Tulane's Phyllis M. Taylor Center (launched post-Hurricane Katrina) serves as a **dynamic social innovation and design thinking hub** on campus. Housed in a central library building, it offers design labs, classrooms, and workshop areas accessible to students, faculty, and community partners. The Taylor Center runs an incubator (Changemaker Institute) and regular training sessions in these spaces. Students have described the Center as a "warm, supportive, inclusive environment to nurture your idea," combining collaboration space with skills-building workshops. *Lesson:* Purpose-built spaces equipped with creative tools (whiteboards, prototyping supplies, etc.) help translate inclusive innovation from theory to practice. The Taylor Center's inviting physical environment – open to "anyone passionate about tackling complex challenges" – illustrates that space can inspire participation. It also provides a neutral ground where community members feel welcome on campus, thus bridging town-gown divides.

