

## 4 social innovators share with SOCIA their thoughts about the social innovation learning needs in the VET system

Article:

Igone Guerra

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Innovation is considered as a key source of competitiveness, sustainable economic growth and social cohesion by the European Commission and, particularly, social innovation is seen as a useful tool to respond to contemporary challenges. Thus, the role of education has emerged as central to shaping citizens with skills to face those challenges. In this sense, it is widely recognized that there is a greater need to foster developing competences and skills regarding social innovation at all levels of the Education System. As for the VET system this have been recently seen as a key element of lifelong learning which “equip citizens with knowledge, skills and competences required”.

In this context, matching these two elements provides light on the needs, demands and challenges of social innovation within the VET system. Thus, with the following interviews what SOCIA wants to do is to:

- Understand perceptions about the value of Social Innovation within VET systems,
- Know the ability of VET to equip people with right skills and competences is attractive for both, the VET’ systems and the Social Innovation field.

As part of our work to co-create a train of trainer’s programme on social innovation in the VET system, SOCIA has interviewed 4 experts and key social innovators. These experts and friends of SOCIA have shed light on the structure, topics and formats that could be considered when designing a training programme particularly aimed at the vocational training system.

In the following lines, we have compiled the answers given by our interviewees to the 5 specific questions that guided the interviews.

## 1. What are the main levers for integrating social innovation into the vocational education system?

**Waldo Soto.** My opinion is based on the universities that have gone through Commons and on conversations I have had with leaders of the social innovation agenda in universities. Firstly, in my opinion the most important enabler would be **keeping a key institutional alignment**, innovation has to be within the strategy. This complements what we have observed in recent exercises we have done. It should be integrated into the strategy, but at the beginning of the process it is necessary to be very careful about how it is integrated in order to avoid fears when the agenda is installed. In many cases it has happened that a lot of noise has been generated and threatens other strategic lines of the university, either because it is not well understood, or because it is unknown. Secondly, it is essential to have **the figure of the leader or champion**, independent of the discipline or area we are talking about. Although, this is contrary to a normative impulse that I would like to see directed towards a more horizontal and more transformative empowering leadership of the team.

**Gabriela Carrasco.** To me **institutional commitment** is crucial to incorporate social innovation in the academic ecosystem and so is it to including it the VET system. The institution has to be committed in some way. The figure of the individual leader may work for a while, but if the institution does not buy into the idea of social innovation, it is difficult for it to be successful in the end. In this sense, this leader must also be validated within the institution. A heterogeneous group that gives it meaning. Social innovation must be integrated from a double perspective: TOP-DOWN but also BOTTOM-UP. Specifically, as regards the VET system, it is key to be close to the needs of the industry and this depends very much on the industry of the country. In the case of Chile, for example, vocational training provides agricultural technicians to the agricultural industry.

**Dmitri Domanski.** If we analyse the way in which social innovation is integrated in universities, one of the things we find is that those universities that have developed specific units or centres for the development of social innovation in the three missions of the universities are most successful in promoting it. In the case of the vocational system, bearing in mind its highly practical nature, **I would emphasise the idea of taking into account the particularity that the VET system demands.** We should link it to the context and turn the needs of the socio-economic environment into opportunities.

**Mónica Nagore.** I hold the view that there is no single element that we can identify as an enabler of social innovation. **Leadership**, for example, is very important, but also the **temporal context** plays a crucial role in driving social innovation, leadership has to be transversal, to have a network of small champions who are going to do their work at a more grassroots level in the organisation. Leadership from the top is important, but equally important is to have a critical mass that pushes social innovation.

## 2. What are the main challenges for a social innovation training program in the vocational training system?

**Waldo Soto.** I think that social innovation changing the person who teaches it in a certain way. That is, **it changes the teachers and it changes the institution.** If the institution before thought about developing a competitive strategy in relation to innovation, when social innovation comes in, it opens the focus towards collaboration, co-creation, creativity and so on. There is an opportunity with social innovation that is a space for transformation, which drives the institution to look for different ways of building relationships with students, the community, in short, with the stakeholders.

**Gabriela Carrasco.** One of the great challenges for the VET system in Chile is the standardisation of all classes. The profile of the teacher is not looking for someone with the ability to motivate students to reflect. **It is necessary to integrate a series of skills into the teacher's profile** that will enable him or her to cope with current demands. Another difficulty is related to the time students have. In Chile, many students work during the day and study in the evening, at night. So, the relationship with the community becomes very difficult. To solve this challenge, **we must think about how to motivate students** to find mechanisms that make it possible to develop skills linked to social innovation.

**Dmitri Domanski.** I think there is a lack of a clear structure of how we integrate social innovation into the vocational training system, that is to say, an appropriate learning content adapted to the vocational training system, such as, entrepreneurship competences that can be applied in the social field to respond to problems not addressed by governments.

**Mónica Nagore.** As regards to the field of social innovation, it is clear to me that the basic thing is that the most necessary thing is to understand the principles. For this reason, I believe it is essential to start or dedicate a module to explaining these principles well and after this, keeping remember them as a crosscutting issue. What I mean with the principles of social innovation is: **collaborative work**, what you generate in a team will always be much better than what you generate individually, you have to work as a team; **diversity**, you have to work with diverse and multidisciplinary actors; **person-centre approach**, the end user has to be taken into account and treated as an expert. The principles of design thinking should be taken up again here: the processes of opening and closing, the double diamond, trying to understand the problem from different perspectives and working with it in an iterative, non-linear way. **The culture of error** is also very important, let's celebrate error because it is a source of learning.

### 3. What would you value most in a social innovation training?

**Waldo Soto.** It is difficult in the vocational training system to teach social innovation because it requires a personal change in how one sees social problems and this is difficult to package in methodologies. There has to be an integration of community awareness skills within the teacher. So, perhaps, this makes social innovation teaching more challenging.

**Gabriela Carrasco.** Linked to what I have said previously, I see the need to implement a very simple training methodology, very simple tools that allow to integrate the work of a competence and how these simple tools can be easily transferred. The second thing would be to design very specific tools for that context that would allow teachers to understand what social innovation is and which aspects can be worked on in isolation and which aspects can be worked on together.

**Dmitri Domanski.** I would definitely structure it around the processes of social innovation. Each process would be supported by a series of resources that could help us develop some previously identified competences.

**Mónica Nagore.** I think it is important to structure training by projects and then see its application in different projects and then, you can deduce what the common elements are. Also, the approach based on the processes of social innovation is interesting because people like to know that there is a process that they can follow and that they have tools that will help them in the development of that process. And here, I come back to the idea that it is important to explain the principles, what are the rules of the game that are going to mark my path. In each part of the process, there are some strong ideas that are important. Apart from the principle of trying to understand the problem, it is important to understand that this is an extremely

important part that normally goes by very quickly but that it is worth spending time defining the problem or challenge we are going to face.

#### 4. What are the preferred online training formats to learn more about Social Innovation?

**Waldo Soto.** It would be interesting to have an international community of mentors and that through short mentoring sessions, teachers could have feedback on doubts or questions they would like to emphasise. Work on what they are thinking of doing in their class, i.e., bring the learning down to concrete cases.

**Gabriela Carrasco.** It would be interesting to offer asynchronous spaces where they can access the information. It is necessary to partner with the leadership of the institutions so that they can then pass all the information to the teachers. It would be interesting to be able to offer certificates to teachers if they complete a course in a self-taught way. For example, perhaps SOCIA could issue a certificate saying that they are certified in a certain subject.

**Dmitri Domanski.** Training pills, social innovation capsules, resources, infographics, videos and gamification. In short, any type of format that enables agile, collaborative and challenge-based learning is essential for social innovation.

**Mónica Nagore.** You can do online workshops and combine different tools, for example, you can work with zoom, where you can work with groups, then for support you have the methodologies.

#### 5. Which social innovation topics would interest you most?

**Waldo Soto.** Climate change and digitalization are the big trends today. Companies have clear challenges in these two areas. So, we should try to connect social innovation to these two trends.

**Gabriela Carrasco.** From the technical-vocational point of view, it is important to link all environmental issues such as **climate change** and to link it to technical competences and to make the bridge to social innovation. Other trends could be the **new forms of teaching**. How we link the different spaces of socialisation of students to teach them these issues. **Internationalisation**. How we integrate teachers and students to take advantage of the wave that the digital world allows us to develop and to be able to learn from what is happening in other areas.

**Dmitri Domanski.** In addition to typical issues such as climate change, digitalisation, migration, social innovations for social welfare, I think that another field of interest for developing new educational resources would be the relationship between social innovation and new economies.

**Mónica Nagore.** Apart from climate change, I also think there are other very important issues such as post-Covid and how innovation can help to address the big challenges and the issue of democracy.

*Interviewed by Igone Guerra*

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