

Reimagining graduate success:

How social entrepreneurship can strengthen graduate development in South African higher education

A policy brief based on the doctoral thesis: *Enhancing Human Development through Social Entrepreneurship: The Case of Enactus in South African Higher Education Institutions*

Crespen Ndlovu

South African universities are under growing pressure to produce graduates who are not only employable, but also adaptable, innovative and socially responsive. Yet higher education graduate success is still judged narrowly through qualifications and labour-market outcomes. Social entrepreneurship (SE), the use of entrepreneurial ideas and action to solve social, economic or environmental problems, offers one practical response to this approach. Its value lies in linking theory, practice and outcomes: students do not only learn concepts in the classroom, but also apply them to real-world challenges through experiential, community-engaged learning. In doing so, SE can help universities develop graduates with stronger leadership, problem-solving ability, collaboration, resilience and social responsibility capabilities, beyond employability alone. In this way higher education can contribute to human development in society

Who should read this brief?

- DHET and public higher education policymakers
- Institutional leaders
- Student affairs, innovation hubs and community engagement units
- Funders, Enactus-type partners, and graduate development programmes

Key messages

1. Social entrepreneurship develops more than enterprise skills

Students reported gains in confidence, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, digital skills and community engagement.

2. Student outcomes depend on the ecosystem around them

These outcomes are strongest when enabling conditions exist, including supportive faculty, peer networks, institutional backing, alumni links, resources and inclusive access.

3. Universities need broader ways of measuring graduate success

The Social Entrepreneurship Capability Framework (SECF) calls on universities to assess student growth in agency, social impact and broader development, not academic credentials alone.

The policy problem

Higher education policy still tends to judge success through qualifications and employability alone. But in South Africa's context of rising graduate unemployment, inequality and rapid change, universities also need to develop graduates who can lead, adapt, collaborate and solve public problems.

Study at a glance

Setting	Two public universities in the Free State (UFS and CUT), with Enactus used as the case through which student social entrepreneurship was examined.
Methods	Interpretivist qualitative case study using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, report review and researcher field notes.
Participants	55 participants: 16 student interviewees, 18 focus group participants, 18 alumni, 2 faculty advisors and 1 Enactus SA representative.
Analytical lens	Capability Approach and Human Development Framework, focusing on broader student development, actual student outcomes, the ability to act and lead, and the enabling or constraining conditions that shape them.

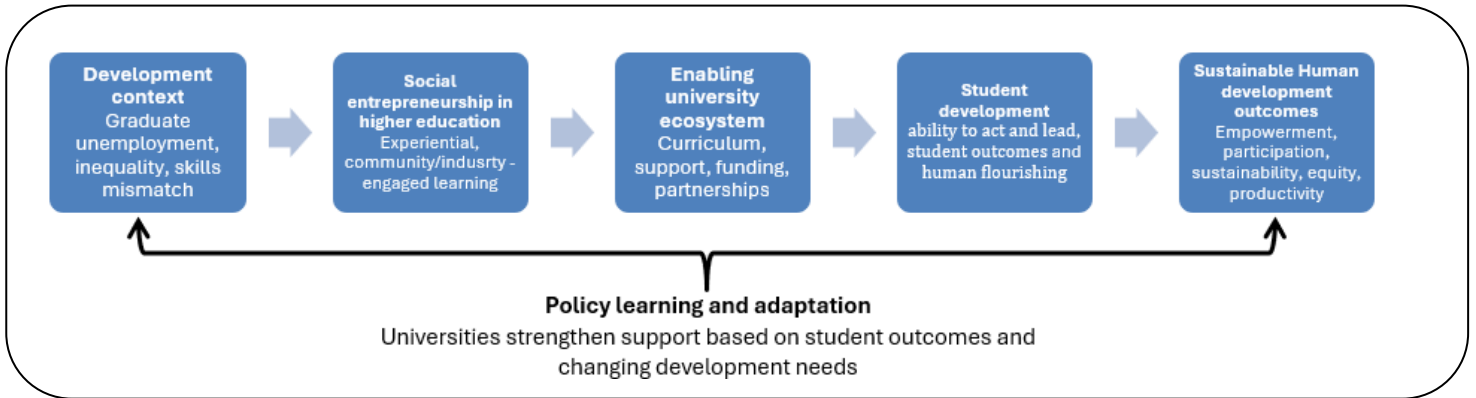
What the study found

- ✓ **Social entrepreneurship fosters entrepreneurial agency.** Students reported to have developed confidence and initiative to identify problems, make decisions, mobilise others and create solutions with social purpose. This ability to act and lead was not only individual; it was also collective, relational and potentially transformative.
- ✓ **Participation in social entrepreneurial initiatives expands valued student outcomes.** Students reported gains in leadership, project management, problem-solving, teamwork, digital skills, resilience, networking and social impact. These are outcomes universities often say they value but rarely measure.
- ✓ **Outcomes depend on enabling conditions, not effort alone.** Whether students turn opportunities into meaningful outcomes depends on social, personal and environmental conditions such as university support, faculty advisors, peer collaboration, access to infrastructure, socio-economic realities and the wider stakeholder ecosystem.

These findings show that student development is shaped not only by participation, but by how universities organise support, opportunities and inclusion. This is the what the Social Entrepreneurship Capability Framework (SECF) seeks to address.

The Social Entrepreneurship Capability Framework (SECF)

The SECF provides a simple policy pathway for understanding how SE can strengthen graduate development in higher education. It shows that when universities create the right support conditions, student learning can translate into meaningful human development outcomes.



The Social Entrepreneurship Capability Framework (SECF)

The SECF is a heuristic framework for higher education that places experiential learning and broader graduate outcomes at the center of university graduate development. It argues that universities should begin by understanding their development context, which is set for intellectual development and addressing challenges such as unemployment, inequality and skills mismatch. This should inform the adoption of social entrepreneurship as an experiential, community-engaged learning approach, supported by an enabling university ecosystem through curriculum, funding, partnerships and institutional support. In turn, this can potentially strengthen student development and contribute to wider human development outcomes such as empowerment, sustainability and productivity. The framework also emphasises continuous learning and adaptation so that universities remain responsive to changing development priorities and produce graduates who are socially and economically relevant.

What does this mean for policy

Redefine graduate success

Universities should assess graduate success through broader indicators, including agency, innovation, social responsibility and community value, not only throughput, credentials and placement rates.

Build enabling ecosystems

Student development depends on mentoring, resources, safe experimentation, digital access, transport, institutional recognition and supportive partnerships.

Embed learning-by-doing

Social entrepreneurship should be linked to curriculum design, interdisciplinary learning, work-integrated learning and community -engaged teaching and learning.

Protect inclusion and equity

Opportunity structures should not benefit only already-advantaged students. Rural campuses, women, low-income students and historically marginalised groups need deliberate support.

Priority recommendations

The recommendations below set out a phased, actor-specific response. The aim is not to make every student a social entrepreneur, but to ensure universities create structured opportunities through which capability-building, innovation and public purpose can flourish.

Actor	Recommended action	Why it matters
DHET / National policymakers	Recognise social entrepreneurship and broader student capability-building in higher education policy, strategic funding and system guidance.	Signals that student development includes agency, innovation and public value, not only completion and employment.
University leadership	Institutionalise social entrepreneurship through institutional strategy, seed funding, recognition, staff support and cross-campus coordination	Moves experiential learning from ad hoc pockets to a stable ecosystem.
Curriculum leaders	Create elective, credit-bearing or linked pathways for experiential, interdisciplinary and community-engaged learning.	Connects academic knowledge to real-world problem-solving.
Student development and innovation units	Provide mentoring, incubation, peer learning, alumni links, digital tools, logistic support and inclusive access mechanisms.	Addresses the conditions that determine how and who can benefit for social impact.
External partners and funders	Support student ventures and capability-building programmes through challenge funds, advisory support and longer-term partnerships.	Improves sustainability and reduces dependence on short-cycle project funding.

Suggested indicators for tracking progress

Institutional inputs	Student capability outcomes	Public-good / ecosystem outcomes
Budget lines, faculty advisors, formal partnerships, credit-bearing pathways, dedicated spaces, digital and logistic support.	Leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, resilience, digital skills, agency, participation and alumni trajectories.	Community impact, sustained student ventures, partner retention, inclusion of under-represented groups and cross-sector collaboration.

Conclusion

Social entrepreneurship should not be treated as an optional add-on. This brief shows that embedding SE in higher learning can help universities develop graduates who are not only employable, but also able to act with purpose, build solutions and contribute to sustainable human development. The policy challenge is to make these opportunities structured, inclusive and measurable.