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# Integrating Social Innovation Education into Higher Education Curricula to Address the Agenda for the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals

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## Abstract

The 2030 agenda for sustainable development is described as a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity that seeks to strengthen universal peace. While Goal 4 of the SDG Agenda focuses on equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all, education is the panacea that will ensure the realisation of the seventeen universal goals that would transform developing and developed countries alike. Therefore, educational institutions have a fundamental role to play in the realisation of these goals. The purpose of this study was to investigate the extent HEIs are integrating social innovation education into higher education curricula to address the agenda for the 2030 sustainable development goals. A qualitative case study research design was adopted for this study. The target population for this study consisted of students from different faculties. Purposive sampling was used. Data was collected using focus group interviews and analysed using content analysis. Key findings reveal that HEI students believe that social innovation education integrated into the curriculum will provoke impactful discussions about the current environment, and existential and socio-economic crisis. Graduates must be competent in social innovation and global citizenship to prepare for the world of work and life. To effectively harness and accelerate these capabilities, higher education institutions (HEIs) must reimagine their teaching methods and curricula to meet the demands of future generations. The creation of new a model for higher education, social innovation education, will promote the development of more critical and socially impactful graduate attributes.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals, Private Higher Education Institutions, technological innovation, social innovation, graduate attributes

## 1. Introduction

The 2030 agenda for sustainable development is described as a “plan of action for people, planet and prosperity that seeks to strengthen universal peace”. The Sustainable Development

Goals (SDG) Agenda calls for a “revitalized Global Partnership for Sustainable Development”, which includes the participation of all countries, stakeholders and people (United Nations, 2024). Goal 4 of the SDG Agenda focuses on “equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2024). However, education is the panacea that will ensure the realisation of the seventeen universal goals. Therefore, educational institutions have a fundamental role to play in the realisation of these goals. Technological innovation in recent times has pervaded educational institutions and has been high on the list of strategic intents in every Higher Education Institution (HEI). To be a global partner of sustainable development and realise the universal goals HEIs must align technological innovations with social innovations. The concept of social innovation is gaining prominence in policy, scientific, and public discussions. There is a growing consensus among practitioners, policymakers, and researchers that widespread social innovation is necessary to address the significant challenges societies face today and in the years to come (Butzin et al., 2014).

Innovation in education transcends technological advances. Social innovation, a vital aspect of innovation, focuses on societal impact and human well-being. Therefore, social innovation can transform the way societies tackle issues ranging from healthcare and education to environmental sustainability and social equity (nova-Institut GmbH, 2024). HEIs must integrate social innovation education into their diverse programme offerings to transform their curricula and promote the SDG Agenda. Graduates need to be proficient in technological innovation, social innovation, and global citizenship to thrive in both their professional and personal lives. They should embody social and ethical responsibility while excelling as emotionally intelligent innovators, leaders, and communicators. To effectively cultivate and advance these skills, higher education institutions (HEIs) must overhaul their teaching approaches and curricula to meet the evolving needs of future generations. The creation of a new model for higher education, social innovation education, will promote the development of more critical and socially impactful graduates who would aid in the realisation of the SDG 2030 Agenda. This study uses a qualitative case study research design to investigate to what extent is the HEI integrating social innovation into their curricula, from the student’s perspective. These students purposefully selected represented the different faculties of study. The purpose of this study was further delineated by the following objectives:

- To evaluate students’ conceptualisation and knowledge about social innovation and sustainable development goals.
- To critically analyse students’ views and experiences from the different faculties of study concerning the benefits of integrating social innovation education into HEI programs of study to address the agenda for the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

## **2. Literature Review**

The literature review for this study constructs a conceptual framework of social innovation and social innovation education. Furthermore, the literature review underscores the impact of social innovation on sustainable development and the role that Higher Education Institutions play in mobilizing global nations to realise the SDG 2030 Agenda.

The political, economic, social, and cultural dynamics of today extend beyond national boundaries, presenting global challenges that are often diverse and complex. Addressing these challenges demands varied approaches and the involvement of multiple stakeholders in crafting solutions (Unceta et al., 2021). The systems we are part of—such as health, economy, environment, governance, and education—have witnessed the rise of new issues and challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, shifts in the world of work, high unemployment rates, and the emergence of new pandemics. These developments have

introduced new areas of vulnerability, necessitating a departure from conventional solutions and a shift toward innovative approaches (Unceta et al., 2021). Sustainable development is a key defining goal of the 21st century and social innovation has a vital role to play in realising this goal. Since sustainable development is a global challenge mutual cooperation and international solidarity is imperative to ensure that successive generations are socially and ethically responsible and innovative leaders (Ilioska, 2021). Despite the pervasive discourse on twenty-first-century skills and the call for innovative modes of learning, a growing body of literature advocates for a transformative model of education known as social innovation education. This approach emphasizes the development of more critical and socially impactful graduate attributes (Alden-Rivers, 2016). Alden-Rivers (2016) supports social innovation education because it not only encompasses twenty-first-century skills but also extends beyond them by fostering attributes essential for driving positive social change.

Heiskala (2007 in Alden-Rivers, 2016, p. 3) defines social innovation for education as the “changes in the cultural, normative, or regulative structures of society which enhance its collective power resources and improve its economic and social performance”. A challenge for educational institutions is developing young people’s capacities for social innovation, given the inevitable variance in how much students care about and believe they can instigate positive social change (Alden-Rivers, 2016). Social innovation education is crafted by principles that encourage systemic and sustainable methods for enhancing society through positive social change, principles that seek to cultivate qualities in students that enable them to drive positive change, encompass the development of employability skills and twenty-first-century skills while striving for a more advanced set of competencies and fosters learning on a deeper, more critical, and socially impactful level compared to traditional education (Alden-Rivers, 2016).

For effective social innovations to take place, it is crucial to strengthen and facilitate cooperation and synergies among diverse actors at the regional level. This includes improving communication and collaboration between all stakeholders, with education playing a central role in this process (Schröder and Krüger, 2019). To optimise social innovation in HEIs there must be more flexible, tailored and learner-centred education, the comparability and recognition of the different educational systems as well as the degrees obtained by students, should be an ambition for the future. This also implies enhanced recognition and appreciation of diversity. Greater flexibility at the institutional level is essential. Consequently, space must be provided for adaptive capacity building and the dissemination of knowledge (Schröder and Krüger, 2019).

The importance of social innovation cannot be underrated especially when aligned with technological and product innovation. Social innovation targets complex societal issues such as poverty, inequality, and climate change. These challenges require holistic solutions that consider social dynamics, ethics and human behaviour. By prioritising the needs of marginalised and vulnerable groups, social innovation ensures that the benefits of progress are distributed more evenly across the broad society. The participatory approach that social innovation employs strengthens community bonds and resilience, empowering individuals to take ownership of their development while also allowing them to consider factors specific to their community and environment, and supporting human relationships simultaneously (nova-Institut GmbH, 2024). Most importantly, social innovations drive sustainable development, therefore, aligning with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Sustainable development, as defined by UNESCO (2024), refers to development that fulfils the needs of the present without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. A key objective of sustainable development is to advance economic and societal goals without depleting nature's capacity to provide natural resources and ecosystem services. When combined with social innovations, sustainable development fosters environmental

sustainability, social justice, and economic progress simultaneously (nova-Institut GmbH, 2024; UNESCO,2024).

Prevalent studies on social innovation education in higher education highlight three key insights which are curriculum transformation, university-community partnerships and the role of diverse stakeholders. Curriculum transformation advocates for the embedding of social innovation into the curriculum within a digitalized context that explores the significant role of advanced technology in social innovation education. While university-community partnerships may be forged through work-integrated learning programmes that are critical for upskilling the future workforce, stakeholders from the universities, governments and industries can form a triple helix model that will drive social innovation in higher education and address complex challenges (Wu et al., 2023). However, Wu et al (2023) also point out that higher education institutions do not have guidelines and policies in place that inform the appropriate infrastructure required, financial support and monitoring, measuring and evaluating indicators that will aid in the embedding of social innovation education into the curriculum.

Social innovation does not follow a one-size-fits-all approach, allowing educators to employ a range of teaching methods—such as collaborative problem-solving, design thinking, and systems thinking. For example, design thinking combines principles from design disciplines and social sciences to tackle complex societal and environmental challenges. Meanwhile, systems thinking enables individuals to analyze how different components of a system interact and influence one another (Bender-Salazar & Lyons, 2024). Bender-Salazar & Lyons, (2024) further add that social innovation education must cover a broad spectrum of topics, including innovation, creativity, social justice, climate change, public policy, and business. This requires students to develop a wide range of skills and perspectives to grasp these evolving subjects. Ultimately, understanding social innovation and effectively teaching its principles involve multiple interconnected dimensions (Bender-Salazar & Lyons, 2024).

In 2015, the United Nations Member States, adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) based on the pillars of the environment, the economy and the society. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals are: “1. No Poverty, 2. Zero Hunger, 3. Good Health and Well-being, 4. Quality Education, 5. Gender Equality, 6. Clean Water and Sanitation, 7. Affordable and Clean Energy, 8. Decent Work and Economic Growth, 9. Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, 10 Reducing Inequality, 11. Sustainable Cities and Communities, 12. Responsible Consumption and Production, 13. Climate Action, 14. Life Below Water, 15. Life On Land, 16. Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, 17. Partnerships for the Goals” (UNESCO, 2024). These SDGs urge nations of the world to collaborate and endeavour to work in an integrated and interlinked manner “to end poverty, to end all inequalities, to stop climate change and environmental degradation and to ensure peace, justice and prosperity to everyone on this planet” (UNESCO, 2024).

Recognising that social innovation and sustainable development have commonalities, the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030 are bringing them together for mutual benefit (Millard, 2023). However, the progress assessment carried out in 2024 reveals that the world is severely off track to realize the 2030 Agenda. Among the assessable targets, only 17 per cent display progress sufficient for achievement by 2030 (United Nations,2024). Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) sees education as the key to unlocking progress in achieving sustainable development goals. ESD teaches individuals to make informed decisions and act, both individually and collectively, to change society and protect the planet. It equips people of all ages with the knowledge, skills, values, and ability to tackle issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, overuse of resources, and inequality that impact the well-being of people and the planet (UNESCO, 2024).

Furthermore, social innovation education integrated with education for sustainable development can contribute to the SDGs and other global frameworks by addressing complex and interrelated problems that require systemic and collaborative approaches (Business Innovation, 2025). Social innovation is a powerful tool for aligning with the SDGs since it can also create economic value, such as new markets, jobs, and income and foster environmental value, such as reduced emissions, waste, and resource consumption (Business Innovation, 2025). Therefore, it is important to strengthen the capacity and resilience of social innovation actors through funding, training, mentoring, and education. In addition, HEIs can play a significant role in fostering a culture and ecosystem of social innovation and expediting the progress of achieving the SDG goals by 2030 (Business Innovation, 2025).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were established to tackle the numerous global challenges impacting all of humanity, rather than isolated groups. Social innovation provides a practical pathway to achieving the SDGs and benefiting everyone. To equip students with the necessary skills, social innovation education should be integrated into educational institutions (Bender-Salazar & Lyons, 2024). Educational researchers and practitioners must engage in both theoretical and practical dialogues, employing quantitative, qualitative, experimental, and action-based research methods to explore how knowledge, expertise, creativity, and imagination can address the world's most pressing issues. Social innovation education also promotes consensus-building and mutual understanding, emphasizing that solutions arise from diverse sources. It encourages collaboration across disciplines, educational backgrounds, demographics, geographies, identities, and histories. By fostering this inclusive and collaborative approach, social innovation education can extend beyond the classroom to effectively address the complex challenges of the 21st century (Bender-Salazar & Lyons, 2024).

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have a critical role in educating and equipping future sustainability leaders and social innovators who are aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and understand the pressing need to develop systematic approaches (Bui et al., 2024; Bonnici, 2020). According to research by Bui et al. (2024), HEIs' motivation to incorporate SDGs stems from their awareness of the potential to influence society and drive transformative change. The study also highlights that universities must prioritize integrating SDGs into curricula and research, adopt innovative teaching methods, and enhance student engagement to advance the 2030 SDG agenda through social innovation education. It emphasizes that universities should take a leading role, rather than falling behind, in promoting and achieving the SDGs (Bui et al., 2024). This notion is reinforced by Sebire and Isabeles-Flores (2023), who argue that higher education institutions (HEIs) must embed sustainability into every facet of their operations, ranging from campus management to research and teaching. HEIs should position themselves as champions of social innovation and serve as role models for society, inspiring others to take meaningful action (Sebire & Isabeles-Flores, 2023). Furthermore, HEIs must foster interdisciplinary and cross-sector collaboration to tackle sustainability challenges, nurture sustainability leadership, and empower students to become catalysts for change. By engaging in such partnerships and initiatives, innovative solutions to sustainability issues can be developed, allowing HEIs to make a substantial impact on the global sustainability agenda (Sebire & Isabeles-Flores, 2023).

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative case study research strategy. The purpose and role of this qualitative inquiry were to explore the meaning of human action by examining and describing the fundamental or essential aspects of human experience by analysing the participants'

responses concerning the extent the HEI is integrating social innovation into their curricula. The qualitative design was well-suited for this study as it allowed me to explore and interpret the perspectives and experiences of participants through a humanistic, interpretive lens. Grounded in the conceptual frameworks of social innovation and sustainable development, this approach facilitated the collection of rich, detailed, and contextually nuanced data, often referred to as "thick description." A descriptive-analytical research design attempted to lay the groundwork for this research since I had a theoretical idea about how HEIs could address the 2030 agenda for sustainable development and sought to understand more about it through both the descriptive presentation and a critical analysis of empirical data that was collected from the participants selected for this study (Kowalczyk, 2021). The intuitive and authoritative epistemological approach that was adopted enabled me to acquire a deep understanding of the research field through the collection of data relying on the participants' beliefs, intuition, experiences and views (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

The target population for this study consisted of students from different faculties (Commerce, Law, Education, Information Technology and Humanities) to obtain a diverse perspective of their views and experiences concerning integrating social innovation education into higher education curricula to address the agenda for the 2030 sustainable development goals. Five focus group interviews were used to collect data from students. These focus groups have been labelled FG1, FG2, FG3, FG4 and FG5. A purposive sampling approach was employed to select the focus groups, as this method is effective for identifying cases that provide in-depth and meaningful data. Each focus group, comprising 6 to 8 students, was asked open-ended questions aligned with the research objectives. Additionally, probing follow-up questions were used to gain clarity and deeper insights. Focus group interviews were ideal for this study since this type of data collection process encouraged and provoked meaningful debate and discourse that supported the humanistic, interpretivism paradigm of this study. To address the goals of this study, the following research questions were formulated:

- To what extent is your HEI integrating social innovation education into their curricula?
- What are your views and experiences concerning the benefits of integrating social innovation education into HEI curricula to address the agenda for the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals?

This study employed a directed content analysis approach. Both inductive and deductive content analysis were used to define the codes and categories of analysis. In the inductive process, codes used to label the data were developed during the coding process based on the data set's actual content. On the other hand, content categories were linked to the questions I asked the participants. This type of analysis is a deductive process since it is based on the conceptual framework. These "content categories" are broad ideas or concepts within which several more specific content codes have been grouped. The units of meaning were coded by recording the frequency of individual words and phrases (Vears & Gillam, 2022). The coding process began with a theoretical foundation and insights from relevant research. Codes generated through open coding were compared to form subcategories, which were then refined into broader, more abstract categories that captured the key principles linked to integrating social innovation education into higher education curricula to address the agenda for the 2030 sustainable development goals (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). These categories are conceptualization of social innovation, knowledge of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, using social innovation to solve environmental and societal challenges in innovative ways and develop global citizenship skills and integrating social innovation into the curriculum to address the agenda for 2030 SDGs.

Confidentiality and respect for participants' anonymity were strictly maintained. Integrity was upheld by being honest, fair, and objective throughout the process. There were no foreseeable risks to participants, and the questions were not designed to assess competence, as there were no right or wrong answers (this was done to safeguard participants' dignity). I took full responsibility for the research and acted with accountability. Participation in the study was voluntary, and individuals were free to withdraw at any stage without facing penalties or victimization. I adhered to institutional, national, and provincial laws, regulations, and professional standards governing research conduct. Compliance with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA, 2013) was ensured during data collection, storage, and analysis. Both the private tertiary institution and the participants were informed that a summarized report of the key findings would be shared with them upon completion of the study.

## **4. Findings and Discussions**

### **4.1 Conceptualisation of Social Innovation**

Students displayed limited knowledge of social innovation. Although they were able to relate to the use of technology as a tool to aid teaching and learning, they could not lucidly conceptualize how technological innovation may enable social innovation. However, some students attempted to explain that social innovation was about “improvements to society” (FG3), “innovation”, or “societal issues” (FG4). Others attempted to unpack the words individually, alluding to the assumption that it was about “creating togetherness in society” (FG1).

Since social innovation has pervaded the arenas of economics and politics and features prominently in the resolution of social and environmental issues, it must be embedded into the educational landscape. This means that HEIs must become familiar with the concept of social innovation and ensure that it is integrated into the curriculum and program design of the different disciplines offered. Butler-Adams (2018) emphasizes that to thrive both as a member of society and as an employee in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and beyond, it is crucial to grasp how the world functions. However, students in the basic and applied sciences must also develop an understanding of the political and social dimensions of the world they inhabit (Butler-Adams, 2018).

Most students believed that they “must find new ways to deal with social issues” (FG2). Future generations must demonstrate “creativity, problem-solving, communication, and open-mindedness” (FG3). Students affirmed that they must “find a balance between technology and physical interaction” (FG1) to “use technology to resolve environmental and social crises” (FG4).

There was a consensus among students from all faculties that they must acquire social innovation skills. The social innovation skills that they identified were “leadership skills”, “communication skills”, “becoming innovators”, “awareness of social and environmental challenges”, “problem-solving”, and “acquiring skills to sustain our planet for future generations. (FG5) stated that there must be “more emphasis on humanity and a focus on what it means to be human”, while (FG5) argued for the inclusion of “diversity and inclusivity”.

The above assertions by students echo the following sentiments by Upshift (n.d.) concerning the acquisition of relevant skills to ensure the sustainability of our planet. “Our world is being impacted by issues such as climate change, rapid urbanisation, scarcity of resources, technological transformation and increasing rates of inequality. These challenges are being seen at the global, national, and local levels. Companies, governments, and institutions are now facing the prospect of developing innovative solutions to these challenges and are seeking

people with the relevant skills and attitudes to work in these challenging environments. It is our responsibility to empower young people with the skills and understanding to create and implement innovative solutions in their lives, as well as within their communities, to address these challenges. Developing social innovation skills can play an important role in helping young people navigate change and develop solutions for their communities” (Upshift, n.d, p.3). To develop young people into social innovators, HEIs must act as critical pedagogues and problem posers to students to develop their problem-solving and practical application skills. These students must be able to implement these skills to find new solutions for environmental and social issues in a world being transformed by technology. However, developing students into social innovators cannot happen incidentally. While the United Nations (2015) is accountable for tracking the progress in implementing the universal goals and targets, including the means of implementation in all countries, HEIs should be designing policies and procedures to assist and expedite this process.

#### **4.2 Knowledge of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals**

While most of the participants heard about the 2030 SDGs, they lacked explicit knowledge of the 17 goals and students from all faculties unanimously agreed that the 2030 SDGs must be deliberately integrated into the HEI curriculum. (FG3) argued that “lecturers and facilitators of the curriculum must also be more knowledgeable about the 2030 SDGs”. (FG1) contended that “curriculum developers and module designers must purposefully integrate sustainable development into the different programs of study”. (FG5) argued for “the integration of practical tasks into the curricula to promote sustainability development and align the sustainability development goals to real-life situations”. This argument was corroborated by (FG4) who suggested that sustainability development be realised and promoted on a smaller scale by HEIs through local community engagement.”

Views expressed by focus group participants fortify findings from the literature that confirm that sustainable development has become a crucial focus in higher education globally. However, despite increasing awareness of its importance, the integration of sustainable development into higher education practices and curricula remains insufficient, presenting significant challenges to advancing sustainable development worldwide. A study by Leal Filho et al. (2019) underscores this issue, revealing that while awareness of sustainable development is growing, its incorporation into higher education is still limited. The study points to several key gaps, including insufficient emphasis on sustainability in curricula, a lack of institutional sustainability initiatives, and inadequate training for students on sustainability-related topics. Leal Filho (2019) emphasizes that the failure to embed sustainability into higher education curricula and institutional practices creates a major obstacle to achieving sustainable development goals. Bui et al. (2024) add that by integrating sustainability initiatives with their strategic objectives, higher education institutions (HEIs) not only meet their social responsibilities but also strengthen their institutional reputation, secure financial resources, and maintain competitiveness in the global education sector. This comprehensive approach represents a paradigm shift, establishing sustainability as a fundamental component of the strategic planning and operational frameworks of contemporary HEIs (Bui et al., 2024). Vanina Farber, Professor and Chair for Social Innovation at IMD Business School corroborate the preceding statement by adding that “social innovation is driven by purpose, partnership and accountability, to develop solutions that enable traditionally excluded people to participate in the economy.” (Bender-Salazar & Lyons, 2024).

Moreover, recent research highlights a widespread gap in the integration of sustainable development within higher education globally. The study indicates that only a minority of higher education institutions have embedded sustainable development into their mission and

vision statements, and fewer than 10% have incorporated sustainability into their teaching and learning practices (Mulà et al., 2017). Mulà et al. (2017) stress that "the minimal integration of sustainable development in higher education significantly limits its capacity to contribute meaningfully to global sustainable development efforts." Additionally, research (Wals, 2014; Leal Filho et al., 2023; Lozano et al., 2015 & Ramos Torres, 2021) affirms that disciplinary boundaries within higher education hinder the integration of sustainable development. These studies highlight that disciplinary silos impede cross-disciplinary collaborations, making it challenging to address sustainability challenges. The need to break down disciplinary silos and HEIs' role in sustainable development has evolved into a subject of escalating academic scrutiny and policy relevance. Empirical findings from these studies fortify the argument that HEIs operate not merely as pedagogical establishments but also as catalysts for transformative societal change. Institutions featured in the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Ranking were acutely cognizant of their societal roles in spearheading sustainable development initiatives. This observation is congruent with prior studies that portray HEIs as indispensable agents in the genesis and diffusion of sustainable practices (Wals, 2014; Leal Filho et al., 2023; Lozano et al., 2015 & Ramos Torres, 2021).

Alden Rivers et al. (2015) underscore the significance of understanding sustainable development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, highlighting that as a forward-thinking society, there is an expectation for young people to emerge as future social leaders and innovators. They also emphasize the underlying belief that societal structures will empower young individuals to act as agents of change. HEIs, aligned with its mission to "transform lives and inspire change" and its dedication to social innovation, aims to catalyze cultivating stronger thinkers and more resilient communities. In numerous ways, the educational institution's approach to social innovation education mirrors the "supercomplexity" of the world we inhabit (Alden Rivers et al., 2015).

#### **4.3 Using Social Innovation to Solve Environmental and Societal Challenges in Innovative Ways and Develop Global Citizenship Skills**

Students confirmed that the HEI curriculum offered in the different faculties was not designed to address existential, environmental and social issues. They further asserted that while being prepared for the world of work and life in this digital age, the imperative also lies in addressing and working towards resolving prevalent global crises. Students further agreed that HEIs must consider the technological skills and social innovation skills that will be conspicuous in the world of work and living and explore ways that these skills may be integrated into the curriculum.

All focus groups agreed that their institution does not formally prepare them to use technology to mobilise social and environmental change but affirmed that "there is a need for this". Responses from students in support of the preceding statement were as follows:

FG1 believed that there was a greater focus on "the teaching of content rather than on how to bring about social change." "Students are exposed to this incidentally rather than through the existing curriculum. The concept of social innovation is sometimes indirectly addressed in some modules but lacks depth. A space should be created in every HEI programme that purposefully teaches students how to use social innovation education to solve global problems" (FG4).

While FG2 suggested that "social media can be used to make students aware of global issues and how to solve these", FG3 suggested that "students must be exposed to social innovators to build social innovation skills". Notably, the discussion centred around how HEIs must align technological innovation with social innovation to address the agenda for the 2030 sustainable

development goals. Students unanimously confirmed that their HEI did not provide them with sufficient knowledge and exposure to confidently align technological innovation with social innovation. The responses from the students indicated that they were genuinely concerned about the problems in the world and sincerely believed that technology could be used to solve some of the problems. Views expressed by these focus groups resonate with research conducted by Sebire and Isabelles-Flores (2023) that indicate HEIs must prioritize sustainable development practices in their policies, procedures and curricula [through social innovation education] to mobilise students to become agents of change and foster sustainable leadership.

The World Economic Forum (2020) identified critical characteristics defining high-quality learning in the 4th Industrial Revolution and promoting Education 4.0. These characteristics include global citizenship that focuses on building global awareness, sustainability and playing an active role in the worldwide community. Innovation and creativity foster complex problem-solving, analytical thinking and system analysis skills. Technological skills encompass digital fluency and citizenship, while inclusive learning includes digital accessibility that ensures that learning is not confined to a classroom, and everyone has access to learning. The critical characteristics identified include interpersonal skills such as emotional intelligence, leadership and social awareness, and personalised, collaborative, and life-long learning (World Economic Forum, 2020). According to the World Economic Forum (2020), these critical characteristics inspire the shift towards a more holistic transformation of education systems globally. HEI curricula must hone the skills of graduates to affect social change.

Advocates of social innovation (Srinivasa, 2018; Uceta et al., 2021; Surikova et al., 2015) align with the perspectives of students, emphasizing the necessity of integrating social innovation into HIE programs. Srinivasa (2018) argues that in a knowledge-driven society, academia holds a pivotal role in cultivating, testing, and disseminating social innovation skills. Uceta et al. (2021) further highlight that universities in the 21st century have begun to reevaluate their roles, transforming and expanding beyond their traditional functions. In addition to their core missions of education and scientific research, universities are now embracing a third critical mission: a commitment to societal engagement. This involves, first, researching to better understand complex social issues; second, equipping students with the skills and capacities to address these challenges; and third, acting as changemakers by developing innovations that serve community needs (Uceta et al., 2021).

Surikova et al. (2015) expand on this by asserting that education for social innovation focuses on fostering the skills, competencies, attitudes, personality traits, and abilities necessary to bring social innovations to life. Their research underscores the interconnectedness of education and social innovation, positioning educational institutions as key actors, drivers, and facilitators in promoting social innovation. These institutions play a vital role in creating training courses, study programs, and learning networks for aspiring social innovators. Education, enriched by its blend of human and non-human entities, as well as social and technological capital, provides an ideal environment for nurturing social innovation. Given that social innovation relies on learning and institutional capacity, learning regions and institutions are essential components of the social innovation process (Surikova et al., 2015). Collectively, these findings underscore the importance of equipping students with social innovation education skills.

#### **4.4 Integrating Social Innovation into the Curriculum to Address the Agenda for 2030 SDGs**

Students also alluded to the realisation that HEIs must incorporate design thinking, especially by interrogating ways in which social innovation education must be integrated into existing curricula to ensure that the next generation is taught how to affect impactful social and

environmental changes. This is one way that HEIs can ensure the 2030 SDGs as a strategic intent.

In response to the question: How can social innovation education be integrated into the different programmes, students responded with insight and critical thinking. The Commerce students (FG1) alluded to the idea that the circular economic model may be practically integrated into the idea of recycling, reusing and reducing to drive sustainable economic growth. The Law students (FG2) suggested that greater consideration should be afforded to environmental, economic and social legislative framework that addresses issues of social justice and inequalities. The education students (FG3) agreed that the teacher education curriculum should prepare pre-service teachers to teach successive generations to find creative solutions to ensure a sustainable future. Education students emphasized that teaching should “extend beyond content sharing”. Information Technology students (FG4) deliberated about the accessibility of technology and finding ways to amplify the impact of technological innovations on social innovations. The Humanities students (FG5) on the other hand affirmed that their modules were often content-based and focused more on theory than practice. They suggested that modules must be designed to include practical ways in which the Social Sciences Department can produce graduates who are changemakers.

The above suggestion elicited from the different focus groups points towards the dire need for social and environmental change and gives new impetus for social innovation education. Schröder and Krüger (2019) elucidate this statement by contending that successful social and environmental transformation needs successful social innovation. This is where education reveals its relevance in transforming society and the environment. Education focused specifically on sustainable development equips individuals with the essential skills and knowledge needed to achieve sustainability. In HEIs, this shift in educational approaches encourages students to adopt behaviours that support sustainable development. To drive societal and environmental transformation toward greater sustainability, it is crucial to impart these skills and knowledge through lifelong learning. This must be implemented across all levels of education, including higher education, and adult education. (Schröder & Krüger, 2019). The value of innovation and creativity is increasing in the world of work; therefore, if students are to succeed beyond their formal education, HEIs must embrace [social] innovation. The design of learning experiences should mirror the increasing significance of innovation and creativity as essential professional skills.

Raja (2021) highlights the convergence of technological innovation and social innovation by emphasizing that technology offers vast opportunities for advancing social services and driving environmental transformation. Social innovators are leveraging technological tools to address some of the world’s most pressing challenges, from revolutionizing mental healthcare to providing digital identities to a billion people. By harnessing disruptive technologies, they are finding innovative solutions to global issues (Raja, 2021). It is therefore essential to equip students with the skills to nurture future social innovators who can utilize technology to tackle environmental and social problems. This shifts the purpose of education beyond individual advancement and addresses human inequalities and power dynamics. Instead, education should focus on teaching individuals how to coexist harmoniously with both the physical and material worlds, while also addressing the imbalances and power struggles that arise between humans and these realms.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study calls to attention the significant role that HEIs play in realising the SDG Agenda through the pervasiveness of social innovation education. A central recommendation is the

establishment of a new model for higher education focused on social innovation education, which will foster the development of more critical and socially impactful graduate attributes. This new social contract for education aims to unite humanity around shared goals, providing the knowledge and innovation necessary to create sustainable and peaceful futures for all, grounded in social, economic, and environmental justice. Importantly, this social contract must emphasize and celebrate the vital role played by teachers (UNESCO, 2021).

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