

Promising practice

University: Corvinus University of Budapest (CUB) and Corvinus Business School (CBS)

Academic discipline: Decision Sciences

Course title: Social Entrepreneurship and Social Economy

Course Description:

Context:

It is an elective course for students in all Master programmes at the Corvinus Business School of CUB, introduced to the curriculum in 2006. The number of students attending the course has varied between 7 and 36 per semester. During the early years of the course Master and Ph.D. students from other faculties of CUB (e.g. Landscape Architecture and Horticulture) and members of (e.g. environmental) CSOs attended as well.

Aim of the course and key elements:

The course aims at introducing the theory and practice of social entrepreneurship and social (civic, solidarity) economy: highlighting the diversity of organisations and businesses; underpinning the potentials of those entrepreneurial initiatives/social innovations where profit is not the ultimate goal of the business activity, but a means to achieve a solution to social problems; and providing a macro perspective on diverse economic activities.

The course is built on a community outreach/service learning approach. Students utilize their accumulated (business) knowledge for providing consultancy to social entrepreneurs while experiencing their philosophies and practices of doing business and running organisations. Therefore the number of seminars in classrooms are limited, the majority of the course takes place in the field working on projects offered by Hungarian social entrepreneurs.

Teaching and learning process:

After the introduction of the fundamental concepts and terminologies (embedded in case studies and also with the contribution of social entrepreneurs as guest lecturers) a project-based learning process is launched.

Social entrepreneurs bring their challenges and actual problems to the course and 3-month long projects are formulated. Groups of 2-4 students work on problems of social entrepreneurs with the supervision and contribution of one of the tutors.

The process starts with a 'menu' of problems defined by the social entrepreneurs advertised at the beginning of the course. Students select the problem/social entrepreneur they would like to work with. After a week of preparations (typically desk research on the social entrepreneur; the social problem the entrepreneur is providing a solution to; and the actual, mostly business problem the entrepreneur faces) the first meeting is organised with the social entrepreneur. The goal is to gain a deeper understanding of the challenge and to (re)define the problem into a feasible project. The latter is mostly the responsibility of the tutors at that point: both the need for problem solving, and the time and competences of the students are taken into consideration.

As a result of this meeting students are providing a written description of their understanding of the project, and if it is accepted by the social entrepreneur the project work begins. The groups work by themselves but in close collaboration with the social entrepreneur and the tutor. The process ends with a mini-conference where all groups present their results to all social entrepreneurs involved in the course.

Learning outcomes:

- To have an understanding about the diversity of economic activities beyond mainstream businesses
- To recognize the legitimacy, sustainability and power of social entrepreneurship, where profit is not an end but a means to solving social problems
- To make students learn about their own contributions to social entrepreneurs and their own potential change agency

How students' learning is assessed:

Assessment is based on 3 elements:

- Reflexivity paper about students' selection of this course provides 5 points to the students regardless of the content – all causes and motivations are valid and legitimate.
- The maximum of 25 points are earned by in-class activity – involvement in discussions in seminars, participation in generating common understanding and knowledge in class.
- The maximum of 70 points are for the project (groups evaluate themselves on a 0-10 scale, social entrepreneurs assess the groups on a 0-20 scale, tutors assess the groups on a 0-40 scale). Fundamentally, efforts mobilized for exploring, defining and solving the problem, the engagement to work with and learn about the social business are assessed.

How students learn with civil society organisations through this course:

The course includes social entrepreneurs in 3 ways. The vast majority of the involved social entrepreneurs have a CSO background: their knowledge of the field, their social entrepreneurial ideas are rooted in their work in CSOs. Many of them are operating in a CSO format, while others have chosen a different legal entity for their social entrepreneurial journey and become non-profit business organisations.

Social entrepreneurs in the course:

1. There are guest lecturers (1-4 per semester) talking about their experience with social entrepreneurship and social innovation.
2. There are local case studies introduced in class about social entrepreneurs in a certain field (e.g. in sectors like agriculture and food production, or problem areas such as sensitization and social inclusion, etc.).
3. This is a project-based course, where students meet and work with social entrepreneurs. The process of working with social entrepreneurs is elaborated in the short description of the course. The number of social entrepreneurs introduced during the course depends on the size of the course, i.e. the number of students: 3-12 projects per semester are implemented from a broader initial 'menu' of 5-18 potential projects. There are social entrepreneurs returning to the course with new projects, and newcomer social entrepreneurs, too. Some of the students have become volunteers and employees of the organizations after finishing the course.

How students learn about dimensions of RRI through this course

Public engagement / social engagement

Students form groups by choosing projects offered by Hungarian social entrepreneurs and carry out the projects in consultation with the beneficiaries (i.e. social entrepreneurs). As social entrepreneurs by definition run a business with a social mission and they work on solving social issues of high significance for society in general and specific social groups (often marginalised ones) in particular, students by choosing and working on projects immediately engage with a social issue. Students are introduced to the social business and learn the social mission targeting a specific social issue their society is being confronted with. By carrying out the projects students are very often engaged with social groups different from their own.

Gender and diversity

Beyond the theoretical issue of a diverse economy (see Gibson-Graham) discussed in class, students are learning about and more importantly working with social entrepreneurs whose initiatives primarily concern diversity issues such as, for example, work integration of ethnic minorities, people with various disabilities, etc.

Ethics

Class discussions involve group reflections on issues such as whose needs and what kind of needs the economy is supposed to satisfy, how to (re-)form institutions that support the dignity and autonomy of all people including, for example, social groups with special needs, etc. Students are also confronted with business cases (in class and through their projects) run by entrepreneurs who share their own ways of ethical reflection imprinted in their initiatives. Students may also see these social entrepreneurs as ethical role models in current society and economy.

Science education and outreach from higher education

Outreach activities are built into the course by design, i.e. it is a project-based course in which projects are offered by Hungarian social entrepreneurs who may benefit from the knowledge and skills master level business students have acquired during their studies and share with social entrepreneurs during project implementation. Students learn about and work with social businesses and gain first-hand experience of social issues that concern social groups typically marginalised in current societies.

Governance

Two issues seem to be relevant here. On the one hand, students learn about the principles of social economy - including governance issues such as participatory arrangements, stakeholder accountability, inclusive decision-making. On the other hand, through the projects students learn about governance practised by social businesses of different types (e.g. non-profit companies, CSOs, social cooperatives, etc.).

Sustainability

Class discussions are infused with sustainability, including cases studies on social entrepreneurs pursuing explicit sustainability goals and cases on sustainability transition initiatives such as community supported agriculture (CSA), transition town movement, etc. Many projects are offered by social entrepreneurs whose businesses involve aspects of sustainability, for example reuse and recycling, or healthy food, as core business activities.

Social Justice

Social justice is discussed as core element of the concept and practice of social economy initiatives. Theoretically the issues of civic responsibility, reciprocity, sharing and solidarity are all touched upon and social businesses are compared to corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. The projects students working on many times involve quite explicit elements of social justice such as racial justice and justice as recognition (of other cultures, autonomy, dignity, etc.).

Anticipation

By confronting many positive examples of social change towards diversity, sustainability and social justice pursued through social entrepreneurship, students learn about visions of an ecologically sustainable, socially just and economically viable future. They see and discuss the possibilities for change and being a change agent both at the micro (business) and macro (systems) levels. In carrying out the project work and delivering their final report students are expected to make explicit to their audience (peers, social entrepreneurs, course tutors) the wider social mission and positive vision of the social business their project is intended to benefit.

Reflexivity

Throughout the course there is a need for opening up towards imagining a diverse economy governed by plural institutional logics (market allocation, state redistribution, reciprocity and gift giving). Students read briefs on social entrepreneurial stories and discuss their characteristics comparing them at the individual (social entrepreneur) and institutional (which logics drives the initiative) levels. Working on their projects students are supposed to reflect in the group how to carry out the project in a way which fits best the social mission and they are supposed to share this reflection through consultation with course tutors and the final in-class presentation of their work (mini-conference). In addition, the first assignment (an optional one) students are supposed to deliver is a short written piece reflecting upon why they chose the course on social entrepreneurship and social economy. Here, students are expected to share their motivations and think about what they are looking for as a learning experience by attending the course.

Inclusion

All business students learn about the importance of stakeholder communication and involvement in managing business, so at the level of rhetoric there is not much new in being inclusive. However, due to the fact that the course is an elective one students of different Master programmes are typically enrolled. They have to form groups and carry out the work in an inclusive way within their groups. Even if the projects they are working on during the academic semester is rather a technical one (e.g. designing a cost accounting system, planning a communication strategy, etc.) students meet social entrepreneurs and gain first-hand experience with social businesses that are characterised by inclusiveness with regard to different social groups. Students are expected to grasp the sense of inclusion particularly characterising the social business they are working with in order to carry out useful project work. They meet social entrepreneurs and many times the beneficiaries of social businesses (e.g. interviewing them) and there are occasions when they have to move beyond their usual comfort zones (beyond their social groups).

Responsiveness

All project work is expected to be carried out for the benefit of the social entrepreneur or business. Students therefore are expected to make an effort to understand well the needs and specificities of the social initiative they are working with and on. Projects are clearly judged to be successful if the beneficiaries report their usefulness. Social entrepreneurs are asked to consult students, assist students to understand the core of the social business and at the end of the semester they are expected to report back to students and tutors about the quality of the project work students produced. In a sense, responsiveness is included in the performance evaluation of the course, too.

RRI keys integrated in the course:

Public engagement/ societal engagement; Gender and diversity; Ethics; Science education and outreach from higher education; Governance; Sustainability; Social justice

RRI process requirements integrated in the course:

Anticipation ; Reflexivity; Inclusion; Responsiveness

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Summary

What makes this course a promising practice in a business school context and/or in general:

- It is the only course at CBS where CSOs are involved not only in an incidental, but in a structured way. CSOs are
 - o directly invited and
 - o they are involved for a longer term, reciprocal process that goes beyond guest lecturing and case study development.
 - o Roles of the 3 groups of actors are clearly defined (social entrepreneurs as the owners of the problems; master students as consultants, tutors as facilitators). Their relationship is built on equal partnership, where students are participating not only as learners but knowledgeable persons, knowledge providers who have their already existing competences to share.
- There is a highly intensive learning and knowledge co-creation going on during the course: challenges of social entrepreneurs are explored, framed and finally defined by the 3 groups of actors together. Social entrepreneurs perceive these processes to be valuable not only because their challenges are nurtured by others and they receive a certain answer at the end of project work, but also and specifically because of
 - o the new ways their problems are framed and redefined – in many cases this comes as a revelation to them
 - o how their ideas are (mis)understood and tested by others
 - o the emerging new ideas they and/or the other 2 groups of actors generate as “side effects” of the process.
- Students are working on problems/projects that are not the ‘usual’ business issues and successes they meet in the business school, but innovations and initiatives that have a highly positive social mission. They meet inspiring change agents, and learning about them by working with them empowers student with a sense of self-efficacy, being able to act, the potential of becoming a change agent, a changemaker themselves.
- When the course was launched to the academic curriculum of CUB in 2006 it was one of the very few Social Entrepreneurship courses internationally. Now, a decade later, it is still quite alternative and pioneering in the local Hungarian context regarding both its subject and format (project-based pedagogy).