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## Article

# Learning social entrepreneurship: Experiences of sociology students

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## MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Learning social entrepreneurship: Experiences of sociology students

Basharat Hussain<sup>1\*</sup>, Abdullah Zafar Sheikh<sup>2</sup> and Tehniyat Fatima<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Social entrepreneurship paves the way for both social and economic development of a country. To learn this unique combination, social entrepreneurship education plays a vital role. It positively influences the entrepreneurial intentions of the students. Previously this education was limited to the realm of business studies, but more recently social entrepreneurship education is encompassing students from different disciplinary backgrounds. The present study aims to highlight the learning experiences of the Sociology students during Social Entrepreneurship. Thematic analysis of the textual reflective papers was conducted to highlight different aspects of their learning experiences. The students were motivated to study the course majorly because of their experience with the instructor. Financial motivations were a main driver towards the selection of the course because social entrepreneurship was viewed as a lucrative alternative owing to the rising unemployment in the country. The students highlighted that experiential learning is indispensable to social entrepreneurship education which was severely affected due to the Covid-19 pandemic as the transition towards online education took place. Gender played a significant role in the motivation and inspiration gained from the course as most female students perceived social entrepreneurship education to be a path towards financial independence. Social entrepreneurship education is

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Basharat Hussain is interested in researching and implementing social entrepreneurship for addressing big social issues including poverty, poor health, aging, illiteracy & poor quality education and climate change. His other research interests include health policy and health services management, leadership and organization, diversity and social inclusion.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Social entrepreneurship as a course is usually taught to business studies students. In this study we explored how Sociology students have perceived learning of this subject. Thematic analysis of the textual reflective papers was conducted to highlight different aspects of their learning experiences. The students highlighted that experiential learning is indispensable to social entrepreneurship education which was severely affected due to the Covid-19 pandemic as the transition towards online education took place. Gender played a significant role in the motivation and inspiration gained from the course as most female students perceived social entrepreneurship education to be a path towards financial independence. Social entrepreneurship education is a growing field in Pakistan and the higher educational institutes must take into account the learning experiences of students with different disciplinary backgrounds to enhance the overall entrepreneurial capacity of students by overcoming the barriers that they face.

a growing field in Pakistan and the higher educational institutes must take into account the learning experiences of students with different disciplinary backgrounds to enhance the overall entrepreneurial capacity of students by overcoming the barriers that they face. The current study presents insights for the growth of social entrepreneurship education in Pakistan.

**Subjects: Public & Nonprofit Management; Corporate Social Responsibility & Business Ethics; Higher Education**

**Keywords: Social entrepreneurship education; sociology students; higher education; Pakistan**

### 1. Introduction

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a field that holds bright promises for sustainable development, economic growth and social inclusion (Bansal et al., 2019). Interest among the scientific community and other stakeholders, regarding the teaching and learning of social entrepreneurship has sparked over the past few decades, particularly in the developed world (Dobele, 2016; Kirby et al., 2011; Lam-Lam et al., 2019). Ample literature regarding entrepreneurship education is available from the developed countries however there is a void in research when it comes to the developing world (Nabi et al., 2011). The advancement of social entrepreneurship in particular in the West, seems only natural as western universities such as Stanford, Harvard and Berkeley are known as its origin and one of its pioneer practitioners, the organization of Ashoka, that has invested in more than 1600 social entrepreneurs from around the world (Sen, 2007), is also based there (Brock & Steiner, 2009). The organization supports innovators who present a viable capitalist venture with the aim of social reform. For example, Ashoka has helped social entrepreneurs in Brazil to bridge the digital divide by providing computer training to urban slum dwellers. Viewing the success of this initiative, UNESCO committed to replicate this approach in all of its 186 member nations (Sen, 2007).

In application, thus, social entrepreneurship seems simple but defining social entrepreneurship precisely is essential when it comes to the dissemination of skills by the educational institutions. The definitions of Social Entrepreneurship differ in various ways one of them being the geographical space. Different forms of economic systems in different countries gives rise to multiple ideas about what social entrepreneurship should and should not do (Bacq & Janssen, 2011). The ideas also differ from the standpoint one sees it. One view is to understand Social Entrepreneurship from the perspective of the vulnerable beneficiaries. This view holds that Social Entrepreneurship should not be seen as a dichotomy with the social enterprise or the social entrepreneur at the giving end and the beneficiaries always at the receiving end. Social value which is the ultimate product of a social enterprise should be defined from the perspective of the beneficiaries (Lorenzo-afable et al., 2020). This will also help in evaluating to which extent the social enterprise has achieved its goals. Along with the multitude of perspectives to define social entrepreneurship another issue is the lack of methodological variety in Social Entrepreneurship research. Most of the studies focus on the qualitative or case study approaches and wide perspective remain missing in the literature (Tina Dacin et al., 2011). For the purpose of this paper we utilize the idea of Gregory Dees regarding social entrepreneurship. Gregory Dees, who is referred to as the “Father of Social Entrepreneurship” (Worsham, 2012) mentioned that the skills required for this unique field are scattered among multiple disciplines which make the “social” aspect of the discipline as important as the “entrepreneurship” aspect.

Even though business schools provide the basic skills for any business venture, others disciplines such as Sociology and Public Policy bear insights which are pivotal for the success of any social entrepreneur (Worsham, 2012). The dual nature of social entrepreneurship (managing both profits

and social change) as opposed to commercial businesses makes the learning and teaching of this discipline particularly challenging (Tracey & Phillips, 2007).

Countries such as USA, UK and Germany have expanded the horizon and offered entrepreneurial education to non-business students as well (Shinnar et al., 2009). Studies have highlighted the positive impact of entrepreneurial education on the attitude of students. Students within the business discipline feel more confident in their disposition towards an entrepreneurial venture as compared to non-business students (Shinnar et al., 2009), they have better knowledge, skills and attitude than non-business students (Vázquez-Burgete et al., 2012) and even though a majority of both business and non-business students intend to start their own business, students with an academic background in business studies are found to have more awareness of the specific concept of social entrepreneurship (Salamzadeh et al., 2013). European Countries have acknowledged the crucial contribution of entrepreneurial education and the importance of fostering entrepreneurs outside the realm of business studies and are working towards providing the students with a diverse learning experience (European Commission, 2008). However, the learning experiences of non-business students, particularly, of those from Humanities and Social Sciences, in the developing countries remain understudied. Jensen (2014) highlighted the importance of academic context in the evaluation of social entrepreneurship course and presented a case study of the course in the Humanities backdrop. He argues for an overarching assessment of entrepreneurship education. This also points to the fact that the learning experiences of the students of different disciplines need to be understood in-depth as the academic context plays an important role in the learning outcomes.

Reflective writing can encapsulate a student's experience much better than any other form of assessment. However students need to be steered to maintain focus of the reflective writing on learning and teaching (YueMing & Abd Manaf, 2014). According to John Dewey (1910) reflective thinking begins with doubt or hesitancy and is followed by an inquiry to test whether that hesitancy was well-grounded or not. Therefore, two major themes that students were guided to keep in mind were fears or challenges and motivations. The first was aimed highlight reasons for doubt and the other would show eagerness to nullify or corroborate those fears. Since the mode of delivery of the course was an unprecedented challenge, it was incorporated separately into the research questions.

Keeping the above framework in mind, this study attempts to answer the following questions

RQ1: How do non-business students, particularly students of Sociology, experience the course of social entrepreneurship?

RQ2: What are the motivations of Sociology students behind choosing social entrepreneurship?

RQ3: What are the challenges and fears highlighted by Sociology students while taking a Social Entrepreneurship course?

RQ4: How has an online mode of education has affected the students' experience of a Social Entrepreneurship course?

## 2. Literature review

The concept of "social entrepreneurship" can be grasped comprehensively by delineating its "social" and "entrepreneurial" elements separately. Peredo and McLean (2006) highlight that a social entrepreneur, just like a traditional one, takes risks, is innovative and unafraid to take up a venture with limited resources. What distinguishes social entrepreneurship from other entrepreneurial activities, however, is the predominance of social value creation (Lorenzo-

afabLorenzo-afable et al., 2020) The social mission which lies at the heart of entrepreneurial activity for a social entrepreneur, takes precedence over profit (Dees, 1998). The “social” aspect unquestionably takes precedence, but the importance of financial sustainability is not completely overlooked. Therefore, balancing the conflicting ends of the social-commercial continuum can be a daunting task. Social entrepreneurs face a dual challenge, first of labelling the venture purely social or purely commercial and the other of the conflicting economic and social values (Smith et al., 2012). Steiner et al. (2018) have noted that most social entrepreneurship courses being taught converge on few key topics and despite multidisciplinary diversity there is a lack of focus on the ethical side of social entrepreneurship. Even though during the learning process social entrepreneurs may have many commonalities with commercial entrepreneurs but it is important to note that subjects like business and management might make social entrepreneurs uncomfortable and therefore require extra diligence at the part of the instructor to minimize it (Howorth et al., 2012).

Previously mentioned differences in the attitude, knowledge, and awareness regarding entrepreneurship among business and non-business students point to the fact that entrepreneurial potential of the non-business students is not being exploited. A study conducted in India highlighted that knowledge about social entrepreneurship was among the most important factors that affected the intention of students in favor of social entrepreneurship (Chengalvala & Rentala, 2017).

Choosing any approach to teaching a program depends on the understanding of the learning process (Collins & Robertson, 2003). Following this idea, a study conducted to understand the experiences of engineering students in entrepreneurship course highlighted that some students found new avenues of opportunities and also expressed that the course should have been integrated early on in their degree (Täks et al., 2014). By studying the learning experiences of non-business students, drastic improvements can be made to the course or the method of delivery which will eventually add to the comprehensive skill set required to pursue social entrepreneurship as a career path. Educators Pihie and Salleh Abdullah Sani (2009) have highlighted the importance of understanding the entrepreneurial learning experiences and they argue that real-life, hands-on experiences in an entrepreneurship course are preferred over lectures and reading materials by the students. Approach to teaching is a particularly pressing matter in the current situation of the outbreak of a global pandemic which has radically changed education as we knew it.

Distance or online education had been around for decades now but in the current situation it seems to be the only option for dissemination of knowledge. The COVID 19 pandemic has accelerated the shift from traditional to online education at an unprecedented rate. It came as a blow to the already challenged campus-based education which was sustaining itself in the face of feasible online education and the MOOC Model (Mazoue, 2013). Arbaugh et al. (2010) have highlighted that although literature pertaining to online learning in management disciplines has expanded in the past decade, the impact of online education on entrepreneurship education remains largely understudied. The online dissemination of entrepreneurial education has its strength and weaknesses for the developing world. A study conducted in Malaysia highlighted that techniques like online business simulation in an entrepreneurship course prove to enhance the entrepreneurship skills in health and medical students more than business students (Tawil et al., 2015). Similarly, Towobola and Raimi advocate open distance learning of entrepreneurship in Nigeria, however they do highlight lack of computer literacy as a hindrance in the process (Towobola & Raimi, 2011). The importance of online entrepreneurship courses, and demand for them has also increased in India and is seen as an indication of future economic development (Ram & Selvaraj, 2012). Research on online education in the field of social entrepreneurship specifically remains non-existent. This paper, therefore, will attempt to highlight not only the experiences of non-business students but also the experience of Pakistani students in an online social entrepreneurship course.

As mentioned previously, Social Entrepreneurship is a field that flourishes better with a multi-disciplinary set of skills. Gregory Dees argues that the social sciences can contribute significantly in understanding social change and social context which is a significant portion of the theoretical concept and practice of social entrepreneurship (Worsham, 2012). Winfield argues that social sciences as part of liberal education have potential for cultivating successful social entrepreneurs (Winfield, 2005). Hines also believed that the synergy created at the intersection of liberal and entrepreneurship education can prove fruitful for the field of Social entrepreneurship (Hines, 2005). Therefore, the experiences of social science students can provide very useful insights for the further development of successful social entrepreneurship education.

Despite the well-established economic and social benefits of social entrepreneurship, very few studies have been conducted in entrepreneurship education in the context of Pakistan. The existing studies concentrate their focus only on the business students (Ahmed et al., 2017; Hussain & Hashim, 2015). One study in the field of Social entrepreneurship in Pakistan highlighted that there is lack of awareness and lack of social entrepreneurship education in Pakistan (Kazmi et al., 2016).

Therefore, this proposed study would be one of its kind not just in content but also methodologically as the few studies that have been conducted are quantitative and the present study aims to conduct an in-depth enquiry of the learning experiences of Pakistani students in social entrepreneurship course. The present study would open further avenues for research and development of social entrepreneurship education in Pakistan.

### 3. Methodology

The main aim of this study was to investigate in detail the experiences of Sociology students in a social entrepreneurship course; for this purpose, a constructivist approach or worldview was chosen which focuses on the subjective meanings that individuals attach with their experiences (Creswell, 2014). The emphasis throughout was on the meanings that the students of Sociology attach with the different aspects of the social entrepreneurship course, from the motivations to opt for the course to the mode of delivery and challenges that they faced being non-business students. Data was collected from a private university in Lahore, Pakistan where the course of Social Entrepreneurship is being offered as part of the elective subjects in M.Phil. Sociology program. Thirty students chose the course from a list of elective subjects and this group was taken as the respondents following the purposive sampling technique which is a commonly used technique of sampling in qualitative research (Miles et al., 2014). As the research is based on social constructivist approach, it is important to understand the meanings that the students of a specific discipline attach to their learning experience of a Social Entrepreneurship course. Therefore purposive sampling best suited the research approach as it helped to select participants whose experiences were most relevant to the research questions. As mentioned previously, the first author was also the instructor of the course. Emanating from this fact, it was decided not to adopt the face-to-face data collection approach in the interest of mitigating any potential bias in the responses of the students. Hence, it was decided to collect data in the textual form where students were provided with the semi-structured interview questions for the research and were asked to write detailed responses about those topics. This method of collecting written accounts from respondents not just increases the self-interpretation which enhances the quality of data but also enables the respondents to shed light upon topics which they would not delve into in a face-to-face interview (Handy & Ross, 2005).

### 4. Data collection

A total of thirty students of the program M.Phil. Sociology, who were enrolled in the Social Entrepreneurship course, were asked to write the following before the start of the course

- Reasons behind their decision of choosing Social Entrepreneurship course,
- Their expectations from the course and

- Their fears regarding the course

The students were also assigned to write a reflective paper regarding their learning experience in the course. The reflective papers were to revolve around certain aspects of their learning experience namely course content, delivery of the course, assessment and course outcome. The students were not strictly limited to these topics but rather these topics were provided as suggestive areas of reflection for the assignment.

The delivery of the course was unprecedented as only three lectures were delivered on campus and then due to the Covid-19 pandemic a sudden and radical shift occurred in the method of delivery. Online classes began immediately which was not the mode of teaching for any course in the university before. Furthermore, in a country like Pakistan, this method was not readily acceptable to all students due to multiple reasons which are discussed in detail in the data analysis section.

A complete set of the questions that the instructor suggested the students to cover in their reflective papers is given below (Annexure A). It is important to note here that all of the students remained within the bounds of the suggested questions as it covered almost all aspects of their experience.

### **5. Data analysis**

All of the thirty textual reflective papers were analyzed thematically. A deductive thematic analysis was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to explore specifically the decision, motivations, expectations and fears of students enrolled in the social entrepreneurship course. Coding was done to understand these four a priori themes which are analyzed in-detail.

The second section of the papers covered the experiences of the students. Using the a priori codes, from the questions that the students were suggested to consider while writing the paper, initial inductive coding was performed, and a coding frame was formulated. However the coding was not limited to a priori codes and the data was analyzed attentively for any and all in-vivo codes that appeared in the papers (Elliott, 2018; Miles et al., 2014). The saturation in the responses of certain topics of the papers appeared around the seventh reflective paper but the analysis was continued because in other topics unique ideas were emerging.

Categorizing similar codes from that coding frame helped us to build our categories which led to the formation of themes. With the help of the coding frame, four major categories were identified three of which reflected the themes of the a priori codes namely reflection on the course content, challenges of online delivery method of the course and reflection on the outcome of the course. One of the themes, which wasn't the part of the a priori coding, was observed repeatedly namely the perceived challenges for a social entrepreneur in the Pakistani context. These four themes are explained below in detail.

### **6. Positionality of the researcher**

Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013) (as cited in Holmes, 2020) have mentioned the positionality of the researcher with regards to the research process as one of the primary ways to identify that the status or social position of the researcher in the research context would influence the study itself. In the present research a limitation arose due to the positionality of one of the authors who was the course instructor of the students from whom data was collected. Even though the students were urged to be impartial in their responses and were ensured that the data would not be analyzed by the instructor, it is however pertinent to note that the status of the author as an instructor might have affected their responses to certain questions. This limitation was catered by not choosing face to face interviews as the data collection tool and using written accounts instead because have the benefit of anonymity and can enable respondents to comfortably take up topics which would be difficult to talk about in a face-to-face interview (Handy & Ross, 2005).



The students were asked to not write their names and mention only their gender. To further overcome this limitation the data was analyzed by the second author so that the results are not self-serving. Despite the efforts to maintain objectivity during the entire research process it is important to note that the researchers were reflective on their positionality throughout the research process.

## 7. Findings

### 7.1. Theme 1: motivation

The students identified the reasons behind the decision of enrolling in the social entrepreneurship course. One of the most frequent reasons that was observed in the data was the familiarity with the instructor and his teaching methods.

I studied a course from the same instructor in the previous semester and thoroughly enjoyed his classes. Keeping in mind his teaching methods, I opted this course immediately.

I chose this course because I really like the teaching methods of the instructor which includes discussions and activities. He allows everyone to share their opinions and never insults any student in the class.

Uniqueness of this course as compared to the other courses offered to Sociology graduates was another major reason of the selection of the course.

I took the decision to enroll in the social entrepreneurship course because I was familiar with almost all other courses which were offered alongside this course. This was the only course which I had not studied before and that sparked my interest to choose this course.

I chose this subject because I was interested in business and startups, and I feel that being a Sociology student we are not offered these types of subjects often.

Another reason behind the decision of choosing social entrepreneurship course was the intention of learning the skills to add value and to work for the overall welfare of the society. A female student highlighted in the following words

I chose this course because I felt that is course is mostly related to social development.

Another female student remarked

I want to add value to my society and this course might help me achieve my goal.

Understanding student motivation enables the instructor to improve learning environment. The students identified their motivations for selecting the social entrepreneurship course. These motivations can be categorized as the following

## 8. Application of practical knowledge

The students highlighted that what motivated them to enroll in the social entrepreneurship course was the intention of starting a social entrepreneurship organization.

It is my dream and passion to become a social entrepreneur. My goal is to learn how to develop a self-sustaining social business so that I can work towards the solutions for social problems of our society.

One of the students who already had a social startup was motivated to strengthen the theoretical foundations and hence improve his startup on ground.

Students also mentioned that they either had a research experience in entrepreneurship or intended to conduct their graduate research in the field of social entrepreneurship which motivated them to enroll in the course.

For my undergraduate research project, I studied young entrepreneurs in Pakistan which sparked my motivation to study about it in detail.

### **9. Community development**

Motivations of some of the students revolved around learning the skills to participate for the sake of greater good for the society. One female student highlighted this motivation in the following words

Our degree (Sociology) emphasizes on understanding the social problems around us and to provide solutions for them. I believe social entrepreneurship course will help in providing plausible solutions to many of the social problems which will be beneficial for the people.

In this statement the student has also highlighted how a social entrepreneurship course is complementing the major subject of the degree and why it is important to develop an interdisciplinary approach to this field.

### **10. Financial motivations**

Apart from the motivations of working for others, some students were motivated to learn social entrepreneurship due to lack of employment opportunities in the country.

One male student remarked

In Pakistan unemployment is a big issue. So, I hope that I am able to create jobs for others through social entrepreneurship. I think entrepreneurship is the solution to unemployment.

A female student also viewed social entrepreneurship as a means to financial independence

It may help me in establishing my own business which will make me independent

#### **10.1 Theme 3: expectations**

Recognizing students as partners in the learning process helps in their retention and academic development. To understand what the students expect is the first step towards this goal.

A majority of students highlighted that they expect experiential learning from the social entrepreneurship course. Going through case studies, having guest lectures with contemporary social entrepreneur, visiting social entrepreneurship organizations and developing their own projects were all the expectations of the students to make the course as practical and experiential as possible.

One female student remarked

I am not well aware about the subject but I want that we learnt practically instead of focusing completely on theoretical knowledge.

A male student conveyed this expectation in the following words

I hope we are able to design our own social entrepreneurship projects and the projects are so sound that in the future if someone invests in the idea, it becomes successful.

One female student elaborated this expectation

My expectation from this course is to know full methods and procedures for a startup in which budgeting, team forming and all necessary knowledge is delivered. There should also be guest sessions with the entrepreneurs who have started their own enterprise and have achieved their desired goals in less time so that we can get motivation from them.

### 11. Conceptual clarity

Students expected that the uniqueness of the course might bring new concepts with which they were not familiar previously.

I am weak in understanding business and corporations. I expect this course would help me to clarify these concepts.

Another male student who already had a background in entrepreneurship remarked

I have a social startup and I hope to strengthen its roots by applying the theoretical concepts I learn in this course.

### 12. Financial stability

Students expected that this course will make them well-equipped to start their own social enterprise which will eventually bring financial stability in their lives.

I started M.Phil. after losses in different businesses. I expect this course will play an important role in helping me gain financial stability.

Social enterprise does involve social value creation through entrepreneurial strategies and it does lead to financial independence not just for the social entrepreneurs but in many cases for other members of society as well.

#### 12.1 Theme 4: fears

As the students of Sociology are not usually taught business related courses, therefore many concerns of the students revolved around unfamiliarity with the course content.

The fear I have is that we are not familiar with this subject and most students perceive it to be a difficult course because it is different than the courses that we have studied previously.

Another student highlighted that lack of interest in business might cause difficulty in grasping the subject as a whole.

I am afraid I might not understand this subject because I have no interest in business

The students also feared that due to different nature of the subject, the evaluation criteria might also be new to them and it might cause them to lose grades.

Some students highlighted that focusing too much on theory might cause them to lose interest in the course. One male student remarked

My fear is that this course should not be based on theoretical knowledge and the culture of rote learning should not prevail. I hope it actually provides me some hands on knowledge through practical implementations.

Students generally had the fear of their expectations not being met.

The Covid-19 pandemic severely affected the delivery of the course as online classes became the new normal. Experiential learning was hindered due to the transition to online education.

[Table 1](#) summarizes the themes and relevant codes elaborated above.

The other section of the paper covered the learning experiences of the students which are analyzed in detail below.

**Table 1. Coding and Themes Formulation**

Theme	Codes
Motivations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Previous research or academic interest</li> <li>(2) Familiarity with the teaching methods of the instructor</li> <li>(3) Importance of the course in overall social development</li> <li>(4) Interest due to observation of entrepreneurs in real life</li> <li>(5) Novelty in the nature and content of the course as compared to other courses taught to a sociology student</li> <li>(6) Word of mouth</li> </ol> <p><b>Application of practical knowledge</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Observation of successful social entrepreneurship organizations</li> <li>(2) To conduct research in the field of social entrepreneurship organization</li> <li>(3) Applying theoretical concepts in real life</li> <li>(4) Starting a social entrepreneurship organization</li> </ol> <p><b>Community development</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) To learn how to resolve social issues</li> </ol> <p><b>Financial motivations</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Financial independence</li> <li>(2) Unemployment</li> </ol>
Expectations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Experiential and practical learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Case studies</li> <li>• Guest lectures</li> <li>• Familiarity with ground realities while running a social entrepreneurship organization</li> <li>• Visit of social entrepreneurship organization</li> </ul> </li> <li>(1) Clarity of concepts regarding social entrepreneurship through class discussions</li> <li>(2) Financial stability</li> </ol>
Fears	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) New concepts will be difficult to grasp, especially those related to business</li> <li>(2) Expectations are not met</li> <li>(3) Different and practical nature of the assignments might be difficult to do</li> <li>(4) The course is too theoretical</li> <li>(5) Grades might be affected</li> </ol>

### 12.2 Theme 1: reflection on the course content

The course content was considered suitable by a majority of the students. They believed that it provided enough information to build a strong base and to spark interest to dig deeper in the concept of Social Entrepreneurship. It is important to note here that even though a great majority of the students came from the academic background of the social sciences, many were not familiar at all with the idea of a social enterprise prior to this course. This shows the lack of importance given to this field in the Higher Educational institutes in Pakistan as no detailed course of Social Entrepreneurship was taught to any student at the undergraduate level. A few students who were already working either with a non-governmental organization or on their own social enterprise plan showed greater interest and were more critical of the course content. This is visible in the following statement of a student who was struggling to develop his own social enterprise previously

A topic which I believe needs to be removed from the course is the steps to social entrepreneurship, as I believe it is too basic, especially at M.Phil. level.

Another student who was working for a non-governmental organization remarked

There must be included a topic in the course content named as 'Launching your startup'. If we will get the idea of how to launch the start-up, it will provide practical, real-world knowledge.

This shows that the few students who were already aware of the basic concepts of a social enterprise are looking for an advanced course which can provide them hands-on experience so that they can take the next step. The potential and interest of the students in this field is evident but the required educational and institutional guidance is either available at a very later stage of education or not at all.

### **13. Experiential learning**

The instructor of the course shared with the students certain case studies of social enterprises working in Pakistan to enhance the understanding of the students. Almost all of the students appreciated this portion of the course content expressing the benefits of learning from the experienced. One of the female students expressed the common sentiment in the following words

Analyzing different case studies was also found to be very helpful as it helped more to know about social enterprises and how do they build their social image, cater a social cause, gain funds and try to serve people of the society.

However, a great majority of the students regretted not visiting the social enterprises personally. The students repeatedly expressed the desire of experiential learning by suggesting incorporating field visits of the social enterprises, implementation of the business plans and internships in the social enterprises as key components of the social entrepreneurship course. One of the female students highlighted the importance of experiential learning by remarking the following

One thing I feel lacking is the internship. This subject requires a practical approach to understand the procedure and working criteria well. Assessment should also be based on 2 or 3-week internship program reports. Because getting into the field is different and more valuable rather than projecting about something. Fieldwork helps the students to understand the core principles of working successfully.

A student highlighted the importance of practical learning in the following way

I think it is more beneficial to implement the business plan practically rather to just make a paper draft. So, in this way students can learn more about different barriers and how to tackle them and different marketing strategies, fund raising strategies etc.

### **14. Managing failure**

The fear of failure or the learning of management of the failure of a social enterprise is a concern highlighted by relatively few students. It is, however, an important issue in the learning phase for students. Learning from failure in social entrepreneurship is crucial for the growth of both the social entrepreneur and the enterprise.

One female student highlighted this as an important part of learning remarking

For adding any content there should be a topic that caters the after effects of social enterprise. All the present contents of the course explain to start and deal a social enterprise but do not explain the process if a social entrepreneur fails after establishing the social enterprise.

Another female student voiced the same concern in the following words

To ignite more interest, students could be given with a writing assignment demanding them to first select a social entrepreneur, read their inspirational story, and then write and highlight those actions of theirs which proved to be the key behind their success and also which of their actions failed them in their chase and how, in short, writing a failure story of those noble persons. This may not only highlight the key actions to the students but also it may motivate their thought process by formulating these entrepreneurs' opportunity costs to calculate their own actions' opportunity cost and manage situations like risk or indecisiveness more efficiently and effectively.

Experiential learning, management of failure and implementation of business plans together form a deeper understanding of the working and sustainability of social enterprises and the students demanded that assessments of the course should not be limited to theoretical understanding only.

#### **14.1 Theme 2: online delivery of the social entrepreneurship course**

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a sudden shift occurred worldwide in the form of online education. Distant or online education was being utilized by various institutions in Pakistan as well but a change like this left the education system with no other choice but to go online.

The first three lectures of the SE course took place on the campus in physical classrooms however due to the lockdown the rest of the course was taught online.

A great majority of the students were not in the favor of online teaching generally and specifically for the Social Entrepreneurship course this teaching method was considered unanimously by students as insufficient. The reasons for this disfavor can be categorized as following

#### **15. Technical hurdles**

One of the most widely faced issues by the students was that of discontinued internet connectivity. Many students remarked that having inappropriate internet connection and unavailability of personal laptop or computer severely affected the quality of learning.

There were a lot of barriers that were faced in these online lectures. Especially for me, because I belong to remote area where there is no proper network and internet connectivity. That caused a lot of difficulties. Managing laptop in such scenario was not an easy task for me.

Another student voiced the same concern

I face some problems during online lectures, like disruption on internet, load shedding, or some technical problems with gadgets (microphone was not working).

According to the students these technical issues affected multiple aspects of learning like class discussions and guest lectures.

Class discussion is the main element to learn effectively, but due to some technical problems, I could not question or give opinion related to course. The quality of education is indeed affected much. I realize the value of face to face interaction during this pandemic.

According to my point of view, online guest speaker lectures were not so much beneficial for me because due to weak internet signals I could not understand what the guest speaker really wanted to say, and that is the reason that those topics related to my subject which were based on guest speakers are unclear.

#### **16. Cultural hurdles and group learning**

A few students highlighted that as opposed to physical classrooms, online classes require more energy due to the lack of conducive environment for learning and certain cultural issues are responsible for this.

When taking online classes at home there are fewer chances to create an environment for study. It required support from other family members. That's not possible in joint families. This is a big disadvantage to study at home.

I am living with my in-laws in a backward area where it was very difficult to arrange internet stability all the time. This resulted in leaving the class during the lecture this experience was too stressful so many important topics have been missed due to this issue. Even I managed to go to my parents' house during the days of our lectures, but this was so difficult to go there every week.

Other students remarked that group learning was disturbed due to online classes which directly affected their learning.

Being physically present in a classroom, I have more classmates to ask for help. In class, I can ask the teacher for help as many times I need, and there's a higher possibility I will understand the assignment. It's totally different online because I only have myself to use as a resource.

### **17. Lack of experiential learning in online environment**

Many students claimed that due to online classes they missed the opportunity of experiential learning which, as mentioned above, is an important element of a social entrepreneurship course according to the students.

Although the field visit was part of this course but due to the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown it was not possible but I suggest that along with the case study presentations, it is necessary that the students physically visit the NGO's so that they can understand more fully the functioning of social enterprises.

Overall the online learning was not appreciated by the students for the course of Social Entrepreneurship and many felt that physical classroom setting is more conducive for learning.

#### **17.1 Theme 3: challenges for a social entrepreneur in Pakistan**

Many western countries have well recognized the importance of social entrepreneurship for sustainable development, economic growth and social justice. Developed countries like the United States, United Kingdom and many European countries have invested largely in social entrepreneurship education (Brock & Steiner, 2009). These countries are not just providing entrepreneurial education at different levels but also devising policies to promote a conducive environment for social entrepreneurs to work effectively within the country and across the globe.

However, for a developing country like Pakistan where social entrepreneurship education has not received the same attention, a huge gap is yet to be filled by academicians and also in terms of policy which can promote the field practitioners in the country.

The same concerns are shared by the students in the present research and they have highlighted multiple issues that they perceive as hurdles in their journey as a social entrepreneur.

### **18. Culturally embedded mistrust in NGO's**

The students expressed mistrust in the actual working of social enterprises in Pakistan felt that field visits were important not just for experiential learning but also to uncover the deviation from goals and ground realities in any social enterprise.

Field case study is much more beneficial for us as they motivate us to do brainstorming about the field and to pinpoint the invisible factors and aware the head of the fields that they change their strategies and policies accordingly.

The words “invisible factors” in this statement highlights the issue and that students believe that there is more than meets the eye in these enterprises. Another female student explicitly stated this issue in the following words

There is somehow critique on these organizations that they only present the information which is positive and favorable, and they avoid sharing negative information because they do not want to spoil the image of organization. There were discussions in class that a certain social enterprise is presenting different picture of their enterprise on the website and on ground realities were different. So, to know reality it is important to physically visit the organization.

These factors are important to be studied in more detail as they can prevent students from being a part of social enterprises or they might have difficulty to establish acceptance of their own social enterprise in the future.

### **19. Gender**

It was a promising outcome of the course that female students felt empowered and motivated to start their own enterprise. They recognized the importance of social entrepreneurship as a career choice not just for themselves but also for the society.

Being a female, this course was beneficial in securing one’s future without depending upon someone else as it provides knowledge for preparing one’s mind into business or social entrepreneurship. In our society, every female should have the knowledge regarding the starting of social enterprise. From case studies I got to know that almost every second social enterprise is run by a young lady and I believe it is an inspiration for all the females around the world to be independent.

Another student shared the same sentiment, remarking

I feel that that starting a social enterprise, as a woman, is worth it. When I started this course, I got curious to read the career-building stories of women enterprise holders. For that sake I watched many of biographies of female entrepreneurs.

However along with the inspiration and motivation, female students were also aware of the hurdles that their gender will bring their way.

Although, according to our culture, the personality of a woman isn’t perceived to do business or to add the value creation work to society. Discouragement from people causes the loss of self-confidence in one’s personality and forces women to think that they cannot do anything like that, but this course gave me courage and confidence to identify an opportunity to do something great for our society.

This shows the importance of social entrepreneurship education especially for women in Pakistan and helps us to understand how men and women have experienced the course of social entrepreneurship differently as female students took inspiration from female role-models in the field. This also highlights the importance of gender representation while developing the course content so that the course can be effective and inspiring for all students.

#### **19.1 Theme 4: course outcome**

The overall outcome of the Social Entrepreneurship course was positive as many students felt inspired and motivated to start their own or become a part of a social enterprise. A student who was previously working on his social enterprise plan remarked

Although I had been working on a social business model previously as well, however, going through this course cleared up many doubts I had about setting up my own social project. Hence, this course has inspired me to get through all the hindrances and continue a social



project I had buried due to lack of seed money and some other hindrances. I believe that the learning I got from this course was enough to set-up a basic social business model. However, it needs to be more detailed in its course outline and content, for a student to advance to the next stage and expand one's social business model.

There were those students as well who had no prior information about social entrepreneurship and after the completion of the course felt intrigued and interested and seriously considered social entrepreneurship as a career choice.

While, developing the business plan it all seemed achievable and I thought that the business plan that I made should be forwarded to some official authority and I should start working on it. The course provided all the necessary information by which we can start a social enterprise. As a part of the assessment I have already learnt how to make a business plan and if there are enough resources or networking, I prefer to start working on it.

However, some students remarked that due to the online delivery method and the pandemic they could not learn as much as they expected but still got enough knowledge to build a base

This course has not given me enough knowledge to start my own social enterprise, but this course has made my base very strong that I know more than 50 percent about the steps and procedures of social enterprise. Before getting enrolment in this course I did not know anything about social enterprise but right now I know about many major concepts of social enterprise. It is no doubt that the course content of social entrepreneurship was outstanding. But due to Covid-19 pandemic and due to online lectures, I had missed many concepts related to this course.

## 20. Discussion

This paper explored the experiences of the Sociology students while studying social entrepreneurship. The course offered a different insight to the students, most of whom were not familiar with the concept of entrepreneurship prior to this course.

Social entrepreneurship is an emerging and crucial field for Pakistan. Although the trend towards social enterprises is growing but shortage of technical skills is creating a barrier in this growth (British Council, 2016). Social entrepreneurship combines the elements of business education with community development and many students from non-business disciplines are being gathered under this umbrella. To achieve the desired aims, the social entrepreneurship education must cater to the learning needs of students from different disciplinary backgrounds. For this it is important to understand the barriers that these students face while acquiring social entrepreneurship education.

As the students were unfamiliar with the course content one major factor that motivated them to opt for the course was familiarity with the instructor. This finding is consistent with that of Mishra et al. (2020) who noted that the holistic experience of the students which includes the intellectual stimulation and sentimental experience is known to have a positive effect on the student's intention to re-engage with the instructor.

The literature also suggests that entrepreneurial interest lies beyond the barriers of academic specializations (Levenburg et al., 2006) specially that of business studies and the present study affirms this finding. This finding also implies that students prefer inter-disciplinary subjects because of their uniqueness and new content. Manju et al., (2017) have highlighted that engineering students strongly recommend the inclusion of inter-disciplinary subjects due to their various cross-disciplinary self-interests. Offering inter-disciplinary subjects can be an opportunity to enhance the skill set of the students and keep their motivation high during a degree program.

It is argued that the reasons of students for their inclination towards social entrepreneurship differ from those of inclination towards traditional entrepreneurship. The former focuses on social value creation, generating positive social impact and working for a greater good whereas the latter emphasizes

monetary gains (Mueller et al., 2015). The present study affirms this finding as many students believed that social welfare is one an important reason for learning social entrepreneurship. A finding complementary to this is the motivation of the students to resolve social issues which is seen as a strong indicator of compassion and empathy, both of which are known to be drivers for encouraging social entrepreneurship (Le et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2012). As noted by Mueller et al. (2015) the present study also highlighted that the students were motivated to balance the social and economic aspects of social entrepreneurship and had the motivation of learning how to do that through the course. Social enterprise involves social value creation through entrepreneurial strategies and it also leads to financial independence (Idris & Hijrah Hati, 2013) not just for the social entrepreneurs but in many cases for other members of society as well.

Experiential learning was part of expectations of students because it was believed that a course like social entrepreneurship cannot be well understood without it. Using the traditional lecture-based teaching method causes loss of interest in students (Gundlach & Zivnaska, 2010). Experiential learning can prove to be more successful in terms of developing entrepreneurial skills (Chang et al., 2014). Tracey and Phillips (2007) have highlighted this aspect of social entrepreneurship education as they acknowledge that there is a lot of tacit learning in this field which can only be acquired through experiential learning. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, online education took over and many students expressed that it affected their learning in the course. This highlights that pure online education is not considered suitable by students for the course of social entrepreneurship. As it is an emerging educational field for non-business students, it is important to remove the barriers in the way of their learning and develop collaborations among educational and professional organizations to facilitate experiential learning.

Some of the students who had a general idea about the concepts of social entrepreneurship were interested in receiving advance training in the field. But as mentioned many of the students had little or no idea of what the course was about. These findings are consistent with those of Salamzadeh et al. (2013) in Iran. They illustrate the awareness, intention and perceived support among students of social entrepreneurship in Pakistan's neighboring country Iran and have highlighted that students other than business faculty have low awareness of social entrepreneurship. The students reported that other than funding and premises, training and mentoring is also important form of support to start a social enterprise.

According to a Gilani Research Foundation Survey carried out by Gallup & Gilani Pakistan, only 49% Pakistanis claim that they trust not-for-profit/non-government Organization (NGOs) (Gallup & Gilani Pakistan, 2020). Students also expressed this culturally embedded mistrust in the NGO sector as a challenge for social entrepreneurs in Pakistan.

Female students felt particularly inspired; they highlighted that, for a woman, social entrepreneurship education can open many avenues. The females students, despite recognizing the challenges that the conservative Pakistani society poses, were motivated after learning about this field. A majority of social enterprises in Pakistan are led by women (British Council, 2016). Thus, future studies can explore the specific factors that inspire the Pakistani women more towards social entrepreneurship. This can also highlight the necessary support which can be provided by educational institutes in this regard.

The overall findings of the present study with regards to the course outcome are consistent with the studies conducted in the past that have highlighted the importance of entrepreneurial education for developing students intentions and motivation to become entrepreneurs (Anjum et al., 2018; Chengalvala & Rentala, 2017; Hussain & Hashim, 2015).

## 21. Limitation

A major limitation of the present study was the positionality of one of the authors who was the course instructor of the Social Entrepreneurship course. The authors maneuvered the research methods to ensure that this factor had minimum influence on the data. Nonetheless, the authors

acknowledge this as a limitation. Secondly, given the fact the data was collected from one cohort of one University in Pakistan, the findings cannot be generalized for the university, let alone the whole country. Having said this, however, given this university is one of the very few in Pakistan (perhaps the only one) offering a course of Social Entrepreneurship at the Mphil level, the findings of the study should not be viewed with undue caution.

## 22. Implications for practice

The present study highlighted that non-business students demonstrate significant interest in the social entrepreneurship course but lack awareness and proper training in the field. Specially for the students of Sociology the social entrepreneurial training is pivotal as it helps them to create value in the society and alleviate social problems being part of Applied Sociology. However, it was highlighted time and again by the students that the online method of delivery was not suitable for a course as practical as this one, given online delivery, ostensibly, hindered their experiential learning. Therefore experiential learning should be made core of the course and should not be ignored if optimum results are to be attained. Special emphasis should also be placed on the gender aspect of social entrepreneurial training and the course outline must include case studies of both male and female led social enterprises so that women can conveniently relate to these cases and get inspired from them.

## 23. Directions for further research

Social entrepreneurship education can act as a precursor for instilling skill, motivation and inspiration in the students. It is important to recognize the specific value addition and the barriers faced by the students of different disciplines in acquiring education of this discipline. The present study highlighted the learning experiences of Sociology students in a social entrepreneurship course. The study has opened up avenues for future research which can help in the growth of social entrepreneurship education in the higher education institutes in Pakistan. Future, more acute, research can possibly articulate a more robust research construct whereby none of the authors/researchers are directly involved in the teaching capacity with the potential research respondents. Secondly, a more broad sampling strategy is warranted to ascertain further insights on the antecedents and learning experiences of students of Social Entrepreneurship. Thirdly, it may be worthwhile, for future researchers, to include a cross-section of non-business students with diverse educational background such as Psychology, Economics and liberal arts as opposed to including students with Sociology background only.

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