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Article

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Business, Management and Economics Engineering (BMEE)

Provided in Cooperation with:

Vilnius Gediminas Technical University (VILNIUS TECH)

Suggested Citation: Sannikova, Aija; Titko, Jelena; Kudins, Janis (2025) : The role of networking competencies in social enterprise performance, Business, Management and Economics Engineering (BMEE), ISSN 2669-249X, Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Vilnius, Vol. 23, Iss. 1, pp. 2-13, <https://doi.org/10.3846/bmee.2025.21468>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/334274>

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THE ROLE OF NETWORKING COMPETENCIES IN SOCIAL ENTERPRISE PERFORMANCE

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Article History:

- received 05 May 2024
- accepted 02 October 2024

Abstract. Purpose – The goal of this research was to identify the need for networking competencies in social enterprises rated by the managerial personnel of social enterprises and academic staff of universities in Latvia.

Research methodology – A survey among representatives of Latvian social enterprises and academic staff of Latvian higher education institutions (HEIs) was conducted. The data was processed by means of average ranking, Kruskal-Wallis H test, and one-way-ANOVA test.

Findings – The analysis of the results of Latvian survey revealed that: 1) social enterprise personnel and university academic staff rated the role of networking competencies in social enterprise performance differently; 2) social enterprises rated cooperation with local governments higher and with industry associations as less important than the group of university academic staff.

Research limitations – The research is limited to the analysis of only networking competencies.

Practical implications – The research results contribute to the institutional framework for the social entrepreneurship ecosystem through recommendations to universities in creating training programmes of social entrepreneurship competencies.

Originality/Value – The conducted empirical study is the first study of its kind in the Latvian social enterprise ecosystem, and it offers unique data that can be used for planning the development of networking competencies.

Keywords: social entrepreneur, social entrepreneurship, competencies, networking competence, Latvia.

JEL Classification: L31, I23.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a growing focus on social innovations and social entrepreneurship, both nationally and globally (Audretsch et al., 2022; Do Adro & Fernandes, 2020; European Commission, 2013; Mendell & Nogales, 2009).

The success of social enterprises depends to a large extent on the capacity and competencies of social entrepreneurs and managerial personnel, which involves a combination of external and internal factors. However, the competence profile could depend on the development stage of a social enterprise and change with the growth and scaling of the enterprise. Scaling up an enterprise requires different or enhanced skills compared with the start-up phase (European Union & OECD, 2016).

The management of a social enterprise should be able to assess the profile of competencies required for their managerial personnel and, in case of lack of a competence, take lifelong learning measures. It is important that social enterprises develop competencies of their personnel to increase the role of social enterprises in society, thereby contributing to their sustainability (European Commission et al., 2020; Sannikova & Titko, 2021). This indicates that social entrepreneurs should be able to assess their business goals and the internal and external factors contributing to achieving the goals. This assessment should also include assessing competencies of the social enterprise's managerial personnel as an internal factor.

The questions related to competencies of social entrepreneurs have been discussed by many researchers (Guritno et al., 2019; Halberstadt et al., 2019; Vázquez-Parra et al., 2021). The number of similar studies in Latvia is still limited. During the six-year period from 2018 to 2023, while the Social Enterprise Law was in force in Latvia (Saeima of the Republic of Latvia, 2017), social entrepreneurs have acquired specific competencies. The competencies, which are combined with socio-economic experience and result in specific behaviour patterns, have not been sufficiently researched. Besides, the goals and benefits of social enterprise networking, as well as competencies, have been little researched in Latvia. In Latvia, networking activities carried out within the social ecosystem are more focused on promoting social enterprise activities rather than on acquiring or improving certain skills or competencies (Latgale Business Centre, 2023; Riga planning region, 2022; Social Entrepreneurship Association of Latvia, 2023a, 2023b). Therefore, the present research aims to identify how the need for networking competencies in social enterprises is rated by the managerial personnel of social enterprises and academic staff of universities in Latvia. Specific research tasks: (1) to review the theoretical literature on the role of networking in social entrepreneurship; (2) to conduct a survey on the need for networking competencies in social enterprise practices and develop recommendations for the development of networking competencies of social entrepreneurs.

The present research contributes to the scientific community and the social entrepreneurship ecosystem of Latvia by giving an insight into the need for networking competencies in the economic reality of social entrepreneurs.

2. Literature review

To achieve successful social change, i.e. the mission of social enterprises, it is essential to engage them in long-term activities and resource-sharing. This involvement fosters sustainable development prospects. (Austin et al., 2006; Stephan et al., 2013).

The ability of entrepreneurs to establish social and business networks is a factor contributing to the growth of the enterprises themselves (Guritno et al., 2019). Integrating marginalized groups into society and reducing poverty are recognized as important goals (Stephan et al., 2013). However, the skills needed by social entrepreneurs to achieve these social and business objectives are not fully defined and change over time, depending on the development of social entrepreneurship in each country.

Previous research has revealed that successful social entrepreneurs share common competencies, supporting the existence of a social entrepreneur competency model (Guritno

et al., 2019; Sannikova et al., 2023; Rubio, 2016). These competencies typically include such skills as effective team leadership, and innovative problem-solving.

Networking competencies should be acquired during the study process, and should be recognized as main learning outcomes in university business programmes. These competences allow representatives of social enterprises to improve their ties with other actors of the social business ecosystem, solve problems better and foster sustainable innovations, as well as implement social entrepreneurship practices (Davidavičienė & Raudeliūnienė, 2022).

When developing competencies, it is essential to consider several factors that can influence the social values of social enterprise personnel. These factors include their media consumption habits, networking practices, educational background, regional context, and gender. (Vázquez-Parra et al., 2021; Bucholtz, 2015). Universities should have a methodology for identifying and developing competencies desired by alumni for entrepreneurship and innovation promotion, including the competencies necessary for social enterprise employees to ensure the sustainability and successful operation of enterprises (Rossano et al., 2019; ALContentfy, 2024).

In a social enterprise, innovations are implemented by employees who are united by a market-oriented culture. For a successful entrepreneur, the ability to innovate is considered to be important, yet the build-up thereof requires training and practice (Rubio, 2016). This further reinforces the role of networking in social entrepreneurship as a way of sharing positive practices.

The networking and cooperation competencies are considered to be an essential component of the success of enterprises. According to business practitioners, the creation of business networks and social networks represents only the first step. It is important to maintain the networks and contacts both through regular communication and by offering help, attending events and sharing experience. Networking can help social entrepreneurs to achieve their goals and expand their business, identify drivers and barriers to new product development (ALContentfy, 2023). The development of the internal digitalization of universities can make educational programmes more accessible (Verina et al., 2021), thus promoting the spread of competences in the field of networking as well.

Networking competence, which represents a combination of employees' abilities, allows them to effectively create, maintain and use social relationships. This competence includes several skill areas: emotional intelligence, social and communication skills and professional etiquette (Evans, 2023).

Competencies are acquired in formal education and need to be improved and enhanced through lifelong learning. Company managerial personnel have specific competencies that are essential for the success of social enterprises in the market (Rozman et al., 2023). However, competencies are not constant and unchanged over time, they need to be adapted to the market situation and enhanced. The entrepreneurship competence framework (EntreComp) is described as a lifelong learning competence (Herrity, 2024; European Commission, 2016). Within the social entrepreneurship ecosystem, universities need to be able to adapt to the changing socio-economic situation and ensure a level of competence that meets the requirements of society.

Within the academic community, it is emphasized that each level of study has different goals for building up networking competencies (Evans, 2023). In real business practice, in addition to knowledge and skills acquired in formal education, social enterprise employees need to create practical networking components, thereby establishing useful networks for their enterprises to grasp and accept new, modern ICT solutions and the legitimacy of the information society (Winseck, 2002).

Building up competencies in business practice could be considered in-depth learning, as it includes cooperation, with academic knowledge and skills being applied in a socially responsible way (Levine & Patrick, 2019). In this process, partners of the social entrepreneurship ecosystem, including universities, play a significant role which can help to prevent networking mistakes (Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2020)

Causing social changes is a complex process that also includes market failures. To prepare students to deal with complex challenges faced by social enterprises, universities should focus on interdisciplinary teaching and research, thereby examining various market requirements and situations (Worsham, 2012).

At the same time, there are still discussions about competencies contributing to the success of a social entrepreneur (Miller et al., 2012). Along with a competence such as adaptability to change, successful communication and cooperation are also believed to lead to success (Washington University, 2024). However, the problem is that the socio-economic situation across regions is different and, therefore, it is not possible to transfer the particular competence development model in a "pure" way, and universities need to follow the requirements of the regional market.

Some researchers, experts in analysing competencies required for social enterprise personnel, believe that social entrepreneurs need to possess certain qualities: social change management competence, social innovation competence, competence in identifying the social value of a business and experience in social change management in order to understand better the processes occurring in social entrepreneurship; besides, they must have high digital competences (García-González et al., 2020; Ferrari, 2013). The researchers point out that there is a need to specifically consider whether there are professionals involved in this type of social business, so that they can analytically identify the range of multidimensional competencies needed for social entrepreneurship, especially given that the competencies include personal leadership aspects, as well as social innovation, social value and business management competencies.

Creating a learning environment that encourages creative and independent thinking in turn creates an active learning environment. In such a learning environment, a more essential role should be played by analyses of entrepreneur experience, as well as the ability of students to perform a problem-based comparative assessment and the ability and skill to act in order to boost business expansion should be developed.

The entrepreneur needs to be ready to take risks and assume responsibility for the decisions made to build social entrepreneurship capacity within local communities (Sherman, 2011). In the learning process, according to some scientists, goals related to the build-up of entrepreneur's own competencies should be separated from goals related to the entrepreneur's ability to manage the enterprise. At the same time, an entrepreneur with high social

capital as a business creator needs to possess a range of personal competencies in describing the business idea, calculating the business value, conducting a business self-assessment and doing networking and conducting business negotiations (Meutia & Ismail, 2012). However, other competencies of an entrepreneur are important for the development of the enterprise: competencies in starting a business, identifying business opportunities, drawing up a business plan and raising capital (Jones & English, 2004).

The theoretical research shows that the managerial personnel of social enterprises, including the entrepreneurs themselves, need multifaceted competencies, which are acquired through education and business practice.

3. Methodology

The research continues to analyse the data obtained from the survey conducted in Latvia in 2023. At the first stage, the research analysed the results of the survey of social entrepreneurs and university academic staff, i.e. the ratings of general competencies needed in social entrepreneurship (Sannikova et al., 2023). The research analysed the answers of social entrepreneurs and university academic staff on networking competencies. The survey conducted in Latvia involved two groups: (1) social enterprises (SE); (2) university business programme teachers (UT). In the group of social enterprises, answers were given by social entrepreneurs and social enterprise managers.

The key questions included in the questionnaires for both groups were the same to make it possible to compare the research results between the groups. The research question was “How important are knowledge, skills and competences in the field of networking in the operation of social enterprises?” The areas of knowledge, skills and competencies included in the research questionnaire were identified by the ratings given by experts – social entrepreneurship practitioners and supervisory-level specialists in Latvia.

The survey of social enterprises was conducted based on data from the Register of Social Enterprises of the Republic of Latvia, and 99% of the enterprises registered gave answers. The “snowball” method was used to select university business programme teachers, including those teachers who had theoretical or practical relation to social entrepreneurship. The selection of this group was a complicated process in the current situation, because universities in Latvia were not yet an essential institutional partner for social enterprises.

4. Results

The survey revealed the fact that the number of social enterprises in the regions of Latvia changes (Table 1), because some enterprises acquire the status of a social enterprise for a certain time period, while others lose it. Table 1 shows the regional representation of social entrepreneurs in the survey (R – Riga region; PR – Pieriga region; V – Vidzeme region; K – Kurzeme region; Z – Zemgale region; L – Latgale region). It does not significantly differ from the share of social enterprises operating in the regions, and roughly corresponds to the actual situation (%) in 2022.

Table 1. Differences between the regional share of social enterprises registered in the register and the regional share of those involved in the survey (source: Ministry of Welfare of the Republic of Latvia, 2024 and the authors' calculations)

Region	Social enterprises registered			Social enterprises surveyed, df, %-points
	December 2021	December 2022	December 2023	
	%	%	%	
R	51	51	50	-2
PR	21	22	22	-1
V	5	10	9	+3
K	10	8	8	+1
Z	9	6	7	-1
L	4	3	4	-1

The respondents of both groups were asked to rate the extent to which the following knowledge of and skills and competencies in local networks and partnerships were important for social enterprise managerial personnel. The answers given by the respondents had to be rated on a six-point scale: 0 – no rating; 1 – not important, 2 – slightly important, 3 – moderately important, 4 – important, 5 – very important. The groups gave their ratings to the following areas: 1) KC – knowledge of cooperation establishment; 2) KM – knowledge of cooperation mapping; 3) SP – skill in identifying partners; 4) CV – acquisition of competencies in the establishment of cooperation networks.

The average ranks for the above areas rated by the respondent groups (SE – social enterprise managerial personnel; UT – university teachers) are presented in Figure 1.

As shown in Figure 1, the social enterprise managerial personnel rated the knowledge of cooperation establishment (rating difference $df = 3.14$) and skill in identifying partners (rating difference $df = 3.14$) higher than the other group did. However, from the perspective of the university academic staff, mapping skills (rating difference $df = -3.47$) and competence in creating cooperation networks, which also included practical experience components (rating difference $df = -1.90$), played a more significant role in successful networking.

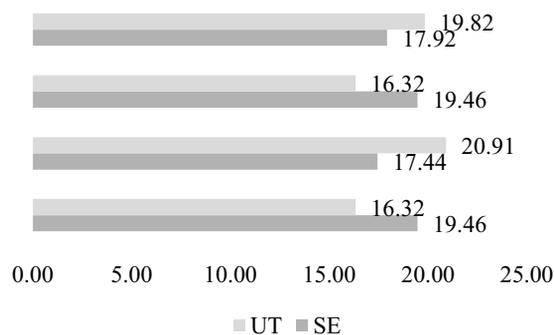


Figure 1. Average ranks for the importance of networking rated by the respondent groups in Latvia (source: authors' calculations)

At the next step, it was determined whether the results obtained showed statistically significant differences between the ratings of social enterprise managerial personnel and university personnel. The following hypotheses were put forward: (1) H_0 – the average ratings by the groups surveyed are the same; (2) H_1 – the average ratings by the groups surveyed are not the same. A non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis H test in SPSS was performed during the research. The results (Table 2) showed that H_0 should be accepted for all the areas rated because $p > p_0 = 0.05$.

Table 2. Kruskal-Wallis H test statistics for the ratings of the areas (source: authors' calculations)

Statistic	KC	KM	SP	CN
Kruskal-Wallis H	0.889	0.956	0.860	0.295
df	1	1	1	1
Asymp. Sig	0.346	0.328	0.354	0.587

The research results revealed that there were no statistically significant differences in the ratings of networking knowledge, skills and competencies between both groups and that the competencies were rated as equally important by both groups. Therefore, it could be concluded that the role of networking in today's business practice is considered important, and the development of such competencies in the learning environment should be part of training and lifelong education programmes.

To identify which kind of competencies – general or networking ones – was considered more important, a comparison of the ratings was performed. The results of the Kruskal-Wallis H-rank test on the ratings of networking competencies (CN) were compared with the results of a previous survey (Sannikova et al., 2023) on general knowledge, skills and competencies rated by the two groups: CA – work competencies in team organization; CB – competence in setting business goals; CC – competencies in assigning individual and team responsibilities (Table 3).

Table 3. Differences in average ranks for general and networking competencies rated by the respondent groups in Latvia (source: Sannikova et al., 2023 and the authors' calculations)

Groups	df (CN/CA)	df (CN/CB)	df (CN/CC)
SE	–1.4	–2.48	–0.96
UT	1.28	3.74	0.28

The analysis revealed that the average ranks for networking competencies rated by university academic staff were higher than the average ranks for work competencies in team organization, competence in setting business goals and competencies in assigning individual and team responsibilities. In contrast, the social enterprise managerial personnel's ratings were in favour of general competencies – the average ranks for competence in setting business goals were much higher than the average ranks for networking competencies ($df = -2.48$). However, there was a smaller difference in the average ranks between networking competence and competencies in assigning individual and team responsibilities ($df = -0.96$). The survey showed that general competencies were more important for social enterprises at this stage of their development. This could be explained by the weak development of networking practices

in Latvia, which is evidenced by the fact that in this period of social enterprise development, networking activities were mainly held by agents of the social ecosystem: ministries, local governments and associations. Therefore, there is a need to discuss more about the role of networking in contributing to the business sustainability of social enterprises.

According to the specific research tasks, the research identified whether the factors "region" and "education" affected the ratings of networking competencies by the social enterprise group. For this purpose, a one-way-ANOVA test (using the least significant difference LSD) was performed. It was established that the survey data met the test application requirements: the independent factors "region" and "education" were measured on a nominal scale and had several gradations, while the dependent factors – the data obtained – were measured on a metric scale. To determine whether the use of the one-way-ANOVA test was correct for the survey data, the research identified Levene's criterion. Levene's test for each group shows whether the variances are not statistically significantly different.

Before performing the one-way-ANOVA test, the data were regrouped:

- 1) regions were regrouped into 2 groups: Riga region; another region;
- 2) respondents were grouped into three groups by their education background: those with secondary or lower education; those with higher education; those with a master's degree or higher.

After the regrouping, a one-way-ANOVA contrast was set, as well as an option was set to compare one gradation to all the others.

An analysis of the test results revealed that the ratings of networking competencies (CN) by the social enterprise group:

- 1) did not depend on the region the social enterprise managerial personnel represented: $F = 2.779$, while $p = 0.097 > p_0 = 0.05$. A test of homogeneity of variances revealed that the test could be used, because the Levene statistic: 1) based on the mean $p = 0.055 > p_0 = 0.05$ and based on the trimmed mean $p = 0.054 > p_0 = 0.05$;
- 2) did not depend on the social enterprise managerial personnel's education: $F = 0.522$, while $p = 0.596 > p_0 = 0.05$. A test of homogeneity of variances revealed that the test could be used because the Levene statistic: 1) based on the mean $p = 0.526 > p_0 = 0.05$ and based on the trimmed mean $p = 0.589 > p_0 = 0.05$.

The results showed that the need for networking competencies was considered equally important in all the regions of Latvia, and it was not affected by the education background of the social enterprise managerial personnel. The authors could explain this fact by the same conditions for social development in the regions of Latvia and, most likely, the same factors contributing to the development. In addition, an insufficient supply of and demand for training in the field of social entrepreneurship contributes to a lack of knowledge about the opportunities provided by networking activities.

Based on the social enterprise networking practices in Latvia, the research identified whether the social enterprise managerial personnel and university academic staff rated social enterprise networking activities and cooperation with local governments (LE) and industry associations (CIA) as a factor contributing to the successful development of social enterprises. The results are presented in Figure 2. It could be concluded that in social entrepreneurship, the social enterprises rated the role of local governments higher (average ranks 20.59), while the university teachers rated the role of industry associations higher (average ranks 19.96).

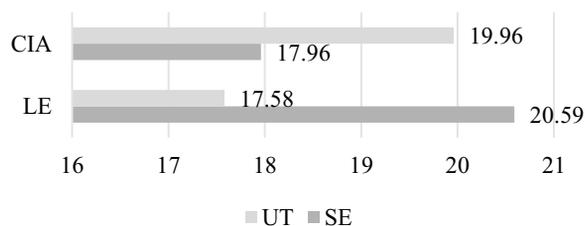


Figure 2. Average ranks for the importance of networking methods rated by the respondent groups in Latvia (source: authors' calculations)

The results were tested for the equality of average ranks, putting forward hypotheses. It was concluded that hypothesis H_1 : the average ratings by the groups were not the same should be accepted for both criteria (CIA and LE), because:

1. the social enterprises rated cooperation with local governments higher than the university teachers did ($df = 3.01$), and this difference was statistically reliable ($p = 0.039 < p_0 = 0.05$);
2. the social enterprises rated cooperation with industry associations higher than the university teachers did ($df = -2.00$), and this difference was statistically reliable ($p = 0.007 < p_0 = 0.05$).

This means that in their practices, the social enterprises relied more on cooperation with local governments, and in the case of Latvia, this could be explained by the wide involvement of local governments in the development of social entrepreneurship through various support instruments such as the allocation of premises, special support programmes or projects and the involvement of enterprises in holding activities.

The research identified whether the ratings of cooperation with CIA and LE were affected by the region the social enterprise managerial personnel represented and their education background. It was concluded (one-way-ANOVA test) that:

1. ratings of CIA were affected by education background, and the differences in ratings within the groups were statistically reliable (ANOVA $p = 0.046 < p_0 = 0.05$; Levene statistic: $1.741, p = 0.185 > p_0 = 0.05$);
2. ratings of CIA were not affected by the region the respondent represented, and the differences in ratings within the groups were not statistically reliable (ANOVA $p = 0.125 > p_0 = 0.05$; Levene statistic: $1.702, p = 0.194 > p_0 = 0.05$);
3. ratings of CM were not affected by the respondent's education background, and the differences in ratings within the groups were not statistically reliable (ANOVA $p = 0.313 > p_0 = 0.05$; Levene statistic: $2.403, p = 0.159 > p_0 = 0.05$);
4. ratings of CM were not affected by the region the respondent represented, and the differences in ratings between the groups were not statistically reliable (ANOVA $p = 0.583 > p_0 = 0.05$; Levene statistic: $2.403, p = 0.159 > p_0 = 0.05$).

The test results revealed that the education background of the social enterprise managerial personnel affected the ratings of cooperation with CIA needed for social enterprises, which could be explained by the differences in the goals of and approaches to training programmes.

In addition, there was a probability that networking practices differed between various personnel groups within an enterprise. To test this hypothesis, the research identified average ranks for the need for networking competencies rated by three subgroups: social entrepreneurs (A), enterprise managers (B), chief specialists of social enterprises (C) (Figure 3). It was concluded that the role of networking competencies in social enterprise development was rated higher by the subgroup of chief specialists (26.00), but lower by the enterprise managers (18.34).

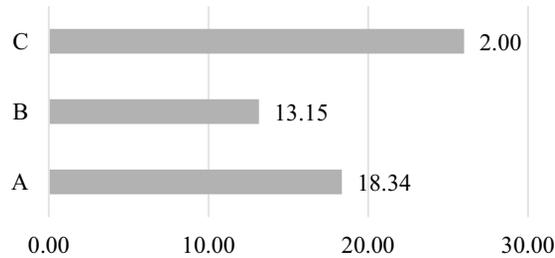


Figure 3. Average ranks for networking competencies rated by the social enterprise managerial personnel in Latvia (source: authors' calculations)

The Kruskal-Wallis H test results revealed that the differences were statistically reliable (Kruskal-Wallis H: 3.469; $df = 2$; $p = 0.017 < p_0 = 0.05$, which means that business practices and specific responsibilities at work affected the need for certain competencies. It could be concluded that social enterprise employee groups could have different goals in building up networking competencies. In the case of social enterprises, chief specialists might have more relation to practical networking tasks, while enterprise managers – to strategic issues. Therefore, universities should design lifelong learning programmes in accordance with the actual demand for competencies. At the same time, given that social enterprises in Latvia mainly belong to the group of small enterprises, there is a high probability that the same employees perform several functions. Therefore, a detailed examination of the needs of social enterprises would be particularly important in order to expand targeted cooperation in the build-up of competencies within the ecosystem of social enterprises through matching the demand and the supply.

5. Conclusions

The research aimed to identify the role of networking knowledge, skills and competencies in social enterprise performance. The theoretical examination has showed that networking competencies are considered important by the academic community, and social enterprise personnel require multi-faceted competencies and could be researched from different perspectives. Universities, which are agents of the social entrepreneurship ecosystem, play an essential role in learning and enhancing competencies.

The research conducted by the authors confirms that networking competencies are important in the practice of social enterprises in Latvia. The data analysis of the survey conducted by the authors in Latvia showed that:

1. There was no significant difference in the ratings of the importance of the networking knowledge, skills and competence profile necessary for the managerial personnel of social enterprises between the managerial personnel of social enterprises and academic staff of universities delivering business programmes. The development of networking competencies should be included in university programmes at various levels;
2. In business practice, the managerial personnel of social enterprises rated general competencies higher than networking competencies, and the ratings did not depend on the region where the enterprise operated and the education background of the personnel;
3. Ratings by the managerial personnel of social enterprises revealed that their cooperation with local governments played a more significant role than that with industry associations. In addition, the ratings of cooperation with local governments were not affected by the education background of the personnel and the location of the enterprise in the region. However, the personnel's ratings of cooperation with industry associations were affected by their education background. Therefore, it could be concluded that the role of universities in the development of competence and cooperation skills should be differentiated and based not only on theoretical considerations but also on the actual development of the social ecosystem.

The conducted empirical study is the first study of its kind in the Latvian social enterprise ecosystem, so it offers unique data that can be used for planning the development of networking competencies. The results of the work will help to increase cooperation between universities and other agents of the social entrepreneurship ecosystem in building competences.

The findings of the authors' research show that when creating business study programmes in universities and lifelong learning offers for social entrepreneurs, knowledge of the activities of regional networking agents and their role in the development of social enterprises must be provided. It is important that these programmes develop the ability to identify agents of cooperation and networking on national or regional level and the competence in building these networks in practice.

However, in the future, more detailed research should be conducted into ratings of networking competencies and the related practices, broken down by the kind of economic activity performed by social enterprises and by social impact on society.

Disclosure statement

The authors of the paper do not have any competing financial, professional, or personal interests from other parties.

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