

# Education and Cooperation for the Development of the Social Economy: Initiatives Undertaken at the University of the National Education Commission in Krakow

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**Abstract:** This article highlights the initiatives in social economy and social entrepreneurship undertaken by the University of the National Education Commission in Krakow. It explores activities related to education for the social economy, educational and research projects in this field, and the development of collaborations with the socio-economic environment, including partnerships with social economy entities.

**Keywords:** social economy, social entrepreneurship, higher education

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## 1. Introduction

Education is a key component of the ecosystem supporting the development of social enterprises and, more broadly, the social economy (Borzaga et al. 2020). Without an understanding of what social entrepreneurship entails, its progress is hindered. In Poland, the formal education of human resources for the social economy remains a relatively underexplored issue. At the university level, social economy and social entrepreneurship were historically taught primarily through postgraduate programs. Over time, however, these educational offerings began to expand. Factors driving the development of social entrepreneurship education were identified, and models of collaboration between universities and social economy actors were explored (Stanienda, Gądek, & Płonka, 2017; Starnawska 2018). Beyond formal curricular proposals, courses on social entrepreneurship have also been integrated into a broader educational and research framework within various management and economics programs (Popowska 2018; Pacut 2019).

The initiative to develop academic programs in social economy education was launched at the Pedagogical University of Krakow (now the University of the National Education Com-

mission in Krakow, abbreviated as UKEN) in 2016. Responding to the growing need for managerial staff within social economy entities, the university undertook the implementation of first- and second-level degree programs. These courses were designed to introduce the unique characteristics of the sector and to prepare graduates for roles in cooperatives, associations, foundations, social enterprises, and even traditional businesses seeking to operate in a socially responsible manner. The establishment of the social economy program at UKEN in 2016 was spearheaded by Professor Janina Pach, who assembled a teaching and research team and inspired it to focus on this emerging field. Since then, efforts have been ongoing to adapt the educational offerings to meet the needs of both the social economy sector and students.

## 2. Presentation of Activities

The degree program in social economics became a permanent part of the educational offerings at the Faculty of Social Sciences at UKEN. Notably, UKEN was the only university in Poland providing free education in this field at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The program featured a practical profile, with a curriculum rooted in collaboration with the socio-economic environment. This was particularly evident in the implementation of a dual studies model for the Master's degree program between 2019 and 2021. The dual studies approach combined the traditional model of knowledge acquisition with skill development and practical vocational training. Before launching the program, the curriculum and study plan, including course charters, underwent extensive consultations and modifications to better align with the actual needs of the labor market. During their studies, students integrated academic knowledge with practical experience through internships and participation in the activities of social economy entities. These included study visits, thesis work conducted with the involvement of mentors from social organizations and enterprises, and other forms of engagement. The dual degree program was implemented as part of the project "Social Economy – Practical, Necessary and Attractive," funded by the National Centre for Research and Development under the POWER 2014–2020 program, co-financed by the European Social Fund. As of the 2023/2024 academic year, UKEN has introduced a degree program in economics with an academic profile, offering specializations in social economics at the undergraduate level and social management at the graduate level.

Educational activities in social economics at UKEN are directed not only at its own students but also at those from other universities, both domestic and international. For example, as part of the annual editions of Social Economy Week, students from various institutions, including overseas participants, engage in these initiatives. Since 2021, UKEN staff have been conducting workshops on social entrepreneurship for students at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) Business School and Taiwan National Chiayi University. These workshops are part of the project "Responsible Business – From East to West," which completed four editions by the end of the 2023/2024 academic year. The project introduces students to diverse business models that move beyond the traditional profit-maximization paradigm, emphasizing the importance of key stakeholders and societal well-being. Participants explore concepts such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), shared value creation (CSV), ESG strategies and reporting, and social entrepreneurship, among others. Social entrepreneurship, in particular, is presented as a pathway to conducting business in a socially responsible manner. The project brings together experts from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, the UK, and Poland, with the UKEN team leading the social entrepreneurship component.

International cooperation plays a crucial role in enhancing and modernizing teaching practices and, equally important, in strengthening research potential. Many projects undertaken by UKEN academics are grounded in conceptual, methodological, and applied frameworks developed through international collaborations co-financed by the EU. The first such initiative was “INN@SE – Innovative Social Entrepreneurship with Youth Engagement,” funded under the Erasmus+ program (KA205, Strategic Partnerships, Cooperation for Innovation), and implemented between 2020 and 2022. This project, led by UKEN in partnership with institutions from Italy, Northern Macedonia, and Jordan, focused on fostering social entrepreneurship among young people. Within the project’s framework, research was conducted to understand young people’s attitudes towards social entrepreneurship. Additionally, a global database and map of best practices in social entrepreneurship were developed, alongside a model for supporting youth engagement in the field. The project also produced policy recommendations aimed at helping policymakers enhance strategies and initiatives to promote social entrepreneurship among young people. All publications and outcomes from the project are accessible at <https://innose.up.krakow.pl/>. In 2022, the project was recognized by Youth@Work – one of Europe’s largest transnational alliances for youth employability and entrepreneurship – as the best project developed within the network.

The next two projects focus on the role of social entrepreneurship in the ecological transformation, also referred to as the green transformation. This potential has been acknowledged by the European Union (European Commission 2021), recognizing that the business models and practices of the social economy are particularly well-suited for creating local and collective initiatives that deliver both social and environmental benefits. To explore green skills in the social economy and develop tools for their enhancement, UKEN has been implementing the project “SDG Labs – Harnessing the potential of the social economy towards a green transformation through the establishment of Socially Driven Green Labs within Universities” from 2021 to 2024. This initiative represents the first comprehensive transnational effort to identify current and future green skills shortages within social economy entities. Strengthening green skills education is critical for empowering social economy actors to contribute to the green transformation of the broader economy (Kowalska et al. 2022). Coordinated by UKEN, the project was carried out in collaboration with partners from the Czech Republic, Greece, and Belgium and received funding through the Erasmus+ program (KA220, Strategic Partnerships in higher education). From the same funding source, the project “SEgoesGreen – Integrating Nature-Based Solutions into Higher Education towards Exploiting the Transformative Potential of the Social Economy for a Green and Inclusive Future” has been implemented by UKEN between 2022 and 2025 in partnership with institutions from Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, and Portugal (UKEN acts as a project partner). The work centers on building a research and analytical framework to identify strategies and practical examples for integrating nature-based solutions and eco-citizenship into social economy curricula. These efforts require an interdisciplinary approach and the establishment of communication pathways between experts from various disciplines (Murzyn et al. 2024).

In the context of international cooperation, it is important to highlight UKEN’s involvement in global networks focused on the social economy and entrepreneurship. Since 2022, UKEN staff have been members of the EMES International Research Network, the largest international research network on social entrepreneurship. In 2024, this collaboration was further strengthened with UKEN joining the Affinity Group on Research on Training and Education on Social Economy, an initiative within EMES. This group focuses on advancing social economics

education and provides a platform for lecturers to share and discuss resources, teaching methods, and educational approaches. It also serves as a space for researchers to exchange experiences, ideas, projects, and events related to social economy education. Additionally, UKEN has collaborated with REVES, the European Network of Cities and Regions for the Social Economy, in preparing a project proposal in the field of social economy for Horizon Europe in 2024.

Recognizing that a modern university should not only fulfill its teaching and research functions but also engage in the so-called “third mission” of addressing contemporary social and economic challenges (Koj, 2013), UKEN staff place significant emphasis on building and fostering relationships with the socio-economic environment. Educational initiatives in social economics, aimed at cultivating a broader sense of social responsibility, are extended to primary and secondary school students as well. Between 2018 and 2020, UKEN hosted the University of Young Explorers, a program offering a series of classes for students in grades VI–VIII from primary schools in the Lesser Poland region. These activities were part of the Entrepreneurial and Socially Responsible Citizen project, funded by the National Centre for Research and Development under the POWER program. Similarly, in 2024, UKEN conducted a series of lectures and workshops, including sessions on social entrepreneurship, for first- and second-year secondary school students. These activities were carried out as part of an educational project funded by the National Bank of Poland.

A significant form of cooperation between UKEN and social economy entities has been the series of student-practitioner meetings organized as part of four editions of the Forum for Cooperation and Integration of the Institute of Law, Administration, and Economics with External Partners, held between 2018 and 2021. These meetings have resulted in a robust network of institutional partners with whom UKEN co-creates and conducts social, economic, and sectoral initiatives.

Since the inception of the Social Economy degree program, UKEN has collaborated closely with regional authorities, including the Regional Centre for Social Policy in Kraków. This cooperation includes promoting and disseminating knowledge about social enterprises, their creation, and management during the annual event Social Economy Week. Additionally, since 2020, UKEN employees have actively participated in the Lesser Poland Committee for the Development of the Social Economy (MKRES), which advises the authorities of the Lesser Poland Voivodeship. Dr. Habil. Dorota Murzyn, prof. UKEN, represents UKEN on the MKRES and joined the Social Economy Research Group, established within the Committee in 2024. The group’s objective is to develop methodologies and research tools to diagnose the demand and supply of social services, particularly for local government units involved in creating social service centers or social service development plans. Reflecting its commitment to social inclusion and raising awareness of responsible consumption, UKEN (then the Pedagogical University) became the first university in Poland to be awarded the title Fair Trade Friendly University.

Since 2017, UKEN has organized international scientific conferences dedicated to addressing various issues within the social economy sector. These conferences provide a platform for presenting research findings and exchanging both scientific insights and practical experiences. Notably, they represent the only recurring event of this kind in Poland. Held annually, each conference focuses on a different theme within the social economy. Topics explored in past editions have included: innovation in the social economy sector; the role of education and social capital in the development of social entrepreneurship; social entrepreneurship in the face of 21st-century challenges, including the transition to a circular economy; green skills in the social economy; and the role of social economy entities in the provision of social services.

A lasting legacy of these conferences is the series of post-conference publications, produced annually as monographs edited and co-authored by UKEN staff.

### 3. Discussion and Planned Courses of Action

The activities and lessons learned in education, research, and cooperation in the field of social economy undertaken at UKEN in recent years allow for several key reflections. First of all, education in economics and social entrepreneurship is not only crucial for socio-economic development but also essential for building awareness and knowledge in this area and fostering pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes, particularly among young people. Since the launch of the social economics degree program, UKEN staff have periodically surveyed students to better understand their motivations, opinions, and attitudes. The results of the first such survey, conducted among students who began their studies in the 2016/2017 academic year, revealed a low initial awareness of the term “social economy,” with more than 50% of respondents indicating unfamiliarity. Additionally, only 8% of students reported choosing this field of study out of personal interest (Maciejewski 2018). Subsequent years saw only slight improvements, although the level of understanding of social economy and social entrepreneurship did increase. However, research also highlighted that young people’s grasp of social entrepreneurship often remains intuitive and unsupported by deeper scientific knowledge. For instance, a 2020 survey conducted as part of the INN@SE project found that half of the respondents claimed familiarity with the terms “social economy” and “social entrepreneurship,” but only 37% stated that they understood the distinction between social entrepreneurship and traditional entrepreneurship. The research, which targeted young people aged 18-35, also identified a subgroup of social economy students. When compared to the broader group, these students demonstrated significantly higher awareness: 68% were familiar with the term “social entrepreneurship” (Chi-square test = 13.336,  $p = 0.001$ ), and 46% understood the difference between social entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship in general (Murzyn et al. 2020). These findings underscore the vital role of education in enhancing awareness and understanding of social entrepreneurship, highlighting its importance in addressing gaps in knowledge and shaping informed attitudes.

Successive surveys of students, along with direct discussions with their representatives (e.g., through educational quality councils), revealed the need to increase the number of strictly economics-focused courses within the degree program. This feedback, among other factors, motivated a shift in the educational profile and led to the introduction of the economics degree program in 2023. To ensure continuity in education for the social economy, the specializations “social economics” and “social manager” were incorporated into the program. The economics degree program is designed with an academic profile, fostering a stronger connection to the research conducted at the university.

The University of the National Education Commission in Kraków (UKEN) is actively advancing its educational and research activities in the field of social economics and entrepreneurship. Recognizing that, in Poland, the social economy is traditionally positioned within the domain of social policy, the university places a stronger emphasis on the economic and entrepreneurial dimensions of the field. To maximize the potential of social enterprises and boost employment within them, it is essential to integrate social entrepreneurship into broader entrepreneurship and business education (Murzyn, 2021). Social economy entities require personnel with entrepreneurial competencies and the expertise needed to manage effective social enterprises.

Moreover, UKEN's educational offerings and ongoing projects increasingly address contemporary challenges, such as environmental and digital transformation, aligning their activities with the evolving demands of the modern world.

The activities outlined above showcase a wide range of initiatives, programs, and projects undertaken by the University of the National Education Commission in Kraków (UKEN) to promote education and cooperation in the development of the social economy. Since 2016, UKEN has offered a degree program in "Social Economy," uniquely providing such studies at both undergraduate and graduate levels free of charge in Poland. UKEN has also participated in numerous international projects that have expanded research and cooperation in social economics. These projects have focused on areas such as developing young people's skills in social entrepreneurship and identifying green competences essential for ecological transformation. Collaboration with other universities, international organizations, and local partners has facilitated the creation of support networks and the exchange of knowledge and best practices. UKEN's educational initiatives extend beyond its students, targeting primary and secondary school students as well as the general public through various social and educational programs. The university also organizes international academic conferences to present research findings and share experiences in the field of social economics, further contributing to the advancement of knowledge in this area.

Drawing from its experience, UKEN recognizes a significant demand for education in the field of social economy across various levels of education. A key focus in fostering pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes among the younger generation is the establishment and reinforcement of partnerships with social economy entities and enterprises committed to social responsibility. UKEN supports this objective by organizing internships, placements, and research projects in collaboration with these organizations. Expanding and continuing international cooperation is also essential, particularly in the context of research and educational initiatives addressing green transformation and sustainable development. Participation in international networks such as EMES plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality of both education and research in these areas.

Promoting social entrepreneurship as an integral component of economic and business education is essential. UKEN plans to continue its efforts in developing green competences and integrating nature-based solutions into academic curricula. The university remains committed to addressing social and economic challenges by strengthening its engagement in the so-called "third mission" of the university. This includes organizing events, collaborating with local authorities and social actors, and fostering education that promotes a responsible and socially aware society. A significant challenge for the social economy lies in developing increasingly effective methods to address both long-standing social issues and emerging problems. These challenges arise from the dynamic evolution of the global economy, including digitalization, e-commerce, demographic shifts, changes in family structures, and, most critically, the need to adapt and innovate in creating social services and solutions.

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