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# Understanding Undergraduate Students' Perception of Social Entrepreneurship

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### Abstract

Social entrepreneurship has the potential to serve as a conduit for reinforcing various sectors, such as the economy, society, environment, politics, and education, on both local and global scales. One of the key initiatives in social entrepreneurship is the creation of training platforms to support these activities. This research focuses on assessing undergraduate students' perspectives, attitudes, and awareness of social entrepreneurship based on the knowledge they have gained through their entrepreneurship courses at the university. Given that these students represent the future generation of social entrepreneurs, this study primarily examines their expectations, interests, and current understanding of the topic. A qualitative research approach was used, incorporating 'focus group discussions' and 'unstructured observations' as data collection methods. The study was conducted with a group of 20 undergraduate students from a foundation university in the TRNC during the 2019-2020 academic year. The results showed that the knowledge students acquired in their entrepreneurship courses had an indirect effect on their awareness of social entrepreneurship.

**Keywords:** Focus group, Entrepreneurship, Undergraduate students, Social entrepreneurship

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## Introduction

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a key concept that evolved to address the diverse needs of contemporary societies. It has gained considerable attention from individuals, universities, and scholars alike [1]. One of the primary factors driving the rise of social entrepreneurship is the compelling narratives created while attempting to answer fundamental questions about 'why' and 'how.' These stories often center around themes such as contributing to societal betterment, personal growth, altruism, and resolving social issues [1]. Although social entrepreneurship lacks a universally accepted definition, it has been interpreted in various ways by researchers and practitioners. Dees [2] emphasizes that the concept holds various meanings for different individuals.

This research aims to examine the perceptions, viewpoints, and awareness of undergraduate students concerning social entrepreneurship, informed by the knowledge acquired in the 'Entrepreneurship' elective course at universities. As future social entrepreneurs, students' interests, expectations, and understanding of the field are key elements explored in the research.

## Conceptual Framework



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### *Characteristics and Definition of Social Entrepreneurs*

The traits associated with social entrepreneurs are commonly categorized into five primary areas: demographic factors, personality traits, personal values, cognitive characteristics, and motivational drivers [3-6]. Demographic factors include attributes such as gender, education, age, and family background. Personal traits encompass perseverance, optimism, a strong internal locus of control, and the inclination to take risks. Cognitive characteristics involve self-efficacy, innovativeness, an ability to recognize opportunities, and leadership. Personal values include spirituality, social responsibility, altruism, ethics, honesty, and empathy. Motivational factors consist of the desire for achievement, the need for superiority, and the desire for autonomy [7-9].

In addition to these traits, social entrepreneurs are often evaluated in terms of their level of diligence. Burger [10] defines diligence as the discipline an individual displays in the initiation, planning, execution, and control of their activities. Those who score high on diligence are typically well-organized, thrive under uncertainty, and follow meticulous planning processes. They tend to be perfectionists who adhere to rules in their work [10].

For social entrepreneurs, who often serve as mediators, it is essential to approach individuals affected by challenges created by other entrepreneurs with empathy. Reconciliation becomes a central tenet for sustaining social entrepreneurship and efficiently utilizing human resources [11-13]. Social entrepreneurs are primarily driven by the opportunities they perceive and the process of bringing their ideas to fruition, rather than being motivated by financial rewards, which are often shaped by disparities in wealth and the commercialization of altruism [14].

### *Social Entrepreneurship and Development of Social Entrepreneurs*

Social entrepreneurship, first introduced by Ashoka in 1980, has gained increasing prominence over the past decade, particularly in developing countries, becoming a sought-after field of business [15]. Two critical factors have shaped the development of social entrepreneurship: first, the creation of opportunities for the emergence of social entrepreneurship, and second, the rapid rise in interest surrounding it. The development of social entrepreneurship is diverse due to its connection to different aspects of entrepreneurship. In this regard, social entrepreneurship can be categorized into two primary domains: practical application and academic inquiry [16]. In practice, it is recognized that social entrepreneurs have long existed, providing sustainable solutions to societal issues.

Although the formalization of social entrepreneurship in Turkey is relatively recent when compared to Europe and America, the concept can be traced back to the country's early history. Pioneering figures such as Yusuf Ziya Bey, who founded Darüşşafaka in 1872, Princess Zeynep Kamil, who established Zeynep Kamil Hospital in 1862, and Mesut Cemil, who started radio broadcasting in the early Republic era, exemplify early forms of social entrepreneurship in Turkey [17]. Alongside these early initiatives, social entrepreneurship was also considered a potential model for national development in the early years of the Turkish Republic. For instance, Atatürk was intrigued by the book *In the Land of White Lilies* [18, 19], which highlighted Finland's recovery through collective social efforts. He recommended incorporating this study into military school curricula as a case study of the power of social entrepreneurship for national advancement. İçli and Anıl (2016) suggest that while Turkey has historical foundations in social entrepreneurship, its formal conceptualization and development have been delayed. Nevertheless, despite this delay, social entrepreneurship's entrepreneurial nature has allowed it to gain significant recognition in practice.

The formal naming and widespread awareness of social entrepreneurship in Turkey began around 2000 [9, 20, 21]. At this stage, organizations like Ashoka and the Schwab Foundation have played a crucial role by offering networking opportunities and financial support to social entrepreneurs within Turkey and internationally.

## **Materials and Methods**

In this study, two qualitative research methods were employed for data collection: 'focus group interviews' and 'unstructured observation.' Focus groups are commonly utilized across several disciplines, such as market research, health management, sociology, communication studies, applied research evaluations, and educational material development [22]. This technique capitalizes on group interactions, where a small group engages in an open, unstructured discussion, facilitated by a moderator, to gather in-depth information and stimulate idea generation. Focus group interviews are considered a qualitative method that follows a structured approach but emphasizes the individual perspectives of the participants. These discussions are guided by predetermined topics and focus on the participants' discourse and the social context surrounding their interactions [22, 23]. In this research, the focus group interviews were conducted at the end of the elective 'Entrepreneurship' course, attended by undergraduate students from various backgrounds. The study involved 20 students from a foundation university in TRNC during the 2019-2020 academic year. The questions asked in the focus group sessions were crafted based on the course content and aligned with Krueger's [24] question framework, which includes: 1) opening, 2) introductory, 3) transition, 4) key, 5)

research, 6) closing, and 7) final questions [22]. During the focus group sessions, the moderator was responsible for managing the conversation, while a rapporteur took notes on the discussion details.

Additionally, ‘observation’ was employed as a data collection method in this study. Contrary to common misconceptions, observation is a process that involves all of the senses, and in cases of sensory limitations, observational tools can be used to enhance this process [25, 26].

The data gathered from video and audio recordings, focus group sessions, and unstructured observation notes taken during the workshops were analyzed using content analysis, a qualitative research method. Through this analysis, the codes and emerging themes were categorized into primary and secondary themes, leading to the final interpretations and findings.

## Results and Discussion

The themes identified in this study were developed based on the results from the focus group discussions and observation notes. These findings were organized into the following categories: ‘Views on entrepreneurship and awareness of social entrepreneurship,’ ‘Distinction between social entrepreneurship and social responsibility,’ ‘Core traits and educational background of social entrepreneurs,’ and ‘Social entrepreneurship in career development.’

### *Views on Entrepreneurship and Awareness of Social Entrepreneurship*

One of the most significant observations from the findings, based on participants’ perspectives, was that students viewed the entrepreneurship course they took as a mandatory elective within the university curriculum. Additionally, students mentioned that they enrolled in the course to qualify for financial support through various funds available for entrepreneurship, to earn a certificate, and as part of their career planning. The course’s selection was notably influenced by the instructor teaching it, which was an interesting and somewhat outside factor. When discussing their reasons for taking the course, a participant shared their motivation from an international student’s viewpoint, stating that they had a genuine interest in working in the field in the future based on their aspirations.

*Volkan: “I took the course to be eligible for certificates, KOSGEP loans, etc. I thought it might be useful for something later on.”*

Upon examining the general views of the participants, it became evident that the students lacked knowledge of social entrepreneurship, which was not commonly addressed in previous educational environments or curricula. The concept of social entrepreneurship seemed unfamiliar to them. While entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship have different goals and characteristics, there is a connection between them. Entrepreneurship is often associated with starting a new business, a concept with a much broader history, while social entrepreneurship, though often perceived as a non-profit, requires generating profits to achieve social benefits. The students’ unfamiliarity with the concept of social entrepreneurship stood out as a notable finding.

*Altan: “In one section of the textbook, there were different types of entrepreneurship. We learned that social entrepreneurs exist to provide social benefits. While they are often viewed as non-profit individuals focused on social good, they still need to generate income and profit to sustain these benefits. Social entrepreneurs do this.”*

When examining the participants’ views on social entrepreneurship, it becomes apparent that the concept is primarily linked to social responsibility. This connection was initiated by a participant’s comment, which steered the discussion towards social responsibility projects. For example, Umut highlighted the idea of non-profit involvement in addressing social issues, improving situations, and solving problems.

*Payende: “Direct assistance means providing immediate help to those in need, but helping people means teaching them how to meet their own needs. In this way, they can sustain themselves over time. The social entrepreneur is like someone teaching how to fish, rather than simply giving fish.”*

Volkan shared that he first encountered the concept of social entrepreneurship during the entrepreneurship course. When discussing the subject, he also noted that businesses aim to enhance their reputation as institutions. According to the participants, one of the primary motivations behind social responsibility projects during the construction phase is to boost the company’s prestige.

*Volkan: “I first heard about social entrepreneurship in the entrepreneurship class. Companies might engage in social entrepreneurship for strategic reasons, aligning with their interests. It’s a way to improve their image, especially if they’ve been associated with negative situations. They can implement social responsibility projects, but I believe that it’s not just charitable organizations doing this—it’s also companies doing it for strategic gain.”*

The participants emphasized that even small efforts could create significant changes, with these small initiatives being essential for societal benefit. They argued that applying ideas and offering help can improve lives and foster greater awareness.

*Onore: “Even a small business can make a difference. In Turkey, for instance, the introduction of a plastic bag fee addresses environmental harm. If a small entrepreneur creates cloth bags instead of plastic, it not only benefits the environment but also generates income through small fees. What is produced can bring societal benefits.”*

The data gathered from the participants indicated that they lacked a solid understanding of both entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the knowledge gained from the course was not retained, primarily due to the absence of practical application. It was observed that students attempted to define social entrepreneurship based on reasoning and other information, but they did not possess a comprehensive understanding of its full depth. Given the interconnection between social responsibility and social entrepreneurship, this issue will be explored further in the next section.

### *Distinguishing Social Entrepreneurship from Social Responsibility*

Social entrepreneurship projects require a foundational idea and the involvement of key stakeholders to be realized. Perçem, one of the participants, highlighted the importance of starting with an idea and provided examples of institutions engaged in social responsibility initiatives.

*Perçem: "To launch social responsibility projects, there needs to be the spirit of the cause. A project cannot succeed without the concept of social entrepreneurship. A company that created a project for vocational high schools under social entrepreneurship became a social entrepreneur and successfully implemented the project."*

When the participants were asked whether social entrepreneurship operates within a defined framework or if it is a one-sided activity, it was concluded that any activity impacting society, either directly or indirectly, falls under social entrepreneurship. According to Miraç, one of the participants, the social entrepreneur must generate a level of profit to achieve their goals and provide benefits to society. This insight suggests that social responsibility initiatives by businesses could also be considered part of social entrepreneurship.

*Miraç: "I think social entrepreneurship follows a certain category. It aims to address societal issues. While entrepreneurship seeks profit through a specific idea, a social entrepreneur needs to earn a profit to contribute to society and achieve their goals. I don't believe it fits into one specific context. For example, companies may support charitable causes like helping people or animals in need or contributing to disaster relief, which can be seen as social responsibility."*

In another participant's perspective, Altan, the goals of the social entrepreneur are seen as crucial, emphasizing that raising public awareness is an essential responsibility. According to the participants, social entrepreneurs should work towards resolving societal issues through awareness campaigns, which can be regarded as their capacity to confront and tackle social challenges.

*Altan: "You need to examine the entrepreneur. Is the entrepreneur solely focused on social entrepreneurship, or is it a commercial venture? If we think of entrepreneurship as two categories, the profit-driven entrepreneur targets a specific market within the context of their business. On the other hand, a social entrepreneur doesn't target a particular group or niche and is open to ideas that benefit all of society. One day, they may advocate for animal rights, and the next day, they may be working to support human rights. Those focused on a single subject may have more of a commercial interest."*

Gizem, another participant, pointed out that one characteristic of consumer-driven societies is the tendency to consume ideas. She noted that the entrepreneurial concepts and projects that catch the attention of the younger generation tend to lose momentum over time. She suggested that while social responsibility and social entrepreneurship may become trends, their true impact is only evident when sustained over time.

*Gizem: "Achieving status and prestige involves both charitable actions and establishing a solid position in society. Social responsibility initiatives have become a trend in our country, especially among the youth. When young people get interested in something, it becomes a trend, and that's how entrepreneurship works now. However, I don't think social entrepreneurship is a mere trend; it's a necessity, something that is required. Some companies even donate a portion of their profits to charity, thus increasing their earnings."*

In a local context, Altan provided an example of educational activities as a form of social entrepreneurship. He referred to the creation of a school and a hospital by a foundation, explaining that such initiatives are also examples of social entrepreneurship.

*Altan: "There are even educational social enterprises. For instance, we could say our school was founded by a social entrepreneur. It was established by a foundation, and this foundation didn't just build universities and schools; it also provided aid and contributed to various other causes. This cannot be classified into just one category. I believe we considered this foundation and individual a social entrepreneur because they established our hospital. Through this foundation, various institutions like kindergartens, high schools, and universities are spread across the province."*

When asked about the presence of social entrepreneurship activities within their immediate circles, participants generally observed a lack of such examples in their surroundings. It became evident that such initiatives were rare in society. However, one participant shared a relevant story.

*Onore: "I have a friend who is pursuing a PhD in environmental studies and is working on developing a tool for air filtration. In his home country, mining is widespread, and air pollution is a significant issue. He was born in Cameroon, where the living conditions are poor due to the weather. With his expertise in chemistry and other areas, he's currently studying environmental science in France and aims to establish a facility to address these problems."*



### Key Traits and Educational Background of Social Entrepreneurs

When discussing the personality traits of social entrepreneurs, a common belief emerged among participants that these individuals should be confident, responsible from a young age, conscientious, and educated in relevant fields. The characteristics identified were largely consistent among participants, with an emphasis on leadership qualities.

*Perçem: "I believe these traits manifest early, even in primary school. Someone with these qualities stands out from the beginning. If they can think broadly, they don't just accept things at face value—they question everything. This questioning nature is evident from an early age, in people who raise their hands first, take responsibility, and stand up against injustice. I don't think there's a specific age for this. A person, whether six or sixty, can exhibit these traits. For example, if someone spits gum on the street, a person with these traits would speak up and educate them about the environmental harm. This attitude must be present throughout life."*

Miraç, another participant, shared that social responsibility projects they are involved with align with the financial capabilities of the individuals they aim to help, contributing at a community level.

*Miraç: "One social media influencer donated a significant portion of the earnings from his videos to the families of martyrs and their children, publicly acknowledging this. While he highlighted the value of this act, he also improved his public image by showcasing his contributions. From what I observe, he is assertive, has excellent interpersonal skills, and is more emotionally driven than he appears."*

Participants also shared examples of social entrepreneurship that they encountered, particularly on social media, highlighting their ability to recognize such initiatives.

*Gizem: "There are individuals who set up institutions to help stray animals, for example. Although the creators of these institutions remain anonymous, people contribute small amounts through online platforms. They create a system where donations, like 5 or 10 TL, are used to cover the costs of food and shelter for animals. This, to me, is a clear example of social entrepreneurship. They leverage social media and target platforms that young people frequent. Key traits of these people include being assertive, bold, and willing to take risks without worrying about the outcome."*

### Social Entrepreneurship in Career Planning

Regarding the participants' career aspirations, it became apparent that they had not made concrete plans for the future, nor did they consider social entrepreneurship in their career trajectories. The primary reason participants did not integrate social entrepreneurship into their career plans was uncertainty about how to generate income from it, which led them to favor traditional career paths. They tend to view social entrepreneurship as an adjunct to their primary career, rather than as a main focus. This conclusion emerged from the discussions during the interviews.

*Altan: "When we were young, no one told us about social entrepreneurship or encouraged us to engage in social responsibility projects, not even in school. Honestly, I don't believe I could have pursued that path myself. I think this should start with education from childhood. People who aim for social entrepreneurship through business studies are few, and for that to change, there should be more specialized programs, and individuals should be directed toward these fields from an early stage."*

Only one participant mentioned having considered this type of career path. The fact that this person has a relative who integrates social entrepreneurship into their career planning also contributed to their positive view of the field. Social interactions, according to the participant, play a significant role in career planning and have been a key factor in their perspective.

*Onore: "I've thought about pursuing such a career. I'm from Rwanda, where people lack financial resources but have many ideas. When I return, I hope to invest in people with ideas. It's beneficial because these ideas emerge and grow within the community. This will also help me develop personally. Social entrepreneurs, unlike typical entrepreneurs who seek opportunities in external places, stay rooted in the regions they care about, aiming to impact their community."*

The dominant perspective among the participants is that a certain level of income is necessary to become a social entrepreneur. While discussions largely focus on financial aspects, participants also expressed the importance of moral support.

*Umut: "Even without financial assistance, a person can still provide moral support, leadership, and awareness in areas where society faces challenges. Social entrepreneurship isn't just about money. Raising awareness can also be seen as a form of social entrepreneurship."*

Although the participants generally show some reluctance towards entrepreneurship, they are beginning to understand the concept of social entrepreneurship. Their future engagement with the topic may warm up as they delve deeper into it, though most participants agree that integrating social entrepreneurship education from an early age is essential.

While social entrepreneurship is viewed as a form of entrepreneurship aimed at bringing about social change, it differs significantly from traditional entrepreneurship, which primarily focuses on creating value and generating profit. Social entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in advancing social progress across various fields, such as art, culture, and technology. In this context, social entrepreneurship addresses societal issues that influence the entrepreneurial environment, thereby affecting the nation's economic progress. Entrepreneurs, particularly those who have received education and training, are vital

to the country's economy. Therefore, it is critical to teach entrepreneurship at all educational levels, and universities play an essential role in cultivating reliable entrepreneurs. Given the growing interest in social entrepreneurship today, many educational institutions have begun encouraging students to engage in social entrepreneurial activities. Incorporating entrepreneurship into university life has become a key area of focus for entrepreneurship researchers. Universities are where students transition into the next phase of their careers, and it is here that they decide how and where to begin their professional journey. To further foster this, the state should begin supporting entrepreneurship initiatives, while also encouraging university students to pursue their ventures after graduation, which would raise awareness of social entrepreneurship among students.

## Conclusion

This research highlights the views, perceptions, and understanding of social entrepreneurship among students who have taken the "Entrepreneurship" elective course offered at the university level. Students are provided with financial support for career development and have access to funds from entrepreneurs. However, many students are unfamiliar with the concept of social entrepreneurship, as they primarily take this course for a certificate. Social entrepreneurship, although briefly mentioned in the course, is not a well-known topic among students, either in their past studies or in future curricula. From a different angle, some participants associate social entrepreneurship with social responsibility, noting that businesses may engage in such activities for strategic reasons aligned with their interests. Additionally, it was emphasized that the execution of initiatives to create societal change can significantly improve lives and raise awareness. A few participants, however, suggested that entrepreneurial ideas and projects, especially among the youth, may lose their impact over time, seeing them as trends that fade away. They expressed that the true effects of social responsibility and social entrepreneurship would only be sustained if these efforts were ongoing. Moreover, it was noted that many participants view social entrepreneurship as a supplementary social responsibility activity rather than integrating it into their primary career plans.

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