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Undergraduate Students' Awareness of Social Entrepreneurship

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Abstract

Social entrepreneurship serves as a vital catalyst for enhancing economic, environmental, social, political, and educational dimensions both locally and globally. Among the initiatives designed and executed within social entrepreneurship activities is the establishment of training platforms. Within this framework, the present study seeks to explore undergraduate students' views, perceptions, and insights regarding social entrepreneurship based on the knowledge gained through their university-level entrepreneurship course. Since these undergraduate students are prospective social entrepreneurs, their interests, expectations, and understanding form the core focus of this research. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study utilized focus group interviews and unstructured observations to gather data. The participants included 20 undergraduate students enrolled at a foundation university in the TRNC during the 2019-2020 academic year. Findings indicate that the entrepreneurship course content indirectly contributed to raising students' awareness about social entrepreneurship.

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

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Introduction

The idea of social entrepreneurship has gained increasing significance as it continuously evolves to meet the demands of modern societies. This concept has attracted growing attention from individuals, academic institutions, and scholars worldwide [1]. A major factor behind its rise in prominence lies in the compelling narratives that seek to answer fundamental questions of 'why' and 'how.' These stories commonly involve efforts to benefit communities, achieve personal fulfillment, provide service, and address societal challenges [1]. Despite the absence of a universally accepted definition, various interpretations of social entrepreneurship exist, shaped by both academics and practitioners. According to Dees and Hass [2], the meaning of social entrepreneurship differs widely depending on individual viewpoints.

This research focuses on exploring the perceptions, attitudes, and understandings of undergraduate students regarding social entrepreneurship, based on the knowledge they have gained through the elective 'Entrepreneurship' course at university. Since these students are prospective social entrepreneurs, their interests, expectations, and levels of knowledge form the core of this study.

Conceptual framework

Social entrepreneur concept, definition, and characteristics

The traits that define social entrepreneurs can be grouped into five main categories: demographic, personal, cognitive, value-based, and motivational characteristics [3–6]. Demographically, social entrepreneurs differ in gender, age, education, and



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family background. Personality traits commonly include persistence, optimism, an internal locus of control, and a willingness to take risks. Their cognitive traits involve self-confidence, creativity, opportunity recognition, and leadership abilities. Core personal values encompass spirituality, altruism, social responsibility, morality, honesty, and empathy. Motivations often stem from the need for achievement, superiority, and autonomy [7–9].

Beyond these, the concept of diligence is also significant in defining social entrepreneurs. Burger [10] describes diligence as the self-discipline applied during the stages of initiating, planning, executing, and monitoring projects. Individuals with a high level of diligence tend to organize efficiently, operate under relative certainty, plan carefully, and maintain a perfectionist adherence to rules [10]. Empathy is crucial for social entrepreneurship stakeholders, who often play the role of mediators and conciliators, especially when engaging with those negatively impacted by others' entrepreneurial activities. In this sense, reconciliation emerges as a vital force for sustaining social entrepreneurship and maximizing human resource efficiency [11–13]. Moreover, social entrepreneurs are primarily driven by the opportunities they identify and the fulfillment of their ideas rather than financial rewards, reflecting the gap between altruism and monetary gain [14].

Social entrepreneurship and development of social entrepreneurs

Social entrepreneurship, initially formalized through Ashoka's work starting in 1980, has grown rapidly in popularity over the past decade, particularly in developing countries, becoming a prominent global entrepreneurial trend [15]. The evolution of social entrepreneurship hinges on two key aspects: the recognition and space for this phenomenon and the sharp increase in interest it has garnered. Its development exhibits variation mainly because it intersects both practical entrepreneurial activities and academic research [16]. Social entrepreneurs have historically existed as changemakers offering impactful, sustainable solutions to social problems.

In Turkey, while the formal discourse on social entrepreneurship is relatively new compared to Western countries, its roots can be traced back to the nation's early history. Notable figures like Yusuf Ziya Bey (founder of Darüşşafaka, 1872), Princess Zeynep Kamil (founder of Zeynep Kamil Hospital, 1862), and Mesut Cemil (a pioneer in early Turkish radio broadcasting) exemplify social entrepreneurship within Turkey's past [17]. Additionally, social entrepreneurship was proposed as a model for national development in the early Republic period. The work *In the Land of White Lilies* [18, 19], which chronicles Finland's recovery through strong community solidarity, attracted Atatürk's interest and was integrated into military school curricula as a case study on social entrepreneurship's impact on nation-building. İçli and Anıl [4] note that although Turkey has a historical foundation for social entrepreneurship, the formal introduction and conceptual acceptance of the phenomenon occurred later and have since progressed slowly. Nonetheless, despite lacking full consensus within academic literature, social entrepreneurship's practical relevance and appeal have grown significantly, propelled by its entrepreneurial dimension. While social entrepreneurial activities have long been part of various Turkish sectors, the terminology and awareness of social entrepreneurship only began to solidify around the year 2000 [17, 20, 21]. Foundations such as Ashoka and Schwab have played crucial roles in Turkey by providing networks and capital support to social entrepreneurs worldwide.

Materials and Methods

This study employs qualitative research methodologies, specifically utilizing 'focus group interview' and 'unstructured observation' as primary data collection techniques. Focus group discussions are widely applied across various disciplines such as market research, healthcare management, sociology, communication studies, evaluation processes in practical fields, educational material development, and educational research [22]. The focus group interview leverages group interaction within an informal interview setting, involving a small number of participants guided by a moderator to elicit rich, detailed insights and foster idea generation. This approach is characterized as a qualitative data gathering method that follows predetermined protocols, emphasizes the subjective perspectives of participants, and carefully considers their discourse within its social context [22, 23]. Taking these aspects into account, data collection was performed by conducting several brief focus group sessions following the completion of the 'Entrepreneurship' elective course, attended by undergraduate students with diverse demographic and social backgrounds. The study sample comprised 20 undergraduate students enrolled at a foundation university in the TRNC during the 2019-2020 academic year. The interview guide used in focus group sessions was tailored to align with the content of the course. Following the structure proposed by Krueger [24], the sequence of questions included:

1. Opening
2. Introduction questions
3. Transition questions
4. Key questions
5. Research questions
6. Closing question
7. Final question [22].

Throughout the focus group sessions, the moderator was responsible for organizing and steering the discussion, while a rapporteur documented detailed observations and queries arising during the meetings.

In addition to focus groups, ‘observation’ served as another data collection method. Contrary to common misconceptions, observation involves the use of all senses, and when sensory capacity is limited, instruments may be employed to enhance observational accuracy [25, 26].

Data obtained from video and audio recordings, focus group interactions, and notes taken through unstructured observations during workshops with participants were subjected to content analysis—a qualitative analytical method. Emerging codes and anecdotes identified via content analysis and thematic coding were organized into main themes and sub-themes, from which findings were derived and interpreted.

Results and Discussion

The themes presented in this section were developed based on the data gathered from focus group discussions and observation notes. During the focus group sessions, participants’ opinions were systematically categorized into several themes: ‘Perspective against entrepreneurship and awareness of social entrepreneurship,’ ‘Social entrepreneurship and social responsibility distinction,’ ‘Basic characteristics and educational status of social entrepreneurs,’ and ‘Social entrepreneurship in career planning.’

Perspective on entrepreneurship and awareness on social entrepreneurship

One of the most notable findings derived from participants’ perspectives is that students enrolled in the entrepreneurship course primarily because it was a compulsory elective within the university curriculum. Additionally, students expressed that their motivation for choosing this course was linked to applying for financial support funds associated with career planning and entrepreneurial ventures, as well as obtaining certification. The influence of the faculty member teaching the course was also reported to significantly affect course selection, which is an exceptional factor beyond the subject matter itself. For example, a participant, representing the international student group, explained that they chose the course voluntarily, hoping to pursue a career in this field in the future.

-Volkan: “I enrolled to apply for certificates, KOSGEP loans, and similar support; I figured it might be useful somewhere down the line.”

When analyzing the general feedback, it became apparent that social entrepreneurship as a concept is relatively unfamiliar to students due to its limited presence in prior educational curricula and environments. While entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship are conceptually linked, they possess distinct goals and dynamics, particularly concerning the traits of social entrepreneurs. The common public understanding of entrepreneurship often simplifies it to starting a new business, although its historical and conceptual richness is substantial. The participants’ unfamiliarity with the concept of social entrepreneurship stands out as a significant finding.

-Altan: “In one chapter of the textbook, different types of entrepreneurship were mentioned; we understood social entrepreneurs as those who operate to create social value. Although social entrepreneurs are often viewed as nonprofit actors focused on social good, they must generate income and profits to sustain their social missions.”

When considering participants’ views on social entrepreneurship, it was generally linked with the notion of social responsibility. This association influenced the flow of the discussion, which shifted towards social responsibility initiatives. For instance, one participant emphasized the nonprofit aspect of social entrepreneurship and its role in addressing social challenges.

-Payende: “Direct aid means giving resources straight to those in need, but helping activities involve teaching people how to meet their own needs. This way, they become self-sufficient over time. A social entrepreneur ‘teaches how to fish instead of giving the fish directly.’”

Volkan mentioned that social entrepreneurship was introduced during the entrepreneurship course. He highlighted that companies may engage in social entrepreneurship strategically to enhance their public image. Participants agreed that social responsibility projects are often developed with the intention of improving corporate reputation.

-Volkan: “I learned about it in entrepreneurship class as well. Companies may pursue social entrepreneurship for strategic reasons aligned with their interests—to improve their corporate reputation. A company with a poor reputation might take this route to improve its image and reputation by engaging in social responsibility projects. I believe both charitable foundations and companies use these strategies.”

In line with the shared anecdotes, participants highlighted the importance of small-scale initiatives to create meaningful social impact, emphasizing that even modest ideas can benefit society and facilitate awareness.

-Onore: "Even small efforts can make a difference. For example, in Turkey, a fee was introduced for plastic bags due to environmental concerns. If a small entrepreneur produces cloth bags here, it can positively affect the environment and generate economic benefits through modest fees. What is produced serves the society."

Overall, the findings indicate that participants had an incomplete understanding of both entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship concepts, and the knowledge gained during the course was not deeply internalized due to the absence of practical application phases. Students tended to define social entrepreneurship through logical inference and related information rather than possessing a comprehensive understanding of the concept. Given the frequent conflation of social responsibility and social entrepreneurship, this relationship will be further explored in the next theme.

Social entrepreneurship and social responsibility distinction

The foundation of social entrepreneurship must be rooted in a clear initial idea. For a project to come to fruition, a comprehensive plan alongside committed stakeholders is essential. Perçem, a participant, shared examples from organizations that carry out social responsibility projects.

-Perçem: To initiate social responsibility projects, there has to be a genuine spirit behind the effort. A fundamental concept is necessary for a business to succeed. Without the presence of social entrepreneurship, an institution cannot implement such projects. For instance, a holding company that launched a project related to vocational high schools under the banner of social entrepreneurship acted as a social entrepreneur and successfully executed the project.

When participants were asked if social entrepreneurship operates within a defined structure or in a more unilateral manner, the consensus was that all activities impacting society directly or indirectly fall under social entrepreneurship. Miraç, another participant, emphasized that social entrepreneurs aim to generate some profit to sustain their efforts for societal benefit. Thus, corporate social responsibility initiatives can be interpreted within the realm of social entrepreneurship as well.

-Miraç: I believe social entrepreneurship fits within a certain category and progresses with the goal of alleviating societal issues. While traditional entrepreneurship aims to launch ideas and generate profit, social entrepreneurs must earn enough profit to support their broader social objectives. I don't think it's limited to a narrow scope. Beyond corporate activities, social entrepreneurship might include helping people or animals during natural disasters by donating part of business profits, which also aligns with social responsibility.

Altan highlighted the importance of the goals that social entrepreneurs pursue and stressed public awareness campaigns as a key responsibility of social entrepreneurs. Participants agreed that such awareness-raising efforts are crucial for addressing societal challenges and signify a commitment to confronting social problems.

-Altan: We need to consider the nature of the entrepreneur. Is the entrepreneur purely social, or commercially driven? There are essentially two types. Profit-oriented entrepreneurs target specific audiences within their business framework. In contrast, social entrepreneurs do not limit themselves to a particular group but embrace ideas that benefit the broader society. One day they might advocate for animal rights, the next for human rights. Those focused on a single issue are more commercially oriented, in my view.

Gizem provided insight into a cultural tendency where society frequently adopts and discards new ideas. She noted that entrepreneurship ideas popular among youth often fade quickly, and she sees social responsibility and social entrepreneurship as impactful only when these efforts are sustained over time.

-Gizem: To gain status and prestige, both charity work and societal recognition matter. Currently, social responsibility projects are a trend in our country, especially among young people. Attention shifts rapidly to new trends, and entrepreneurship follows this pattern. However, social entrepreneurship is not merely a trend—it's essential. Some companies contribute a portion of their profits to charities, increasing their earnings simultaneously.

Altan also pointed out local examples where social entrepreneurship extended into educational initiatives, such as building schools and hospitals linked to foundations.

-Altan: Education can indeed be an area of social enterprise. For example, our school was founded by a social entrepreneur through a foundation. This foundation not only established universities and schools but also provided aid and support across various issues. It doesn't fit into a single category. I believe we consider that foundation and its founder as social entrepreneurs because they established our hospital. This foundation oversees many institutions including kindergartens, high schools, and universities throughout the region.

When asked if participants had witnessed social entrepreneurship in their immediate circles, most indicated a lack of such examples, suggesting that social entrepreneurship remains relatively rare in their communities. Nonetheless, one participant shared the following story:

-Onore: I have a friend pursuing a PhD in environmental science who is developing an air filtration device. His home country, Cameroon, experiences significant air pollution linked to extensive mining activities, and living conditions there are harsh. With a background in chemistry and other fields, he is currently studying in France and aims to establish a facility to address this environmental issue.

Fundamental traits and educational background of social entrepreneurs

When examining the personality attributes associated with social entrepreneurs, a common consensus emerges that these individuals tend to be assertive, demonstrate responsibility from a young age, possess conscientiousness, and receive education aligned with these traits. The participants' descriptions closely align, highlighting the importance of leadership qualities in social entrepreneurs.

-Perçem: I believe these traits become evident as early as primary school. Such individuals possess distinctive features. They think broadly and don't accept things at face value or rely on simple logic. They naturally question the world around them. From a young age, they raise their hands first, volunteer, and take on responsibilities. They are the ones who speak out against injustice and refuse to remain silent. This behavior is not limited by age; whether six or sixty, anyone can display social entrepreneurial characteristics. For instance, a person who would confront someone littering gum on the street by explaining its environmental harm shows this mindset. Someone who remains silent and passive lacks these traits. This attitude must be embedded in their life.

Miraç provides an example highlighting how social responsibility projects often align with individuals' income levels, showing contributions to society according to their capacity.

-Miraç: A popular social media figure donated a large part of his video earnings to families of martyrs and their children, openly sharing this information. His actions both promote the cause and enhance his public image. Observing his traits, he appears assertive, emotionally driven, and skilled in interpersonal relationships.

Participants frequently shared examples of social entrepreneurship from their surroundings and social media, suggesting an ability to distinguish these initiatives from others.

-Gizem: Certain individuals create organizations, for example, for stray animals. Although the founders might remain anonymous, donations flow through various channels and websites, turning small contributions like 5 or 10 TL into food and shelter. This creates a cycle that supports the cause. They utilize social media effectively and engage with platforms popular among young people. The defining traits of these social entrepreneurs seem to be assertiveness, courage, and willingness to take risks without fearing consequences.

Social entrepreneurship in career development

Regarding career aspirations, it appears that participants have not followed a deliberate plan or foresight concerning their future careers, nor have they seriously contemplated social entrepreneurship as part of their career path. One key reason people often exclude social entrepreneurship from career planning is uncertainty about how to generate financial income through such activities, tending instead to opt for conventional career paths. Most participants see social entrepreneurship more as a supplementary social responsibility initiative alongside their primary jobs rather than the central focus of their career journey. The interview findings support this viewpoint.

-Altan: When we were young, nobody encouraged or taught us to become social entrepreneurs or to engage in social responsibility projects, even in school. Honestly, I don't see myself as fitting into that role; it requires foundational education starting from childhood. Those who pursue social entrepreneurship through business studies are rare, and there should be more specialized academic programs to guide them from the basics.

Only one participant reported having contemplated social entrepreneurship within career planning. This participant also has a close relative engaged in social entrepreneurship, which influences their positive attitude towards it. Social connections play a significant role in shaping career plans.

-Onore: I have thought about pursuing such a career. Coming from Rwanda, where financial resources are limited but ideas are abundant, I hope to return as an investor supporting people with innovative ideas. This approach helps develop society's ideas and contributes to my personal growth. Social entrepreneurs work in the communities they care deeply about, unlike traditional entrepreneurs who seek opportunities elsewhere. Social entrepreneurs aim to positively impact their society.

Most participants agree that having a certain level of income is important to becoming a social entrepreneur, though discussions about whether financial resources are strictly necessary revealed that moral support is also vital.

-Umut: Even if someone cannot provide financial aid, they can still offer moral support, leadership, and raise awareness about social issues. I believe social entrepreneurship goes beyond just money; educating and awakening society is part of it. While participants tend to approach entrepreneurship cautiously, they are beginning to understand the concept of social entrepreneurship more clearly. Their growing interest may lead them to embrace it more fully in the future, yet there is a widespread belief that social entrepreneurship education should begin in childhood.

Although social entrepreneurship is seen as a subset of entrepreneurship focused on driving social change, it differs significantly from traditional entrepreneurship, which prioritizes creating value and profit. Social entrepreneurship actively contributes to social progress across various fields including art, culture, and technology. Within this framework, social entrepreneurship represents a socially conscious mindset that influences the entrepreneurial environment and supports economic development nationally. Entrepreneurs who receive relevant education and training play an essential role in the

economy. Thus, integrating entrepreneurship education at all academic levels and fostering trustworthy entrepreneurs at the university stage is crucial.

Given the increasing interest in social entrepreneurship, many educational institutions have started encouraging students to engage in social entrepreneurship initiatives and behaviors. Incorporating entrepreneurship into university life has become a key concern among researchers in this field. Universities serve as transitional institutions where students plan their professional lives post-graduation. Government support for entrepreneurship, coupled with encouragement for university students to launch their own ventures, is expected to heighten awareness and participation in social entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reveals that when examining university students' opinions, perceptions, and understandings of social entrepreneurship—gleaned from the elective 'Entrepreneurship' course—they tend to recognize opportunities for financial backing within their career planning and the availability of entrepreneur-supported funding. However, many students demonstrate limited familiarity with social entrepreneurship, as their enrollment in the course is often motivated by obtaining a certificate rather than genuine engagement; furthermore, the concept is scarcely addressed in prior educational settings and curricula. From another viewpoint, participants linked social entrepreneurship closely with social responsibility, noting that companies may pursue social entrepreneurship strategically to align with their own interests. It was also highlighted that transforming innovative ideas into practice eases the challenges faced by individuals and communities, with various forms of assistance fostering greater awareness. Conversely, some participants expressed concern that entrepreneurial initiatives popular among youth might lose their effectiveness over time, perceiving such activities as trends or temporary enthusiasm; thus, the lasting impact of social responsibility and social entrepreneurship efforts depends heavily on their continuity. Additionally, participants generally regarded social entrepreneurship as an ancillary social responsibility endeavor accompanying their primary occupations, rather than a central career focus.

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