

# **Social Entrepreneurial Intention: Educating, Experiencing and Believing**

With current social, environmental and economic challenges, there is an increasing need to encourage more sustainable business models, which include social entrepreneurship, in the education of our future leaders and entrepreneurs. This has resulted in significant research and practice towards improving students' social entrepreneurial intention with higher education programmes. We used survey data collected from 220 university students in Brazil. These students participated in the Enactus programme, which exposed them to social entrepreneurial experience and entrepreneurial education. Our findings highlight the importance of experience-based programmes in forming empathy, essential to self-efficacy development, and in improving the ability to identify social opportunities, which together are indispensable for developing social entrepreneurial intentions. This paper contributes to social entrepreneurship education literature by emphasising the need to integrate experience-based opportunities into higher education programmes. It confirms that social entrepreneurial actions are contextually driven and should be addressed and developed closer to the needs. This results in empathic individuals who can see opportunities others do not see and become social entrepreneurs. In regard to public policy support and the encouragement of social entrepreneurship models, our findings emphasise the need to help universities and encourage experiential programmes to develop **students**. In this way, universities which develop social entrepreneurship education programmes have the opportunity to act as agents of change, developing human capital to address the social/environmental challenges and create a fairer society.

Keywords: Self-efficacy, empathy, opportunity recognition, social entrepreneurship education, **social experience**.

# 1 Introduction

## *1.1 Research question*

Increasingly, we come across governments and international organisations that recognise the vital role of social entrepreneurship (SE) in tackling current social, environmental, and economic challenges through innovative and sustainable practices, contributing to a more sustainable and fair society (European Commission 2021). This recognition comes typically with further interest and support in developing these practices, encouraging more people to create, join and work on SE projects. As a response, we have seen an increasing trend of more SE development programmes at various levels of education (e.g., Hockerts 2018; Bazan et al. 2020; Roslan et al. 2020), expecting to motivate students to pursue SE.

However, creators, designers and educators formulating these SE development programmes still lack methods to evaluate their impact, missing the opportunity to improve them and increase the interest and opportunities for SE development (Forster and Grichnik 2013; Kwong et al., 2022). Researchers have studied some variables/outcomes to assess this impact, these include social entrepreneurial intention (SEI), which reflects the willingness to establish a new social enterprise (Mair and Noboa 2006; Prieto 2012). This intention considers the drive to acquire knowledge, foment new ideas, and implement the social entrepreneurial plans to eventually become a social entrepreneur and pursue a social mission (Mair et al. 2006).

Some studies, mainly in developed countries, **have used SEI to assess SE programmes, identifying specific attributes that can influence SEI. However, understanding to what extent and how a social entrepreneurship development programme is impacting the social entrepreneurial intention from an individual**

perspective in developing countries remains a gap in the literature.

Considering the current gap identified in the literature, our paper aims to answer the following research question 'To what extent and how does a social entrepreneurship development programme impact the social entrepreneurial intention of university students in Brazil?'

## ***1.2 Rationale of the study***

Some studies have used SEI to assess SE programmes or initiatives, identifying specific attributes and behaviours that can influence SEI (e.g., Mair and Noboa 2006; Bacq and Alt 2018). However, these studies tend to focus more on the characteristics of the programmes themselves (Forster and Grichnik 2013; Hockerts 2017; Tiwari et al. 2017; Tran and Von Korflesch 2016), with less consideration on how the individual factors and their interactions can influence a student's intentions to become social entrepreneurs.

Empathy and opportunity recognition are two individual attitudes that can play a crucial role in SEI. Empathy is an attribute associated with the emotional response produced by the perceived well-being of a person in need, which is an expected attribute of social entrepreneurs (Mair and Noboa 2006; Dees 2012; Sousa-Filho et al. 2020). It is considered the primary motivator differentiating social entrepreneurs from their counterparts, commercial entrepreneurs (Mair et al. 2006), playing a crucial role in developing future social entrepreneurs (García-González and Ramírez-Montoya 2020). Nevertheless, few studies have explored how empathy is developed through SE development programmes and the mechanisms through which it motivates SEI (Hockerts 2017; Tiwari et al. 2017; Bacq and Alt 2018), and those that there are have shown contradictory findings. Opportunity recognition is also essential in developing successful SE activities. So far, only a few studies have included this as a pre-condition

for SEI (Hockerts 2017), with a lack of understanding of how it is developed and how social entrepreneurs recognise and exploit social opportunities (Zahra et al. 2009; Geradts and Alt, 2022).

Despite some cross-cultural contributions (Walter and Block 2016), another critical gap in current SEI and SE education studies is the lack of perspectives from developing countries. Most of the studies focus on programmes in developed countries, where the socio-cultural context of students and social enterprises varies significantly from those in the developing world (Sousa-Filho et al., 2020). Developing countries usually have a weaker institutional environment, poverty and social problems, all of which influence social entrepreneurship activities, and which are seen as a tool that replaces an absent governmental role. Students from developing countries typically come from more disadvantaged backgrounds with fewer resources but, at the same time, have more experience with social and environmental challenges. All these bring new perspectives to the implementation of SE development programmes and their impact on SEI.

To answer the research question, we focused on a SE development programme known as Enactus, an international programme developed by a non-profit organisation working in 33 different countries, bringing together thousands of university students. It encourages and supports them in creating social entrepreneurial projects strongly related to the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. Following a quantitative research design, we collected 220 responses from university students in Brazil and analysed them using Structural Equations Modelling (SEM) based on the Partial Least Squares (PLS) technique.

The findings give evidence that the current programme impacts students by

improving their intention to become a social entrepreneur or work in social entrepreneurship. Our novel contribution lies in demonstrating how the programme is achieving this impact. It reveals the influence that the students' education and experience have on increasing empathy, which improves self-efficacy behaviours and the ability to recognize opportunities (believing), resulting in an intention to become a social entrepreneur or work in social entrepreneurship. Our findings contribute to the SE literature and have implications for policymakers and educators. Firstly, by further understanding entrepreneurial education and the motivating roles of social experience and empathy in supporting SEI, this paper contributes to current SEI and SE education literature, emphasising the need to embed experience-based opportunities in education programmes. We argue that both the skills and knowledge gained from education and experience-based programmes, can develop empathy in individuals who feel more self-efficacy, recognise opportunities easier and faster, and have a stronger intention to become social entrepreneurs.

Secondly, by focusing on opportunity recognition, the study has brought to attention the relevance of social opportunities to social entrepreneurs. By creating and exposing individuals to knowledge and experience of real social problems affecting their local communities, there is a crucial opportunity to nourish their interest and intention to become social entrepreneurs. Therefore, we acknowledge that social entrepreneurial actions are contextually driven and should be addressed and developed closer to the needs.

Thirdly, our paper highlights the usefulness of interventions in higher education institutions to encourage individuals to pursue social entrepreneurial careers and develop social entrepreneurial ventures. This is important for policymakers promoting SE as they need to support universities in developing higher levels of SEI, empathy, and

social opportunity recognition amongst aspiring social entrepreneurs. In this way, universities developing SE education programmes have the chance to act as agents of change. They can develop human capital to address the social/environmental challenges and create a fairer society.

The paper is organised as follows. The second section develops the theory and hypotheses of the study related to SEI that guides the research. The third and fourth sections describe the study's methods and results. Finally, the fifth and sixth sections discuss the implications for theory and practice. The seventh section presents conclusions, limitations and directions for future research.

## **2 Theory and Hypotheses**

### ***2.1 Social entrepreneurial intention (SEI)***

Intention reflects a motivational factor that influences behaviour (Ajzen et al. 2009). Entrepreneurial intentions are thus considered a conscious state of mind that directs personal attention, experience, and behaviour toward planned entrepreneurial behaviour (Bird 1988). Therefore, starting a business is an outcome of intentions, and entrepreneurship is a planned and intentional behaviour (Liñan and Chen 2009). This follows Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which has received substantial empirical support in studying entrepreneurial intentions (e.g., Shirokova et al. 2016). This understanding has been translated and applied to creating social ventures, resulting in a growing interest in social entrepreneurial intentions (SEIs) (e.g., Mair and Noboa 2006; Bacq and Alt 2018).

SEI is the willingness to establish a new social enterprise (Mair and Noboa, 2006; Prieto 2012), as well as the drive to acquire knowledge, foment new ideas, and implement social entrepreneurial plans to eventually become a social entrepreneur (Mair

et al. 2006). Several empirical studies have been conducted to analyse the antecedents and predictors of SEI, including the application of well-established theories such as TPB (e.g., Forster and Grichnik 2013; Hockerts 2017; Tiwari et al. 2017), Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (e.g., Forster and Grichnik 2013; Hockerts 2017; Tiwari et al. 2017), Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Tran and Von Korflesch 2016), servant leadership approach and lifestyles theory (Rivera et al. 2018), as well as the analysis of individual-level characteristics/antecedents, such as personality, motivations, and demographics (e.g. Baierl et al. 2014; Bacq and Alt 2018; Liang et al. 2019). However, most studies lack an empirical assessment of how specific educational programmes impact SEI among university students. This knowledge is vital to assess the effectiveness of these programmes and the way SEI develops.

In the following sections, we developed further the ideas and proposed the hypotheses of our study.

## ***2.2 Entrepreneurial Education and Social Experience***

Entrepreneurial education (EE), focused on entrepreneurial knowledge, skills, and attitudes, can improve students' entrepreneurial competencies; increase their enthusiasm to become entrepreneurs; and encourage interest in entrepreneurship as a career choice, influencing intention (Souitaris et al. 2007). Recent literature has argued that EE should be planned and delivered using the KSA triptych: 'about' entrepreneurship 'knowledge', 'for' entrepreneurship 'skills', and 'through' entrepreneurship 'attitudes' (Mitra, 2017; Kakouris and Liargovas, 2020; Larsen, 2022). Teaching 'about' focuses on the content and theoretical approach around entrepreneurship, teaching 'for' focuses on an occupational-oriented approach to developing skills, and teaching 'through' focuses more on experiencing the entrepreneurial learning process. Understanding the difference between the three types

is crucial as educators who start from different learning domains encounter qualitatively different learning situations and are gradually led to various forms of EE (Kakouris and Liargovas, 2020). This is critical in the context of SE, as social entrepreneurs point to education as the most vital resource in creating their social ventures (Shumate et al., 2014; Bazan et al., 2020).

On the one hand, the knowledge and skills gained in EE, generally with an 'about' and 'for' pedagogical approach, can make people believe they possess relevant abilities to cope with the realisation of the entrepreneurial endeavour (Ernst, 2011). Moreover, a 'through' pedagogical approach provides opportunities for mastery experiences, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and judgments of one's physiological state (Zhao et al. 2005), resulting in self-efficacy.

On the other hand, EE can facilitate learning and task performance, particularly at the early stages following a 'for' and 'through' pedagogical approach, influencing their ability to recognise opportunities (e.g., Urban, 2020). Even though there is a growing interest in understanding and developing social entrepreneurship education (SEE) (e.g., Thomsen et al. 2019; García-Morales et al. 2020), there is still a lack of evidence on how these programmes are resulting in SEI. Significantly, we should consider the lack of research around the emotions and affective dimensions of entrepreneurial learning (Kakouris and Liargovas, 2020), which are fundamental when addressing social challenges (Bublitz et al., 2021). Most studies exploring the relationship between SEE and SEI include education as a control variable (Shahverdi et al., 2018). However, we argue that EE plays a more determinant role in SEI by influencing two individual abilities, self-efficacy and opportunity recognition.

**H1a: Entrepreneurial education is positively related to self-efficacy.**



**H1b: Entrepreneurial education is positively related to opportunity recognition.**

Entrepreneurship scholars have identified that prior entrepreneurial experience is a significant predictor of entrepreneurial intention as it can increase an individual's attitudes and motivations toward entrepreneurship (e.g., Shane, 2000). Some programmes aim to develop entrepreneurial experience associated with SE, such as the Enactus programme, to encourage SE careers among students. For instance, a study of South African students participating in Enactus found that this initiative promotes entrepreneurial intentions as they learn real-life business skills, contributing to better communities (Tshikovhi and Shambare 2015). Despite these findings, there is still scarce evidence of how these programmes effectively support SEI. Concurring with Hockerts (2017), we argue that entrepreneurial experience on its own might not result in intention. However, it is necessary when developing certain attitudes that can contribute to developing SEI.

Experience with social-sector organisations provides familiarity with social problems. Thus, it gives the person social awareness, learning, and knowledge to recognise new opportunities to address these social problems (e.g., Gist and Mitchell 1992; Mair and Noboa, 2006; Urban, 2020). The entrepreneurial experience then allows the individual to focus on resources they already possess or be able to facilitate the idea development process to recognise opportunities (Guclu et al. 2002). Moreover, the experience of being exposed to social problems can prompt empathy (Hodges et al. 2010). Social entrepreneurs are more likely to have volunteer experience, worked in underprivileged neighbourhoods, or have been exposed to those in need (Hills et al. 1999). As has been identified in psychological studies (Coke et al. 1978), similar

experiences may be a crucial situational antecedent for feeling empathy for another person.

**H2a: Prior social entrepreneurial experience is positively related to opportunity recognition.**

**H2b: Prior social entrepreneurial experience is positively related to empathy.**

### ***2.3 Empathy***

Empathy is an attribute that reflects an attitude towards a person, an emotional response produced by the perceived well-being of a person in need (Batson et al. 1996). The person can imagine what another person is feeling, resulting in compassion, sympathy and other similar feelings (Preston et al. 2007). Empathy is considered the key driver for supporting social ventures and is an essential attribute of social entrepreneurs (Mair and Noboa 2006; Dees 2012; Sousa-Filho et al. 2020). It can also produce solid prosocial motivations, being a crucial antecedent of SEI (Batson 1996; Bacq and Alt 2018; Younis et al. 2020). However, there is still a lack of evidence and understanding of the mechanisms through which empathy motivates SEI. It is argued that not all empathic individuals may want to start a social enterprise (Ernst 2011; Hockerts 2017; Tiwari et al. 2017; Bacq and Alt 2018).

As evidenced by Bacq and Alt (2018) and Younis et al. (2020), empathy can influence SEI by its effect on self-efficacy, which is the individual's confidence in their abilities and competencies to perform an activity. They argued that empathy could reduce the visceral arousal of an individual when faced with the challenging circumstances typically experienced by beneficiaries of SE. Hence, the individuals who feel empathetic feelings towards others may feel more confident in their competence to help them through social enterprise activities.

In this study, we argue that empathy plays a vital role in indirectly influencing SEI with its effect on self-efficacy and acts as a mediator between prior social entrepreneurial experience and self-efficacy. For SE, prior social entrepreneurial experience with social issues may not necessarily result in the individual feeling confident enough in their ability to address such social problems, as they may not feel the need to do so (Gist and Mitchell 1992). We argue that empathy is the key motivator that provides that feeling. Hence, individuals can visualise how to use their skills and knowledge gained from social entrepreneurial experience so as to be confident in addressing social problems through SE.

**H3: Empathy is positively related to self-efficacy.**

#### ***2.4 Social Entrepreneurial Self-efficacy***

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's understanding of their ability and capability to accomplish an intended behaviour. It can influence individual choices, goals, emotional reactions, effort, coping, and persistence (Bandura 1977), which can influence entrepreneurial behaviour, and, consequently, entrepreneurial intention (e.g., Zhao et al. 2005; Bullough et al. 2014). In the case of social entrepreneurial self-efficacy, it can motivate empathic individuals to perceive the creation of a social venture as feasible, thus developing SEI (Mair and Noboa 2006; Forster and Grichnik 2013; Hockerts 2017; Bacq and Alt 2018; Urban and Galawe 2019). It allows the individual to perceive the creation of a social enterprise as a viable behaviour. This may be because individuals with high self-efficacy are likely to apply more effort and perseverance into impediments when pursuing opportunities (Shane 2000). These impediments may be more acute for social entrepreneurs, as they can perceive societal problems as so enormous that they may doubt their ability to create a contribution (Hockerts 2017). Hence, the crucial role of self-efficacy is to provide confidence in the individual's

abilities to become a social entrepreneur.

**H4: Social entrepreneurial self-efficacy is positively related to social entrepreneurial intentions.**

### ***2.5 Opportunity Recognition***

When creating a new enterprise, it is argued that the first step for the entrepreneur is opportunity recognition by identifying an unmet need that can result in a new venture (e.g., Shane 2000; Ma et al. 2011; Davidsson 2015). More recent authors have questioned the problematic linguistic practice of using the word 'opportunity recognition', which can create conceptual distortions since opportunities are 'ineliminably unknowable' (Ramoglou, 2021). Instead, they suggest that we focus on understanding what exactly the entrepreneur believes and why, preferably referring to imagined opportunities, new venture ideas, or opportunity beliefs (Davidsson, 2015; Ramoglou and Tsang, 2016; Wood et al., 2021). Nonetheless, it is still accepted that opportunity recognition, or the opportunity beliefs of the entrepreneur can be a strong predictor of entrepreneurial decision and intention (Hockerts 2017). In the SE context, opportunity recognition is related to the entrepreneur's ability to create a solution to a social problem (e.g., Guclu et al. 2002; Corner and Ho 2010), this is often done in collectives rather than as individual entrepreneurs (Lehner and Kaniskas, 2012). As is the case with entrepreneurial studies, it is argued that the inherent uncertainty of opportunities to address social problems can hamper the ability of social entrepreneurs to form expectations about the future, affecting their opportunity recognition (Geradts and Alt, 2022). Moreover, finding social solutions requires the social entrepreneur (s) to identify and exploit financially and socially viable opportunities, generating positive external effects (Yitshaki and Kropp, 2016). Social entrepreneurs see opportunities where others see problems (Skoll Foundation 2020). However, not everyone can see

them as they are usually embedded in a social sector (Mair and Noboa 2006) and specific contexts (laws, regulations, institutions, among others). Thus, it is recognised that opportunity development in the context of SE is complex and recursive (Corner and Ho, 2010), and there is still a lack of understanding of how opportunity recognition influences SEI and the mechanisms that affect this ability (Saebi, Foss and Linder, 2018; Geradts and Alt, 2022).

**H5: Opportunity recognition is positively related to social entrepreneurial intentions.**

Our theoretical model is presented in Figure 1.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

### **3 Method**

#### ***3.1 Survey Participants***

To investigate our hypotheses, we followed an exploratory research design. We conducted a survey with students who participated or were participating in social and environmental projects during their studies in different public and private universities in Brazil. Our sample technique involved collecting data from the students who participate in social and environmental projects and were part of the Enactus programme. Enactus is a non-profit organisation working in 33 countries, bringing together thousands of university students and encouraging them to create SE projects capable of generating innovative solutions to challenges experienced by diverse communities and territories.

In Brazil, the Enactus programme works with 120 universities (public and private) in the five major regions of the country, promoting the application of scientific knowledge in favour of social transformation processes, reaching 3,000 students.

Students join the Enactus programme voluntarily. Parallel to their courses' activities,

the "Enactors" (as they call themselves) dedicate on average 133 hours per year, with some exceeding more than 1000 hours, to activities to develop their team SE projects (Enactus Brazil, 2020). These activities include workshops (face-to-face and online) offered by Enactus about sustainable business models, SDG's, leadership, impact evaluation, fundraising, and other crucial entrepreneurial topics, as well the participation in virtual discussion forums, visits to the communities, and engagement in competitions (national and worldwide) which connect them with mentors from different organizations and provide funds to winners to start or develop their team SE projects. The combination of education and experiential activities offered by the Enactus programme provided an excellent context to explore the crucial role of entrepreneurial education and social experience in social entrepreneurial intentions.

Using the Enactus Brazil networks, we sent an online questionnaire to 2,246 students in 2019. As detailed in Table 1, a total of 220 students took the survey: mostly undergraduates (85.9%), primarily female (57.7%), ranging from 21 to 25 years old (54.5%) and single (95.5%). They were studying different programmes at the university, such as Business Administration, Engineering, Psychology, Social Work, and Law, among others. Some of them declared that they had no salary income (45.4%), the other part had up to two minimum wages (approximately R\$2000 or US\$400) at that time (38.6%), and the rest earned more than two minimum wages. Most students (60%) said they had led at least one project in the Enactus team. Most respondents had participated in Enactus for more than one year (61%). Finally, we asked if respondents have participated in other entrepreneurial initiatives beyond Enactus, and most (82.7%) said no. The sample size was deemed sufficient and appropriate in modelling, number of variables, and related constructs (Hair et al. 2016).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

### ***3.2 Measures***

As presented in Figure 1, our research model consisted of six latent variables assessed by 20 items (see Table 2). Scales were used and validated by previous authors for opportunity recognition (Ma et al. 2011), entrepreneurial education (Liñán and Chen 2009), empathy, prior social entrepreneurial experience, social self-efficacy, and social entrepreneurial intentions (Hockerts 2017). The items were measured using the seven-point Likert scale. Scales were translated to Portuguese and later submitted to a revalidation process consisting of several steps. First, questions were translated to Portuguese by two authors, then back to English by a native speaker with an academic background. Finally, we compared the original questions to the back translations to ensure accuracy. As control variables, we used gender, time (years) in the team, project leadership, and the number of projects. Afterwards, the questionnaire was sent out by e-mail and through social media channels of Enactus in Brazil.

Indicators showed that the used scales are reliable. As for validity and reliability, all constructs presented satisfactory indicators of AVE (above .50), composite reliability, and Cronbach's Alpha (above .70). Inline factor loads of each latent variable were adequate. Table 2 presents the details.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

Discriminant validity was tested with Fornell-Larcker criteria (Fornell and Larcker 1981), confirming discriminant validity between constructs. Table 3 shows discriminant validity.

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

### ***3.3 Data Analysis Procedures***

The proposed model in Figure 1 shows variables that are both dependent and

independent, a common feature of structural models. In this way, Structural Equations Modelling (SEM) based on Partial Least Squares (PLS) was used to test the hypotheses.

#### 4 Results

Bootstrapping for PLS-SEM indicates statistical significance of relations, that is, the influence of a construct on others. Statistical significances were found between entrepreneurial education and social entrepreneurial self-efficacy (H1a), entrepreneurial education and opportunity recognition (H1b), prior social entrepreneurial experience and opportunity recognition (H2a), prior social entrepreneurial experience and empathy (H2b), empathy and social entrepreneurial self-efficacy (H3), social entrepreneurial self-efficacy and social entrepreneurial intentions (H4), and opportunity recognition and social entrepreneurial intentions (H5). All relations tested had statistical significance, supporting all hypotheses. Moreover, the statistical collinearity measured by Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) indicates that data did not have collinearity problems. The variables met the estimate in which each one represents a unique construct. Table 4 presents the results showing the path coefficients, the statistical significance, and VIF.

[INSERT TABLE 4 HERE]

Opportunity recognition showed greater strength in influencing social entrepreneurial intentions ( $\beta=.307$ ;  $p\text{-value}=.000$ ), followed by social entrepreneurial self-efficacy ( $\beta=.266$ ;  $p\text{-value}=.000$ ). Other results show the influence of empathy on social entrepreneurial self-efficacy ( $\beta=.219$ ;  $p\text{-value}=.001$ ), entrepreneurial education on opportunity recognition ( $\beta=.233$ ;  $p\text{-value}=.001$ ), entrepreneurial education on social entrepreneurial self-efficacy ( $\beta=.260$ ;  $p\text{-value}=.000$ ), prior **social entrepreneurial** experience on empathy ( $\beta=.231$ ;  $p\text{-value}=.000$ ), and prior social entrepreneurial experience on opportunity recognition ( $\beta=.289$ ;  $p\text{-value}=.000$ ). Control variables were not statistically significant, with the following values: gender ( $\beta=-.019$ ;  $p\text{-value}=.758$ ),



time (years) in the team ( $\beta=.122$ ; p-value=.116), leadership in projects ( $\beta=.019$ ; p-value=.797), and number of projects ( $\beta=.091$ ; p-value=.145), thus not influencing the model. The results can be seen in Figure 2.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

## 5 Discussion and implications for theory

Social entrepreneurial intentions **provide evidence** that a person **can** form a social enterprise in the future. Hence, it is important to understand how to develop this intention and how current SEI programmes influence this process to inform practice, policy, and research. This paper discusses **the role of some antecedents, such as** empathy, in the motivation of SEI. By focusing on opportunity recognition, the study has brought to attention the relevance of social opportunities to social entrepreneurs.

First, our findings go beyond previous studies that separately identified entrepreneurial education and entrepreneurial experience as predictors or control variables of entrepreneurial intentions (Forster and Grichnik 2013; Hockerts 2017). We argue that **a combination of** entrepreneurial education and social entrepreneurial experience **can** develop particular abilities that result in intention. As suggested by Ernst (2011), to understand how to form social entrepreneurial intention, it is relevant to investigate the perception of an individual's abilities to combine perceived knowledge and skills received by education and experience. The abilities influenced by an individual's **entrepreneurial education and social experience** are social entrepreneurial self-efficacy and social opportunities recognition. The skills and knowledge obtained from education or experience allow entrepreneurs to quickly recognise opportunities, as they are closer to real social needs. It also affects their confidence to address these opportunities and become social entrepreneurs, enhancing their self-efficacy (Zhao et al. 2005; Ernst 2011).

Our paper highlights the need to embed experience-based opportunities in higher education programmes. Getting students out of the classrooms and looking for social problems in their communities is **recommended** in any SEI development. The socialising effects of education, which we argue need to include social entrepreneurial experience, can impact an individual's moral values and increase empathy. This aligns with demands to provide 'humanistic' entrepreneurial education where the 'about', 'for' and 'through' teaching interweave and coevolve with learning, influencing the individual's attitudes, beliefs, motives, emotions, values, and past experiences (Kakouris and Liargovas, 2020). Therefore, we state that education and experience can help individuals gain empathy, a sense of self-efficacy, and recognise social opportunities. Together this can result in social entrepreneurial intentions.

Secondly, our study identified the critical role of empathy in supporting SEI. We agree with Bacq and Alt (2018) and Younis et al. (2020) that an individual can be very empathetic, but that does not mean they have the intentions to become social entrepreneurs. Individuals must experience social entrepreneurial self-efficacy to be able to channel their empathy into SEI. However, our findings provide further insights into how social entrepreneurial experience influences empathy. It **suggested** that being exposed to social problems can prompt empathy. For instance, those individuals who engaged in extracurricular activities that required them to engage with communities and understand their social and environmental needs could imagine what the community was feeling and needing, allowing them to gain confidence in their ability to address these needs. Similarly, those individuals who, based on their circumstances, have experienced social difficulties can share them with others while working together to solve others' social needs. Those behaviours can result in higher empathy towards the community's needs, finding innovative ways to solve them, and **suggest** that social

entrepreneurs tend to be concerned with 'helping others' (Tan et al., 2005; Mair and Noboa, 2006).

In the Enactus programme, students work on community outreach projects designed to improve quality of life and living standards for those in need. Thus, this platform can simulate essential aspects of entrepreneurial learning, such as learning by doing, learning through mistakes and learning from entrepreneurs, and, more importantly, increasing empathy in members. In addition, the collective atmosphere forges a robust collective identity and a sense of commitment to doing things together (Liang et al., 2019). This can mitigate the pressures of being entrepreneurial and enable the individual to take charge of one's life.

Thirdly, our paper contributes to the emerging literature on social opportunity recognition by identifying an important precedent for its development, social entrepreneurial experience. Previous studies have identified the vital role of opportunity recognition as a driver of SEI (Mair and Noboa 2006). However, there was still a lack of understanding of how social entrepreneurs recognise and exploit social opportunities (Zahra et al. 2009). In our paper, we identified that opportunity recognition is an ability which influences SEI. This finding may illuminate growing research that looks to understand the critical role of social context in opportunity recognition (Di Domenico et al. 2010). We argue that by being exposed to different experiences in a social context and having the opportunity to address communities' social and environmental needs, individuals gain the motivation needed to see opportunities that others did not see. Hence, there is evidence that social entrepreneurs identify new opportunities based on their experiences and personal background (Mair and Noboa 2006; Corner and Ho 2010; Urban and Galawe 2019) and are motivated by socially driven goals critical to developing SE.

Our paper contributes to the ongoing argument that context matters (Sousa-Filho et al. 2020; Trajano et al. 2022), helped by the fact that our study focused on a developing country (Brazil). Understanding the positive influence of social entrepreneurship education programmes on self-efficacy and opportunity recognition, which are antecedents of SEI in this context, represents a significant contribution.

## **6 Implications for practice, limitations and future research**

By addressing factors that could improve the effect of curricular and extracurricular activities on entrepreneurial intention (Arranz et al. 2017), the findings provide practical implications for educators and policymakers alike. Firstly, **entrepreneurial education and social experiences** are crucial for fostering social entrepreneurial intentions in university students through their influence on empathy, self-efficacy, and opportunity recognition. Educational programs, therefore, **could** include ways of enhancing **entrepreneurial education and social experiences** amongst students. One way of achieving this is by integrating experiential learning programmes into the current university curriculum, allowing students to work on SE projects in their local communities and creating local and impactful solutions. We acknowledge the importance of continuity in implementing structural programmes with a long-term perspective (not only through short courses), as this facilitates the development of certain attitudes and motivations of ‘believing’ that result in intention.

Secondly, for public policy support and the encouragement of SE models, our findings emphasise the need to help universities and encourage experiential programmes to develop **entrepreneurial education and social experiences**. Consequently, policymakers must foster higher levels of SEI, empathy and social opportunity recognition amongst aspiring social entrepreneurs. In this way, universities developing

SEE programmes have the chance to act as agents of change. They can develop human capital to address the social/environmental challenges and create a fairer society.

The limitations of our study can be related to the generalisability of our findings. The sample covered only one developing country. Although it can represent similar developing countries, future studies could include other countries. All geographical locations have idiosyncrasies that influence the research, more importantly, from a human capital perspective. This could facilitate cross-cultural generalisability and provide new theoretical and practical contributions. Another limitation is about the scales used, although the statistical analysis demonstrated robust results, the scales used cannot explain in a broader manner about the phenomena. **Another limitation is about 'selection bias', since we collected data from students that were participating in a social programme, and did not collect data from other students, such as those who dropped out of the programme.**

Future research can be addressed as follows. First, a comparative study between students with and without social entrepreneurial experience could present new perspectives, explaining which variables affect SEI in each case. This could provide a more profound understanding of the effects of SEE in SEI. Future studies can also expand our findings to include other predictors of SEI, such as early entrepreneurial competence acquired during primary or secondary school (Dickel et al. 2020), entrepreneurial personality (Liang et al. 2019), and entrepreneurial passion (Neneh 2020).

Second, we focused on SEI, but future research could advance towards social entrepreneurial behaviour. There is growing evidence suggesting that not all intentions translate into the actual behaviour of starting and operating a new business (Shirokova et al. 2016). For this purpose, SE researchers may use a longitudinal design to examine

whether SEI lasts in the long-term. These researchers could study other variables, such as individual and environmental factors (Shirokova et al. 2016) and self-control (Van Gelderen et al. 2015), which play a vital role in translating entrepreneurial intentions into actions.

Third, we used empathy as an antecedent of SEI. As was indicated by Urban and Galawe (2019), and we agree, it is necessary to explore further the vital role of empathy in other SE outcomes apart from intentions. Therefore, investigating how differences between experiences can moderate empathy seems to be a fruitful path for scholars interested in developing the SE field and academics involved in entrepreneurial education programs in a broader sense.

Fourth, findings suggested that the Enactus programme makes a positive impact on SEI, but these findings do not explain 'how' and 'why'. A suggestion for future research would be to implement a qualitative approach to investigate these aspects of the programme.

Finally, our findings suggested that embedding experience in social entrepreneurial education significantly influences the students' intentions to become social entrepreneurs, as is the case with the Enactus programme. As identified in EE, this requires further consideration of the inclusive nature of the 'through' mode of entrepreneurial teaching, which appears underdeveloped regarding its role in the present and future of EE and SEE (Kakouris and Liargovas, 2020).

## **7 Conclusion**

The growing interest in social entrepreneurship as a sustainable and innovative solution to society's problems has inspired the development of SEE programmes in higher education. Most of the studies have focused on how to develop and implement these programmes. However, there is a lack of research assessing the impact of these

programmes on students' intentions and behaviours. Our paper answers this need by providing **some** evidence that both the skills and knowledge gained from education and experience-based programmes of 'educating and experiencing', can develop empathic attitudes and motivations in individuals 'believing', who then have more self-efficacy, recognise opportunities easier and faster, and have a stronger intention to become social entrepreneurs.

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Figure 1: Theoretical model

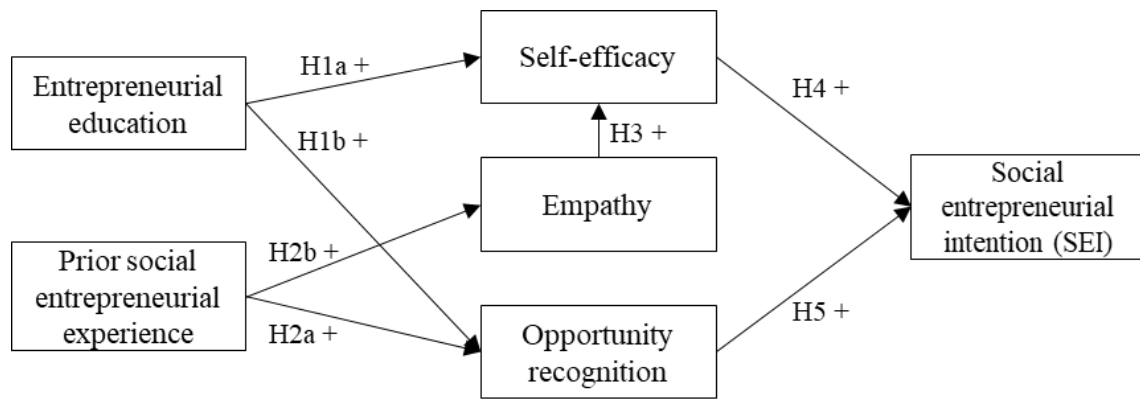


Figure 2: Results

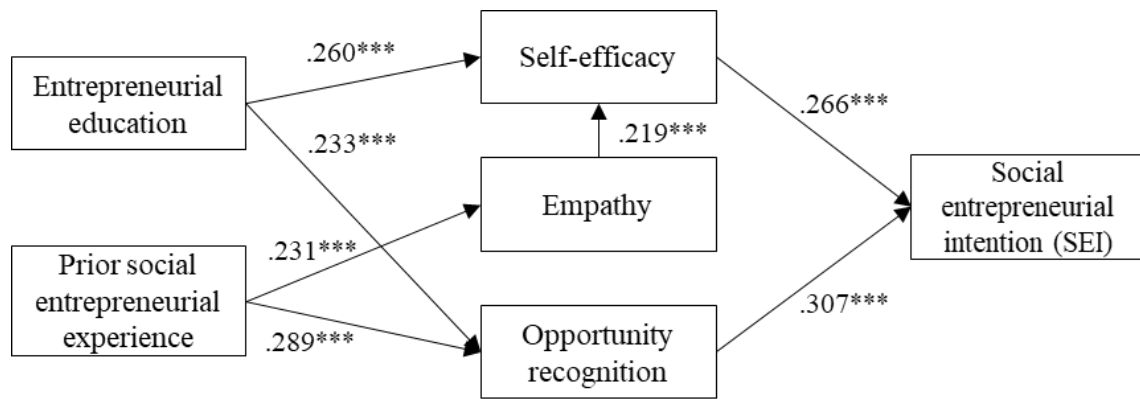




Table 1 – Descriptive statistics

<b>N (complete answers)</b>	220
<b>% Undergraduates</b>	85.9%
<b>% Female</b>	57.7%
<b>% 21-25 years-old</b>	54.5%
<b>% Single</b>	95.5%
<b>% No income</b>	45.4%
<b>% Income up to two minimum wages</b>	38.6%
<b>% Project leadership experience</b>	60%
<b>% More than one-year Enactus experience</b>	61%
<b>% No entrepreneurial experience beyond Enactus</b>	82.7%

Table 2 – Scale, validity and reliability

Items	Factor Loads	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
<b>Empathy (Hockerts, 2017)</b>				
	.759	.702	.834	.627
When thinking about socially disadvantaged people. I try to put myself in their shoes				
Seeing socially disadvantaged people triggers an emotional response in me.	.773			
I feel compassion for socially marginalised people.	.842			
<b>Entrepreneurial Education (Liñán and Chen, 2009)</b>				
	.686	.795	.857	.546
Knowledge about the entrepreneurial environment.				
Greater recognition of the entrepreneur figure.	.749			
The preference to be an entrepreneur.	.773			
The necessary abilities to be an entrepreneur.	.737			
The intention to be an entrepreneur.	.748			
<b>Opportunity Recognition (Ma et al., 2011)</b>				
	.867	.789	.871	.694
While going about day-to-day activities, I see potential new ideas (e.g., for new products, new markets, and new ways of organising firms all around me).				
I have a special alertness or sensitivity towards new opportunities (e.g., about new products, new markets, and new ways of organising the firm).	.876			
Seeing potential new opportunities (as mentioned above) does not come very naturally to me.	.751			
<b>Prior Social Entrepreneurial Experience (Hockerts, 2017)</b>				
		.792	.875	.701

I have some experience working with social problems.	.867		
I have volunteered or otherwise worked with social organisations.	.760		
	.880		
I know a lot about social organisations.			
<b>Social Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy (Hockerts, 2017)</b>		.776	.870
			.692
I am convinced that I personally can make a contribution to address societal challenges if I put my mind to it.	.829		
	.882		
I could figure out a way to help solve the problems that society faces.			
	.780		
Solving societal problems is something each of us can contribute to.			
<b>Social Entrepreneurial Intentions (Hockerts, 2017)</b>		.843	.905
			.761
I expect that at some point in the future I will be involved in launching an organisation that aims to solve social problems.	.876		
	.827		
I have a preliminary idea for a social enterprise on which I plan to act in the future.			
	.912		
I plan to start a social enterprise.			

Table 3 – Discriminant validity

	Empathy	Entrepreneurial Education	Opportunity Recognition	Prior Social Entrepreneurial Experience	Social Entrepreneurial Self-efficacy	Social Entrepreneurial Intentions
Empathy	<b>.792</b>					
Entrepreneurial Education	.251	<b>.739</b>				
Opportunity Recognition	.198	.298	<b>.833</b>			
Prior Social Entrepreneurial Experience	.231	.226	.342	<b>.838</b>		
Social Entrepreneurial Self-efficacy	.284	.314	.247	.209	<b>.832</b>	
Social Entrepreneurial Intentions	.129	.145	.373	.257	.341	<b>.872</b>

Table 4 – Path coefficients, statistical significance and collinearity statistics

	<b>Path Coefficient (β)</b>	<b>Standard Deviation (STDEV)</b>	<b>T Statistics ( O/STDEV )</b>	<b>p-values</b>	<b>VIF</b>
<b>Empathy -&gt; Social Entrepreneurial Self-efficacy</b>	.219	.068	3,210	.001	1.067
<b>Entrepreneurial Education -&gt; Opportunity Recognition</b>	.233	.070	3,332	.001	1.054
<b>Entrepreneurial Education -&gt; Social Entrepreneurial Self-efficacy</b>	.260	.063	4,092	.000	1.067
<b>Opportunity Recognition -&gt; Social Entrepreneurial Intentions</b>	.307	.068	4,507	.000	1.065
<b>Prior Social Entrepreneurial Experience -&gt; Empathy</b>	.231	.063	3,656	.000	1.000
<b>Prior Social Entrepreneurial Experience -&gt; Opportunity Recognition</b>	.289	.066	4,380	.000	1.054
<b>Social Entrepreneurial Self-efficacy -&gt; Social Entrepreneurial Intentions</b>	.266	.058	4,547	.000	1.065