



**Social Innovation in South East Asia programme**

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# **Case studies series: Social innovation in higher education**

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[www.britishcouncil.org/society/social-enterprise](http://www.britishcouncil.org/society/social-enterprise)

# How social innovation is making universities relevant again

**The world's most difficult problems are best solved through collaboration. Universities in the UK and South East Asia have joined forces to explore how they can push forward social innovation.**

'Are universities even relevant any more, now that we can get knowledge in all kinds of other places?' Tristan Ace, British Council's outgoing Social Enterprise and Inclusive Economies Lead, asks a valid and increasingly pertinent question. In a digital age of unfettered access to information, universities are being called on by students, academics, funders and governments to prove their value. There is growing expectation that abstract learning and academic research should have practical relevance to society.

Universities are now reimagining their role in communities and assessing how to demonstrate their civic responsibilities. Piling on the pressure in 2019, the *Times Higher Education* publication launched its annual university [Impact Rankings](#), assessing universities on their contribution to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The aim was to show 'the differences a university is making to the world we live in', and the rankings are consulted by students and their families, academics, university leaders and industry.

This is where social innovation comes in – the process of developing and implementing solutions to complex and

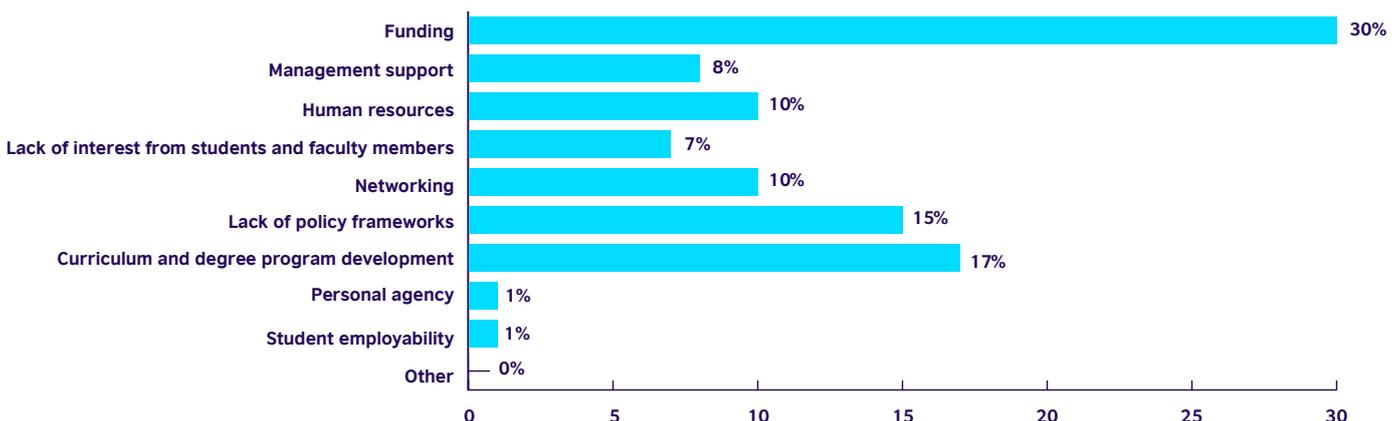
challenging social and environmental issues. If universities must play a more active role in society, they need to place greater emphasis on social innovation. They need to address the most difficult problems which are multi-dimensional, cross border and interdisciplinary.

## Collaboration and innovation

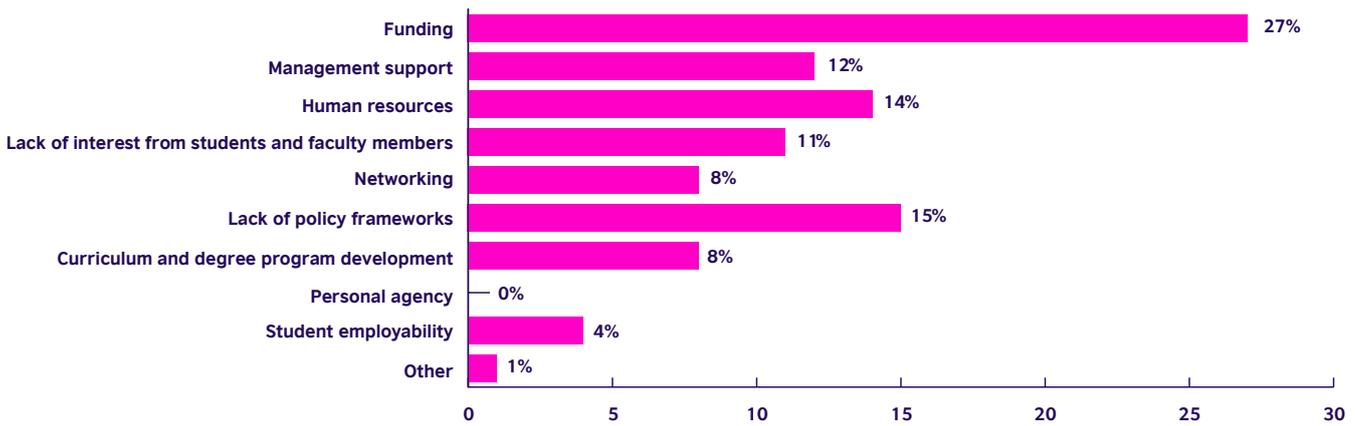
Collaboration between universities in social innovation engagement is increasing. In 2018, the British Council, with the Good Lab and Social Innovation Exchange (SIX), and guided by Professor Alex Nicholls of Oxford University's Saïd Business School, took the first step. Together they led the ambitious *Building Research Innovation for Community Knowledge and Sustainability* (BRICKS) project in Hong Kong. It grouped universities with social innovators and entrepreneurs, social services and NGOs to boost social innovation research and action.

Building on this, in 2019 the British Council and the University of Northampton launched a series of studies aimed at exploring social innovation in five countries in South East Asia: Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Korea and the Philippines. The *Social Innovation and Higher Education Landscape* report found that although the number of social innovation courses in higher education institutions in these countries is growing, the challenge arises in embedding social innovation teaching across all academic disciplines, and connecting teaching and research to much-needed social change in the community.

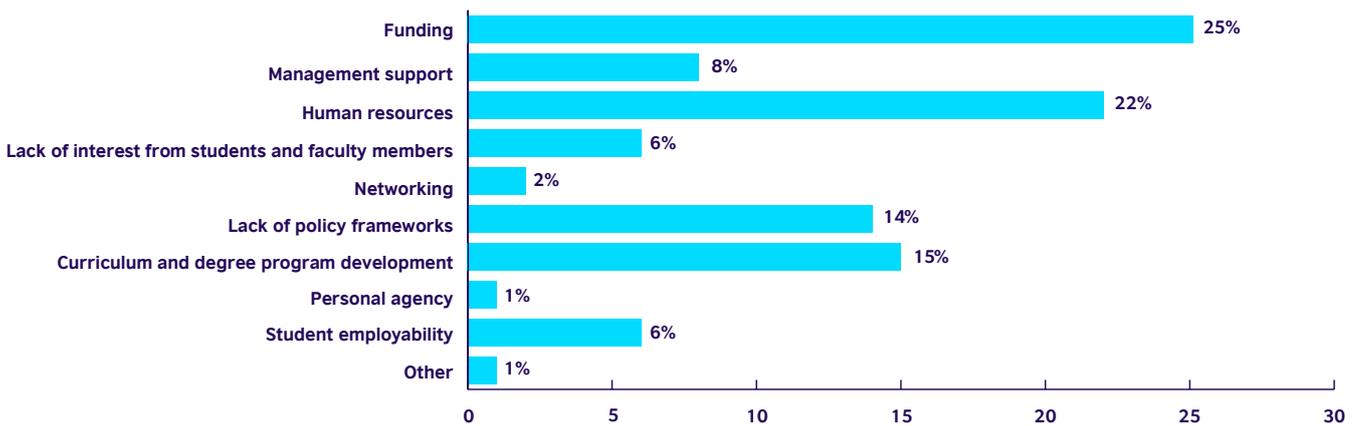
## Distribution of the challenges in promoting social innovation in Indonesia



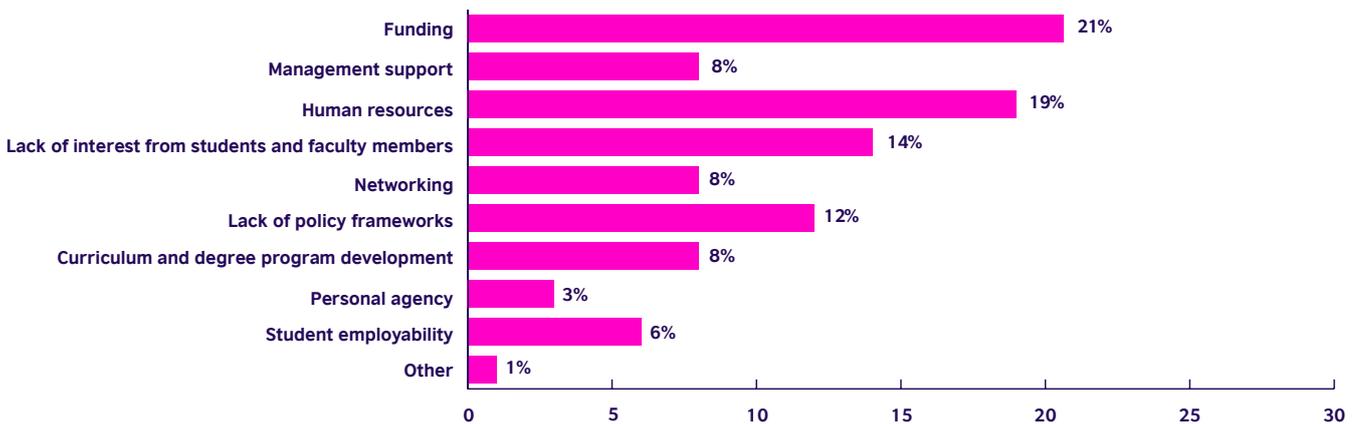
### Distribution of the challenges in promoting social innovation in Malaysia



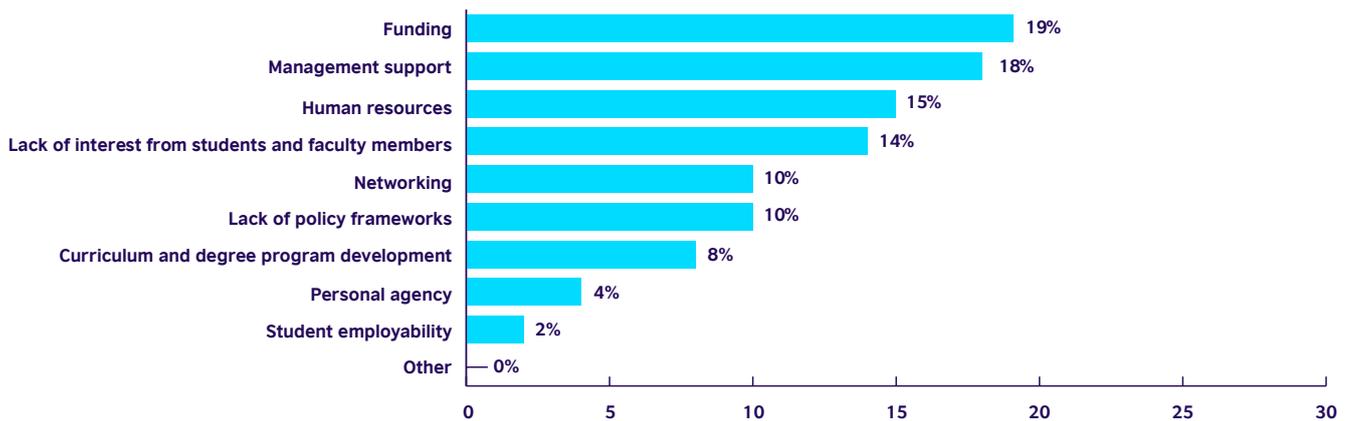
### Distribution of the challenges in promoting social innovation in the Philippines



### Distribution of the challenges in promoting social innovation in South Korea



## Distribution of the challenges in promoting social innovation in Vietnam



*The most frequent challenge in promoting social innovation in research and teaching in all five countries was funding, but other challenges were also significant. Graphs from the Social Innovation and Higher Education Landscape regional report*

### Linking teaching with practice

In Vietnam a 'Train the Trainers' programme bridged the gap between teaching and the community. Truong Thi Nam Thang, Associate Professor at the Center for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Vietnam's National Economics University, has been involved since the centre's inception in 2016. Social innovation education from social entrepreneurs and those with knowledge grounded in experience has helped to arm the 'trainers' – mentors, researchers and university lecturers – with the skills and understanding to pass on to their students to help them to address community issues.

For Thang, linking theory and practice is 'critical for teaching innovation and entrepreneurship'. So critical that a new term has been coined – the 'pracademic', the practical, innovation-oriented academic.

### Learning and knowledge exchange

The *Social Innovation and Higher Education Landscape* survey shone a light on four important areas of focus in South East Asia: research, teaching, community engagement and knowledge exchange.

Bringing cohesion to these four strands is Social Innovation Linkages for Knowledge Exchange Network (SILKEN), a project launched in December 2020. Run collaboratively by Richard Hazenberg, Professor of Social Innovation at Northampton University, and Mark Anderson, Director of Research and Innovation at Glasgow Caledonian University, it is laying the foundations of a network of UK and Asia-based researchers, practitioners, exchange professionals and social innovators.

'We can be so siloed, so focused on our own areas,' explains Hazenberg. While some academics focus on research and getting published in journals, others teach or focus on community engagement.

The project's long-term goal is to develop a sustainable network of knowledge exchange and liaison between universities and external stakeholders in the UK and Asia.

### Crucial collaborations

Why are these collaborations crucial? While universities in South East Asia may have well-established networks in other areas, explains Ace, 'it's clear that in the field of social innovation, because it's so new, those ways of connection aren't quite there yet'.

And although Northampton and Glasgow Caledonian Universities are pioneering when it comes to social innovation, each having worked in the field for more than 10 years, Hazenberg highlights the general lack of understanding of the concept. 'My parents still cannot tell you what I actually do for a living,' he says. This puts the upcoming challenge in South East Asia, where social innovation teaching is in its infancy, into perspective.

That said, many of these countries already have the necessary foundations. 'Particularly in Indonesia, but also in Vietnam, they are better plugged into the local communities. I think there's a cultural element to the community engagement side of things, and they actually have much better networks than in the UK,' says Hazenberg.

Anderson goes on to explain that there's also a greater need for social innovation and social enterprise in South East Asia where social welfare systems are less well developed than in other parts of the world.

Universities should be places where ideas meet reality. Thang believes their role is 'to inspire students, to change their mindset'. She adds: 'Teaching is about influencing people, it's about role modelling.'

And the power of this shouldn't be underestimated, as Ace emphasises: 'These institutions are community anchors, focusing on issues and how we can address them. They can transcend politics and governments – they will stand the test of time, whereas governments will rise and fall.'

*This article was written by Sasha Gallick at [Pioneers Post](#) for the British Council.*