

EXPANDED ABSTRACT

University students' educational interests and perspectives on Social and Solidarity Economy

Introduction

Social and solidarity economy in higher education combines three key aspects in strengthening organizations in the sector: the complementarity of empirical, theoretical and interdisciplinary knowledge; the improvement of social and business skills in leaders, workers and associates; and, in a broader sense, the promotion of skill acquisition in students as active citizens and entrepreneurs. This has been noted in some studies, in which researchers have made visible pedagogical models, teaching strategies and impacts of including social and solidarity economy contents and practices in undergraduate and graduate programs on the educational community, organizations and society. In accordance with the literature review, most studies have reported the perspective of professors or managers on educational experiences, but little is known about students' involvement in these processes. Consequently, it is appropriate to continue exploring the educational potential of this relationship as a contribution to the quality and relevance of higher education and, in turn, the development of social and solidarity economy as an alternative for social transformation.

Objetives

This article derives from an educational research process whose objective is to analyze the questions asked by university students about social and solidarity economy, giving an account of their educational interest and perspectives.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted under educational research guidelines, the hermeneutic approach and descriptive-interpretative research guidance, assuming that student asks questions from their particular interest and prior knowledge. It involved 96 university students whose undergraduate curriculum includes social and solidarity economy education and who, at the time of the study, were enrolled in one of the specific courses on the subject. The technique employed to gather information was the focal group and the instrument used was a workshop called "Question Tree" that caused students to ask open questions on social solidarity economy. Questions were later categorized in a double-entry analysis matrix: dimensions of social and solidarity economy and types of questions according to the complexity level of the knowledge required by them.

Results/Limitations/Implications

Students' questions reflect their interests, expectations and cognitive processes; 170 questions were asked which, regarding the dimensions of solidarity economy, mostly reflect (49%) a pragmatic interest on the current reality of this socio-economic model, followed by an emerging category that questioned the educational strategy for the subject, especially in terms of didactics (22%). There was no particular interest in the theory. The types of questions are mainly those reflecting critical thinking and active citizenships to support social transformation (41%), followed by those looking into data (36%), which points out the need for supplementary strategies to even out basic knowledge of the topic. In some cases, there is certain skepticism about the reality and project of social and solidarity economy.

Findings imply subsequent research to develop teaching strategies and the proposed topics, showing the potential of questions to trigger innovative educational processes centered on students' learning and experiences. Another alternative for future studies is to apply the same data collection instrument to a statistically representative sample of the studied population, which this qualitative research presents as a limitation to establish correlations by gender, age group, region of the country, and program.

Conclusions/Originality

The condensed results of the study indicate that, for university students, social and solidarity economy as a reality, theory and project becomes contents and practices that favor critical and systemic thinking, interdisciplinarity, analytical resolution of social problems, cooperative work, creativity, entrepreneurship and social innovation. Also, students demand significant learning and active participation in knowledge building based on experiences that are motivating and aimed at responding to challenges such as those posed by the problems of today's society. In this respect, the relationship between higher education and social and solidarity economy is an opportunity to introduce educational innovation that broadens students' skills to be active citizens, know about social and solidarity economy, and undertake solidarity enterprises and social innovation in the territory. In doing this and using technologies, they could join a global movement that is being consolidated by academic and union networks. This presents challenges to professors and the development of educational approaches that, based on interaction and the students' interests, knowledge and expectations, focus on learning and experience in personalized processes.

Higher education in social and solidarity economy, with its potential to contribute to sustainable development, has not been sufficiently explored. While educational agendas and the social solidarity economy movement highlight the importance of young people and their role in the generational connection required to strengthen their organizations, little is known about their interests and expectations. The originality of this research then lies in the fact that it does not build on the questions asked to young students, which generally guide most studies, but on the voice of students who, with their questions and the method used, provide a baseline that can be replicated, compared

with other realities, and supplemented as part of a teaching strategy applicable at different formal and non-formal educational levels that further solidarity education. Therefore, this study replicated in other higher education contexts may help to improve approaches, contents and methods to enable better coordination between education and a scenario of professional performance in the social and solidarity economy sector, taking the jobs it creates and, from entrepreneurship, establishing new organizations or providing new products and services to territories.

KEYWORDS: Social and solidarity economy, higher education, professional education, competency-based education, solidarity education.