# Navigating complexity: academics' agency in establishing social innovation and entrepreneurship education at universities

Yutong Wang & Hugo Horta

Published online: 17 Oct 2025.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

Article views: 164

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

# Navigating complexity: academics' agency in establishing social innovation and entrepreneurship education at universities

Yutong Wang [a,b] and Hugo Horta [b]

aFaculty of Social Sciences, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, People's Republic of China; bSocial Contexts and Policies of Education, Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, People's Republic of China

## ABSTRACT

In response to society's growing focus on social and environmental challenges, universities worldwide are integrating social innovation and entrepreneurship (SIE) education into their curricula. This is a vital step towards achieving sustainable development. However, many SIE education initiatives struggle to maintain rigour and long-term sustainability due to inherent tensions within the university system. While the overall trend is promising, it is crucial to examine what underpins the varied development of SIE courses and programmes. Central to this inquiry are academics, whose agentic roles in educational changes have been acknowledged in the literature but remain understudied in the context of SIE education. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts an agent-based perspective to investigate academics' experiences and perspectives as they design, implement, and drive innovations in SIE education. Drawing on interviews with 30 academics teaching and leading SIE courses and programmes across diverse disciplines and academic positions in Hong Kong's eight publicly funded universities, the study reveals that their agency emerges through the reflexive processes of aligning motives and navigating structures. The analysis also identifies factors at multiple levels that condition academics' agency and highlights the heterogeneity of their experiences based on their roles as professoriate, teaching, or practitioner academics. This study deepens understanding of the agency–structure interplay in SIE education, offering insights that can help university leaders and policymakers better support academics engaged in SIE education. The findings also add nuance to interpretations of the global proliferation of SIE programmes and enrich discourse on universities' societal engagement through teaching.

## Introduction

Social innovation and entrepreneurship (SIE) has emerged as a strategic approach to achieving sustainable development for twenty-first century societies, which are globalised, complex, technology-dependent and unequal (Chan, Chui, and Chandra 2022; Diepenmaat, Kemp, and Velter 2020). SIE entails using innovative methods to mobilise resources to address social needs and catalyse social change (Mulgan et al. 2007). As universities worldwide are increasingly expected to enhance their societal engagement and strengthen the social impact of their work, the integration of SIE education into teaching and learning practices has become a viable and critical strategy (Bayuo, Chaminade, and Göransson 2020). This has led to the global proliferation of SIE courses and academic

programmes in universities over the past few decades (e.g. Han and Lee 2020; Hazenberg, Ryu, and Giroletti 2020; Mir Shahid and Alarifi 2021).

However, it is increasingly evident that enthusiasm for SIE education at the macro level does not match the nuanced challenges faced by educators navigating the complexity of implementing SIE courses and programmes. Universities have different rationales for adopting SIE, and SIE programmes exist in diverse forms, with different degrees of innovativeness and societal engagement and ultimately varying impacts (Bayuo, Chaminade, and Göransson 2020; Wang and Horta 2024). While some courses are well integrated into disciplinary core curricula and progressively increase in impact over time, others remain experimental, struggling to maintain rigour and long-term sustainability within formal curricula (e.g. Nunes 2017; Panitch et al. 2022; Pope-Ruark, Motley, and Moner 2019; Smith and Woodworth 2012). Given the diverse development trajectories of SIE education across universities, it is necessary to look beyond the sheer volume of programmes to consider what factors promote the quality and sustainability of SIE education efforts. This study investigates the complexities of teaching and leading SIE education in universities, contributing to the heated debate on reorienting universities' missions towards social impact, particularly through teaching (Bayuo, Chaminade, and Göransson 2020; Carl and Menter 2021).

The introduction of SIE courses as a recent and novel phenomenon in higher education has generated tensions at multiple levels within the university system (Lake, Motley, and Moner 2022), posing challenges for academics leading these innovative changes to curricula (Hazenberg et al. 2019). Most studies of university-based SIE education have focused on course-level developments, showcasing innovative SIE curricula, pedagogical designs and assessment models (e.g. García-González and Ramírez-Montoya 2021; Otten et al. 2022; Peng et al. 2022;). While these studies have provided valuable insights into teaching and learning designs, they have not adequately addressed the underlying mechanisms and processes through which academics integrate SIE courses into university curricula, nor the challenges to sustaining the development and impact of these courses. There is a critical need to shift research from the course level to the organisation and system levels to understand the factors influencing academics' engagement with SIE education.

Some studies of the challenges of SIE adoption in universities have highlighted barriers such as resource constraints, competing institutional priorities, rigid management practices and a normative emphasis on economic and technological advancements (Cinar and Benneworth 2020; Hazenberg et al. 2019). However, these institutional factors alone do not fully capture the complexity of the phenomenon, as individuals interpret and interact with their enacted environments differently, leading to differences in their perceptions and sense of agency, which in turn guide their responses to educational changes (Annala et al. 2023). Thus, focusing entirely on institutional constraints may create a propensity to blame macro managerial structures for stifling innovation, overlooking individuals' potential to navigate these structures and carve out innovative pathways despite such constraints (Hasanefendic et al. 2017).

The role of academics as agents of innovative change in higher education is frequently underplayed (Hasanefendic et al. 2017). Academics are often at the forefront of the design and implementation of educational changes, and their perceptions and actions can therefore determine the success of these initiatives (Vähäsantanen 2015). Research needs to focus on their agency, as the impact of any given change is mediated by the understanding, creativity and resistance of the individual actors involved in the change (Clegg 2005). Agency, the ability to set individual goals, direct effort and negotiate towards achievements, plays a pivotal role in how individuals navigate changing academic contexts and in the development of academic practices (McAlpine et al. 2014; Vähäsantanen et al. 2020). Despite recognition of academics' agency in the SIE education development process (Hazenberg, Ryu, and Giroletti 2020), the factors shaping their decisions and actions and the process of interaction between academics and their enacted environments remain underexplored.

The present study bridges these gaps by investigating the agency of academics within the context of SIE education, focusing on the following research question: How does agency emerge amongst academics offering SIE education in universities? We conducted interviews with 30

academics leading and teaching SIE courses and programmes in universities in Hong Kong, enabling us to identify the reflexive processes and factors that contributed to their agency, which in turn influenced their engagement in SIE education.

Amidst intensified discussion of universities' social impact (Lehmann, Otto, and Wirsching 2024; Menter 2024) and the potential of SIE education to augment universities' mission to address societal needs (Bayuo, Chaminade, and Göransson 2020), understanding the emergence and development of SIE education from the viewpoint of academics is crucial. This study focuses on the experiences of academics leading SIE educational innovations and seeks to contribute to understanding of the wider dynamics of university societal engagement through teaching. In particular, our study makes three key contributions to the literature. First, it identifies the reflexive processes that influence academics' sense of agency in their involvement in SIE education. Second, it underscores the structural factors at the intersection of universities and society that are utilised by academics to instigate innovative changes. Third, it adds nuance to the overly optimistic narratives surrounding the growth of SIE education across university campuses worldwide and suggests strategies for scaffolding academics' agency to drive more sustainable and impactful development, particularly through teaching activities (Carl and Menter 2021).

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 presents the literature review and our analytical framework. Section 3 describes the data and methods adopted for this study. Section 4 outlines the findings, and Section 5 discusses the results, implications and directions for future research.

## Academic agency in educational changes

The interdisciplinary and socially relevant nature of SIE education presents a unique context for examining innovations in teaching and learning, changes in higher education and the agentic role of academics in these endeavours (Bayuo, Chaminade, and Göransson 2020; Wang and Horta 2024). Guided by the concept of agency, drawing on sociological theory and building on previous research on academic agency in higher education, this study explores the processes and factors that influence academics' engagement with SIE education. An analytical approach centred on the interplay of agency and structure provides an effective framework for this exploration.

In sociological theories, agency is often discussed in relationship to structure. Individuals, being 'neither free agents nor completely socially determined products' (Ahearn 2001, 120), navigate a complex social landscape in which their actions are influenced by both structure and agency, with outcomes dependent on how these factors interact. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) conceptualised agency as a temporally embedded process shaped by past experiences, envisioned future possibilities and context-specific judgements in the present. This temporal perspective provides a nuanced framework for understanding how academics navigate the constraints of institutional systems and align their personal and professional aspirations with broader structural forces. Within the university context, academics are bound by the constraints, expectations and requirements associated with their positions, yet they also possess, to varying extents, the capacity to act according to their own objectives (Vähäsantanen et al. 2020).

Research has shown that amidst educational changes, academics often employ proactive strategies to adapt to new demands, such as creating specialised products, combining disparate elements and revamping current programmes (Louvel 2013). Individuals may also exercise agency by resisting external norms and regulations that contradict what they perceive to be justifiable academic practices (Toom, Pyhältö, and Rust 2015). Agentic efforts are made to reconfigure current work conditions and formulate alternative strategies (Ursin et al. 2020). In this sense, to understand the process of change within a system, it is important to focus on the agency exercised by individuals (Clegg 2005). This also highlights how academics' self-motivation and desire to be agentic are shaped by their personal and work goals, as well as by their perceptions of the structural influences that either support or impede their agency (McAlpine et al. 2014).

Research has highlighted various factors that influence academics' agency. Henkel (2005) argued that an academic's agency is intrinsically linked to their professional identity and entails managing the multiple relationships between teaching, research and service. Mula-Falcón, Caballero, and Segovia (2022) suggested that agency also surfaces in academics' responses to broader social and organisational demands, such as managerialism and performativity. Toom, Pyhältö, and Rust (2015) highlighted how the dynamic interplay between personal and structural factors, including professional experience, motivation, priorities, social affordances, institutional norms and power structures, shapes agency. Building on these findings, Annala et al. (2023) showed how agency in university curriculum reforms is shaped by structures at the individual, community and institutional levels. Individual-level factors include variations in academic identity and motivation; community-level factors involve the interconnected disciplinary, pedagogical, and social cultures of academics' immediate work environments; and institution-level factors include organisational design, resources and governance systems. These findings underscore the interconnectedness of structural–agentic processes, which are especially salient in the context of SIE education.

The unique dimensions of SIE education add a distinctive complexity to the interplay of agency and structure in academia. In this context, 'agency' denotes the capacity and willingness of academics to initiate, adopt and drive changes through SIE education. The very nature of SIE education requires academics to challenge established norms in teaching, research and service, foster collaboration in addressing complex and authentic issues, and promote an entrepreneurial mindset among both learners and educators (Hazenberg et al. 2019; Wang and Horta 2024). Teaching SIE courses inevitably requires academics to navigate and negotiate the existing structures of conventional university systems, to which they introduce a transformative and innovative teaching and learning paradigm aimed at generating tangible social impacts (Elmes et al. 2012; Lake, Motley, and Moner 2022). Furthermore, the socially relevant and action-focused nature of SIE education necessitates a connection between academia and society. Agency is inherently relational and context-sensitive, shaped by individuals' positions within social networks and their interactions with other fields (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Academics teaching SIE courses and programmes are expected to operate as 'bricoleurs', leveraging their networks and resources beyond the university to enhance their classroom interactions and institutional practices (Hazenberg et al. 2019). However, the structures of traditional education systems, such as rigid curricular requirements and a lack of institutional support or recognition, as well as a culture that is resistant to change (Hacker and Dreifus 2010; Hazenberg et al. 2019), can hinder these efforts. It is within these constraints that the agency of academics can be most powerfully exercised, as they find innovative ways to circumvent these constraints to embed SIE principles into their practices.

## The context of Hong Kong

This study focuses on Hong Kong universities, which offer a suitable context to explore academic agency in the emerging field of university-based SIE education. Despite being one of the world's wealthiest societies, Hong Kong grapples with a high degree of socio-economic polarisation and a range of other social issues (Yu 2021). The concept of SIE, initially developed in the West and later introduced to Hong Kong as part of the new public management reform of the social service sector, has received extensive government support since the mid-2000s (Chan, Chui, and Chandra 2022). In the evolving SIE ecosystem, universities are increasingly expected and incentivised to contribute to society through knowledge and talent development (Cheung and Fung 2017). This change has coincided with the growth and diversification of the student population and, as in other higher education systems, a growing emphasis on improving university – society relationships (Jung and Chan 2017). In addition, Hong Kong's higher education system has developed into one of the most competitive worldwide, recognised globally for its high rankings, international academic staff and multicultural environment (Postiglione and Jung 2017). Hong Kong's status as a global business hub is also reflected in its higher education sector, fostering a discourse of efficiency,

quality and accountability that has led to a top-down management style within autonomously governed institutions (Chao and Postiglione 2017). Like other developed higher education systems, academics in Hong Kong universities are challenged to achieve excellence in both research productivity and teaching efficiency, as reflected in assessment schemes at various levels within the system (Chao and Postiglione 2017). In this context, SIE education in Hong Kong has emerged at the confluence of broader societal changes, increasing demand for university – society engagement and a highly competitive higher education system. These changes and challenges are experienced by most higher education systems worldwide, particularly those that have reached an advanced or mature stage of development (e.g. Marginson 2016).

Since the introduction of the first SIE-related course in Hong Kong in 2011, all eight publicly funded universities have rolled out SIE education programmes (Wang and Horta 2025). Hazenberg et al. (2019) identified 49 active SIE courses offered by 10 public and private universities across a range of disciplines. These courses are predominantly integrated into existing undergraduate curricula as elective modules, with some compulsory modules for SIE-related minors or majors. In addition, Wang and Horta (2025) analysed 53 syllabi from 43 unique courses offered over time by the eight public universities and found considerable variation in programme design and implementation. While most institutions deliver SIE as standalone courses, others focus on comprehensive programmes development, cross-institutional collaboration, or strengthening the broader SIE ecosystem. The analysis also revealed that SIE education in Hong Kong remains largely discipline-bound and involves multiple curriculum ideologies, assessment approaches, and frequent engagement with societal stakeholders.

Despite the growing popularity of SIE education among Hong Kong universities over the past decade, these institutions are often perceived as slow to change and reluctant to embrace new practices (Hazenberg et al. 2019). Previous research has identified several potential barriers to the wider adoption of and engagement with SIE education, including the tenure system, curriculum rigidity and traditional research funding structures (Chui et al. 2023; Hazenberg et al. 2019; Tam 2017). The administrative 'red tape' typical of large institutions can also limit the scope of adoption of SIE education (Cheung and Fung 2017). However, the role of individuals as agents that drive institutional change should not be underestimated. Some research has suggested that the personal agency of academics can be a crucial factor in driving SIE education initiatives on campus (Hazenberg et al. 2019), but this perspective is often overlooked, and the experiences of academics who have established new courses on innovative topics are under-researched. In this study, we apply the agency–structure framework to investigate how academics exercise agency while interacting with structural factors in the development of SIE education in Hong Kong universities. Our study thus offers a valuable understanding of the intricate relationship between agency and structure in this context.

## Methods

### Sample

We used qualitative research methods to investigate the agency of academics in university-based SIE education. Given that SIE education is understood and implemented in diverse and context-specific ways, qualitative methods are particularly suited to capturing the perceptions, experiences, and decision-making processes of the engaged academics (Creswell and Poth 2018). Through semi-structured interviews with 30 academics responsible for leading SIE courses and academic programmes across all eight publicly funded universities in Hong Kong, we were able to elicit rich, in-depth insights into their reflective processes and the structural factors shaping their sense of agency.

To identify potential participants, we conducted an initial search of each university's website using keywords such as 'social innovation' and 'social entrepreneurship' to locate credit-bearing SIE-related courses and academic programmes. We then contacted the academics who taught or

coordinated these courses. Snowball sampling was also used, wherein the participants identified in the initial search were asked to recommend other academics involved in SIE-related courses at their own universities or other universities in Hong Kong. Our inclusion criteria were as follows: an eligible academic was required to be teaching a course and/or leading a programme whose title included 'social innovation' or 'social entrepreneurship' and/or for which SIE was an essential focus. Our final sample included academics from various disciplines holding different academic positions, including professoriate academics (P), who held tenured or tenure-track positions; teaching academics (T), who were not on the tenure track but held important teaching responsibilities; and practitioner academics (Pr), who maintained their own professional careers while teaching SIE courses on a part-time basis (see Table 1). The sample of 30 academics was specifically chosen to ensure comprehensive coverage of the eight publicly funded universities in Hong Kong. The participants were also selected to ensure that the sample represented a variety of academic ranks, positions and disciplines, thus providing a diverse range of perspectives. Furthermore, the sample was an extension of a sample of 17 academics used in a recent study of university-based SIE education in Hong Kong (Hazenberg et al. 2019).

We collected information on the participants' current and past affiliations with universities in Hong Kong, revealing their mobility across institutions in pursuit of their personal and professional objectives. Seven of the professoriate and teaching academics had taught at other institutions before being interviewed for this study (as indicated by the 'Past institution(s)' column in Table 1)

**Table 1.** Interviewee profiles.

| Interviewee ID | Institution when interviewed (present institution) | Past institution(s) | Gender | Discipline | Academic position |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | U1 | | F | Social sciences | Associate professor |
| P2 | U1 | | F | Social sciences | Assistant professor |
| T3 | U1 | | F | Social sciences | Senior lecturer |
| T4 | U1 | | F | Social sciences | Lecturer |
| T5 | U1 (U4) | U4 | F | Social sciences | Lecturer |
| T6 | U1 | | F | Social sciences | Assistant lecturer |
| T7 | U1 | U8 | M | Social sciences | Senior project officer |
| Pr8 | U1 | | F | Social sciences | Honorary lecturer |
| P9 | U1 | | M | Business | Professor |
| T10 | U1 | | M | Business | Associate professor of teaching |
| T11 | U1 | | F | Education | Lecturer |
| P12 | U2 | | M | Business | Associate professor |
| Pr13 | U2 | | F | Business | Adjunct associate professor |
| T14 | U2 | | M | Social sciences | Associate professor of teaching |
| P15 | U2 | | F | Social sciences | Assistant professor |
| P16 | U2 | U1, U4 | M | Social sciences | Assistant professor |
| Pr17 | U2 | | F | Interdisciplinary | Lecturer |
| Pr18 | U3 | | M | Engineering | Adjunct professor |
| T19 | U3 | | F | Engineering | Teaching assistant |
| T20 | U4 | | M | Social sciences | Senior lecturer |
| T21 | U4 | | M | Design | Lecturer |
| Pr22 | U4 | | M | Design | Assistant project manager |
| P23 | U5 | U5, U4 | M | Social sciences | Associate professor |
| T24 | U6 | | F | Business | Senior lecturer |
| Pr25 | U6 | | M | Business | Professor of practice |
| P26 | U7 | | M | Social sciences | Assistant professor |
| P27 | U7 (U4) | U1 | F | Social sciences | Assistant professor |
| P28 | U8 (U7) | U2 | F | Social sciences | Assistant professor |
| Pr29 | U8 | U1 | M | Interdisciplinary | Adjunct associate professor |
| T30 | U8 | | M | Interdisciplinary | Adjunct assistant professor |

and three switched to new institutions after being interviewed (as indicated by the 'Institution when interviewed (present institution)' column in Table 1). This indicates their mobility within the local higher education landscape. All of the practitioner academics had served as guest speakers at multiple institutions, but their credit-bearing courses were only offered at one university.

All of the public universities in Hong Kong were represented in the sample. We conducted semi-structured interviews from October 2022 to May 2023. The interviews typically lasted for 60 to 90 min each, with an average duration of 78 min. The interviews focused on several key areas, including (i) the participants' past and present roles within and beyond the university; (ii) the context and organisational fit of their SIE courses and academic programmes; (iii) their decision-making processes in transitioning to and developing SIE education, including the influencing factors, main changes enacted and challenges faced; and (iv) their overall experience as academics in the field of SIE education. The interviews aimed to foster open conversations while also addressing our predetermined themes, without adhering strictly to set questions or a specific order (Creswell and Poth 2018). All of the interviews were audio recorded, and the data were anonymised and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Interviews were conducted until information saturation was reached; that is, the data were thick and rich and no new themes could be derived from any data collected from new interviews (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006).

## *Data analysis*

We conducted reflexive thematic analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke 2021, 2023). This approach was chosen because it allowed for the identification of patterns and themes within the data, focusing on the lived experiences and perspectives of the academics and the factors influencing their decision-making processes when engaging in SIE education. Reflexive thematic analysis is a qualitative method that acknowledges researchers' reflexivity during the analysis process (Braun and Clarke 2021). We followed the six-phase data analysis process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021): familiarisation with the data, systematic data coding, searching for themes, developing themes, defining themes and writing up. This process allowed us to frame the data and their meanings both experientially and critically and engage in deductive and inductive analysis. Thus, we were able to consider current agency and structural frameworks while remaining open to findings that could emerge organically from the analysis. We first coded the interviewees' reasons for engaging in SIE education. We found that their initial motives differed from their current personal and professional objectives. Through inductive analysis, we identified how their motives had evolved in the process of implementing SIE education. We then analysed the discussions of structures that enabled or constrained educational change in the interview transcripts, using previous studies as references (e.g. Annala et al. 2023). We coded both deductively and inductively at the individual, community and institutional levels to assess the factors influencing academics' agency in teaching and developing SIE programmes. The process of data analysis is illustrated in Figure 1, which systematically organises the reflective processes, third-level themes, second-level structural categories, and examples of first-level codes derived from the interview data. In the findings section, we examine each of these aspects in greater depth, providing specific examples and pertinent quotes extracted from the interview data for clarity and context.

It is important for researchers to acknowledge their personal reflexivity in the reflexive thematic analysis process (Braun and Clark 2023). Our knowledge and experience in the fields of higher education, SIE and SIE education could have influenced our perceptions of how new and innovative academic programmes are implemented in higher education institutions. Accordingly, we made a conscious effort to remain reflexive and minimise bias, which helped us to ensure that the participants' experiences and perceptions were authentically presented. In the following section, we explore how the interviewed academics engaged in the reflexivity process and how different forms of agency emerged from this process.
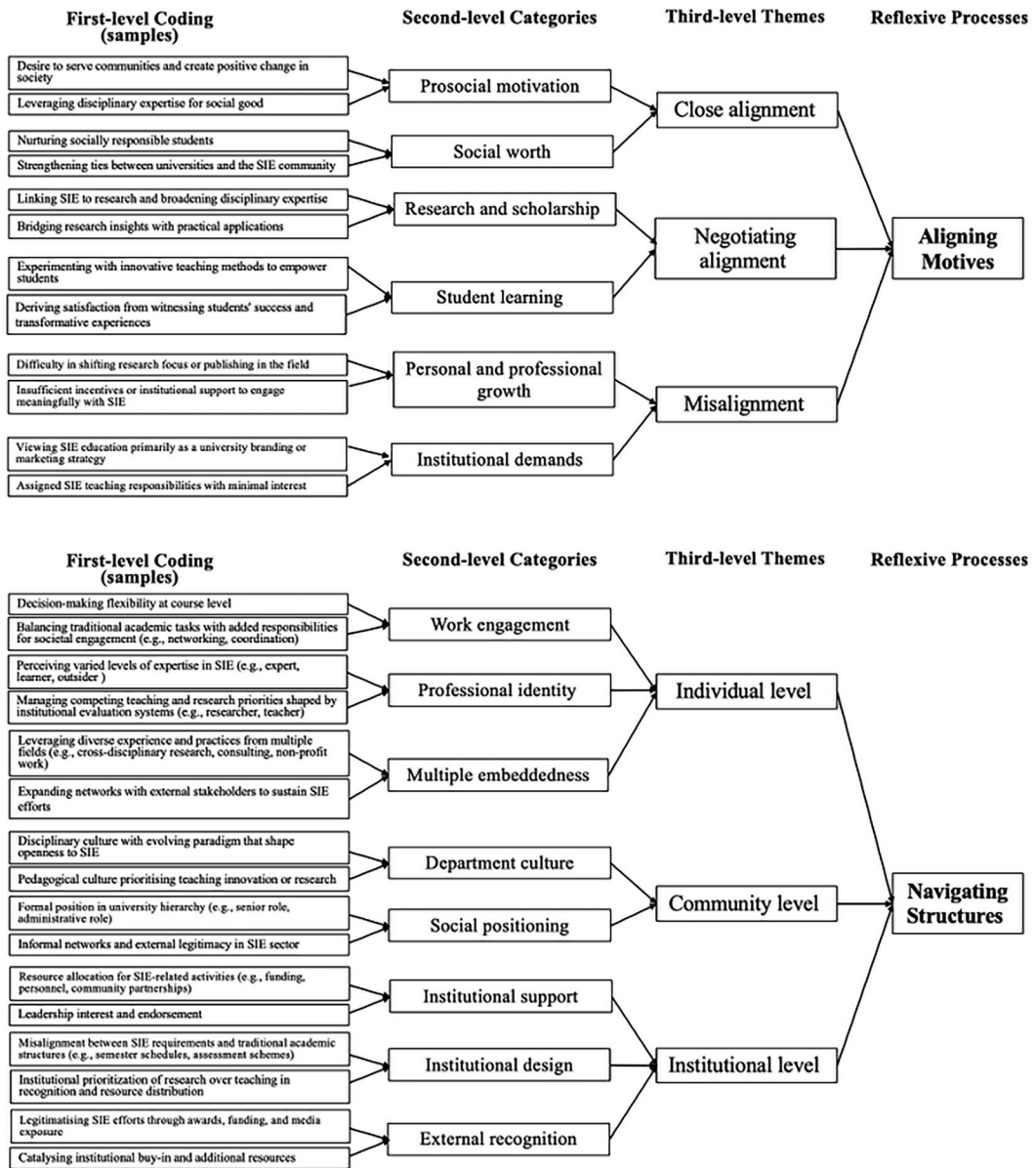
**Figure 1.** Process of data analysis.

## Findings

To address the research question, we present our findings in two sub-sections that describe the two major reflexive processes applied by the interviewed academics in SIE education. First, the academics' agency emerged in the reflexive process of aligning motives as they transitioned into the role of teaching SIE. Their personal and professional backgrounds and faculty positions as professoriate, teaching and practitioner academics shaped their interests and objectives as they engaged with SIE education. Second, the academics' agency was further demonstrated in the reflexive process of navigating structures as they sought to implement SIE education in the curriculum. Their varying actions, ranging from proactively driving innovation and prudently experimenting with possibilities

to passively complying with instructions, were mediated by their agency as they perceived the situation in their own ways.

## Aligning motives

Given the nascent nature of SIE as both an academic and a practical field, most of the academics interviewed had not specialised in SIE prior to teaching it. Different motives had driven the academics to transition into SIE teaching. One group's engagement with SIE education had arisen from their own interests and volition; that is, their values were closely aligned with the values and ideas of SIE. Conversely, two other groups had become involved in SIE after being asked by their faculties or departments to teach SIE courses to meet strategic or management objectives. The academics in one of these groups had actively negotiated an alignment between their own knowledge and objectives and the teaching of SIE, thereby attempting to contribute to the further development of SIE courses and academic programmes. Those in the third group remained passive due to misalignments between their own personal and professional goals and SIE; this group was critical of the universities' intentions and the value of SIE courses. In the following sections, we investigate the motives and alignments of these three groups.

### Close alignment

*Pro-social motivation* emerged as an important motive for the academics' proactive engagement with SIE education, especially among the early adopters of SIE education, who initiated innovative measures that transcended individual courses, effected changes at the bachelor's or master's level and fostered cross-institutional collaborations. Their pro-social motivation manifested as a strong desire to leverage their disciplinary expertise to exert a positive impact on others; they viewed the creation of social value as an integral part of their personal and professional pursuits. For example, several professoriate academics from the fields of public policy, social work and management viewed SIE as an emerging academic field that potentially 'transcends disciplinary boundaries' (P23) and thus allowed them to 'break through the bottleneck in research and be a pioneer' (P12). They transitioned into the field of SIE with the aligned motives of doing social good and advancing *research and scholarship*. The congruence between their personal values, societal interests and academic duties (teaching and research) reinforced their agency for proactive engagement. This close alignment of motives was demonstrated in the following statement shared by one professoriate academic:

> I find it [SIE] to be fascinating. Deep in my heart, I'm a person who wants to serve society. Now you have given me a good opportunity to do it. It's my interest personally and as a career choice. It was also the interest of the department at that time. (P12)

The aspiration to achieve *social worth* emerged as another key motive for the majority of the practitioner academics. Specifically, social worth refers to a sense of connection to and regard by others in a larger community. These individuals, already well-established professionals in the SIE sector, saw education as a powerful means to enhance the influence of SIE by nurturing socially responsible individuals. Their teaching further enhanced their sense of social worth by allowing them to forge new connections between the university and the SIE community and to facilitate trusting, reciprocal and long-term relationships between students and various stakeholders. These academics also perceived a close alignment in their motives, which fuelled their proactive engagement in SIE teaching.

> What marks my transition to SIE education is that education is such a good place to sow that seed [of SIE]. I'm satisfied [with my work with social enterprises], but there is no long tail effect. Education is totally different. You inspire students to start social enterprises that help people. It's not about how much money you make. It's about how much impact you have. (Pr25)

> I think that the person who's doing [SIE] teaching needs not just the knowledge but also the passion. As a leader in this sector, it's my calling to extend the knowledge to those who may potentially be impacted. (Pr17)

## *Negotiating alignment*

In contrast, over half of the professoriate and teaching academics shared that their universities had assigned them to teach SIE courses. They initially possessed the relatively passive motive of meeting *managerial requirements*, as their previous research and teaching experiences were not aligned with SIE. However, as they designed and implemented their courses, their motives evolved. They began to make a conscious effort to align their teaching of SIE courses with their personal and professional goals, such as advancing research and scholarship or *improving student learning*. This change in motives was captured by one interviewee, who detailed how her objectives shifted as she prepared and taught SIE courses.

> If it were not for the department head, it is unlikely I would have proposed the course … Now I like this [SIE] course more [than other courses that I teach] as it provides a space for experimentation through the untraditional approach of teaching with more interactions, open discussions and an agentic atmosphere … I tried to link it to my research, collaborating on projects that look into students' SIE learning processes. (P28)

Some academics initially experienced a sense of disconnection. However, they approached the field with an open and explorative mindset and derived satisfaction from the process of reassessing their own disciplinary and teaching practices, witnessing student achievements and receiving positive feedback and recognition. A few also perceived it as an opportunity to broaden their areas of expertise and build networks within the SIE field; that is, they were driven by the aspiration for *personal and professional growth*.

> I have no idea why [the school] asked me to teach it. … I [was] quite like an outsider [to the field of SIE] … [When I teach this course] I realise that it includes rethinking how to design as a collective … . In the past, we never taught design this way … This is the first pleasure that I found. It's also very fruitful for me. I think it is where the discipline is heading. I also meet with different social enterprises and NGOs, and I can see my personal growth. (T21)

## *Misalignment*

Nevertheless, a small number of the interviewed academics reported engaging in SIE teaching solely to fulfil their universities' minimum requirements. They regarded the introduction of SIE courses and programmes as a top-down decision made by faculty or university leaders to compete with other universities and gain legitimacy for their academic programme offerings. Some viewed this managerial requirement as a 'rebranding' strategy rather than an initiative to make fundamental changes to teaching, research or societal engagement. This group of academics perceived a misalignment between their experience of teaching SIE courses and their personal and professional interests and objectives. This sentiment was particularly prevalent among junior professoriate academics, who often had less control than their more senior counterparts over their teaching engagement, experienced more pressure to perform in their research and lacked the interest and incentives to engage with the field of SIE or faced challenges when doing so. When managerial requirement was the sole motive driving engagement with SIE, the academics chose to remain passive and preferred to delegate their SIE teaching responsibilities to others when possible. This situation was described by the interviewees as follows:

> It is because of the position [assistant professor] that I was required to teach [SIE]. In terms of teaching, I can handle it. But in terms of research, you can see my publications are not relevant [to SIE]. It is difficult to change research focus. (P27)

> The university wants to revamp the programme. This is a very top-down decision. To me, when there's a teaching need, I will see how I can adjust my knowledge structure to teach. However, I may not be the programme leader next year. Others may take over the job if their research area is more related or if they are more experienced in teaching or practicing SIE. (P26)

## *Navigating structures*

The academics' perceptions of the relevant structural factors developed as they implemented their SIE courses. Their agency was manifested in their reflexive interpretations of the constraints and

enablers offered by the enacted environment and through their ability to achieve their objectives by navigating these factors at the individual, community and institutional levels.

### *Individual level*

Academics' *work engagement* was identified as an important structural factor at the individual level. This referred to academics' task-related choices and decision-making opportunities. In line with previous research (e.g. Vähäsantanen et al. 2020), all of the interviewees believed that they had ample space and flexibility at the course level to design curricula and implement teaching and learning approaches, even when they had undertaken SIE courses primarily due to managerial requirements. SIE education, however, often necessitated a broader scope of involvement, extending beyond traditional classroom teaching and academic roles to include extensive societal interactions (Wang and Horta 2024, 2025). It required academics to build and maintain connections with practitioners and community members, in addition to their regular teaching and academic responsibilities. A few senior professoriate and practitioner academics fully utilised their course-level flexibility to introduce progressive and innovative educational approaches. However, the added responsibilities that came with societal interactions, such as networking, community outreach and the coordination of practical, real-world experiences for students, were widely perceived as a significant constraint. This was particularly evident amongst the professoriate and teaching academics, many of whom felt overwhelmed by these duties or believed that their efforts were insufficiently recognised and rewarded. As one interviewee noted,

> [working with social enterprises] requires year-round attention in a work environment that is traditionally not year-round … Unless you have external resources, this makes it very difficult to maintain those relationships. It just requires a level of commitment that goes beyond traditional education work. (T10)

The academics' *professional identity* was another individual-level factor that had a notable influence on their perceived alignment with SIE and their exercise of agency. Their identity as an expert in or learner of SIE, as well as their identity as a researcher or a teacher, affected their perceived efficacy, relatedness and capacity to teach and engage with SIE. As mentioned earlier, the academics in the sample had transitioned into SIE education from different backgrounds and positions. While a small number felt disconnected from SIE and unmotivated to engage with it (mainly those who perceived a misalignment), about half viewed themselves as learners and sought to connect their expertise with SIE and SIE education (e.g. those attempting to align their motives with SIE education). In contrast, those who had developed practical or research expertise in SIE confidently identified themselves as experts in the field (e.g. perceiving a close alignment with SIE and proactively driving innovation). They considered it feasible to introduce innovative teaching elements and expand the impact of SIE education beyond the course level.

At the same time, many professoriate academics regarded their SIE engagement to be constrained by their research roles in the conventional evaluation system. This was related to their work engagement, as the quality of their professional work was typically evaluated solely on the basis of research-related output (Dashper and Fletcher 2019), leaving teaching and societal involvement on the periphery. The pressure to produce research was greatest for junior professoriate academics:

> We are held accountable, like 80%, based on research. So our KPI is if you do great research but your teaching is poor, that's ok. But if you do great teaching and poor research, you are out. So that actually tells us where to put our weight. (P2)

Notably, academics' *multiple embeddedness* emerged as a significant individual-level factor that could facilitate their navigation of such constraints. Academics with experience in multiple fields, such as those engaged in cross-disciplinary research or who held roles in both management consulting and engineering, were more likely to leverage their diversified experiences and resources to enact change and operate beyond the current structure. One interviewee attributed the sustainable

engagement with practitioners in his course to his prior experience in the commercial and non-profit sectors:

> I sit on the board for half of the companies [that students work with for class projects] and the ones that I don't sit on the board of, I either started or was involved in very early on. (T10)

In addition, a few of the academics innovated by transposing commercial-sector logic to the design of learning experiences for students through novel approaches such as incubation, management consulting and funding committees. This was particularly common among the practitioner academics, who drew on their experiences of being embedded in fields where such practices were institutionalised and applied them, and the ideas underlying them, in the classroom. Such familiarity also gave them access to ideas and networks that supported their SIE teaching.

> I worked as a management consultant. [In designing the SIE courses] I usually start with the end goal of what kind of year-end projects I want students to be able to achieve and then build backwards. The mindset is just like that of a management consultant. I look at how we can help students to learn about this subject, but in the meantime, deliver meaningful projects for our clients. (Pr13)

### *Community level*

*Department culture* was identified as a community-level factor that could either constrain or enable academics' agency in SIE education. The local management and community involved in teaching and learning development can shape practices and policy (Barman et al. 2016). From a disciplinary perspective, major differences surfaced among the interviewees in how SIE was perceived within department cultures. Several interviewees stated that the integration of SIE education into the curricula reflected paradigm shifts in their respective fields. For example, the interviewees from design schools viewed the incorporation of social impact considerations into design studies as a paradigm shift from an industry and consumer market-driven focus towards responsible designs that address global and local issues. Likewise, in the aftermath of the financial crisis and with the growing emphasis on social value creation, several of the interviewees from business schools regarded the integration of SIE concepts into the curriculum as a progressive step towards embracing sustainability and connecting with social development issues. They viewed this shift in disciplinary culture as empowering them with the agency to steer innovative SIE education efforts.

The adoption of SIE is fundamentally connected to curriculum and pedagogy. A strong sense of agency was present in communities that value pedagogical culture and focus on student learning. For example, those with a keen interest in teaching often perceived SIE courses as an opportunity for innovation, but this could be constrained by the research requirements in some disciplinary fields. As one interviewee suggested, 'teaching is often perceived as secondary to research' and 'high-ranking journals tend to prefer research rooted in existing frameworks' (P15). One professoriate academic also noted that SIE has received limited attention 'as a serious academic pursuit' (P23) in Hong Kong compared with other regions, which have restricted the opportunities for agentic projects. Thus, while most of the professoriate academics attempted to derive research output from their teaching experiences, some chose to minimise their teaching efforts to make room for research. Alternatively, a small number maintained a separation between teaching and research and were prepared to relinquish their SIE teaching responsibilities if given the opportunity.

From a social perspective, department culture also encompassed relationships within local communities and their hierarchies and power dynamics. Junior academics, for example, had less power and influence than their senior counterparts. Several of our participants encountered opposition to SIE initiatives from colleagues in established disciplines who questioned the relevance of such initiatives to their disciplinary training and students' learning. They noted that some senior faculty dominated the discourse on programme development and bent it to serve their interests.

> Many of the senior academics are against it. They think that innovation and entrepreneurship don't belong here. (Pr29)

> Powerful academics tried to divert the programme according to their own expertise. That's why we call it, 'the dark side of the academic world' … they wanted their field of expertise to be the main part of student learning [in SIE], [but] I don't think it has a lot to offer. (P23)

At the community level, academics' *social positioning*, which encompassed both their formal hierarchical positions in universities and their positions in external informal networks, was identified as another factor that could enable or constrain their agency. The networks to which the academics belonged played a critical role in legitimising their teaching of SIE courses. For instance, previous experience of and an established reputation in the SIE sector provided the academics with resources they could use to exercise their agency when implementing courses and driving innovation. Knowledge of the sector and extensive networks with external stakeholders also empowered the academics, as access to these resources increased their sense of control over their teaching and work engagement.

> I got a bit famous after [running SIE] projects, because I did a lot of work for the faculty and a lot of work in terms of NGO capacity building. So people in the field already knew my name. Then [the university] recruited me [to teach SIE courses]. (T5)

> I borrow from all my [previous corporate] experiences in addition to helping over hundreds of social enterprises to start their businesses … The course outline is for the eyes of management … I bring students different experiences. I'm exercising my privilege [as a practitioner] to the maximum extent; unfortunately my full-time colleagues cannot do this. (Pr25)

Academics who were new to the field sought to enhance their positions by actively reaching out to experts and practitioners from various SIE-related organisations to acquire knowledge, expand their networks and build partnerships for teaching. Academics on the professoriate track highlighted their scholarly engagement with international SIE academic communities through research and participation in major projects with key public agencies, such as projects evaluating SIE funds. These efforts enhanced their social positioning within and beyond their own institutions and facilitated their exercise of agency.

### *Institutional level*

*Institutional support*, which included both resource allocation and leadership support, was an important factor at the institutional level. While all of the interviewees recognised the importance of incorporating practitioner perspectives into SIE teaching and learning, most felt that they lacked the necessary support to do so. Resource allocation (e.g. financial backing) from universities was required to cover teaching activities such as guest speaker expenses and the cost of organisation field trips and recruiting additional personnel to mentor student projects and maintain community relationships. Innovative course designs that transcended traditional classroom teaching required supplementary resources that could be challenging to secure.

> The university has no stake in engaging community partners. We need to be creative and leverage our own resources. (P23)

The lack of resource support also led several of the academics to criticise SIE education and avoid actively engaging with it. They viewed SIE education as a top-down directive or an attempt to rebrand academic programmes to make them more appealing to students and funders without a genuine interest in change.

> It [SIE] seems to be a better term [than the previous programme title] … The general encouragement [for teaching SIE] offers nothing concrete. They [the university and department] do not actually give you any support. (P16)

The involvement of university leadership could shape academics' agency in either direction. Formal leadership support was considered essential for the effective development of courses (Clavert et al. 2018), particularly SIE courses, as it granted legitimacy and ensured that resources

were available. Several of the academics noted that their department heads, faculty deans or university vice-presidents played a critical role in initiating and sustaining SIE courses. As Pr25 said,

> [if] the vice-president of any university got interested in that area, you would have a high chance that it will succeed. If that person changes, everything will change. (Pr25)

Some of the academics proactively sought leadership support for new SIE academic programmes by demonstrating their alignment with institutional goals, requesting public endorsement from management and organising seminars to raise awareness and build momentum. They advocated for SIE to be viewed as a means of realising the university's mission, vision and strategic goals. These actions included showcasing how the programme contributed to innovative teaching, community engagement or sustainability initiatives. They also connected the programmes with leadership priorities of recruiting more students and attracting additional public and private funding.

Another factor, *institutional design*, was identified as potentially constraining teaching innovation, particularly innovation in SIE education. For example, although the academics' universities were increasingly acknowledging teaching as a vital mechanism for knowledge dissemination, research was often prioritised in resource allocation and recognition, particularly for professoriate academics. This was an additional challenge for those attempting to obtain resources to support SIE teaching. As T10 pointed out,

> the majority of funding goes toward research. Why invest additional money per year when you can still hit that metric [of academic output]? (T10)

Moreover, integrating SIE courses into universities often required compliance with current academic structures and requirements, which had practical impacts on their implementation. For example, course schedules, semesters and assessment periods were academic structures that could be misaligned with the continuous and intensive effort required to understand social and environmental issues and develop sustainable solutions. Some of the participants perceived assessment schemes under the current grading system as constraints on innovative and authentic learning activities. Similarly, students' anxiety over assignments, deadlines and grades were seen to compromise collaborative problem-solving, in-depth investigation and the incorporation of community voices and needs into education.

> In a university, all projects have to be completed within the 13-week semester structure. Thirteen weeks might be sufficient for students to engage in certain types of research or prototyping … but it would be extremely difficult to experience the whole process with a good beginning and a good ending. (Pr21)

> Students' priorities [in full-time courses] are different from those of community partners and their daily operations. Students should involve themselves in the whole thing, not just get the work done, submit papers and finish [the course]. (Pr17)

Despite the interdisciplinary nature of SIE, we found that SIE collaboration among academics was not common practice, even within the same university. Due to competition for students and funding, they often preferred to establish their own courses and work on individual projects. When collaborations did occur, they typically occurred at the personal level, such as by engaging colleagues from various disciplines to conduct guest lectures. This highlighted the impact of the direct work environment, which could either strengthen or constrain academics' efforts, depending on the culture of the department (van Lankveld et al. 2017).

*External recognition* was another important factor mediating academics' relation to the enacted environment in which they were embedded. External funding, awards and media coverage could bestow legitimacy upon academics and, in some cases, helped to sustain their courses and programmes. Several interviewees mentioned that without recognition from other prestigious institutions or teaching award bodies, their courses would have been unlikely to receive support from their university management.

> We had pushback from those corners of the university … Of course, people question [why teach the topic] but I think we don't have to answer this question anymore, because we were the finalist in even the […] teaching award. (T30)

> There's a lot of privilege in that statement [regarding winning an award] … The money is really critical because we don't have other outside resources. (T10)

In addition, some of the interviewed academics capitalised on funding support from public agencies, foundations and private investors. This external support catalysed resource allocation and leadership buy-in within the university, which contributed to the development of SIE educational programmes. A small number of the academics – typically one or two individuals from five universities – initiated cross-institutional SIE activities, such as competitions and course collaborations, to draw attention, build influence, scale up practices and secure the sustainability of their SIE educational initiatives.

## Discussion and implications

This study applied an agent-based approach to explore the experiences and perspectives of academics teaching and leading SIE educational courses and programmes. By examining the mechanisms and factors that conditioned the academics' agency, we identified how they integrated these novel and socially relevant education efforts into their universities' curricula. In this section, we discuss three key insights and their implications for scaffolding academics' agency in driving SIE educational innovations. We also propose directions for future research.

*1. Academics' agency in SIE education is constructed temporally through the reflexive processes of aligning motives and navigating structures.* Academics' agency evolves dynamically as they reconcile their personal and professional orientations with the structural realities of their institutions. This temporal construction of agency aligns with Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) conceptualisation of agency. It also extends previous research on academic agency (e.g. Hasanefendic et al. 2017; Vähäsantanen 2015) by showing that academics' motives evolve in meaningful ways: from passive compliance when SIE teaching is imposed, to negotiated alignment as they reframe their disciplinary expertise, and, in some cases, to proactive engagement driven by intrinsic pro-social motivation. Importantly, our findings challenge the overly optimistic depictions of SIE education innovations in the literature, where academics are often portrayed as passionate and proactive innovators (e.g. Wang and Horta 2024). The broader process of integrating SIE into university curricula is much more nuanced. In reality, not all academics are willing or prepared to engage in SIE education.

The heterogeneity of trajectories, including adaptation, compromise, disengagement and resistance, underscores that agency is not static but fluid and negotiated. Academics with strong pro-social motivation envision SIE as a channel through which academia can achieve societal impact. They articulate a close alignment between their personal values, professional orientation, and SIE education. Despite perceived constraints, they draw on enablers and charter innovative pathways to align their practices with objectives. Such pathways even include moving to universities perceived as having fewer constraints on SIE engagement. These examples demonstrate proactive agency in the pursuit of education innovations.

By contrast, misalignment arises when academics' engagement with SIE education is solely driven by extrinsic institutional requirements. Junior academics, in particular, frequently prioritise publishing over teaching innovation, often and primarily to advance their careers and meet the publication expectations that universities focus mostly on tenure and promotion decisions. This misalignment intensifies perceived constraints, ultimately discouraging junior academics – and more seasoned ones – from pursuing teaching innovation. These processes of passive accommodation and disengagement are consistent with studies on teacher agency in educational reforms (Luttenberg, van Veen, and Imants 2013; Vähäsantanen 2015).

Between these poles, some academics adopt a more neutral stance. They remain open to developing their competence and resources in SIE while gradually negotiating alignment with their

disciplinary expertise and career development goals. Despite research being prioritised in evaluation systems, their desire to enhance student learning and employability, combined with the satisfaction derive from expanded teaching portfolios and professional networks, sustains their progressive engagement. These academics manage constraints by developing their SIE expertise identity and associating themselves with practitioner communities.

Understanding these reflexive processes in a temporal context is crucial for universities. Institutions should not assume that academics automatically embrace SIE teaching. Instead, they can scaffold alignment by offering tailored support, such as mentorship and seed funds for early engagement, recognition of innovative practice, and incentives that link SIE engagement to professional development and career progression. Future research can build on these findings by designing longitudinal studies to further trace how academics' motives and sense of agency shift over time with supportive institutional measures. Cross-national comparisons can also examine how different cultural and institutional contexts shape academics' agency in SIE education.

*2. Enabling factors that connect the institutional and societal spheres are critical for scaffolding academics' agency in driving SIE education innovations.* Our analysis also points to factors at the individual, community and institutional levels that condition academics' agency in SIE education beyond the university. Individuals' multiple embeddedness, social positioning across fields and external recognition of the education initiatives emerge as critical enablers that amplify academics' sense of agency in advancing SIE education. This builds on Annala et al.'s (2023) framework by adding a societal-relevant dimension and resonates with Hazenberg et al.'s (2019) view of SIE academics as 'bricoleurs'. This broadened perspective aligns with recent calls for greater attention to the wider university system (Peng et al. 2022) and with the increasing recognition of universities' role in addressing society's needs (Lehmann, Otto, and Wirsching 2024; Menter 2024). By demonstrating how academics draw on these cross-sectoral enablers to circumvent institutional barriers, our findings also contest the view that institutional constraints alone determine the trajectory of educational innovations.

Multiple embeddedness enables academics to develop more diversified or fluid identities, allowing them to transpose practices and circumvent constraints (Battilana, Leca, and Boxenbaum 2009). Academics with cross-disciplinary research and professional experience often approach SIE as a multidisciplinary field that addresses complex societal issues. They draw on their diverse networks, establish reputation and trust among stakeholders, and generate new possibilities – all essential elements of SIE education – and contribute to enhancing the quality of SIE courses and programmes (Elmes et al. 2012).

Social positioning beyond the university also shapes how academics perceive their enacted environment. Even if they do not occupy leadership or prominent positions within their department, their reputable engagement in the SIE practice field can provide legitimacy to their teaching innovations. Their ability to mobilise resources from diverse stakeholders and facilitate collaborations to support teaching and learning enables them to lead innovative educational efforts that circumvent community and institution-level constraints. In addition, external recognition further strengthens agency by making innovative efforts visible to the wider academic and professional community. External recognition not only mediates academics' relations with their institutions but also catalyses support and contributes to the sustainability of their innovative efforts.

These findings have implications for governance and policy. University and policymakers should consider placing greater emphasis on the societal elements in teaching and create conditions that allow academics to leverage cross-sectoral resources. In Hong Kong, for example, societal impact accounts for 15% of the weighting in the Research Assessment Exercise (UGC 2018). However, this criterion focuses almost exclusively on research output. Societal engagement through teaching and learning, especially when embedded in curricula, is left either unassessed or underassessed. Incorporating societal engagement and impact into evaluation systems would better reflect the full scope of universities' contributions and positively influence academics' motivation and sense of agency in developing novel, multidisciplinary and socially relevant SIE courses and programmes. Nevertheless, further research on the perspectives of university governance leadership could better

clarify the priorities and considerations of institutional leaders, and how leadership decisions and practices influence SIE at multiple levels. Such efforts would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics surrounding university-based SIE education.

*3. Reflexive processes reveal heterogeneity across academic positions.* SIE education is unique in its engagement of a wide range of academics. While previous studies often focus primarily on tenure-track or tenured professors (e.g. Drake et al. 2019) or do not differentiate participants' academic positions (e.g. Annala et al. 2023), this study demonstrates how structural constraints, and agentic experiences vary across professoriate, teaching, and practitioner academics.

Professoriate academics frequently face constrained agency because of an institutional overemphasis on research-driven performance metrics, which are intricately linked to career advancement, field recognition, and prestige; metrics that do not always correlate with improved research outcomes (Horta and Santos 2020). Some manage to align SIE with their research agenda, envisioning it as a pathway to interdisciplinary collaboration or funding opportunities. However, many must prioritise their traditional scholarship due to constraints like researcher – educator identity conflicts and the limited recognition for SIE's scholarly value in their disciplinary communities.

The motives of teaching academics often evolve as they negotiate the alignment between their personal and professional goals and SIE education. While department recognition of SIE and its associated innovative teaching approaches can facilitate agency, constraints can arise from rigid curricula requirements or limited resources for implementation. Non-tenure track positions further limit academics' access to institutional resources, the visibility of their work and innovative efforts, and the legitimacy needed within the department or university to initiate changes (Drake et al. 2019).

Practitioner academics, less constrained by traditional metrics, leverage their professional experience and networks to innovate curricula. They often creatively blend cross-sector practices, such as social enterprise consulting, with academic goals, positioning themselves as linkages between academia and practice. Leveraging resources beyond the academic disciplines and institutions, they can often circumvent institutional constraints and drive SIE education innovations.

Institutions should consider recognising and tailoring support to the distinct needs of professoriate, teaching and practitioner academics. Academic agency in SIE education is not only the choice to innovate, comply or resist, but a dynamic process of constant negotiation and navigation. Given the increasing involvement of non-tenure track academics in practice-oriented and socially relevant educational programmes, it is important to pursue further research that can explore their motives and experiences within these diverse academic roles.

In conclusion, our study enriches understanding of how the agency – structure framework influences the integration of SIE education into university teaching and learning practices. The experiences and perspectives of the academics in this study offer insights into how academics can navigate structural factors and leverage resources and opportunities to overcome the constraints they encounter in the pursuit of their personal and professional objectives. The findings provide novel perspectives on the successes and failures of SIE education in universities and offer valuable insights for university leaders seeking to support innovative teaching and learning programmes. By cultivating conditions that enhance academics' agency and leveraging the societal relevance of SIE education, universities can more effectively align their pedagogical activities with societal needs, thereby amplifying their social impact (Bayuo, Chaminade, and Göransson 2020).

## Disclosure statement

## ORCID

*Yutong Wang* https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5570-8158
*Hugo Horta* http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6814-1393

# References

Ahearn, Laura M. 2001. "Language and Agency." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30 (1): 109–37. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.30.1.109.

Annala, J., J. Lindén, M. Mäkinen, and J. Henriksson. 2023. "Understanding Academic Agency in Curriculum Change in Higher Education." *Teaching in Higher Education* 28 (6): 1310–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1881772.

Barman, L., S. Josephsson, C. Silén, and K. Bolander-Laksov. 2016. "How Education Policy is Made Meaningful - A Narrative Exploration of How Teachers Show Autonomy in the Development of Teaching and Learning." *Higher Education Research & Development* 35 (6): 1111–1124. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2016.1144571.

Battilana, Julie, Bernard Leca, and Eva Boxenbaum. 2009. "How Actors Change Institutions: Towards a Theory of Institutional Entrepreneurship." *The Academy of Management Annals* 3 (1): 65–107. https://doi.org/10.5465/19416520903053598.

Bayuo, Blaise B., Cristina Chaminade, and Bo Göransson. 2020. "Unpacking the Role of Universities in the Emergence, Development and Impact of Social Innovations – A Systematic Review of the Literature." *Technological Forecasting & Social Change* 155:120030.

Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2021. "One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice in (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis?" *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18 (3): 328–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238.

Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2023. "Toward Good Practice in Thematic Analysis: Avoiding Common Problems and Be(Com)Ing a Knowing Researcher." International Journal of Transgender Health 24 (1): 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597.

Carl, Johannes, and Matthias Menter. 2021. "The Social Impact of Universities: Assessing the Effects of the Three University Missions on Social Engagement." *Studies in Higher Education* 46 (5): 965–76. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2021.1896803.

Chan, Chee Hon, Cheryl Hiu-Kwan Chui, and Yanto Chandra. 2022. "The Role of Social Innovation Policy in Social Service Sector Reform: Evidence from Hong Kong." *Journal of Social Policy* 51 (2): 346–64. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279421000167.

Chao, Roger, and Gerard A. Postiglione. 2017. "Academic Promotion and the Changing Academic Profession in Hong Kong." In *The Changing Academic Profession in International Comparative Perspective,* Vol. 19, edited by G. A. Postiglione and J. Jung, 15–35. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56791-4_2.

Cheung, Kenny, and Yvette Y. Fung. 2017. "Partnering for Impact." In *Social innovation and social transition in East Asia*, edited by R. Maruca and Elissa Rabellino. *Stanford social innovation review*.

Chui, Cheryl Hiu-kwan, Shiqi Peng, Virgo Lai, Chee Hon Chan, and Sammy Fung. 2023. "Enhancing Social Entrepreneurial Competence amongst University Students: A Social Entrepreneurship Pedagogical Model in Hong Kong." *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*: 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/19420676.2023.2217427.

Cinar, Ridvan, and Paul Bennew0rth. 2020. "Why Do Universities Have Little Systemic Impact with Social Innovation? An Institutional Logics Perspective." *Growth and Change* 52 (2): 751–69. https://doi.org/10.1111/grow.12367.

Clavert, Maria, Erika Löfström, Hannele Niemi, and Anne Nevgi. 2018. "Change Agency as a Way of Promoting Pedagogical Development in Academic Communities: A Longitudinal Study." *Teaching in Higher Education* 23 (8): 945–62. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1451321.

Clegg, Sue. 2005. "Theorising the Mundane: The Significance of Agency." *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 15 (2): 149–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/09620210500200137.

Creswell, John W., and Cheryl N. Poth. 2018. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. 4th ed. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Dashper, Katherine, and Thomas Fletcher. 2019. "'Don't Call Me an Academic': Professional Identity and Struggles for Legitimacy within the Vocational Field of Events Management Higher Education." *The Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education* 25:100201. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2019.100201.

Diepenmaat, Henk, René Kemp, and Myrthe Velter. 2020. "Why Sustainable Development Requires Societal Innovation and Cannot Be Achieved without This." *Sustainability* 12 (3): 1270. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12031270.

Drake, Anna, Laura Struve, Sana Ali Meghani, and Beth Bukoski. 2019. "Invisible Labor, Visible Change: Non-tenure-Track Faculty Agency in a Research University." *The Review of Higher Education* 42 (4): 1635–64. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2019.0078.

Elmes, Michael B, Scott Jiusto, Gail Whiteman, Robert Hersh, and Greig Tor Guthey. 2012. "Teaching Social Entrepreneurship and Innovation from the Perspective of Place and Place Making." *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 11 (4): 533–54. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2011.0029.

Emirbayer, Mustafa, and Ann Mische. 1998. "What Is Agency?" *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (4): 962–1023. https://doi.org/10.1086/231294.

García-González, Abel, and María Soledad Ramírez-Montoya. 2021. "Social Entrepreneurship Education: Changemaker Training at the University." *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning* 11 (5): 1236–51. https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-01-2021-0009.

Guest, Greg, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson. 2006. "How Many Interviews Are Enough?: An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability." *Field Methods* 18 (1): 59–82. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903.

Hacker, Andrew, and Claudia Dreifus. 2010. *Higher Education?: How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids —and What We Can Do about It*. New York: Macmillan.

Han, Ling, and Chengpang Lee. 2020. *University Social Innovation: Social Impact Education in top Global Universities*. SG, Singapore: National University of Singapore.

Hasanefendic, Sandra, Julie M. Birkholz, Hugo Horta, and Peter Van Der Sijde. 2017. "Individuals in Action: Bringing about Innovation in Higher Education." *European Journal of Higher Education* 7 (2): 101–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2017.1296367.

Hazenberg, Richard, Jieun Ryu, and Toa Giroletti. 2020. "Social Innovation and Higher Education Landscape in East Asia: Comparative Study. Accessed August 22, 2024. https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/sihe-report-asia_final.pdf.

Hazenberg, Richard, Norah Wang, Yanto Chandra, and Alex Nicholls. 2019. "Surveying the Social Innovation and Higher Education Landscape in Hong Kong." Access August 22, 2024. https://www.britishcouncil.hk/sites/default/files/bricks_baseline_fullrpt.pdf.

Henkel, Mary. 2005. "Academic Identity and Autonomy in a Changing Policy Environment." *Higher Education* 49 (1): 155–176. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-004-2919-1.

Horta, Hugo, and João M. Santos. 2020. "Organisational Factors and Academic Research Agendas: An Analysis of Academics in the Social Sciences." *Studies in Higher Education* 45 (12): 2382–97.

Jung, Jisun, and Cecilia K. Y. Chan. 2017. "Academics' Perception on Research versus Teaching and Their Recognition." In *The Changing Academic Profession in Hong Kong*, Vol. 19, edited by G. A. Postiglione and J. Jung, 145–160. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56791-4_8.

Lake, Danielle, Phillip M. Motley, and William Moner. 2022. "Completing the CiCLE: Long-Term Assessment of Community-Involved Collaborative Learning Ecosystems for Social Innovation in Higher Education." *Social Enterprise Journal* 18 (1): 28–50. https://doi.org/10.1108/SEJ-10-2020-0089.

Lehmann, Erik E., Jonah M. Otto, and Katharine Wirsching. 2024. "Entrepreneurial Universities and the Third Mission Paradigm Shift from Economic Performance to Impact Entrepreneurship: Germany's EXIST Program and ESG Orientation." *The Journal of Technology Transfer* 49 (6): 2184–99. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10961-024-10080-y.

Louvel, Séverine. 2013. "Understanding Change in Higher Education as Bricolage: How Academics Engage in Curriculum Change." *Higher Education* 66 (6): 669–91. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9628-6.

Luttenberg, Johan, Klaas van Veen, and Jeroen Imants. 2013. "Looking for Cohesion: The Role of Search for Meaning in the Interaction between Teacher and Reform." *Research Papers in Education* 28 (3): 289–308. https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2011.630746.

Marginson, Simon. 2016. "High Participation Systems of Higher Education." *The Journal of Higher Education (Columbus)* 87 (2): 243–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2016.11777401.

McAlpine, L., C. Amundsen, and G. Turner. 2014. "Identity-Trajectory: Reframing Early Career Academic Experience." *British Educational Research Journal* 40 (6): 952–969. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3123.

Menter, Matthias. 2024. "From Technological to Social Innovation: Toward a Mission-Reorientation of Entrepreneurial Universities." *The Journal of Technology Transfer* 49 (1): 104–18.

Mir Shahid, Satar, and Ghadah Alarifi. 2021. "Social Entrepreneurship Education: A Conceptual Framework and Review." *The International Journal of Management Education* 19 (3): 100533. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2021.100533.

Mula-Falcón, Javier, Katia Caballero, and Jesús Domingo Segovia. 2022. "Exploring Academics' Identities in Today's Universities: A Systematic Review." *Quality Assurance in Education* 30 (1): 118–34. https://doi.org/10.1108/QAE-09-2021-0152.

Mulgan, Geoff, Simon Tucker, Rushanara Ali, and Ben Sanders. 2007. "Social Innovation: What It Is, Why It Matters and How It Can be Accelerated." Working paper. Oxford: Skoll Centre for Social Entreprenuership. Retrived from https://youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Social-Innovation-what-it-is-why-it-mattershow-it-can-be-accelerated-March-2007.pdf

Nunes, Viviane G. A. 2017. "Designing More Responsible Behaviours through Design Education: Reflections on a Brazilian Pilot Experience in Social Innovation for Sustainability." *The Design Journal* 20 (1): S1014–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2017.1353045.

Otten, Rebecca, Máille Faughnan, Megan Flattley, and Samantha Fleurinor. 2022. "Integrating Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion into Social Innovation Education: A Case Study of Critical Service-Learning." *Social Enterprise Journal* 18 (1): 182–200. https://doi.org/10.1108/SEJ-11-2020-0101.

Panitch, Melanie, Jessica Machado, Jocelyn Courneya, Afrah Idrees, and Samantha Wehbi. 2022. "HEI as a Pressure Cooker: Crafting the Secret Sauce to Social Justice in Social Innovation." *Social Enterprise Journal* 18 (1): 218–33. https://doi.org/10.1108/SEJ-10-2020-0080.

Peng, Fanke, Benjamin Altieri, Todd Hutchinson, Anthony J. Harris, and Daniel McLean. 2022. "Design for Social Innovation: A Systemic Design Approach in Creative Higher Education toward Sustainability." *Sustainability* 14 (13): 8075. https://doi.org/10.3390/su14138075.

Pope-Ruark, Rebecca, Phillip Motley, and William Moner. 2019. "Creative Innovation Takes a (Team Teaching) Family." *Teaching and Learning Inquiry* 7 (1): 120–35. https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearninqu.7.1.8.

Postiglione, A. Gerard, and Jisun Jung. 2017. "The Changing Academic Profession in Hong Kong: Challenges and Future." In *The Changing Academic Profession in Hong Kong*, Vol. 19, edited by G. A. Postiglione, and Jisun Jung, 3–14. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56791-4_1.

Smith, Isaac H., and Warner P. Woodworth. 2012. "Developing Social Entrepreneurs and Social Innovators: A Social Identity and Self-efficacy Approach." *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 11 (3): 390–407. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2011.0016.

Tam, Raymond K. Y. 2017. "Educating Social Entrepreneurship: Insights from the Higher Education Courses in Hong Kong." *The Hong Kong Journal of Social Work* 51 (1/2): 145–64. https://doi.org/10.1142/S0219246217000092.

Toom, Auli, Kirsi Pyhältö, and Frances O'Connell Rust. 2015. "Teachers' Professional Agency in Contradictory Times." *Teachers and Teaching, Theory and Practice* 21 (6): 615–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1044334.

UGC (University Grant Committee). 2018. "General Panel Guidelines for RAE 2020". Accessed January 16, 2025. https://www.ugc.edu.hk/doc/eng/ugc/rae/2020/gpg_sep18.pdf.

Ursin, Jani, Katja Vähäsantanen, Lynn McAlpine, and Päivi Hökkä. 2020. "Emotionally Loaded Identity and Agency in Finnish Academic Work." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 44 (3): 311–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1541971.

Vähäsantanen, Katja. 2015. "Professional Agency in the Stream of Change: Understanding Educational Change and Teachers' Professional Identities." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 47:1–12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.11.006.

Vähäsantanen, Katja, Susanna Paloniemi, Eija Räikkönen, and Päivi Hökkä. 2020. "Professional Agency in a University Context: Academic Freedom and Fetters." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 89:103000. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.103000.

van Lankveld, Thea, Judith Schoonenboom, Monique Volman, Gerda Croiset, and Jos Beishuizen. 2017. "Developing a Teacher Identity in the University Context: A Systematic Review of the Literature." *Higher Education Research and Development* 36 (2): 325–42. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2016.1208154.

Wang, Yutong, and Hugo Horta. 2024. "Teaching and Learning Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Higher Education: A Scoping Review." *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*: 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/19420676.2024.2370837.

Wang, Yutong, and Hugo Horta. 2025. "University-Based Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship Education in Hong Kong: A Curriculum Analysis." *Studies in Higher Education* 50 (6): 1248–67. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2369202.

Yu, Andrew. 2021. "The Failure of the Welfare Ideology and System in Hong Kong: A Historical Perspective." *Human Affairs* 31 (1): 99–108. https://doi.org/10.1515/humaff-2021-0009.