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## **Social entrepreneurship education in higher education: insights from a developing country**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this research is to investigate awareness, intentions/support, and the contextual elements among higher education students in the University of Tehran (UT) in order to find the gap(s) in social entrepreneurship education in Iran. The authors used Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour as the theoretical framework. The research questions are based on a revised version of Kirby and Ibrahim's (2011) questionnaire. A survey was conducted in three faculties of UT. These faculties were selected intentionally, to evaluate the social entrepreneurship gaps for post-graduates of entrepreneurship, management, and engineering, and to capture varied orientations. Findings show a significant rate of intention towards and awareness of the concept among respondents, but a lack of sufficient attention to contextual elements and adequate support. Investigating social entrepreneurship intention and education is lacking in Iran's higher education and this study is one of the first in the country.

**Keywords:** theory of planned behaviour; social entrepreneurship; education; University of Tehran.

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## 1 Introduction

Entrepreneurs are called 'change agents' (e.g., Schulyer, 1998; Schumpeter, 1934), 'value creators' (e.g., Salamzadeh et al., 2011b; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000), and 'risk takers' (e.g., Thomas and Stephen, 2000). Many such metaphors and titles are available in the literature, but who are these people who are looking for changing their peripheral environment? To many scholars, entrepreneurship is something to be learned, while to others it is a heritage of their forefathers (Aronsson and Birch, 2004). The answer to this question calls up new research questions, which are not among our research goals in this study [for more information, see Rauch and Frese (2007), and Painter (1998)].

Based on the arguments of Kirby and Ibrahim (2011), entrepreneurship is currently one of the major challenges facing economies. Most economies are paying attention to the need for development of this field and to development of entrepreneurial skills, attitudes, and culture. Examples of such challenges and movements include in the USA (e.g., Macke and Markley, 2006), Europe (e.g., Ireland et al., 2008), Asia (e.g., Aidis et al., 2008), Africa (e.g., Davies, 2001), and Australia (e.g., Gnyawali and Fogel, 1994) and there have been numerous research papers and projects to fulfil this goal. On the other hand, scholars and researchers in the field of entrepreneurship and business showed great interest in this domain (e.g., Kirby and Ibrahim, 2010; Kirby, 2007; Meyer, 2001; Charney and Libecap, 2000; Sexton and Upton, 1984; Loucks, 1982).

As Kirby and Ibrahim (2011) mention, students' interest in entrepreneurship is growing in different countries, and they try to run their own businesses instead of being employed by an employer. At the same time, Krueger et al. (2000) consider this behaviour (creating a new business), as a planned career choice. In this research, we used Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour as our theoretical framework, in order to investigate the attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control of higher education students in three faculties of University of Tehran (UT), taking into account the contextual elements.

The study follows the theoretical premise of Kirby and Ibrahim (2011, p.404), that “if young people are made aware of the concept of social entrepreneurship, recognize its role and importance to society and believe they have the ability to create a new venture, they will do so”. Therefore, we first review the literature that serves to define social entrepreneurship. Then, the next section provides an introduction to social entrepreneurship in Iran. After presenting the methodology of our research, we then discuss the findings. Finally, important findings are highlighted and the paper concludes with a consideration of the implications of the findings.

## **2 Literature review**

To many scholars, such as Peredo and McLean (2006), social entrepreneurship is a two-sided entity, which brings ‘social’ and ‘entrepreneurship’ concepts together. Dees (1998) considers social entrepreneurship as a type of entrepreneurship, while according to Austin et al. (2006), there are two types of entrepreneurs: social and commercial. This categorisation reveals that the most important issue is to determine whether the created value is social or commercial; but the entrepreneurial side is common in both of these definitions. Even Certo and Miller (2008) argue that social entrepreneurship is a sub-discipline within the field of entrepreneurship. In other studies, Thompson (2002) refers to social entrepreneurs in the non-profit sector, and Spear (2006) calls it entrepreneurship in a social context for non-commercial organisations.

To better understand social entrepreneurship, Nicholls (2006) provides a categorisation of institutions based on the extent they engage in social aspects and business activities, ranging from embedded, and integrated, to external enterprise. The typology of Fowler (2000) categorises entrepreneurial social activities in three main groups: ‘integrated social entrepreneurship’, ‘re-interpretation’, and ‘complementary social entrepreneurship’. More formally, Leadbeater (1997) places social entrepreneurship between three spheres of economic activity: public, private, and voluntary sectors. Neck et al. (2009) have proposed another classification based on the mission and the achieved degree of impact of social entrepreneur organisations.

Although many definitions, interpretations, conceptualisations, and frameworks are available in the literature, social entrepreneurship is defined here as a recurring process starting from social idea formation, and going through some steps (identification or creation, evaluation and exploitation of opportunities (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000) toward social value creation, which leads to social changes and sustainable development. Concisely, social entrepreneurs are social change agents who are seeking to create a social value (Salamzadeh et al., 2011b).

Various intentions and incentives are in the literature to explain why social entrepreneurs engage in such an activity. Drayton (2002), the founder of Ashoka,<sup>1</sup> considers social entrepreneurs as individuals who are driven by their social values. Thompson et al. (2000) refer to entrepreneurs’ potentials and leadership skills, and to vision and fortitude as their necessary traits, while Roper and Cheney (2005) point out their immense personal charisma. Moreover, Salamzadeh et al. (2011b) review the literature of social entrepreneurship and discuss some of the intentions behind these activities. For instance, Reis (1999) argues that social entrepreneurs bring business and market-based skills to social services. They try to become engaged in activities to eliminate social problems and shortcomings. Similarly, Seelos and Mair (2005) refer to

the basic human needs that exist in the market, and Tan et al. (2005) call them risk takers who make profit for their society. While Anderson et al. (2006), consider it as the expression of virtuous behaviour in order to achieve a social mission, Weerawardena and Mort (2006) suggest that an organisations' social mission is the source of this kind of activity.

Despite the differences in the definitions and interpretations, Peredo and McLean (2006, p.24) have a very precise definition of what social entrepreneurship is. In their eyes, "social entrepreneurship is exercised where some person or group:

- 1 aim(s) at creating social value, either exclusively or at least in some prominent way;
- 2 show(s) a capacity to recognize and take advantage of opportunities to create that value ('envision');
- 3 employ(s) innovation, ranging from outright invention to adapting someone else's novelty, in creating and/or distributing social value;
- 4 is/are willing to accept an above-average degree of risk in creating and disseminating social value; and
- 5 is/are unusually resourceful in being relatively undaunted by scarce assets in pursuing their social venture".

Zahra et al. (2009, p.519) discussed the notion of enhancing "social wealth by creating new ventures or managing existing organizations in an innovative manner", while Urbano et al. (2010) used institutional theory to examine how institutional factors affect the emergence and implementation of social entrepreneurship (Salamzadeh et al., 2011b). Recently, institutional theory has been used by other researchers in this field, such as Townsend (2008), Mair and Marti (2009), Nicholls (2009, 2010), Dacin et al. (2010), Vurro et al. (2011), and Bacq and Janssen (2011).

In their paper, Kirby and Ibrahim (2011, p.404) perceive social entrepreneurship "to be about applying the expertise, talents, and resources of entrepreneurs to the variety of problems developing countries face, such as education, health, personal safety and security, poverty alleviation, social advancement, environmental sustainability, and so forth".

Taking into account the earlier definitions and approaches toward social entrepreneurship, the main purpose of this paper is to apply Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour to investigate the awareness of postgraduate students of UT, and their attitude toward social entrepreneurship. In addition, the authors intend to explore and discuss the gaps in this domain.

### **3 Social entrepreneurship in Iran**

Although information in the published literature is limited, the footsteps of social entrepreneurship activities in Iran can be traced in the history of the country. While some authors relate the social entrepreneurship culture in Iran to the Islamic orientations of the country (Salarzahi et al., 2010; Stewart, 2012), the history of such movements goes back two thousand years, to the Zoroastrian doctrine. For instance, as Stewart (2012, p.59) argues: "In Iran and India religious philanthropy has been a feature of Zoroastrian piety as well as providing the means by which both communities have prospered throughout

their respective histories". Then, she considers the case of Qasr-e Firuzeh as a sample of a charitable endowment in Iran, in the early 20th century. While, Chand (2011) mentions in his book review of Leo Paul Dana's book *Entrepreneurship and Religion* (Dana, 2010), that Zoroastrian/Parsi enterprises, had foundations in the interaction among religious and spiritual values and entrepreneurial behaviour (including philanthropy and social entrepreneurship). Moreover, some scholars like Jany (2004) investigate Zoroastrian law and its relation with entrepreneurial activities.

Some of the samples of such activities can be found in Parsi (Persian) festivals, as mentioned by Karaka (2008). These activities continued as time went on and the Iranian people have historically stuck to these kinds of activities based on their social and religious beliefs. Although there is a fragmented literature in this field, the following are some of the relevant hints in the literature. For instance, Deboo<sup>2</sup> presents some historical evidence about the social orientation of Zoroastrians in Iran. He argues that:

"Besides being fabulously rich, the Parsis<sup>3</sup> as per the Zoroastrian doctrine became linked with phenomenal charity work and the phrase developed, "Parsi thy name is Charity". Combined with the fact that since the fifteenth century, as per the Persian Rivayats, the Parsis were aware of the suffering of their fellow co-religionists back in Iran, but at that time they were powerless to help."<sup>4</sup>

However, more recent studies, which take the Islamic side of Iranian culture into account, acknowledge the persistent movements. As, for example, Salarzahi et al. (2010, p.183) argue:

"In Iran in parallel with other Islamic countries there are many examples of benefices and properties' that are allocated for public affairs and we can certainly claim that the friendly tradition of Waqf has been able to assist the deprived of the vulnerable society. Social entrepreneurship culture in Iran has managed the value of friendship, divine revelation and seeking Islam to mingle."

Consequently, the somewhat embryonic literature on social entrepreneurship in Iran is only marginally relevant to our concerns. Herein, the purpose of this study is not to fill this important gap in the literature, but to answer our aforementioned research questions. One challenge for future studies is to elucidate how this evolutionary process might have occurred.

Unfortunately, entrepreneurship was not promised in the country. Until the third economic, social, and cultural development plan (2000–2004) assigned a portion of the annual budget for this matter. Therefore, a series of projects was introduced in different ministries of the country, mainly in the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, the Ministry of Health and Medical Education, and the Ministry of agriculture.

During the last decade, governmental national plans like KARAD<sup>5</sup> played a paramount role in promotion of entrepreneurship in higher education. Moreover, Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs planned various entrepreneurship courses for the public, in different specialisations and industries. These educational programmes can be considered as new lifeblood circulating in the entrepreneurial body of the country.

In sum, after years of neglect, entrepreneurship, and more precisely social entrepreneurship in Iran is attracting the attention of many scholars and entrepreneurs. In Iran, based on the Terjesen et al. (2009), 1.1, 0.3, 1.4, and 0.6% of the working population are respectively nascent, new, early-stage, and established social entrepreneurs, and 2.0% of the working population are dealing with social

entrepreneurship activities. According to these data, Iran stands in the third place in the Middle East and North Africa. Hopefully, based on pervasive efforts of the governmental bodies and private sector organisations, these entrepreneurs are more appreciated and supported recently through providing them with different incentives from government (such as low interest rate loans allocated to nascent social entrepreneurs), and private sector NGOs.

#### **4 Research methodology**

The purpose of this research is to investigate awareness, intentions/support, and the contextual elements among postgraduate students in the UT in order to find the gap(s) in social entrepreneurship education. To do so, like Kirby and Ibrahim (2011), the authors use Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour as a conceptual framework for structuring the study and not to test Ajzen's theory.

The research questions are investigated using a questionnaire based on a revised version of Kirby and Ibrahim's (2011) questionnaire, and a survey conducted in three faculties of UT, i.e., Faculty of Entrepreneurship, Faculty of Management, and College of Engineering. These faculties were selected intentionally, to evaluate the social entrepreneurship gaps for postgraduates of entrepreneurship (as a completely relevant field), management (as partially relevant field), and engineering (as a not much relevant field), and to capture varied orientations. In addition, the authors explore the contextual element, to consider how the education system and the atmosphere might need to be adapted to make the students more eager to run such ventures.

UT enjoys an old tradition of education dating back to Jondishapour in Sassanid period (224–651 AD) and in seminaries 700 hundred years ago (<http://www.ut.ac.ir>). UT, in its new form founded by Sayyed Mahmoud Hessaby<sup>6</sup> in 1934, is the 'mother University of Iran', and named the 'symbol of higher education' in the country. In 2010–2011, UT had about 11,492 masters' students and about 3,559 PhD students, respectively in 270 and 115 fields of study.

According to the research goals, the authors conducted a survey in the above-mentioned faculties of UT. Some 316 higher education students responded, from which 103 students (51 women, and 52 men) from the Faculty of Entrepreneurship (32.6%), 80 students (28 women, and 52 men) from College of Engineering (25.3%), and 133 students (48 women, and 85) from the Faculty of Management (42.1%). Then, students from the Faculty of Management and the Faculty of Entrepreneurship are overrepresented (74.7%). The students were studying a masters' degree or a PhD programme. Based on their education, the distribution of respondents was as follows: Faculty of Entrepreneurship (99 MA, and 4 PhD), Faculty of Management (94 MA, and 39 PhD), and College of Engineering (72 MA, and 8 PhD). Some 40.2% of the respondents were female, and the rest were male (59.8%).

The main sections in the questionnaire were 'profile data', 'awareness', 'intentions/support', and 'context'. The first section was designed to gather the demographic information of the respondents. Questions in Section 2 were asked to determine the level of awareness. In this section, we provided the respondents with five different definitions of social entrepreneurship to determine their understanding. It should be noted that the definitions were presented anonymously. The definitions were as follows:

- 1 The use of entrepreneurial behaviour for social ends rather than for profit objectives, or alternatively, that the profits generated from market activities are used for the benefit of a specific disadvantaged group (Leadbeater, 1997).
- 2 Play the role of change agents in the social sector, by:
  - a adopting a mission to create and sustain social value (not just private value)
  - b recognising and relentlessly pursuing new opportunities to serve that mission
  - c engaging in a process of continuous innovation, adaptation, and learning
  - d acting boldly without being limited by resources currently in hand
  - e exhibiting heightened accountability to the constituencies served and for the outcomes created (Dees, 1998).
- 3 A major change agent, one whose core values centre on identifying, addressing and solving societal problems (Drayton, 2002).
- 4 ... a process of creating value by combining resources in new ways...intended primarily to explore and exploit opportunities to create social value by stimulating social change or meeting social needs (Mair and Marti, 2006).
- 5 ... a recurring process starting from social idea formation, and going through some steps (identification (or creation), evaluation and exploitation of opportunities (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000) toward social value creation, which leads to social changes and sustainable development (Salamzadeh et al., 2011b).

The next question in the second section was asking respondents to identify social entrepreneurs from a list of four national and four international social entrepreneurs and their institutions. Four international social entrepreneurs were Ashoka (Bill Drayton), Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Bill and Melinda Gates), Grameen Bank (Muhammad Yunus), Skoll Foundation (Jeff Skoll), and four national ones were Mahak (Saideh Ghods), Hamedanian (Hosein Hamedanian), Mehrafarinan (Fatemeh Daneshvar), and Kahrizak (Dr. Hakimzadeh). Sections 3 and 4, respectively were intended to determine intentions/support and the context. All statistical calculations were performed using SPSS, and descriptive statistics were produced.

## **5 Findings and discussion**

### *5.1 Awareness*

Awareness about opportunity reflects an entrepreneur's ability to identify when and where a value-creating product or service exists (Kirzner, 1973). As Austin et al (2006, p.9) mention, "a social entrepreneur may seek to make an impact by raising awareness and attention to the issue". Here, the first element to be investigated is students' awareness of the concept of social entrepreneurship, and social opportunities to be identified, evaluated, and exploited by them.

Most of the respondents (60.4%) claimed to be aware of the concept, while 38.9% were not, and less than 1% (0.7%) did not answer. Paradoxical as it might seem at first thought, this information might be misleading. As the sample was a combination of three groups of respondents from different faculties with different backgrounds, it would be

better to discuss the results separately. Almost all of the postgraduate students of the Faculty of Entrepreneurship (95.1%) were aware of this concept, a very insignificant number were not (3.9%), and just one person did not answer. Although in the other two faculties, 43.7% were aware of social entrepreneurship, 55.9% were not, and others did not respond (0.4%). The results show a significant decrease as we put entrepreneurship graduate students aside, and discuss the results separately. It shows a gap between who studied entrepreneurship and who did not.

As mentioned earlier, five definitions of social entrepreneurship were proposed to evaluate the most appropriate one in the respondents' eyes. Based on their answers, interpretation of Dees (1998) was the most accepted one (28.8%), while, the second accepted definition was a result of a study in Iranian context (Salamzadeh et al., 2011b) with 17.4%. However, the definition of Salamzadeh et al. (2011b) was the second choice in overall, entrepreneurship students preferred Drayton's (2002) (22.3%) and then Leadbeater's (1997) (19.3%) definitions. It shows a significant difference between the understandings of these two groups, and the more theoretical approach of entrepreneurship students toward this concept. Although, the definition proposed by Dees (1998) was considered as a more appropriate one for non-entrepreneurship students and reveals the public's opinion of the concept. Moreover, less than 6% (5.7%) of the respondents did not answer (Table 1).

**Table 1** accepted definitions of social entrepreneurship

	<i>Total</i>		<i>Entrepreneurship</i>		<i>Non-entrepreneurship</i>	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Leadbeater (1997)	52	16.5	20	19.3	32	15
Dees (1998)	91	28.8	28	27.2	63	29.6
Drayton (2002)	54	17.1	23	22.3	31	14.6
Mair and Marti (2006)	46	14.5	15	14.6	31	14.6
Salamzadeh et al. (2011b)	55	17.4	14	13.6	41	19.2
No answer	18	5.7	3	3	15	7
Total	316	100	103	100	213	100

From Table 2, it is clear that there is a significant gap between the answers of entrepreneurship and non-entrepreneurship postgraduate students. While respectively 32.1% and 61.9% of the answers of entrepreneurship students show their awareness of 'international' and 'national' social entrepreneurs/institutions, only 24.2% and 42.5% of the answers for other postgraduate students showed their awareness. In addition, respectively 6% and 33.3% of the answers of entrepreneurship and non-entrepreneurship students were missing. Based on the information, the most well-known international and national social entrepreneurs/institutions were, respectively, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Bill and Melinda Gates) with 9.9%, and Mahak (Saideh Ghods) with 21.65% of the answers.



**Table 2** Awareness of the social entrepreneurs/institutions

	<i>Total</i>		<i>Entrepreneurship</i>		<i>Non-entrepreneurship</i>	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Ashoka (Bill Drayton)	24	4.95	15	7	9	3.3
Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Bill and Melinda Gates)	48	9.9	22	10.2	26	9.7
Grameen Bank (Muhammad Yunus)	46	9.5	27	12.6	19	7.1
Skoll Foundation (Jeff Skoll)	16	3.3	5	2.3	11	4.1
Mahak (Saideh Ghods)	105	21.65	59	27.5	46	17
Hamedanian (Hosein Hamedanian)	20	4.1	9	4.2	11	4.1
Mehrafarinan (Fatemeh Daneshvar)	31	6.4	19	8.8	12	4.4
Kahrizak (Dr. Hakimzadeh)	92	19	46	21.4	46	17
No answer	103	21.2	13	6	90	33.3
Total	485	100	215	100	270	100

## 5.2 Intention

Intention is an integral part of any social entrepreneur's life, as he/she seeks to eliminate a social need, a social problem, etc., and goes far beyond his/her purely commercial entrepreneurial spirit (see Mair and Marti, 2006; Austin et al., 2006; Aoki, 2009; Zahra et al., 2009). Even Mair and Marti (2006) speak about an intention formation stage, which is to some extent in line with Ajzen's (1991) theory. Students also need to have such feelings and intentions to initiate social businesses and to continue this behaviour.

According to Table 3, most of both entrepreneurship (68.9%) and non-entrepreneurship (33.8%) students intend to work for themselves by starting their own businesses (45.2%). However, a significant difference (35.1%) is evident between these two groups. It might be due to several reasons such as entrepreneurship education, entrepreneurial environment in the Faculty of Entrepreneurship, etc. Besides, finding employment in an MNE is the second choice of both groups, respectively with 10.7% and 22.1%.

**Table 3** Intentions on graduation

	<i>Total</i>		<i>Entrepreneurship</i>		<i>Non-entrepreneurship</i>	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Find employment in an MNE	50	15.9	8	7.8	42	19.7
Find employment in an SME	58	18.4	11	10.7	47	22.1
Work for myself by starting my own business	143	45.2	71	68.9	72	33.8
Other	51	16.1	10	9.7	41	19.2
Do not know	14	4.4	3	2.9	11	5.2
Total (sample size)	316	100	103	100	213	100

**Table 4** Reasons for not working for self

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent<sup>a</sup></i>
Lack of finance	103	72%
Lack of experience	86	60.1%
Lack of self confidence	73	51%
High uncertainty in the market	63	44.1%
Work in family business	42	29.4%
Lack of supports	41	28.7%
Other	12	8.4%
Total (sample size)	143	

Note: <sup>a</sup>Sums to over 100% because of multiple choice.

**Table 5** Reasons for not starting asocial enterprise

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Lack of finance	101	66%
Lack of experience and knowledge	97	63.4%
Lack of self confidence	72	47.1%
High uncertainty in the social businesses	57	37.3%
Looking for money at this stage	48	31.4%
Lack of supports from such businesses	42	27.5%
Other	14	9.2%
Total (sample size)	153	

Lack of finance and experience was the most important reason for not working for self, respectively with 72% and 60.1%. In addition, lack of confidence (51%) and high uncertainty in the market (44.1%) were among the most influential factors for the students (Table 4). The results, i.e., lack of experience and lack of self-confidence, therefore provide support for Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour, which suggests that intention is the most influential predictor of behaviour. In this case, if the authors

find some solutions to train these students, and increase their entrepreneurial abilities, such as risk taking, tolerance of uncertainty, and self-confidence, along with providing financial support, they will be more likely to run their own businesses. Moreover, Table 5 reveals almost the same findings.

### 5.3 Support

Mair and Marti (2006) suggest that the social entrepreneurs' potential to access information, resources, and support, is a function of structural capital. They believe that support is a critical element for social entrepreneurs. Sharir and Lerner (2006) also refer to 'acquiring support information and resources' as a challenge for social entrepreneurs. Mair and Noboa (2003) identified 'social support' as the key aspect that distinguishes social and commercial entrepreneurs. Moreover, Kirby and Ibrahim (2011, p.410) argue that: "according to the extension of Ajzen's (1991) theory to the field of entrepreneurship, the existence of support/encouragement is an important consideration when deciding whether to start a business, as it impacts on the individual's attitude, perception of social norms and perceived behavioural control".

Therefore, we asked two questions to understand the types of support needed to start a business venture or a social enterprise. As shown in Table 6, the most needed support for initiating a business venture were, respectively, funding (36.3%), premises (15.6%), and training (14.3%). While to start a social enterprise, the support needed were funding (25.3%), role models and training (both with 16%).

**Table 6** Support needs for starting a business and asocial enterprise

	<i>Support needed to start a</i>			
	<i>Business venture</i>		<i>Social enterprise</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Non-required	8	15	9	1.7
Role models	67	12.3	83	16
Training	78	14.3	83	16
Mentoring	70	12.9	73	14
Funding	198	36.3	132	25.3
Premises	85	15.6	62	12
No answer	39	7.1	79	15
Total	545		521	

Taking into account the results shown in Tables 4, 5, and 6, it is evident that funding is a very critical criterion in hampering such activities. Apart from this limitation, the data suggests that training is needed to help interested students run such enterprises.

### 5.4 Context

Another important issue to be investigated is the effect of contextual elements in speeding up or slowing down the rate of such activities. As Austin et al. (2006, p.9) argue, "an adverse context may often lead the social entrepreneur to seek to change the context itself, as often the social problem is deeply embedded in contextual factors".

Also, Zahra et al. (2009) suggest that future researchers would also investigate the contextual variables that influence social entrepreneurship. Moreover, Ajzen (1991) implies that his theory is designed to predict and explain human behaviour in specific contexts. Therefore, the answers to the following questions are analysed in order to elaborate an interpretation:

- 1 How do you evaluate your university as an entrepreneurial university?
- 2 Are there any courses related to social entrepreneurship/business in your curriculum?
- 3 Is business environment of the country appropriate for running a social enterprise/business venture?

According to Table 7, 62.4% of the respondents did not consider UT as an entrepreneurial university [based on the definition proposed by Ropke (1998)].<sup>7</sup> While only 13.6% of them believed so. In addition, 14.5% of them had courses related to social entrepreneurship, and 85.2% did not. On the other hand, 45.9% of the respondents did not believe that the business environment of the country is appropriate for running a social enterprise/business venture. This can be seen by considering Table 7 that according to this investigation, the main contextual elements were not appropriate to do so.

**Table 7** Critical contextual elements

	<i>Yes</i>		<i>No</i>		<i>No idea</i>		<i>No answer</i>	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Studying in an entrepreneurial university	43	13.6	197	62.4	75	23.7	1	0.3
Studying courses related to social entrepreneurship/business	46	14.5	269	85.2	0	0	1	0.3
Appropriateness of environment to run a social business	86	27.2	145	45.9	81	25.6	4	1.3

## 6 Conclusions

In the present study, the authors used Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour as the theoretical framework to investigate awareness, intentions/support, and the contextual elements which might lead to social entrepreneurial behaviour of the postgraduate students in three faculties of UT. As Ajzen (2002) argues, this theory has emerged as one of the most influential frameworks for the study of human actions and behaviour. Based on this theory, an individual will run a business, if "he/she has enough information to form an opinion, a favourable opinion, the intention and sufficient support/encouragement plus, and importantly, the belief that he/she has the knowledge and ability to do it" [Kirby and Ibrahim, (2011), p.411].

Most of the respondents (60.4%) claimed to be aware of the concept, while 38.9% were not, and less than 1% (0.7%) did not answer. However, the entrepreneurship students were more aware of the concept (95.1%) in comparison with non-entrepreneurship students (43.7%). Then, five definitions were proposed to examine their understanding of social entrepreneurship concept. According to the answers, the definition proposed by Dees (1998) was chosen as the most preferred one. While respectively 32.1% and 61.9% of the answers of entrepreneurship students show their awareness of 'international' and 'national' social entrepreneurs/institutions, only 24.2% and 42.5% of the answers for other postgraduate students showed their awareness. Similar to the findings of Kirby and Ibrahim (2011), there was some confusion about social entrepreneurship and only relatively weak awareness of national social entrepreneurs.

The findings show that most of both entrepreneurship (68.9%) and non-entrepreneurship (33.8%) students intend to work for themselves by starting their own businesses (45.2%), as discovered by other scholars like Seelos and Mair (2005), and Kirby and Ibrahim (2011). Moreover, this result is consistent with the theory of Ajzen (1991). This intention could lead in social entrepreneurial movements, such as establishing a business or a venture (Kirby and Ibrahim, 2010).

Based on the research, lack of finance and experience was the most important reason for not working for self, respectively with 72% and 60.1%. In addition, lack of confidence (51%) and high uncertainty in the market (44.1%) were among the most influential factors for the students. Moreover, the most needed support for initiating a business venture were respectively funding (36.3%), premises (15.6%), and training (14.3%). While to start a social enterprise, the support needed were funding (25.3%), role models and training (both with 16%). In addition, contextual elements, which are of paramount importance (Sahlman, 1996), were not appropriate to run a social business or a venture in the eyes of the respondents.

## **7 Limitations**

The present study has certain limitations that need to be taken into account. Like any other survey research, there were two primary limitations. First, the survey was more expensive and time-consuming than other methods. However, here many cost-saving approaches were implemented to save time and money. In other words, one of the main limitations in the present study was the limited access to a large number of postgraduate students in UT. Therefore, we concentrated on postgraduates in three faculties – Faculty of Entrepreneurship, Faculty of Management, and College of Engineering-in order to become able to compare the findings between entrepreneurship, and non-entrepreneurship students. Second, because it was necessary to elaborate the probable outcomes, the questionnaire underwent modest revisions to fit into the context. Moreover, questionnaires were distributed and returned in a way that maintained the privacy and anonymity of respondents. Also, the survey was conducted in one institution, i.e., UT, which are the first rank university and also the symbol of higher education of the country. This might lead to some limitations in generalisation of the results. Although following different sampling procedures might increase confidence in the generalisation of the results.

## **8 Theoretical and practical implications**

Based on the findings, three main practical implications are identified by this research:

- 1 There is a need to develop social entrepreneurship education in higher education. Then, this requires revision to the present curriculum; as it is not well discussed and established in the higher education system of the country. Therefore, it is suggested to the higher education officials that they put curriculum change in their agenda. Also, at university level, the social aspect of the higher education institutes needs greater attention.
- 2 Fostering an entrepreneurial culture that encourages and supports students, particularly post-graduates in the context of establishing new social ventures or businesses, needs attention.
- 3 Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour could be used to promote social entrepreneurial behaviour among students. The theory should be more discussed in the practical and theoretical areas. In this way, devising different scenarios and solutions becomes more possible. Moreover, theoretical implications might arise from these studies. As mentioned earlier, if young people are made aware of the concept of social entrepreneurship, recognise its role and importance to society and believe they have the ability to create a new venture, they will do so. Then, that is where theory and practice come together, and social entrepreneurship realises.

## **9 Directions for future research**

In sum, as it is discussed earlier, development of social entrepreneurship could lead to socio-economic development of the regions and realising a sustainable society. The present study offers some future directions in this field, the most important amongst which are:

- 1 To conduct more detailed research in the field of social entrepreneurship education in universities in Iran and elsewhere, as this might lead to promotion of social entrepreneurship, from both practical and theoretical points of view. Moreover, there is a substantial gap in this field, at least in developing countries like Iran.
- 2 To investigate the history and background of social entrepreneurship in Iran and other developing countries. This research stream would elaborate the concept and its roots in the context in question, and consequently would lead to more appropriate solutions and implications based on the context.
- 3 To study the relationships between the constructs of Ajzen's (1991) theory. Quantitative research will clarify the causes and effects of this theory, and therefore might shed more light on the issue in question.
- 4 To examine the effect of contextual elements more precisely and carefully to become able to neutralise the negative effects, and to empower the positive ones. In this manner, policy makers and researchers will be able to set more effective and efficient goals and policies.

- 5 To investigate the most appropriate social entrepreneurship education techniques to be used for different graduate and postgraduate students in order make them more eager and intended to run social businesses/ enterprises in an entrepreneurial manner.

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## Notes

- 1 "Ashoka is the global association of the world's leading social entrepreneurs – men and women with system changing solutions for the world's most urgent social problems. Since 1981, we have elected over 2,500 leading social entrepreneurs as Ashoka Fellows, providing them with living stipends, professional support, and access to a global network of peers in 70 countries" Source: <http://www.ashoka.org>.
- 2 <http://www.zoroastrian.org.uk/vohuman/Article/Seth%20Maneckji%20Limji%20Hataria.htm>.
- 3 Zoroastrian refugees who fled Iran were the Parsis in India.
- 4 <http://www.zoroastrian.org.uk/vohuman/Article/Seth%20Maneckji%20Limji%20Hataria.htm>.
- 5 A national plan initiated and directed by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology.
- 6 A prominent Iranian Scientist, Researcher and Distinguished Professor of UT, also known as the 'Father of Iranian Physics'.
- 7 "Ropke (1998) considers the entrepreneurial university as an "Entrepreneur Organization" and classifies his views in three items: first, a university, as an organization, adopts an entrepreneurial management style, Second, its members act entrepreneurially, and third, it follows an entrepreneurial pattern to interact with its environment" (Salamzadeh et al., 2011a).