ARK Policy Brief

Move fast and mend things: Social innovation and universities

Jonny Hanson, Kevin Mulligan and Christopher Baird

Social innovation involves the development and implementation of new ideas, practices, products, services or models that address societal challenges and create social value for communities and society (Salisbury and Morris, 2023). In Northern Ireland, over a quarter century after the Belfast/ Good Friday Agreement, these challenges include persistent divisions and inequalities, alongside ongoing political, and growing environmental, instabilities. Previous reports have helped to explain how social innovation in Northern Ireland could address challenges like these (Norman et al., 2013; MATRIX, 2014; Sachrajda and Williams, 2016). They have, for instance, identified key actors, barriers, opportunities and frameworks. Similarly, Northern Ireland's two main universities – Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and Ulster University (UU) – also play important roles in addressing its challenges, especially in their role as anchor institutions.

Yet limited attention has been paid to how social innovation and universities in Northern Ireland can be combined to better address its interlinked social, economic and environmental challenges. This Policy Brief considers this in three ways. Firstly, it assesses the relationship between social innovation and universities in general. Secondly, it considers this connection in the context of Northern Ireland, including in relation to the public, private, and voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE), sectors. And finally, it provides a case study of ARK's 2025 social hackathon as an example of university-based social innovation in practice. Throughout, our central argument is that more and better social innovation with students, staff and stakeholders can help universities in Northern Ireland address its social challenges and contribute to their institutional missions.

Social innovation and universities

Social innovation is a broad and often contested concept. Although it generally refers to a process of organisations and individuals developing new responses to unmet social needs and challenges, its meaning can vary across different policy, practice and research settings. Furthermore, it can also involve more fundamental changes in relationships, decision-making dynamics or the distribution of power.

Social innovation is distinct from, but can take place within, the social economy. The social economy comprises a sphere of economic activity involving organisations that prioritise social objectives over the maximisation of profit, and which can include social enterprises. Social innovation, however, is not defined by a particular organisational form or sector. Rather, it describes the processes through which new ideas, practices, relationships and forms of collaboration are developed and implemented to address social challenges. Such innovation can emerge within social enterprises and other social economy organisations, but also within public institutions, universities, private businesses and communities. Social innovation therefore provides a useful lens for understanding how different actors, including universities, can contribute to addressing societal challenges (Salisbury and Morris, 2024).

Universities themselves are increasingly expected to contribute to social innovation as part of their wider civic, social and economic roles. This can take the form of teaching, research, knowledge exchange and community engagement, among others. However, compared to commercial innovation, social innovation is often less visible and less supported. Disparate activities may be spread across Schools and Faculties, while institutional incentives do not always recognise or reward the effort involved in establishing and maintaining such initiatives. Universities can therefore address these barriers by adopting an engaged approach. This can contribute to enhanced social innovation by working more comprehensively and effectively with individuals and teams within and across institutions, as well as with wider communities of geography, practice and interest (Salisbury and Morris, 2023).

Recent policy developments reflect this shift. In the UK, the Civic University Commission recommended that universities formulate Civic University Agreements with local partners, based on the needs of their communities (UPP Foundation, 2019). These agreements set out how universities could work with local councils and other stakeholders to address shared local priorities. UU was a signatory of this initiative in 2019, while QUB launched its own Civic University Agreement in 2025.

The Northern Ireland context

Northern Ireland has a long record of social innovation, even if those who have been engaging in it have not always used the term. Community restorative justice and reconciliation initiatives, credit unions and community enterprise all grew from local efforts to meet unmet social needs. These examples illustrate how social innovation can emerge from communities themselves and can involve new services, approaches or power dynamics (Norman et al., 2013).

Social innovation gained greater policy recognition in Northern Ireland during the early to mid-2010s. The Building Change Trust (2008–2018), established with a £10 million grant from the Big Lottery Fund to strengthen Northern Ireland's VCSE sector, commissioned research from the Young Foundation (Norman et al., 2013; Sachrajda and Williams, 2016). This identified significant innovative activity, despite social innovation being "not a commonly used term". Sachrajda and Williams (2016) also made 15 recommendations in relation to developing a social innovation ecosystem in Northern Ireland, although there were limited references to universities' potential role in this. The Young Foundation's Amplify Northern Ireland programme expanded on the Building Change Trust-funded pilot work to deliver an intensive five-year social innovation programme in Belfast, Derry/Londonderry and Enniskillen (Sachrajda and Williams, 2016).

The then Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) also convened a social innovation panel, whose report shaped the Northern Ireland Executive's *Innovation Strategy for Northern Ireland 2014–2025*. Delivery fell largely to the previous Department for Social Development (DSD), with subsequent activity including a social innovation working group, an accelerator and further research. The panel also recognised universities' contributions through

knowledge transfer, support for social enterprises and research centres, while identifying a gap in dedicated social innovation provision within university and college curricula (MATRIX, 2014).

These early efforts expanded the foundation for social innovation, although sustaining and embedding the agenda across institutions and sectors remains a challenge. The suspension of the Northern Ireland Executive between 2017 and 2020, the closure of the Building Change Trust in 2018, the restructuring of government departments (DETI becoming the Department for the Economy [DfE], and DSD largely becoming the Department for Communities [DfC]), and the growing prominence of related agendas, such as social enterprise, community wealth building and inclusive innovation, have all shaped the landscape in which social innovation now operates. More fundamentally, social innovation cuts across conventional organisational and policy boundaries, spanning government departments, universities, civil society and business, reflecting the broader emphasis on collaboration within Northern Ireland's innovation ecosystem (Innovate UK, Department for the Economy and Invest Northern Ireland, 2025). This breadth creates opportunities for collaboration, but can make it hard to establish who is responsible for connecting and advancing activity.

Northern Ireland's two main universities are well placed to help address this challenge. As anchor institutions, they can provide continuity, convene partners across sectors, and connect teaching and research with local needs, including in the public, private and VCSE sectors. Both already support a diverse range of relevant activities with stakeholders (Table 1).

Table 1: Selected* social innovation activity at Northern Ireland's universities

Activity	Institution	Focus
Community partnerships		
Innovation Zones	QUB	Since 2016, partnerships with the Greater Shankill Children and Young People Zone and the Colin Neighbourhood Partnership to improve outcomes for children, young people and families
Science Shop	QUB and UU	Community and voluntary groups propose research questions that students answer through their coursework, with a single point of access across both universities
North West Community Wealth Building Partnership	UU	Named social partner and lead on leadership and succession planning in the North West pilot, jointly funded by DfE and DfC (2025)
Teaching and curricula		
Sustainability and Social Innovation (MBA module)	QUB	Students design and pitch social innovation initiatives, with visits to social ventures
Advanced Certificate in Social Enterprise	UU	Funded places for people working in or leading social enterprises

Activity	Institution	Focus
Remaking Cities (undergraduate module)	QUB	Co-taught with the University of Pittsburgh; explores social enterprise and regeneration in East Belfast with Eastside Partnership
Mini MBA Social Enterprise	UU	Delivered at the Derry~Londonderry campus, with fees funded by DfE
Student challenges		
Move fast and mend things social hackathon	QUB and UU	November 2025; run by ARK with QUB innovation and enterprise development staff, with challenges set by The Executive Office and Sustainable Ventures
IMPACT programme and Social Innovation Challenge	QUB	Multidisciplinary postgraduate teams co-design solutions with communities, such as 'Vacant to Vibrant' with the Shankill Partnership and BUILD community groups
Inspire Impact	QUB and Trinity College Dublin	Cross-border ideas programme focused on the UN Sustainable Development Goals
Research and policy		
ARK	QUB and UU	Joint social policy research centre
Clustering for Impact: shared services for social enterprise	UU and Atlantic Technological University	Cross-border study proposing a model for social enterprises to share functions such as HR, IT and finance; 2026 policy briefing to the NI Assembly's Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series
Northern Ireland Social Enterprise Sector Report 2025	QUB	Key research partner in the DfE-commissioned report
Queen's Communities and Place (QCAP)	QUB	Since 2021, work on the social economy, community wealth building, social value, and the social and solidarity economy in urban regeneration

*This is a non-exhaustive list of social innovation activities at universities in Northern Ireland.
Source: Authors' compilation from publicly available information provided by QUB, UU and programme partners.

While this work is promising, there is scope to make the university contribution more coherent and sustained. Neither institution has a dedicated social innovation strategy, and relevant work spans initiatives that are often organised under different institutional and policy agendas. Greater coordination could help connect existing efforts, creating further opportunities for student and staff involvement, and embed social innovation more systematically across teaching, research, knowledge exchange and civic engagement. Strengthening collaboration within and between universities, and with their partners in the public, private and VCSE sectors, would help build on existing capabilities rather than starting from scratch (Salisbury and Morris, 2023). The following case study illustrates one practical approach.

Case study: ARK's social hackathon

A practical example of social innovation in a university setting that involved students, staff and stakeholders was ARK's move fast and mend things social hackathon. Social hackathons are structured group problem-solving events that focus on real-world social challenges and opportunities (Stepczak, 2023). ARK's event was designed as an intense one-day initiative involving QUB and UU students in addressing social policy challenges in Northern Ireland, and developing and pitching solutions to them. The event took place at QUB's One Elmwood on 18 November 2025, as part of Global Entrepreneurship Week and ARK's 25th anniversary programme. In doing so, it translated social innovation from an abstract concept into a facilitated learning and problem-solving format, including for students and stakeholders who were new to the idea.

Move fast and mend things involved 25 participants from 11 countries. QUB innovation and enterprise development staff were involved in co-designing and co-planning the event, and also acted as mentors to the student groups. The students themselves represented multiple degree pathways, including sociology, law and computer science, and different educational levels, from undergraduate to masters and PhD. The Executive Office (TEO) and Sustainable Ventures (SV), a venture capital fund, provided the social hackathon challenges, while a range of leaders from university, civil society and social enterprise settings comprised the judging panel.

The day progressed from the welcome, team formation and icebreakers to client problem statement, research, mentor check-ins, solution design, presentation preparation and public pitching. This structured approach allowed for time to be spent on research and exploration, encouraging students to understand the problem before designing an intervention (Stepczak, 2023). Staff from TEO and SV were present to deliver and clarify their respective challenges with their assigned student teams. Their briefs focused on segregation and transport, integration and minority ethnic communities, and the energy transition in rural communities.

Team one proposed community shuttle buses and longer-term integrated transport hubs to connect divided communities and repurpose interfaces as shared mobility spaces. Team two proposed "The Craic in Common Ground," using music, dance, sport and food to create shared social spaces and increase contact between ethnic communities. Team three proposed Rural Open Sourced Energy, or R.O.S.E., power banks as a transparent and community-oriented approach to energy storage and rural resilience. The client organisations were also present to hear these projects pitched to the judging panel, who assessed them based on: problem understanding; innovation and creativity; social impact; feasibility and sustainability; and presentation quality.

This social hackathon demonstrates how social innovation can be embedded into university activities, with multiple benefits for students, staff and stakeholders. For students, the event provided an opportunity for experiential learning, working across disciplines to rapidly interpret, respond to and present on real social problems. For external organisations, the format created focused engagement with existing challenges from new perspectives. And for the institutions, the initiative provided a practical model of cross-university and cross-faculty collaboration at the intersection of social policy, social innovation and student engagement.

A one-day social hackathon cannot solve entrenched issues such as segregation, integration or energy transitions. Nevertheless, its real value lies in the learning and relational opportunities for all of its participants, reflecting the *process-oriented* nature of social innovation. Beyond the event itself, for instance, the winning team went on to pitch their idea at a QUB Students' Union enterprise competition, while one undergraduate participant reported that taking part helped to give them the confidence to apply for a Master's programme. As such, social hackathons can provide an accessible and applied entry point into social innovation for students, staff and stakeholders alike.

Conclusion

Social innovation is increasingly important, both for universities *and* for addressing interconnected social, economic and environmental challenges. In Northern Ireland, social innovation has developed significantly over the last two decades, building on strong traditions of tackling societal problems. This includes multiple initiatives within and between QUB and UU. Nevertheless, social innovation by and with universities in Northern Ireland could be expanded and improved, their challenging fiscal context notwithstanding. Initiatives that may help to achieve this goal include: social innovation strategy development; more cross-university/faculty social innovation modules, assessments and activities; better recognition of social innovation experience in staff recruitment and promotion; more focused collaboration with small and medium enterprises (SMEs); and a joint QUB-UU social innovation/enterprise incubator/accelerator. Whether through these or other approaches, and in summary, more and better social innovation with students, staff and stakeholders can help universities in Northern Ireland address its social challenges *and* contribute to their institutional missions.

References:

Innovate UK, Department for the Economy and Invest Northern Ireland (2025) *Collaborative Innovation Plan for Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Invest Northern Ireland.

MATRIX (2014) *Harnessing the Power of Social Innovation to Drive the Northern Ireland Economy*. Belfast: Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Norman, W., Russell, C., Clarke, K. and Mackin, D. (2013) *Growing Social Innovation in Northern Ireland*. London: The Young Foundation.

Sachrajda, A. and Williams, K. (2016) *Fertile Ground: Creating the Conditions for Social Innovation to Flourish in Northern Ireland*. London: The Young Foundation.

Salisbury, E. and Morris, V. (2023) *Report on the State of the Art: Analysing the State of the Art of Social Innovation in Higher Education Institutions*. London: INNONEXUS.

Stepczak, P. (2023) 'Unlocking social solutions: Exploring the power of social hackathons'. Available at: https://medium.com/open-working-reuse/unlocking-social-solutions-exploring-the-power-of-social-hackathons-4e83ccbdbe5f (Accessed 13 August 2026).

UPP Foundation (2019) *Truly Civic: Strengthening the Connection between Universities and their Places*. Civic University Commission final report. London: UPP Foundation.

About the authors:

The authors are all based at QUB. **Dr Jonny Hanson** is ARK's Survey Manager, a Research Fellow in the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work and a former social entrepreneur. **Dr Kevin Mulligan** is a Senior Lecturer in Innovation and Strategy and **Dr Christopher Baird** is a Lecturer in Social Entrepreneurship, both at Queen's Business School.

In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences
Ulster University
York Street, Belfast, BT15 1ED

Tel: 028 9536 5611 Email: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work
Queen's University Belfast
20 College Green, Belfast, BT7 1LN

Tel: 028 9097 3034 Email: info@ark.ac.uk