



RESEARCH ARTICLE

PERFORMANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF A UNIVERSITY SOCIAL INCUBATOR: METHODOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT, IMPLEMENTATION AND ADAPTATION OF THE PORTO SUL SOCIAL INCUBATOR (2023–2026)

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the development of management, performance and methodological adaptation within the Porto Sul Social Incubator (ISPS), an outreach project of the State University of Santa Cruz (UESC), developed in partnership with Bahia Mineração (BAMIN) between 2023 and the first half of 2026. This is an applied, descriptive and analytical study employing both qualitative and quantitative approaches, conducted through a case study, documentary research and a literature review. Management plans, reports, activity records, spreadsheets, training materials and institutional dashboards were analysed. The results recorded 653 mobilisation activities, reaching 8,645 people across 28 communities, with 16 entrepreneurs selected and 18 training topics delivered. A substantial increase in advisory sessions was observed, from seven in 2023 to 22 in 2025, accompanied by an increase in average participation. Methodological adaptations were also identified, including the replacement of a formal public call with invitation letters, cohort restructuring, the expansion of training content and the introduction of complementary activities. The study concludes that the ISPS underwent progressive organisational structuring, intensified participant support and demonstrated adaptive capacity, although more systematic indicators of participant retention and enterprise outcomes are still required.

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INTRODUCTION

Business incubators occupy a central position in contemporary debates on entrepreneurship, innovation and regional development, particularly by providing institutional conditions that enable early-stage initiatives to address challenges associated with limited resources, managerial weaknesses and difficulties in accessing markets. In the literature, these structures are understood as support environments capable of bringing together knowledge, infrastructure, entrepreneurial training and collaborative networks in support of the creation and strengthening of new ventures. Their role therefore extends beyond the provision of physical premises for nascent businesses and encompasses the mediation of ideas, local capabilities, support institutions and opportunities for socio-economic integration. The expansion of this field has encouraged the emergence of different forms of incubation, including social incubators. These organisations incorporate objectives that extend beyond the economic dimension of ventures, including the promotion of productive inclusion, employment and income generation, community strengthening and territorial development. Within this context, social incubation may be understood as a process of technical, educational and institutional support provided to individual or

collective initiatives seeking to generate economic and social value within their territories. When linked to universities, social incubators assume additional importance because they enable closer connections between academic knowledge, university outreach and concrete societal demands. These initiatives embody what has been described as the university's 'third mission', by extending institutional engagement beyond teaching and research and contributing to the social application of knowledge. Through training, advisory support, institutional networking and technical assistance, university incubators can strengthen community-based initiatives and contribute to the development of entrepreneurship, social innovation and sustainable development. It is within this context that the Porto Sul Social Incubator (ISPS), the object of this study, is situated. The ISPS is a university outreach project of the State University of Santa Cruz (UESC), developed in partnership with Bahia Mineração (BAMIN) and linked to the Entrepreneurship Support Programme and to socio-environmental programmes associated with the Porto Sul project. Its activities are primarily directed towards individual and collective entrepreneurial ventures and initiatives located within the Enterprise Surrounding Area and the Direct Area of Influence of the Porto Sul project, in the municipality of

Ilhéus, Bahia. In this way, the incubator connects the university's outreach activities with community demands and with socio-environmental responsibility initiatives developed in partnership with BAMIN. The trajectory of the ISPS, analysed from 2023 to the first half of 2026, encompassed the stages of modelling, mobilisation, selection, pre-incubation and incubation. During this period, methodological instruments, training materials, activity records, spreadsheets, reports and dashboards were developed to monitor implementation and participant development. The documentation demonstrates that the incubator did not simply implement a previously defined model, but progressively developed and refined its methodology throughout implementation, making adjustments according to territorial characteristics, the profile of entrepreneurs and demands identified during the process. The analysis of the ISPS experience is relevant because the performance of a social incubator should not be assessed solely on the basis of the number of activities undertaken or ventures supported. It is necessary to examine the relationship between planning and implementation, the quality of monitoring instruments, the intensity of advisory support, participant engagement, collaboration with partners and the organisation's capacity to learn and adapt its procedures. From this perspective, changes introduced during implementation may represent not merely deviations from the original plan, but also evidence of adaptive capacity and organisational learning. Although the literature recognises the importance of incubators for entrepreneurship, innovation and territorial development, studies that integrate the analysis of management, performance and methodological adaptation in university-based social incubators remain limited. This gap is particularly relevant in territories characterised by social inequalities, productive vulnerabilities and the need for collaboration among universities, businesses, communities and support institutions. The analysis of the ISPS therefore provides an opportunity to understand how a university outreach project, developed by UESC in partnership with BAMIN, organises its activities, monitors its results and responds to the concrete conditions of its territory.

Against this background, the following research question is formulated: How did the Porto Sul Social Incubator structure and adapt its management and incubation model between 2023 and the first half of 2026, and what evidence of performance can be identified in the relationship between planned activities, implemented activities and process outcomes?. The overall objective of this article is to analyse the development of management and performance within the Porto Sul Social Incubator between 2023 and the first half of 2026, considering the relationship between planning, implementation, methodological adaptation and outcomes across the different stages of incubation. Specifically, the study seeks to characterise the methodological development of the ISPS; compare planned and implemented activities across the different stages; analyse indicators of mobilisation, selection, pre-incubation and incubation; identify the main methodological adjustments introduced during implementation; assess evidence of performance and adaptive capacity; and identify limitations and opportunities for improving incubator management. This study is justified by the social, academic and institutional relevance of the ISPS, whose activities contribute to strengthening entrepreneurial initiatives, productive inclusion, employment and income generation, and community development in areas surrounding the Porto Sul project.

Academically, the research contributes to studies of management, performance and adaptive capacity in university-based social incubators. Institutionally, systematising the incubator's trajectory may contribute to improving planning, monitoring and evaluation instruments, while strengthening the initiative's organisational memory and supporting future decision-making by UESC, BAMIN and other participating institutions. The article is organised into four sections in addition to this introduction. The second section presents the theoretical framework concerning business incubators, social incubators, management and performance, university incubators, social innovation and territorial development. The third section describes the methodological procedures adopted, including the research design, unit of analysis, documentary sources and data-analysis techniques. The fourth section presents and discusses the results relating to modelling, mobilisation, selection, pre-incubation, incubation and the methodological adaptations identified throughout the ISPS trajectory. Finally, the fifth section presents the conclusions, summarising the main findings, contributions, limitations and opportunities for improving the management and evaluation of the incubator.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Business Incubators and Innovation Environments: Business incubators are intermediary organisations designed to support ventures at an early stage or undergoing consolidation. Their activities include the provision of infrastructure, technical guidance, managerial training, access to networks, innovation support and connections with public, private and academic institutions. Mian (1996) conceptualises incubators as structures capable of bringing together knowledge generated by universities and research centres with the conditions required for its economic and social application. From this perspective, the incubator performs a mediating function between knowledge, entrepreneurship and markets. Hackett and Dilts (2004) emphasise that incubation should be understood as a structured organisational process rather than merely the provision of physical space or isolated services. According to these authors, incubators create conditions that enable new ventures to develop capabilities, reduce uncertainty and increase their prospects of survival and growth. This approach shifts the focus from the physical infrastructure of the incubator towards the processes of monitoring, learning, selection and support provided to entrepreneurs.

The literature also recognises that incubators take different institutional forms and may operate in technological, traditional, social, cultural, agro-industrial or cooperative sectors. Grimaldi and Grandi (2005) observe that incubation models vary according to institutional objectives, the profile of supported ventures, funding sources and relationships established with the external environment. Consequently, there is no single incubator model applicable to all contexts, and it is necessary to consider the economic, social and territorial specificities of each experience. The role of incubators is also associated with the articulation of different actors. Siegel, (Siegel, Westhead, and Wright, 2003) argue that these environments contribute to knowledge and technology transfer processes by connecting researchers, entrepreneurs, investors and support organisations. Lockett and Wright (2005), in turn, highlight that incubators facilitate interaction among individuals, organisations and knowledge, stimulating processes of learning, collaboration and opportunity creation.

In this sense, incubators may be understood as components of innovation ecosystems. They do not operate in isolation but form part of networks involving universities, businesses, governments, civil-society organisations, financial institutions and communities. Hausberg and Korreck (2020) argue that, despite the diversity of definitions and formats, incubators share an institutional commitment to the creation and development of new ventures. The authors also emphasise that contemporary incubators should be analysed in relation to their position within entrepreneurial and innovation ecosystems. Within the Brazilian context, incubators have become increasingly established through closer relationships between universities, research centres, public policies and entrepreneurship-support organisations. Fiates (2014) considers these environments strategic mechanisms for connecting knowledge, innovation and development, while Plonski (2010) highlights their importance in transforming scientific knowledge into solutions with economic and social value. Incubators can therefore contribute not only to business creation but also to strengthening entrepreneurial, institutional and territorial capabilities. Understanding incubators as support organisations also requires attention to their management processes. The availability of resources and services does not, in itself, guarantee incubator performance. It is necessary to assess how objectives are defined, how participants are selected, how activities are monitored and how results are recorded and used to inform decisions. Bergek and Norrman (2008) argue that incubator performance should be understood in terms of the correspondence between objectives and outcomes. Thus, an incubator may be considered successful when its achievements are consistent with its mission, target population and institutional goals. Performance evaluation should also consider factors associated with the incubation process. Studies in this field highlight the importance of venture selection, monitoring intensity, quality of assistance, resource availability and the management team's networking capacity. Recent reviews identify entry and exit criteria, managerial capabilities, service provision, institutional structure, social capital and available resources as relevant dimensions of performance. This perspective is particularly important for the present study because it allows the ISPS to be analysed beyond the number of activities undertaken. Incubator performance may be observed through the interaction between planning, implementation, monitoring, participant engagement, training provision, territorial mobilisation and methodological adaptability.

Social Incubators and Social Entrepreneurship: Social incubators have emerged as a form of incubation oriented towards the generation of social value, productive inclusion, community strengthening and territorial development. Although they share characteristics with traditional business incubators, they differ in the central importance attributed to their social mission and in the criteria used to assess their outcomes. Dees (2001) conceptualises social entrepreneurship as a form of action aimed at transforming reality by identifying social problems, mobilising resources and creating innovative solutions. From this perspective, social entrepreneurs are not guided exclusively by profit maximisation but by the creation of social value in a sustainable manner. Social incubators therefore provide support that enables individuals, groups and organisations to develop initiatives capable of responding to collective needs.

Nicholls (2006) argues that social entrepreneurship represents an innovative response to problems that are not adequately addressed by either markets or the state. In this approach, social innovation is not restricted to the development of products or technologies, but may involve new forms of organisation, collaboration, governance and resource mobilisation. Social incubators operate precisely within this space, supporting initiatives seeking to generate positive change in communities and territories. Mair and Martí (2006) define social entrepreneurship as a process of creating social value through the innovative combination of resources. This perspective is relevant to understanding social incubators because many initiatives supported by them operate under conditions of financial scarcity, limited infrastructure and restricted market access. The incubation process helps organise resources, develop capabilities and strengthen collaborative networks. Austin, Stevenson and Wei-Skillern (2006) observe that social ventures face specific challenges related to financial sustainability, multiple objectives, dependence on partnerships and the need to reconcile economic and social outcomes. Social incubators can therefore provide managerial training, strategic guidance, resource-mobilisation support, partnership development and continuous monitoring. The activities of such incubators should not be reduced to supporting formalised businesses. In many cases, they work with productive groups, associations, cooperatives, community initiatives, impact ventures, solidarity-economy organisations and projects that are still in the process of being structured. The incubation process may involve the organisation of ideas, development of business models, definition of market strategies, improvement of financial management and strengthening of collective decision-making capabilities.

Yunus (2010) contributes to this debate by arguing that social businesses can be structured to address problems related to poverty, exclusion, education, health and environmental sustainability. In this context, sustainability does not refer solely to profit generation but also to the capacity of an initiative to continue operating and producing social benefits over time. This perspective broadens the criteria for evaluating social incubators, incorporating autonomy, impact, participation, inclusion and community strengthening. Social incubators are also closely connected with the solidarity economy and community-based initiatives. In such experiences, economic activity is frequently associated with collaboration, collective participation and the valorisation of local knowledge. The objective is not merely to develop individual entrepreneurs, but to strengthen groups and organisations capable of acting collectively within the territory. For this reason, social innovation may manifest itself through the creation of new relationships, processes and organisational forms. An incubator may generate innovation by bringing together actors who previously did not collaborate, democratising access to knowledge or developing methodologies appropriate to the circumstances of vulnerable groups. Innovation should therefore be analysed not only in terms of material outcomes but also through the processes of learning, participation and networking established during incubation.

Management, Performance and Methodological Adaptation: Incubator management involves a set of decisions concerning planning, participant selection, service provision, activity monitoring, partner mobilisation and outcome evaluation.

Within this process, the definition of objectives and indicators is fundamental to guiding implementation and identifying progress, limitations and the need for change. Bergek and Norrman (2008) propose that incubators should be analysed through dimensions such as infrastructure, selection, support and mediation. Infrastructure refers to the material and institutional conditions provided; selection concerns entry criteria and the alignment between venture profiles and incubator objectives; support encompasses training, advisory services and other forms of assistance; and mediation relates to networking with external organisations and resources. Hackett and Dilts (2004) emphasise that incubation performance depends on the combination of selection quality, monitoring and business-assistance intensity, and resource availability. This contribution is important because it demonstrates that incubator outcomes do not depend solely on the characteristics of the supported ventures. They are also influenced by the manner in which the organisation structures its processes and monitors implementation.

Performance evaluation may employ both quantitative and qualitative indicators. Quantitative indicators may include the number of mobilisation activities, participants, communities reached, entrepreneurs selected, advisory sessions delivered, training activities completed and partnerships established. Qualitative indicators may include the appropriateness of training content, quality of support, participants' perceptions, development of managerial capabilities and contribution to territorial development. However, the use of indicators requires caution. The number of activities undertaken does not, by itself, reveal the quality of outcomes. A high volume of activities may simply reflect an expansion in provision without necessarily indicating learning, retention or improvements in venture performance. Similarly, a smaller number of participants does not necessarily indicate poor performance if support has been intensive, personalised and appropriate to participants' needs. Reviews of the literature demonstrate that incubator evaluation should incorporate both tangible and intangible dimensions. In addition to indicators such as growth, survival, sales and employment generation, it is necessary to consider social capital, networks, learning, institutional reputation, relationship quality and networking capacity. A systematic review of 74 studies identified social capital as one of the dimensions most frequently emphasised in incubator performance assessment. This approach is particularly relevant to social incubators, where outcomes may take the form of strengthened relationships, increased trust, improved organisational capacity, access to new knowledge and participation in networks. Such outcomes may not immediately translate into financial indicators, but they can be decisive for venture sustainability and territorial transformation. Another important element is adaptive capacity. The implementation of an incubation programme takes place in contexts characterised by uncertainty, institutional changes, different levels of venture maturity and varied territorial conditions. Planning should therefore provide guidance without preventing adjustments when these become necessary during implementation. Methodological adaptation may occur when a planned activity is modified, expanded, replaced or complemented. Replacing a formal public call with invitation letters, for example, may indicate a mobilisation strategy better suited to the initial conditions of engagement. Similarly, the inclusion of new content, cohort restructuring or the creation of complementary activities may represent responses to needs identified during implementation.

Adaptation, however, becomes institutional learning only when it is recorded, analysed and incorporated into management processes. This requires documenting the activity originally planned, the change introduced, the rationale for the change, the outcomes observed and the decision regarding its continuation. Such a procedure makes it possible to distinguish planned adaptation from an unmonitored circumstantial alteration. In the case of the ISPS, this perspective enables analysis of the relationship between adherence and flexibility. Adherence indicates the capacity to implement what was planned, whereas flexibility reflects the capacity to adjust the process when actual conditions require change. Institutional performance therefore results from balancing predictability with responsiveness.

University Incubators and the University's Third Mission:

University incubators are associated with the transformation of the role of higher education institutions within society. In addition to producing and transmitting knowledge, universities are increasingly expected to contribute directly to economic, social, technological and territorial development. Etzkowitz (2003) associates this movement with the entrepreneurial university and interaction among universities, government and industry, commonly referred to as the Triple Helix. Within this model, the university acts as a producer of knowledge, educator and agent of development. University incubators constitute institutional mechanisms through which academic knowledge can be transformed into products, services, ventures and applied solutions. They may also facilitate interaction among students, academics, researchers, businesses, social organisations and communities. Lockett and Wright (2005) emphasise that university incubators facilitate the creation of ventures associated with academic knowledge and technology transfer. Although this perspective was initially associated with technology-based companies, it can be extended to social and community initiatives. In this case, transferred knowledge is not limited to patents or technologies but includes management methodologies, planning, organisation, communication and capacity development. The university's so-called third mission is directly related to this expansion. Compagnucci and Spigarelli (2020) observe that the third mission encompasses activities through which higher education institutions contribute to economic and social development, including knowledge transfer, innovation, outreach and interaction with different sectors of society. University-based social incubators embody this function by connecting academic knowledge with community needs. This relationship should not be understood as a one-way transfer in which the university simply transmits knowledge to beneficiaries. Rather, social incubation can constitute a process of mutual learning in which community knowledge also influences methodologies, content and solutions developed. This participatory dimension is essential because supported initiatives are embedded in specific social realities. Entrepreneurs possess knowledge of territorial conditions, community relationships, local markets and the problems faced by residents. Universities contribute technical and analytical tools, but the development of solutions depends on interaction between academic and experiential knowledge. University incubators can also strengthen the education of students and professionals involved. Participation in advisory, research and outreach activities enables the development of skills related to management, communication, problem analysis, social responsibility and interdisciplinary practice. Thus, the benefits of incubation extend both to supported ventures and to the

academic community itself. In the case of the Porto Sul Social Incubator, its university dimension is associated with the outreach activities of UESC and its engagement with institutions linked to the regional innovation ecosystem. The university's involvement enables the mobilisation of knowledge, professionals, infrastructure and collaborative networks, while the partnership with BAMIN connects the project with broader socio-environmental initiatives and territorial demands associated with the Porto Sul project.

METHODOLOGICAL

This research is characterised as applied, descriptive and analytical, employing both qualitative and quantitative approaches and conducted through documentary research, a literature review and a case study. The case-study approach was selected because it enables an in-depth analysis of the Porto Sul Social Incubator (ISPS) within its institutional and territorial context, considering its relationship with the State University of Santa Cruz (UESC), Bahia Mineração (BAMIN), the Entrepreneurship Support Programme and the communities located within the Enterprise Surrounding Area and the Direct Area of Influence of the Porto Sul project. The temporal scope covers the period from 2023 to the first half of 2026, encompassing the stages of modelling, mobilisation, selection, pre-incubation and incubation. The investigation used secondary data obtained from the ISPS Management Plan, technical reports for 2023, 2024 and 2025, records from the first half of 2026, as well as spreadsheets, forms, invitation letters, mobilisation materials, training content, advisory records, tables, graphs and institutional dashboards. Documents were purposively selected according to their direct relevance to the trajectory and operation of the incubator.

Data analysis was conducted across two dimensions. The quantitative dimension examined indicators relating to mobilisation activities, people engaged, communities reached, entrepreneurs selected, training topics, advisory sessions, participation, complementary activities and institutional partnerships. These data were organised using absolute and relative frequencies, means and simple rates. In the qualitative dimension, documents were analysed using content-analysis procedures, following Bardin (2011), in order to identify management strategies, planned activities, implemented activities, monitoring mechanisms, partial outcomes and methodological changes. A comparison was also undertaken between planning and implementation. Identified changes were classified as implementation according to plan, partial implementation, expansion, adaptation, non-implementation or creation of a new activity. Among the principal documented adjustments were the replacement of the formal public call with invitation letters, cohort restructuring, expansion of complementary activities, inclusion of new training content and intensification of advisory support. The adherence index between planned and implemented activities was considered only where the documents provided sufficient data to establish such a relationship, thereby avoiding the calculation of percentages without documentary support. The research did not involve interviews, questionnaires or direct intervention with participants and was based exclusively on institutional documents and secondary data. Limitations include dependence on the quality of existing records, the availability of aggregated information, the fact that part of the incubation stage was still ongoing, and the inability to automatically generalise the findings to other social incubators. Nevertheless,

the procedures adopted enabled an analysis of the development of ISPS management, its implementation capacity, monitoring mechanisms and adaptations undertaken throughout the incubation process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Structuring and Modelling of the Incubator: The modelling of the ISPS took place between January and September 2023. During this period, 12 strategic initiatives involving 75 participants were recorded. Activities included institutional alignment, analysis of incubation experiences, development of management instruments, methodological structuring, creation of the visual identity and engagement with partner institutions. The modelling process involved the Innovation and Technology Transfer Office of the State University of Santa Cruz (NIT/UESC), Bahia Mineração (BAMIN), the Ilhéus Technology-Based Business Incubator (INETI), CEPEDI and Broto/UESC. This process demonstrates that the ISPS was conceived as part of a broader institutional network. Its management did not depend exclusively on an internal structure but on collaboration among the university, company, socio-environmental programmes, innovation institutions and communities. The modelling process also enabled the scope, target population and operational stages to be defined. The Management Plan established that the incubator should support individual and collective ventures or initiatives located primarily within the Enterprise Surrounding Area and the Direct Area of Influence of the Porto Sul project. The methodological structure was organised into successive stages: mobilisation; selection; pre-incubation; incubation; and post-incubation. The existence of this sequence indicates an effort to institutionalise the process. The incubator was not structured as a collection of isolated activities but as a continuous support pathway.

Territorial Mobilisation: Between 2023 and the first half of 2026, 653 mobilisation activities were recorded, reaching 8,645 people across 28 communities. Of this total, 181 mobilisation activities were conducted in person and 472 digitally. Digital activities accounted for approximately 72.3% of the total, while face-to-face activities represented approximately 27.7%. The annual data demonstrate variation in the volume of activities and people reached, according to Table 2.

Table 1. General Indicators of the ISPS

Indicator	Result
Total mobilisation activities	653
People engaged	8,645
Communities reached	28
Face-to-face mobilisation activities	181
Digital mobilisation activities	472
Digital share	72.3%
Face-to-face share	27.7%

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the ISPS Consolidated Report (2026).

Table 2. Mobilisation activities

Year	Mobilisation activities	People reached
2023	149	3,577
2024	188	1,251
2025	256	2,989
2026*	60	828

*First half of 2026. Source: Prepared by the authors based on the ISPS Consolidated Report (2026).

The number of mobilisation activities increased from 149 in 2023 to 256 in 2025. This increase suggests an intensification of the incubator's operational presence, although the number of people reached varied across the years. The difference between the volume of mobilisation activities and the number of people reached indicates that mobilisation performance should not be interpreted solely in terms of the number of activities. Average reach, activity type, audience and conversion into participation in subsequent stages should also be considered. In this regard, mobilisation served two functions. First, it publicised the existence of the incubator. Secondly, it created opportunities to identify entrepreneurial potential and strengthen the institution's connection with communities. The combination of face-to-face and digital activities increased the ISPS's territorial reach, particularly in a territory comprising geographically dispersed communities.

Selection and Cohort Composition: The selection stage recorded 25 invitation letters, 21 selection-support activities, 16 entrepreneurs selected and representation from 12 communities.

Table 3. Selection and Cohort indicator

Indicator	Result
Invitation letters	25
Selection-support activities	21
Entrepreneurs selected	16
Communities represented	12
Withdrawals or disengagements	10

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the ISPS Consolidated Report (2026).

One of the main methodological adjustments was the replacement of a formal public call with invitation letters. This decision represents an adaptation to the initial context of the incubator and to the concrete conditions for mobilising potential participants. The use of invitation letters may be interpreted as a more direct engagement strategy with the territory. Rather than relying exclusively on a formal public call, the incubator used targeted communication mechanisms that were potentially more compatible with the level of development of the initiatives and the relationships established within communities. However, the record of 10 withdrawals or disengagements demonstrates that entering the incubation process does not guarantee participant retention. This indicator should be accompanied by additional information, such as: reasons for withdrawal; stage at which disengagement occurred; characteristics of the ventures; distance or accessibility difficulties ;scheduling constraints ;maturity level of the initiative;participants' perceptions of the activities.

Without such information, it is not possible to attribute causality to the withdrawals. Nevertheless, the finding demonstrates the importance of retention indicators in incubator management. The recorded number of active entrepreneurs by year was:

Table 4 . Active entrepreneurs

Year	Active entrepreneurs
2023	8
2024	9
2025	14
2026	6

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the ISPS Consolidated Report (2026).

The variation demonstrates that the participant portfolio was dynamic. The increase observed in 2025 suggests an expansion in support capacity, whereas the reduction in the first half of 2026 should be interpreted in light of the partial period and the specific stage of the process.

Pre-incubation and Training: The pre-incubation stage comprised 18 topics, two modules delivered, and 14 entrepreneurs supported. The documentation records 100% adherence to the training plan. Of the 18 topics developed, five were delivered in 2024 and 13 in 2025, representing a substantial expansion of the training content over the period. This increase may be interpreted as a response to the diversity of participants' needs and to the learning accumulated by the incubator team throughout the implementation process. The distribution of content was as follows:

Table 5. Pre-incubation participation

Topic	Participation
Strategic planning	33%
Marketing and markets	28%
Production and operations	22%
Finance	11%
Entrepreneurial management	6%

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the ISPS Consolidated Report (2026).

The predominance of strategic planning and marketing demonstrates that training prioritised venture organisation and market engagement. Production and operations also represented a significant proportion, while finance and entrepreneurial management accounted for smaller shares. Regarding the products or instruments developed, 44% corresponded to the Business Map and 56% to the Development Plan. This distribution suggests a slightly greater emphasis on developing structured plans to guide the evolution of the initiatives. The 100% adherence rate to the training plan is an important implementation indicator. However, it should be interpreted cautiously. Full delivery of planned activities demonstrates operational adherence but does not, by itself, demonstrate participant learning, application of content or improved venture performance.

Intensification of Advisory Support: Advisory support constituted one of the most significant dimensions of ISPS development. The number of advisory sessions increased from seven in 2023 to nine in 2024 and 22 in 2025.

Table 6. Advisory support

Year	Advisory sessions	Participations	Average participation per session
2023	7	14	2.0
2024	9	27	3.0
2025	22	129	5.9

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the ISPS Consolidated Report (2026).

Between 2023 and 2025, the number of advisory sessions increased by approximately 214.3%. Over the same period, participation increased from 14 to 129, representing an approximate increase of 821.4%. There was also an increase in average participation per advisory session: 2.0 participations per session in 2023; 3.0 in 2024 and 5.9 in 2025. This result is relevant because it demonstrates not only quantitative growth in provision but also greater average participation intensity. The incubator appears to have moved from an initial phase of

structuring and more limited support towards a phase of more systematic monitoring and engagement. The intensification of advisory support supports the proposition that ISPS methodological development was accompanied by increased structuring and greater support intensity. Nevertheless, participation indicators should be interpreted alongside information concerning individual attendance, duration, type of support and outcomes achieved.

Complementary Activities and Methodological Adaptation:

In addition to the activities included in the main plan, the ISPS developed complementary activities. During the pre-incubation stage, three additional activities were recorded, involving 26 participations and reaching seven communities. Among the activities identified in the documentation were *Inspire-se!* activities; Entrepreneurial Guidance; the inclusion of Module 5 — Digital Inclusion; expansion of additional activities; cohort restructuring; intensification of Module 3; and replacement of the formal public call with invitation letters. These activities indicate that the incubator operated according to an adaptive management logic. The initial methodology functioned as a reference framework rather than an immutable structure. Implementation was accompanied by adjustments designed to respond to participant characteristics, institutional opportunities and needs identified during the process. Methodological adaptation can be analysed across four dimensions:

Table 7. Dimension and Evidence

Dimension	Evidence
Access and mobilisation	Replacement of public call with invitation letters
Cohort composition	Participant restructuring
Training	Inclusion and expansion of modules
Monitoring and support	Creation or expansion of advisory and complementary activities

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the ISPS Consolidated Report (2026).

These changes should not automatically be regarded as planning failures. In complex social and territorial contexts, adjustments may indicate institutional learning and responsiveness. The problem arises when changes are neither recorded nor justified or evaluated.

Incubation and Institutional Collaboration: During the incubation stage, 10 advisory sessions were recorded, with 55 participations and support provided to five communities. The average was 5.5 participants per advisory session. Additional incubation activities, two partner institutions and one activity integrated with BAMIN were also recorded.

Table 8. Incubation and Institutional Collaboration

Indicator	Result
Incubation advisory sessions	10
Participations	55
Communities supported	5
Average per session	5.5
Complementary activities	3
Partner institutions	2
Activities integrated with BAMIN	1

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the ISPS Consolidated Report (2026).

The recorded distribution for institutional collaboration was 67%, while programme integration accounted for 33%. These

data suggest that collaboration with external partners played a more prominent role than integration among internal programmes. Integration with BAMIN and socio-environmental programmes also warrants attention. It may contribute to aligning the incubator with broader territorial strategies, but should be accompanied by governance mechanisms capable of defining responsibilities, targets and information flows.

Assessment of the Propositions: The documentary analysis enables the propositions to be assessed as follows:

Table 9. Assessment of the propositions

Proposition	Evidence identified	Assessment
P1 — Increased structuring and monitoring	Growth in advisory sessions from 7 in 2023 to 22 in 2025; increased average participation	Supported by available data
P2 — Adherence combined with adaptation	Full implementation of the training plan alongside invitation letters, cohort restructuring and new modules	Supported
P3 — Adaptive capacity supporting continuity	Adjustments to selection, training and cohort composition	Partially supported; retention indicators required
P4 — Expansion of scope through combined activities	Mobilisation, training, advisory support, complementary activities and institutional collaboration	Documentarily supported

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the ISPS Consolidated Report (2026).

P1 is supported by the increase in both the number and intensity of advisory sessions. P2 is likewise supported by the coexistence of planned implementation and methodological adjustments. P3 is plausible but should be treated with greater caution. The documentation demonstrates that adaptations occurred, but does not independently establish that these changes were responsible for participant continuity. Data on retention, withdrawals, satisfaction and venture development would be required to support such a conclusion. P4 is supported by the diversification of activities and expansion of support mechanisms. The incubator combined training, individual or group advisory support, complementary activities and institutional collaboration.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study aimed to analyse the development of management and performance within the Porto Sul Social Incubator (ISPS) between 2023 and the first half of 2026, focusing on the relationship between planning, implementation, methodological adaptation and outcomes across the incubation process. The documentary analysis indicates that the ISPS underwent progressive institutional structuring, expanded its support activities and adapted its procedures to the conditions encountered during implementation. The findings demonstrate a transition from an initial stage of modelling and instrument development towards increasingly structured operations. The 2023 modelling process involved different institutional actors and established the target population, incubation stages and principal management instruments. This indicates that the ISPS was conceived as part of a broader network connecting the

university, company, innovation institutions and local communities. Operationally, the incubator demonstrated substantial territorial reach. A total of 653 mobilisation activities reached 8,645 people across 28 communities through face-to-face and digital strategies. The predominance of digital mobilisation contributed to extending territorial coverage, particularly among geographically dispersed communities. However, reach alone should not be interpreted as evidence of effectiveness. Future assessment should examine the conversion of mobilisation into participation, selection, retention and venture development. The selection and pre-incubation stages also provide evidence of methodological flexibility. The replacement of a formal public call with invitation letters, cohort restructuring, the inclusion of additional modules and complementary activities demonstrate the capacity to adjust the incubation model to the characteristics of participants and the territory. The delivery of 18 training topics with 100% documented adherence to the training plan further indicates strong operational implementation. Nevertheless, implementation does not necessarily demonstrate learning or improvements in venture performance.

The strongest evidence of increased support intensity is found in advisory provision. Advisory sessions increased from seven in 2023 to 22 in 2025, while participation rose from 14 to 129 and average participation per session increased from 2.0 to 5.9. These results suggest that the ISPS progressively strengthened its monitoring and support processes, moving towards more frequent and intensive interaction with participants. Methodological adaptation therefore emerges as a central finding. The experience suggests that adaptation should not necessarily be understood as a failure of planning, but as a potentially necessary component of managing social programmes in complex territorial contexts. However, adaptive capacity can only become institutional learning when changes are systematically documented, justified and evaluated. The ISPS would therefore benefit from a formal adaptation-recording system documenting the planned activity, the change introduced, its rationale, observed outcomes and subsequent management decision. The findings support the propositions concerning increased organisational structuring and support, adherence combined with methodological adaptation, and expansion of the incubator's scope. The proposition concerning adaptive capacity is only partially supported, as the available evidence does not establish a causal relationship between methodological changes and participant retention or venture performance. The 10 recorded withdrawals or disengagements highlight the need for stronger retention indicators and systematic investigation of the factors associated with participant continuity.

Overall, ISPS performance should be understood as multidimensional. It encompasses not only the volume of activities delivered but also the capacity to translate planning into implementation, provide sustained support, respond to territorial conditions and incorporate experience into organisational learning. From an institutional perspective, future monitoring should therefore include indicators of retention, individual entrepreneur development, market access, income generation, formalisation, job creation, managerial capabilities, network formation and venture continuity after incubation.

The study contributes to the literature by connecting discussions of incubator management, performance, methodological adaptation and the university's third mission with a concrete university-based social incubation experience. It also demonstrates how university outreach can operate simultaneously as a mechanism for applying academic knowledge and as a process of institutional learning. The principal limitations relate to the reliance on documentary records, the presence of aggregated data, the lack of systematic information on the reasons for withdrawals and the fact that the incubation process was still ongoing. In addition, as a single case study, the findings cannot be automatically generalised to other social incubators. Future research should therefore adopt longitudinal designs to follow supported ventures after incubation and incorporate the perspectives of entrepreneurs, managers, institutional partners and other stakeholders. Comparative studies involving other university-based social incubators may further identify transferable management practices, performance indicators and adaptation mechanisms. In conclusion, between 2023 and the first half of 2026, the Porto Sul Social Incubator underwent a process of methodological consolidation characterised by the combination of adherence to planning and flexibility in implementation. Its trajectory demonstrates that effective management of university-based social incubators requires the integration of planning, monitoring and adaptive capacity, with institutional learning playing a central role in the continuous improvement and sustainability of such initiatives.

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