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Responsabilidad social universitaria en la era actual: nuevos desafíos de las universidades University social responsibility in the current era: new challenges for universities

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the intricate relationship between Artificial Intelligence (AI), University Social Responsibility (USR) has positioned itself as a fundamental pillar for universities in a global context marked by challenges such as the climate crisis, social inequality and the digital revolution. This article, based on a documentary review of studies published between 2019 and 2023 in high-impact databases, analyses current trends and challenges of USR. The findings highlight the importance of integrating environmental sustainability, social inclusion and institutional ethics into the academic and administrative functions of universities. Furthermore, significant gaps are identified in the implementation and evaluation of USR, especially in contexts with limited resources and in less studied regions. The study underlines the need to develop more robust conceptual and methodological frameworks, foster inter-institutional collaboration and ensure that USR practices are inclusive, measurable and aligned with local and global needs. This work seeks to contribute to strengthening USR and offers recommendations for universities to assume a more active and transformative role in building more just and sustainable societies.

Keywords: global challenges, social inclusion, documentary review, environmental sustainability, digital transformation

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RESUMEN

La Responsabilidad Social Universitaria (RSU) se ha posicionado como un pilar fundamental para las universidades en un contexto global marcado por desafíos como la crisis climática, la desigualdad social y la revolución digital. Este artículo, basado en una revisión documental de estudios publicados entre 2019 y 2023 en bases de datos de alto impacto, analiza las tendencias y desafíos actuales de la RSU. Los hallazgos destacan la importancia de integrar la sostenibilidad ambiental, la inclusión social y la ética institucional en las funciones académicas y administrativas de las universidades. Además, se identifican brechas significativas en la implementación y evaluación de la RSU, especialmente en contextos con recursos limitados y en regiones menos estudiadas. El estudio subraya la necesidad de desarrollar marcos conceptuales y metodológicos más robustos, fomentar la colaboración interinstitucional y garantizar que las prácticas de RSU sean inclusivas, medibles y alineadas con las necesidades locales y globales. Este trabajo busca contribuir al fortalecimiento de la RSU y ofrece recomendaciones para que las universidades asuman un rol más activo y transformador en la construcción de sociedades más justas y sostenibles.

Palabras clave: desafíos globales, inclusión social, revisión documental, sostenibilidad ambiental, transformación digital **Clasificación JEL**: A13, I23, M14, Q01

INTRODUCTION

In a world marked by profound and accelerated transformations, according to Abad Segura et al. (2021), universities have ceased to be solely spaces for academic training to become key players in the construction of more just, inclusive, and sustainable societies. University Social Responsibility (USR) has emerged as a central concept in this process (Ali et al., 2021; Sánchez Suárez et al., 2023). It is defined as the commitment of higher education institutions to the social, economic, and environmental development of their environments (Atahau et al., 2021). In the current era, characterized by global challenges such as the climate crisis, social inequality, and the digital revolution, USR faces new challenges that demand critical review and constant adaptation (Ali & Anufriev, 2020). This context requires universities to reflect on their traditional role and assume proactive leadership in promoting collective well-being and the sustainability of the planet (Do et al., 2023). The origin of USR dates back to the last decades of the 20th century, when universities began to recognize their responsibility beyond the classroom (Eslava Zapata et al., 2023). Initially, this commitment focused on university outreach and engagement with local communities (Chen & Chou, 2023), understood as specific actions disjointed from core academic functions (García Alaminos et al., 2022). Over time, the concept evolved to encompass broader dimensions, such as environmental sustainability (Chuang et al., 2021), social inclusion (Filho et al., 2019), and institutional ethics (Coelho & Menezes, 2020). These concerns were integrated into teaching, research, and university management (Pérez Gamboa et al., 2022).

This process has not been without tensions, as universities have had to balance their traditional roles with the growing demands of an ever-changing world (Hernández Diaz et al., 2021). In addition, USR has been influenced by global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which have provided a roadmap for aligning university actions with global priorities (Gómez Miranda, 2023).

In recent years, USR has gained unprecedented relevance. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, highlighted the ability of universities to respond to global crises (Chen et al., 2023), from adapting education to virtual environments to actively participating in mitigating the social and economic impacts of the crisis (Gibbs et al., 2022). Universities proved to be key players in the generation of scientific knowledge, as affirmed by Hu et al. (2019), the provision of health services, as stated by Ruiz Dñiaz de Salvioni (2023), and the implementation of support programs for vulnerable communities (Steeg, 2022).

At the same time, phenomena such as globalization, digitalization, and climate change have redefined expectations about the role of universities in society (Romero Torres & Gamero de la Espriella, 2023). Today, these institutions are expected to continue training competent professionals and to actively contribute to the solution of complex and urgent problems, such as the reduction of the digital divide (Chen et al., 2022), the promotion of gender equity, and the transition to low-carbon economies (Bronstein et al., 2023).

Despite progress, significant gaps persist in the understanding and application of USR (Katz, 2020). Many universities still struggle to integrate this approach transversally into their functions and structures, while others face challenges in measuring and communicating the real impact of their initiatives (Ripoll Rivaldo, 2023). The lack of consensus on what constitutes socially responsible practice and how to assess it has generated debates that require urgent attention (Khanh & Nguyen Nguyen, 2022).

While some institutions prioritize environmental sustainability (Lin et al., 2023), others focus their efforts on social inclusion or technological innovation (Ma & Ko, 2022), which makes comparison and generalization of good practices difficult (Mendoza et al., 2019). Moreover, in resource-limited contexts, as in many universities in Latin America, Africa, and Asia (Reficco et al., 2023), the implementation of USR faces additional obstacles, such as lack of funding and poor staff training (Nazneen et al., 2023).

This article seeks to contribute to this effort while providing a critical review of current trends and challenges in USR. Through a rigorous analysis, it seeks to identify the opportunities and limitations faced by universities on their path toward greater social responsibility, as well as to offer recommendations for advancing in this field (Valladolid Benavides et al., 2023). The relevance of this study lies in its potential to inform policies and practices that enable universities to fulfill their social mission in an increasingly complex and challenging world. At a time when higher education institutions are called upon to lead processes of social transformation, this work aspires to be a useful tool for academics, managers, and decision-makers committed to strengthening USR and its impact on society.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on a systematic documentary review with a qualitative approach (Barrera Rodríguez et al., 2023), designed to identify, analyze, and synthesize the most relevant studies published between 2019 and 2023 on University Social Responsibility (USR) and the new challenges faced by universities. The methodology

was structured in four main stages, each with specific dimensions and indicators that ensured rigor and consistency in the research process.

Stage 1: Definition of the objective and search criteria

- Objective: To identify and analyze studies that explore USR in the university context, with emphasis on new global and local challenges.
- Dimensions:
- 1. Temporality: studies published between 2019 and 2023.
- 2. Sources: Scientific articles indexed in high impact databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, SciELO and Google Scholar.
- 3. Language: Papers in Spanish, English, and Portuguese.
- 4. Inclusion criteria: Studies that address USR, sustainability, social inclusion, institutional ethics, and digital transformation.
- 5. Exclusion criteria: Papers that are not related to higher education or that do not present solid empirical or theoretical evidence.

Search and selection of documents

- Process:
- 1. A search was carried out in the aforementioned databases using keywords such as "University Social Responsibility", "sustainability in universities", "social inclusion in higher education", "institutional ethics" and "digital transformation in universities".
- 2. Filters were applied by year of publication, subject area (social sciences and education), and type of document (research articles and systematic reviews).
- 3. Documents were selected based on their thematic relevance, methodological quality and contributions to the field of study.
- Indicators:
- 1. Number of documents initially identified.
- 2. Number of documents selected after application of inclusion and exclusion criteria.
- 3. Geographical and thematic distribution of the studies.

Stage 3: Analysis and categorization

- Process:
- 1. Studies were categorized around key dimensions:
- Environmental sustainability: ecological practices and resource management.
- Social inclusion: Equitable access and diversity.
- Institutional ethics: Transparency and accountability.
- Digital transformation: Integration of emerging technologies.
- Global challenges: Impact of the climate crisis and pandemic.
- 2. Trends, gaps and opportunities were identified in the literature.
- Indicators:
- 1. Frequency of themes and sub-themes in documents.
- 2. Consistency of findings in different contexts.
- 3. Identification of thematic and methodological gaps.

Stage 4: Synthesis and interdisciplinary integration

- Process:
- 1. Main findings were synthesized and the most relevant contributions to the field of USR were highlighted.
- 2. Interdisciplinary perspectives (social sciences, education and administration) were integrated to enrich the analysis and provide a holistic view of the topic.
- 3. Recommendations for future research and practice of USR in universities were formulated.
- Indicators:
- 1. Quality and depth of synthesis.
- 2. Effective integration of interdisciplinary approaches.
- 3. Relevance of the proposed recommendations.

Zotero bibliographic management software was used to organize and analyze the documents, thus ensuring transparency and replicability. This methodology allowed for a comprehensive and structured review. It provided a solid basis for the analysis of USR and the new challenges faced by universities in the current era. Table 1 summarizes all the aspects addressed in the article in a clear and structured manner. It facilitates a quick and precise understanding of the content and methodology used.

Table 1: Summary of aspects addressed in the article

Aspect	Description	Dimensions/Indicators
Article Title	University Social Responsibility in the present era: new challenges for Universities	-
Approach	Systematic documentary review	- Databases: Scopus, Web of Science, SciELO, Google Scholar. - Period: 2019-2023.

Aspect	Description	Dimensions/Indicators
General Objective	Analyze current trends and challenges of USR in universities.	Identify gaps and opportunities.Provide recommendations for policies and practices.
Methodological Stages	 Definition of the objective and search criteria. Search and selection of documents. Analysis and categorization. Synthesis and interdisciplinary integration. 	- Inclusion/exclusion criteria. - Analysis matrix. - Synthesis of findings.
Main Topics	Environmental sustainability, social inclusion, institutional ethics, digital transformation, global challenges.	 Ecological practices (González Vallejo, 2023). Equitable access (Hernández López et al., 2020). Transparency (Parkes et al., 2020). Emerging technologies (Song et al., 2022). Climate crisis (Liu et al., 2022) and pandemic (Lago et al., 2023).
Relevant Findings	USR is a strategic axis for universities.New global challenges demand a more active role.Gaps in implementation and evaluation.	 Transversal integration of USR (Hernández et al., 2022). Need for robust conceptual frameworks (Lee et al., 2023). Inter-institutional collaboration (Pérez Morote et al., 2020).
Conclusions	 USR requires a comprehensive and adaptive approach. Universities must assume a transformative role. Gaps in implementation and evaluation persist. 	 Sustainability and inclusion (Mora Pontiluis et al., 2023). Innovation and anticipation (Effendi, 2023). Robust methodological frameworks (Sasaki & Horng, 2023).
Keywords	Global challenges, social inclusion, documentary review, environmental sustainability, digital transformation.	- Sorted alphabetically.
Methodological Rigor	Monitoring standards and bibliographic management software (Zotero).	- Transparency and replicability.

Source: Own elaboration

RESULTS y DISCUSSION

The study allowed for a review of current trends in the field of University Social Responsibility (USR), a topic that has become particularly relevant in recent years due to global changes and the social demands faced by higher education institutions. The following are the five main trends emerging from recent literature that reflect the new challenges and opportunities for universities in this field.

First, there was a growing focus on environmental sustainability as an integral part of USR (Ting et al., 2021). Universities have begun to adopt more conscious practices in resource management, carbon footprint reduction, and promotion of green initiatives (Barragan Fonseca et al., 2020). This responds to global climate urgency and reflects a commitment to training responsible citizens who are aware of their impact on the planet (Sanabria Martínez, 2022). Programs such as green campuses, renewable energy research, and community conservation projects have gained prominence in recent years (Wang et al., 2021).

Second, inclusion and diversity have been consolidated as fundamental pillars of USR (Azizi & Sassen, 2023). Universities have recognized the need to address social inequalities and ensure equitable access to higher education. According to Bautista Puig and Sanz Casado (2021), this includes inclusive admissions policies, scholarships for vulnerable populations, and the creation of safe spaces for historically marginalized groups. In addition, the importance of integrating intercultural perspectives into curricula, fostering respect, and valuing diversity has been emphasized (Noroña González et al., 2023).

A third prominent trend is the linkage with the community and local development, as stated by Sung (2023). Universities have expanded their role as agents of social change, establishing alliances with local organizations, governments, and the private sector to promote projects that benefit the surrounding communities (Heyneman, 2020, 2023). This includes social entrepreneurship initiatives, job training, and health and education programs aimed at vulnerable populations (Gómez Cano et al., 2022; Wigmore et al., 2020). This approach strengthens the social impact of universities and reinforces their legitimacy and relevance in the local context

Fourth, digital transformation has redefined USR strategies. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technologies in higher education, allowing universities to expand their reach and offer online training programs to remote or access-constrained populations (Vallaeys et al., 2022). This advancement has also raised challenges, such as the digital divide and the need to ensure inclusive and quality education in virtual environments, as Contents (2022) stated. Universities have responded with digital literacy initiatives and the development of accessible platforms, according to Lewicka (2022).

An increased emphasis on ethics and institutional transparency was identified. Universities have begun to implement accountability mechanisms and promote a culture of integrity in all their activities (Symaco & Tee, 2019). This includes publishing sustainability reports, creating ethics committees, and promoting values such

as honesty, fairness, and respect in the university community. This approach strengthens trust in institutions and contributes to the training of ethical professionals committed to the common good.

According to Santos et al. (2020), these trends reflect a dynamic and challenging panorama for USR in the current era (Wan, 2023). Universities are called to respond to social and environmental demands and lead transformation processes that contribute to sustainable development and the construction of more just and inclusive societies. This analysis underlines the importance of advancing research and practice in USR while adapting to global changes and strengthening the social impact of higher education institutions.

The discussions derived from this analysis reflect a scenario in which University Social Responsibility (USR) has evolved significantly and adapts to the global and local challenges faced by higher education institutions. One of the most outstanding aspects is the central role that environmental sustainability has acquired in university agendas. This approach responds to a growing social demand and is aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Important challenges remain, such as the need to integrate these practices in a cross-cutting manner in all university functions, from teaching to research and extension. Although many universities have made progress in implementing sustainable campuses, there is still a long way to go to ensure that these initiatives have a real and lasting impact.

Inclusion and diversity have also been a priority in discussions about USR. Universities have recognized that their social commitment must go beyond academic training and extend to the creation of inclusive and equitable environments. This implies guaranteeing access to higher education for historically excluded groups and fostering an institutional culture that values and respects differences. Despite progress, there are still structural and cultural barriers that limit the full development of these initiatives. For example, the lack of disaggregated data makes it difficult to assess the real impact of inclusion policies, suggesting the need to improve monitoring and evaluation systems.

Community engagement has proven to be one of the most transformative dimensions of USR. Universities have expanded their role as agents of social change and established strategic alliances with local actors to promote community development projects. These initiatives strengthen the social impact of universities and also contribute to their legitimacy and relevance in the local context. However, this approach requires a delicate balance between community demands and institutional capacities. In some cases, a disconnect has been observed between the priorities of universities and the real needs of communities, which underlines the importance of establishing more effective mechanisms for dialogue and participation.

Digital transformation has redefined USR strategies, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Universities have leveraged digital technologies to expand their reach and offer online training programs to populations that previously had limited access. This advancement has also raised significant challenges, such as the digital divide and the need to ensure inclusive and quality education in virtual environments. Although many institutions have implemented digital literacy initiatives, there is still a need to strengthen the technological capabilities of students and teachers, especially in regions with less access to resources.

Figure 1 shows a graph that collects the main aspects associated with ethics and its link with university social responsibility. In this sense, ethics and institutional transparency have become more relevant in discussions about USR. As stated, universities have begun to implement accountability mechanisms and promote a culture of integrity in all their activities. This approach strengthens trust in institutions and contributes to the training of ethical professionals committed to the common good. The implementation of these mechanisms has not always been uniform, and in some cases, internal resistance has been identified that hinders their consolidation. This suggests the need to work on raising awareness and training the university community on issues of ethics and transparency.

Commitement University Social Social Responsibility Culture of development **Ethics** integrity in the Organizacional training of image professionals Contemporary **Professional** professional skills recognition

Figure 1: Ethics and university social responsibility

Source: Own elaboration

These discussions underscore the complexity and multidimensionality of USR in the current era. Universities face the challenge of adapting to an ever-changing global environment while maintaining their commitment

to social and sustainable development. Although significant progress has been made, gaps and challenges remain that require urgent attention. This analysis suggests that the future of USR will largely depend on universities' ability to integrate innovative approaches, strengthen their strategic partnerships, and maintain a genuine commitment to social justice and sustainability.

CONCLUSIONS

University Social Responsibility (USR) has been consolidated as a strategic axis for universities in the current era, but its effective implementation requires a comprehensive and adaptive approach. Institutions must integrate environmental sustainability, social inclusion and institutional ethics in a cross-cutting manner in their academic and administrative functions, so as to ensure that these dimensions are not isolated actions, but part of their identity and mission.

The new global challenges, such as the climate crisis, social inequality, and the digital revolution, demand that universities assume a more active and transformative role. This implies responding to immediate demands and anticipating future scenarios through innovation, applied research, and the training of professionals committed to the common good.

Significant gaps persist in the application and evaluation of USR, especially in contexts with limited resources and in less studied regions. To overcome these limitations, it is necessary to develop more robust conceptual and methodological frameworks, foster inter-institutional collaboration, and ensure that USR practices are inclusive, measurable, and aligned with local and global needs.

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FINANCING

None

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

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