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University environmental social responsibility in Latin America: motivations and barriers from a systematic review

Responsabilidad social universitaria ambiental en Latinoamérica: motivaciones y barreras desde una revisión sistemática

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Abstract

University environmental social responsibility (USR) is a strategic approach aimed at integrating sustainable practices that reduce the ecological impact of higher education institutions and contribute to environmental protection. In this context, the objective of this article was to identify and analyze the motivations and barriers associated with environmental social responsibility programs developed by Latin American universities during the period 2020–2024. A systematic review of the literature was conducted, following the PRISMA guidelines, with an analytical, descriptive, and explanatory design. The corpus consisted of 54 scientific articles retrieved from the Scopus, SciELO, and Google Scholar databases, as well as from official websites. The main search term was "university environmental social responsibility," applied with language filters in Spanish, English, and Portuguese. The results show that university USER programs are based on positive motivations, such as social commitment, the promotion of sustainable development, and the strengthening of ties with the community. However, they face significant structural barriers, including the absence of clear institutional policies, limited financial and human resources, insufficient management support, and an inadequate understanding of the environmental approach. Consequently, it is concluded that the development of university environmental social responsibility in Latin America is still in its infancy, requiring more robust institutional strategies for its consolidation.

Keywords: environmental social responsibility, university sustainability, Latin American universities.

Resumen

La responsabilidad social ambiental universitaria (RSU) constituye un enfoque estratégico orientado a la integración de prácticas sostenibles que permitan reducir el impacto ecológico de las instituciones de educación superior y contribuir a la protección del ambiente. En este contexto, el objetivo del presente artículo fue identificar y analizar las motivaciones y barreras asociadas a los programas de responsabilidad social con enfoque ambiental desarrollados por universidades latinoamericanas durante el período 2020–2024. Se empleó una revisión sistemática de la literatura, siguiendo las directrices del enfoque PRISMA, con un diseño analítico, descriptivo y explicativo. El corpus estuvo conformado por 54 artículos científicos, recuperados de las bases de datos Scopus, SciELO y Google Scholar, así como de sitios web oficiales. El término principal de búsqueda fue "responsabilidad social ambiental universitaria", aplicado con filtros de idioma en español, inglés y portugués. Los resultados evidencian que los programas universitarios de RSU se sustentan en motivaciones positivas, tales como el compromiso social, la promoción del desarrollo sostenible y el fortalecimiento del vínculo con la comunidad. No obstante, enfrentan barreras estructurales significativas, entre las que destacan la ausencia de políticas institucionales claras, limitaciones de recursos financieros y humanos, escaso apoyo directivo y una comprensión insuficiente del enfoque ambiental. En consecuencia, se concluye que el desarrollo de la responsabilidad social ambiental universitaria en América Latina aún se encuentra en una fase incipiente, lo que demanda estrategias institucionales más sólidas para su consolidación.

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Palabras clave: responsabilidad social ambiental, sostenibilidad universitaria, universidades latinoamericanas.

Introduction

University social responsibility (USR), particularly that which adopts an environmental perspective, has gained growing relevance as a means of rethinking the role of higher education in light of the ethical, social, and ecological challenges confronting contemporary society. From this vantage point, the university ceases to be conceived solely as a space for academic training and instead assumes an active role as an agent of social impact, a promoter of sustainability, and a shaper of conscientious and co-responsible citizens (Revuelta & Vegas, 2020; Vallaeys & Álvarez, 2019). This approach fosters comprehensive education by articulating environmental ethics, sustainability, and social responsibility, thereby bolstering institutional image and promoting transformative processes within the university community (Salcedo et al., 2023; Hernández et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, scientific evidence indicates that environmentally oriented USR encounters considerable difficulties in becoming institutionalized. Conceptual confusion persists, often reducing it to isolated or welfare-oriented actions, which undermines its consolidation as an integral university governance policy (Carrillo et al., 2023). In the Latin American context, the gap between theoretical discourse and practice manifests in initiatives that frequently depend on individual efforts, face funding constraints, exhibit scant curricular integration, and reflect a weak sustainability culture within universities (García et al., 2024; Cuba et al., 2023).

In countries such as Peru, the enactment of University Law No. 30220 spurred the formal incorporation of USR into the institutional university framework; however, its application has been fragmentary and, in numerous instances, has been limited to meeting administrative requirements tied to licensing rather than fostering substantive educational, ethical, and environmental transformation (Morante, 2022; Andia et al., 2021). Despite this, some universities, including Universidad César Vallejo, Universidad Nacional Federico Villarreal, and Universidad Nacional de Jaén, have developed initiatives aimed at consolidating sustainable practices that articulate environmental stewardship, community engagement, and civic education (Universidad Nacional de Jaén, 2024; Universidad César Vallejo, 2024). Yet these experiences face challenges related to administrative divergences, cultural resistance, limited student participation, and insufficient community outreach (Monge et al., 2021; Gamboa et al., 2022).

The scientific literature reveals relevant albeit scattered advances. In this regard, Fuentes et al. (2020) highlight that integrating environmental sustainability into institutional plans strengthens the social relevance of universities. Mendoza et al. (2020) demonstrate that the effectiveness of environmental USR depends largely on the degree of linkage between the university and its community surroundings. Rojas et al. (2021) underscore the key role of faculty as mediators of social commitment, particularly in crisis contexts. Likewise, García (2023) points out that regulatory compliance proves insufficient unless articulated with robust academic environmental management, while Moreno and Torres (2024) emphasize the value of using data to strengthen USR programs. Nevertheless, these studies emerge in a fragmented manner, with little systematization regarding the motivations that drive the adoption of environmental USR programs and the barriers that hinder their sustainable development in Latin American universities during the 2020–2024 period (Condori et al., 2022; Chueca, 2024).

In this context, a research gap exists concerning the factors that favor or constrain the sustainable implementation of environmental USR in Latin American universities, making its study necessary to strengthen institutional governance and promote replicable good practices.

Given this reality, the central research question arises: what are the motivations for and barriers to environmental social responsibility programs in Latin American universities during the 2020–2024 period? Accordingly, this study aims to determine the motivations and barriers that affect the implementation of environmentally oriented USR programs in Latin American universities between 2020 and 2024, thereby contributing to academic debate and the construction of sustainable, relevant, and contextualized institutional models.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach, employing a systematic literature review as the primary research method. In this context, bibliographic review serves a central function in identifying recent trends, synthesizing theoretical foundations, and contributing to the consolidation of a specific disciplinary field (Arnau & Sala, 2020). To ensure a rigorous, transparent, and replicable process, the methodological guidelines for systematic reviews proposed by Ferreras Fernández (2016) were followed, applied to the search, selection, analysis, and interpretation of information related to university environmental social responsibility (UESR).

For organizing the methodological procedure, the four-phase structure proposed by Codina (2018) was adopted: search, evaluation, analysis, and synthesis, complemented by the PRISMA guidelines, which strengthened the selection and refinement of the identified records.

Phase 1. Search

- A systematic search was carried out in the Scopus, SciELO, and Google Scholar databases, as well as in institutional or official websites.
- The primary search term employed was "university environmental social responsibility," combined with close variants when appropriate.
- A language filter was applied to include studies published in Spanish, English, and Portuguese.
- The search period was delimited to the years 2020–2024 in order to gather recent evidence.
- Works of international, Latin American, and local (Peruvian) scope were considered.
- Scientific articles from indexed journals and relevant academic documents explicitly linked to UESR were included.
- Duplicate documents, preliminary non-peer-reviewed versions, and materials lacking full-text access were excluded.

The selection criteria are summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1

Selection criteria

Aspect	Criteria applied
Databases	Scopus, SciELO, Google Scholar, institutional websites
Keywords used	"University environmental social responsibility"
Language	Spanish, English, Portuguese
Geographic scope	International, Latin American, and Local (Peru)
Search period	2020–2024
Type	Articles from indexed journals
Methodology	Scientific articles

Phase 2. Evaluation

- Titles, abstracts, and keywords of the retrieved records were reviewed to assess their thematic relevance to UESR.
- The defined inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied (central theme in university environmental social responsibility, 2020–2024 period, language, document type).
- Studies not meeting these criteria were discarded at this stage.

Phase 3. Analysis

- In-depth reading of the selected texts was conducted to extract information on objectives, methodological approach, university context, environmental dimensions of social responsibility, and main findings.
- Relevant data were recorded in synthesis matrices, identifying conceptual approaches, UESR implementation strategies, and reported empirical evidence.
- The analysis, supported by the PRISMA methodology, showed that Google Scholar (47.6%) and institutional websites (33.3%) concentrated the largest proportion of identified documents, followed by SciELO (15.9%) and Scopus (3.2%), evidencing the diversity and accessibility of the sources consulted. The complete flow of identification, screening, and selection of studies is represented in Figure 1 (PRISMA diagram).

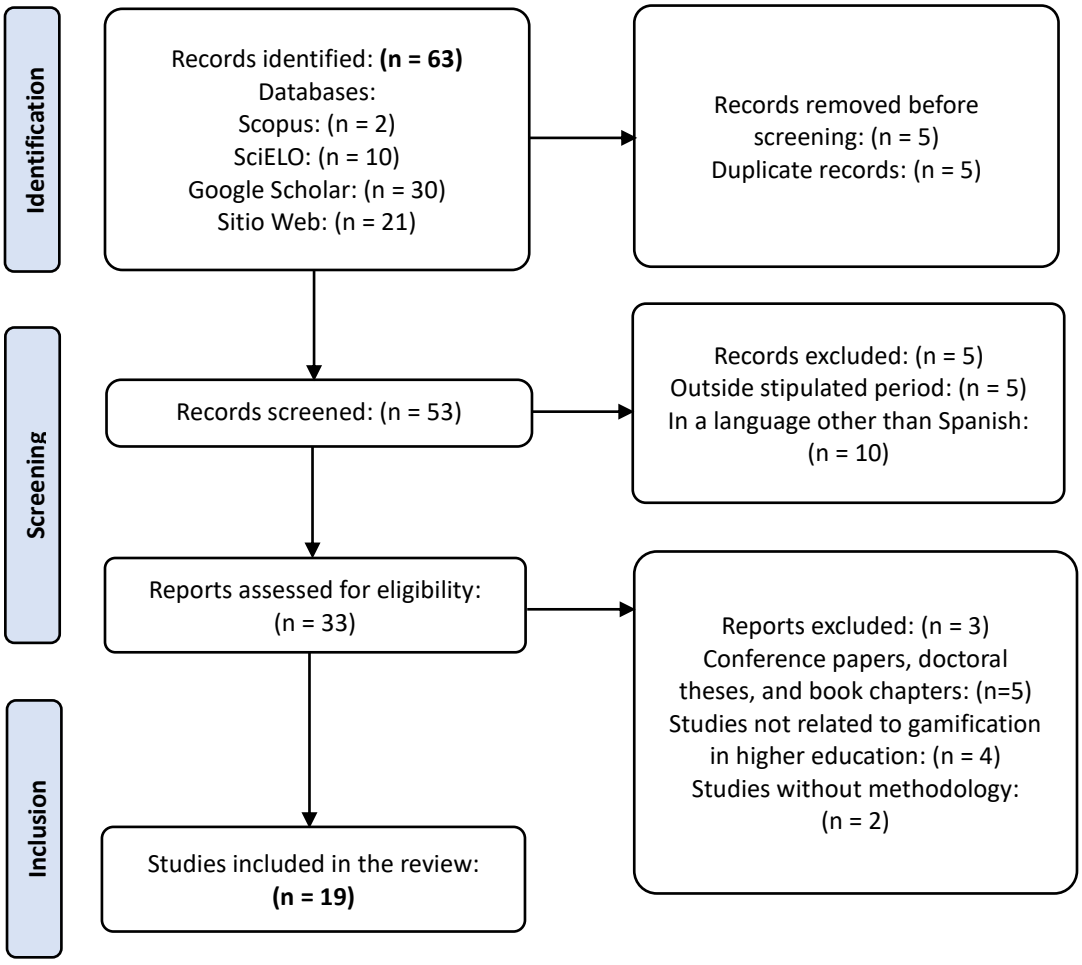
Phase 4. Synthesis

- Findings were compared and grouped around conceptualizations of UESR, university environmental management strategies, implementation experiences, and research gaps.
- Patterns, convergences, and divergences among studies were identified, enabling the construction of a critical synthesis of the state of knowledge on university environmental social responsibility.

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- From this synthesis, the study's conclusions and recommendations were formulated, highlighting implications for university management and future research lines.

Figure 1
PRISMA method



Results

Table 2

Research findings.

No.	Article Title	Concept/Contribution	Contextualization	Author(s)
1	Environmental Social Responsibility in University Institutions in the Department of Córdoba	Universities must integrate environmental social responsibility goals into their action plans, execute them, and report them in sustainable reports to contribute to social progress.	Environmental social responsibility is a key approach that integrates ecological factors to balance social and economic development with environmental protection.	(Fuentes et al., 2020)
2	University Social Responsibility from the Perspective of Guayaquil University Students	There is diffuse knowledge among students regarding the university's substantive processes and its relations with stakeholder sectors.	On environmental matters, students indicate that the university develops projects that contribute to and are linked to environmental issues at 73.85%.	(Saltos & Velásquez, 2020)
3	University Social Responsibility: A Tool to Enhance the Level of Environmental Culture	Through educational workshops, the dimension of being is reinforced in terms of environmental attitudes.	Training functions as a strategy that improves attitudes toward environmental sustainability and should therefore be replicated.	(Vásquez et al., 2021)
4	University Social Responsibility in Higher Education Institutions in El Oro Province, Ecuador	USR is an evolving notion, influenced by market dynamics, technological innovation, and internationalization.	USR significantly impacts the creation and restoration of community values.	(Salcedo et al., 2023)
5	Environmental Awareness in University Social Responsibility	Environmental awareness significantly affects USR at 99.4%.	Environmental awareness influences the formation of optimal responsible and respectful behavior toward the environment.	(Moreno et al., 2023)
6	Social Responsibility of the University of La Guajira toward Indigenous Communities	Low involvement of the university in the community; consequently, communities receive no benefits from the institution, nor any campaigns to improve their living conditions, health, etc.	The university must exercise social responsibility by following strategies such as school adoption, recreation, business advisory services, among others.	(Mendoza et al., 2020)

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7	Barriers to the Institutionalization of University Extension: Experience of the Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica	Academic, administrative, and financial barriers limit the university's contribution to meeting UN Sustainable Development Goal target 4.	These barriers hinder the university's extension pathway and work with communities; similar cases occur in various Latin American universities.	(Monge et al., 2021)
8	The Triple Bottom Line in University Social Responsibility Actions: Case of the Universidad Técnica de Machala	The university's USR actions are not fully understood or assimilated by its stakeholder groups.	However, implementing strategies linked to society may help overcome this barrier.	(Gamboa et al., 2022)
9	Legal Regulations and Academic Curriculum toward Environmental Education: Case of the Universidad Central del Ecuador	The university plays an initial role in regulatory compliance and academic management from an environmentally sustainable perspective.	Strengthening university action is necessary to promote sustainable environmental education and foster socially responsible behaviors.	(García S., 2023)
10	Innovation and Social Responsibility of Private Universities in Trujillo, 2020	Universities focus more on academic aspects; they lack clarity on how to approach social responsibility and neglect the expected social impact.	In this context, deeper understanding of innovation and social responsibility in universities is needed.	(Yzquierdo, 2023)
11	University Social Responsibility in Latin America, 2018–2023	USR strengthens inclusion, educational quality, institutional trust, and student satisfaction.	The implementation of USR positions the university as an agent of change aligned with the SDGs, improving stakeholder perception.	(Moreno Carrión, 2025)
12	Sustainable Development Goals and University Social Responsibility	USR requires attitudinal and institutional transformation based on sustainability and cooperation.	Sustainability demands collaboration among government, universities, the private sector, and civil society to protect ecosystems and human rights.	(Pernía et al., 2022)
13	University Social Responsibility and Environmental Education: Challenges Contributing to the Development of Educational Policies in Chile	USR, environmental education, and sustainability are interrelated.	The need for policies aligned with the SDGs is highlighted to transform institutional practices and the behavior of the university community.	(Gonzales et al., 2024)
14	Exploring University Social Responsibility in Higher Education: A	USR strengthens training, community	Scientific systematization through USR aids research	(Chunga et al., 2023)

	Systematic Review 2019–2023	ties, and institutional prestige.	advancement and the development of social impact.	
15	Onto-epistemic Vision of the Education–Environment Binomial from the Perspective of Private University Social Responsibility	Importance of incorporating stakeholder groups in the evaluation of USR actions.	Although universities carry out USR actions, they must involve stakeholders to improve their impact and align with the SDGs.	(Castillo, 2023)
16	University Social Responsibility: Perception of Faculty and Authorities at Peruvian Public Universities	USR has positive valuation in management, training, and participation; negative in research.	The need to establish a USR policy is emphasized to reinforce the quality and legitimacy of public universities.	(Condori et al., 2025)
17	Perceptions of University Social Responsibility Actions: Are They the Same for All Types of Stakeholders?	Perceptions of USR vary among stakeholders, so institutional communication should be strengthened.	Adequate dissemination of USR results is key to improving visibility, social commitment, and accountability.	(Higuera et al., 2023)
18	University Social Responsibility: Challenges and Perspectives in the 21st Century	USR should be integrated into institutional philosophy with ethical principles and sustainability.	USR must create social value, be based on ethical principles, and be integrated into strategic planning.	(Morante, 2023)
19	University Social Responsibility as a Catalyst for the Sustainable Development Goals: Strategies and Reflections	Need to institutionalize USR to train ethical professionals and agents of change.	USR should become part of university culture and be integrated across all academic and administrative domains.	(Olivera-Carhuaz & Pulido, 2024)

Analysis of results

The literature review reveals that university social responsibility (USR) with an environmental focus is present in Latin American universities, although its level of institutionalization and consolidation remains incipient. In most cases, the identified initiatives respond to isolated actions, academic voluntarism, or regulatory compliance rather than to strategic integration within university management models.

Environmental USR programs are driven by motivations such as social commitment, sustainability, environmental awareness, and strengthening institutional image. Nevertheless, these motivations do not always translate into solid structures, owing to their limited articulation with institutional planning and academic management.

Among the main barriers identified are the absence of clear institutional policies, resource scarcity, administrative obstacles, unfavorable attitudes, and conceptual confusion that reduces environmental USR to sporadic activities. Taken together, the findings indicate that although discursive recognition of environmental USR exists, its sustainable implementation remains in an initial phase, conditioned by structural and organizational limitations.

Discussion

The results obtained indicate that university social responsibility (USR) with an environmental focus is present in Latin American universities; however, its implementation has yet to become solidly and sustainably consolidated. Although initiatives reflecting institutional and community commitment do exist, they remain limited in scope, mainly due to weak structuring of environmental policies and the absence of formal mechanisms

integrating this approach into the university's substantive processes, such as teaching, research, extension, and institutional management. This situation aligns with the observations of García (2023) and Condori et al. (2025), who note that while USR is positively valued in areas like management and social outreach, administrative, research, and organizational weaknesses persist, preventing its consolidation as a comprehensive institutional model. Likewise, Castillo (2023) emphasizes that stakeholder groups do not always participate actively in the planning, execution, and evaluation of environmental actions, thereby reducing their impact and sustainability in the community environment.

Regarding the motivations driving environmental USR implementation, findings reveal factors such as social and environmental commitment, the need to generate ecological awareness, community engagement, and the strengthening of institutional positioning and image. These results concur with the assertions of Fuentes et al. (2020) and Moreno (2025), who maintain that USR contributes to improving trust, student satisfaction, and the university's social recognition when aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Similarly, Gonzales et al. (2024) explain that university social responsibility, environmental education, and sustainability are part of a single formative approach that should be promoted through institutional policies generating changes both in university management and in the attitudes, values, and behaviors of educational community members.

In this regard, Salcedo et al. (2023) affirm that environmental USR fosters the creation, strengthening, and restoration of community values, which is consistent with the contributions of Chunga et al. (2023), who highlight its contribution to research, community engagement, and institutional prestige. In that context, Vásquez et al. (2021), Moreno et al. (2023), and Ramírez and Morales (2024) agree that environmental training and the development of ecological awareness constitute key elements for consolidating USR; however, they caution that such influence can only materialize when these actions are supported by clear and sustained institutional policies. This position is reinforced by Morante (2023), who points out that environmental USR must be explicitly integrated into the organizational philosophy, institutional culture, and strategic planning of universities.

In contrast, the results also reveal structural barriers limiting the development of environmentally oriented USR. Chief among these are scant implementation of institutional policies, economic and budgetary constraints, weak awareness-raising among university actors, cultural resistance to change, and a lack of effective articulation between university, society, and community. These limitations are corroborated by Mendoza et al. (2020), Monge et al. (2021), and Gamboa et al. (2022), who note that the absence of interinstitutional coordination, insufficient internal and external communication, and conceptual confusion between USR and isolated or welfare-oriented actions hinder its institutional appropriation and sustainability over time. Along the same lines, Higuera et al. (2023) stress the need to strengthen communication channels, transparency, and stakeholder participation to ensure sustainable environmental and social outcomes.

The reviewed literature converges in pointing out that, although a regulatory framework supporting environmentally oriented USR exists, its actual application remains incipient and largely depends on the commitment and leadership of university authorities (Vallaeys & Álvarez, 2022; Berbejal, 2021). In this regard, Olivera-Carhuaz and Pulido (2024) indicate that USR must be institutionalized and become part of the university's organizational culture in order to train ethical, critical professionals committed to sustainable development and social change. Similarly, Yzquierdo (2023) and Pernía et al. (2022) show that many universities continue prioritizing academic and administrative management over socio-environmental impact, reflecting a limited view of the university's role as a transformative agent in society.

Overall, the reviewed studies confirm that Latin American universities are in a transitional stage regarding the implementation of environmentally oriented USR. Although a growing willingness to incorporate sustainability and social responsibility principles exists, it is necessary to strengthen institutional policies, strategic management, organizational communication, community participation, and a comprehensive understanding of USR as a university governance model, rather than merely as a complementary activity or regulatory compliance exercise.

Conclusions

In the Latin American context, universities are called upon to respond to environmental and social challenges through a renewed exercise of university social responsibility (USR) with an environmental approach; this perspective represents not only a regulatory mandate but also an ethical and institutional commitment aimed at promoting sustainability, ecological awareness, and active engagement with society and territory. However, study findings reveal that environmental USR remains in an initial stage, characterized largely by discursive development, fragmented actions, and limited integration into the substantive processes of training, research, and university management.

The motivations identified relate primarily to environmental commitment, the strengthening of ecological awareness, and institutional interest in contributing to sustainable development. Nevertheless, these motivations

lack formal structures that would grant them continuity, reach, and sustained impact, remaining in many cases subject to isolated initiatives or individual wills without long-term strategic articulation.

In contrast, the study reveals that the barriers facing environmental USR programs are mainly structural and cultural in nature, notably including the scant institutionalization of environmental policies, weak conceptual understanding of environmental USR, limited resource allocation, and a traditional vision that prioritizes academic functions over the university's social and environmental role. These limitations hinder the consolidation of a sustainable, cross-cutting university culture.

The challenge, therefore, does not lie solely in promoting environmental activities but in advancing toward integrated institutional models that articulate ethics, sustainability, management, training, and community participation as axes of university life; from this perspective, environmentally oriented USR must be assumed as a strategic component of the 21st-century university, capable of shaping critical citizens, socially responsible professionals, and agents of transformation in the face of local and global environmental challenges.

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