



# University social responsibility: a transformational approach

## Responsabilidad social universitaria: un enfoque transformacional

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### Abstract

University social responsibility is a topic that has acquired relevance over time, especially for the development of societies, not only because of its ability to generate knowledge, but also because of its influence on the formation of citizens committed to their environment. However, their ability to anticipate and lead changes that promote social justice, equal opportunities and sustainable development lacks effectiveness. Thus, the general objective of the article is to provide theoretical foundations that support the construct of university responsibility from a transformational approach, proposing four great perspectives for this literary concept: Training, research, leadership and social action. As a result, university social responsibility, understood from a transformational approach, has the potential to be a driver of social change; universities as centers of knowledge and training, have the capacity to influence society in a profound and lasting way.

**Keywords:** University social responsibility, transformational, social leadership, training, social commitment.

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## Resumen

La responsabilidad social universitaria es un tema que ha adquirido relevancia con el tiempo, especialmente para el desarrollo de las sociedades, no solo por su capacidad de generar conocimiento, sino también por su influencia en la formación de ciudadanos comprometidos con su entorno. Sin embargo, su capacidad de anticiparse y lideren cambios que promuevan la justicia social, la igualdad de oportunidades y el desarrollo sostenible adolece de efectividad. Así, el objetivo general del artículo es brindar fundamentos teóricos que cimenten el constructo responsabilidad universitaria desde un enfoque transformacional, proponiéndose cuatro grandes perspectivas para este concepto literario: Formación, investigación, liderazgo y acción social. Como resultado la responsabilidad social universitaria, entendida desde un enfoque transformacional, tiene el potencial de ser un motor de cambio social, las universidades como centros de conocimiento y formación, tienen la capacidad de influir en la sociedad de manera profunda y duradera

**Palabras clave:** Responsabilidad social universitaria, transformacional, liderazgo social, formación, compromiso social.

## Introduction

Social responsibility (SR) has its origins in the business world and has become a very important issue in the minds of entrepreneurs as a business strategy because, in addition to economic benefits, it provides other highly relevant benefits that contribute to the creation of a corporate image (Mehta, 2011). The application of SR is very broad, but all lead to better interrelationships with the social groups linked to the company. However, these groups are diverse (employees, customers, suppliers, community, among others), which makes it difficult to establish indicators and apply them effectively (Bermúdez and Mejías, 2018). It is necessary to know the specific scope of the organization, the groups with which it interacts, and the environment that surrounds it in order to generate socially responsible strategies equipped with indicators that facilitate their measurement and control (Peña, Guevara, Fraiz, and Botero, 2019).

In addition to being applied in the business world, SR has also been applied in education, specifically in universities, mainly because they are constantly interacting with society, promoting its development in different areas. According to Niebles (2018), "higher education, together with other social actors, produces and disseminates knowledge, a key element in the economic and social development of countries. Its responsibility in this regard is unquestionable" (p. 2). Higher education institutions (HEIs), due to their research capacity, are the ones that foster new ideas, design projects, and even provide new approaches to solving recurring problems that affect society and promote the convergence of diverse thoughts.

In this vein, Martínez, Ramón, Mavárez, and Belkis (2008) state that “the university plays a fundamental role in researching policies to be implemented, in designing fields of action to be explored, or in analyzing established frameworks to propose alternative solutions” (p. 90). The university has the primary role of researching, but there are also other social actors, such as foundations, who collaborate directly in the field of action and have valuable primary information.

It is vitally important for universities to be involved in society, responding to its demands and needs. University institutions must be aware of and seriously assume their responsibility to collaborate in solving social problems, seeking to comply with basic principles that should inform their actions. The social responsibility of universities is an essential dimension and an unavoidable responsibility when it comes to addressing their commitments in a transformational way, ignoring such an attitude in the development of the various university disciplines, fundamentally in their social dimension.

Given that the university is a fundamental pillar for the development of society, not only because of its capacity to generate knowledge, but also because of its influence in the formation of citizens committed to their environment. University social responsibility (USR) emerges as a key concept that goes beyond the simple transmission of knowledge, integrating ethical and social values into the educational mission (Vallaes & Álvarez, 2019). Therefore, it requires various actors who, when properly coordinated, can transmit the knowledge that will train professionals to promote the social and economic development of the population around them.

Seen in this light, this is a topic still under construction, and against this backdrop, the general objective of this article is to provide theoretical foundations that cement the construct of university social responsibility from a transformational approach, in order to contribute significantly to social change by promoting a more inclusive, equitable, and common good-oriented education.

According to the dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy (2024), “responsibility is the moral obligation of someone to answer for something or someone, or to take responsibility for its consequences,” so social responsibility is the obligation to answer for the effects on related groups and to address their demands. For Vallaes and Álvarez (2019), USR is a new way of managing universities, in which the academic and administrative social approach is redefined, observing the impact of its processes.

USR is the obligation of higher education institutions to contribute to the sustainable development of society by responding ethically to social, environmental, and economic needs. This concept implies that universities

should not only be concerned with the academic training of their students, but also with instilling in them values that will make them agents of social change.

However, there are many definitions on this subject, and researchers have not been able to agree on it. According to Carroll (1979), this is due to the large number of characteristics that this concept encompasses, as well as the different approaches used to address it. Matten and Moon (2008) contribute by asserting that disagreements arise for three reasons that arise when conceptualizing it, summarizing them in three points

1. It is a concept with flexible rules, allowing for assessments that trigger challenges.
2. It is a constantly changing phenomenon.
3. It has various applications and conceptions, but all analyze the relationship between the university and society.

Following this line of thought, the university is a social institution and therefore seeks to respond to the needs of society; needs that are constantly changing. This role is what motivates the RSU, which according to Vallaey (2006) is "A policy of ethical quality in the performance of the university community through the responsible management of the educational, cognitive, labor, and environmental impacts that the University generates, in a participatory dialogue with society to promote Sustainable Human Development" (p. 5). It is easy to see that the author defines it in terms of the impact it has on its environment, on education, on the generation of knowledge, because of its constant engagement with society, and above all because it promotes sustainable human development.

On the contrary, the view that the university is only a center where knowledge is generated, separated from the problems of society and with research practices far removed from the reality of the community, has been discontinued. According to Espitia et al. (2020), this is because the changing environment in which society is immersed has forced a change in its objectives, in order to align the axes of USR with its components.

Similarly, Schwalb et al. (2019) assert that university activity has an impact on cognitive, organizational, and social aspects. The first relates to research activities and all scientific production that seeks to solve social and production problems. the second refers to the impact on related social groups, such as teachers, students, and administrative staff; and finally, the third refers to interaction with external social groups, which are influenced through links with students to generate social capital and progress.

In addition to complying with accreditation standards and other legal requirements, HEIs must contribute to the development of the social groups with

which they interact, considering moral and ethical aspects, in order to provide a well-rounded education to human beings. For this reason, it is urgent that study programs contribute to the formation of well-rounded professionals (De la Torre-Lazcano, 2019).

However, according to another author, their role as educators and trainers of professionals is of greater relevance.

University institutions fulfill a public function, that of educating, which generates a social responsibility in relation to the training of professionals. They play a new social and moral role beyond ensuring professional, technical, and scientific training, teaching ethical and supportive behaviors in favor of development. They constitute one of the most important spaces for learning and create social networks based on trust, tolerance, mutual understanding, and shared values (social capital), which contribute to the healthy and sustainable development of a society and an economy (Castañeda, 2007, pp.114).

Within this framework of ideas, USR is related to the ethical and responsible management of the university itself, research aimed at solving social problems, university outreach that promotes links with the community, and the training of professionals committed to their environment. These dimensions must be integrated coherently into the mission and vision of universities so that their impact on society is significant and lasting.

The impact of USR on society is profound and multifaceted. On the one hand, universities can influence public policy by providing research and proposals that address the most pressing social challenges, such as climate change, poverty, and inequality. On the other hand, USR has a direct impact on the training of critical and committed citizens who are capable of contributing to the well-being of their communities.

Furthermore, universities' links with the community through outreach and community service projects strengthen the social fabric by involving students and faculty in solving local problems, classifying them as a resource for transformation. Such initiatives not only benefit communities but also enrich students' academic education by providing them with practical experiences that complement their theoretical learning.

## Materials and methods

The methodology employed consists of several phases. The first phase consisted of identifying and collecting documentary sources. By reviewing these documents, primary and secondary sources were identified in order to obtain sufficient information on the subject under study. The second phase involved reading and analyzing the documents obtained. A qualitative approach was used in this research, and an inductive process was employed to understand the reality under study.

The systematic review of the documents was carried out using the Kitchenham method (cited by Carrizo and Moller, 2018). This method has three sections: planning the review, conducting the search, and finally, discussing the results.

In the first phase, the topics to be searched were planned, based on the USR and the perspectives necessary to achieve university transformation. In the second phase, a thorough exploration of scientific articles, texts, and web pages was carried out, with the aim of obtaining information on the approaches, conceptualization, and theoretical progress of the variables studied. The data sources for citations and abstracts were Redalyc, Scielo, and university repositories, using the keywords "university social responsibility," "corporate social responsibility," and "university transformational approach" for the search.

## Results

It can be noted that "SR in higher education is a transformative resource that promotes the implementation of transparent practices and ethical conduct for sustainable development, generating social well-being on university campuses for the comprehensive and appropriate training of their students" (Viteri & Arce, 2007, as cited in Niebles, 2018). Adopting a transformational approach to university social responsibility means considering universities as active agents in the transformation of society. Seen in this light, it implies that universities not only adapt to social demands, but also anticipate and lead changes that promote social justice, equal opportunities, and sustainable development.

An example of this transformational approach is the promotion of inclusive education that recognizes and values cultural, social, and economic diversity. Universities should be spaces where gender equality, respect for human rights, and the inclusion of historically marginalized groups are promoted. This not only enriches the educational process but also contributes to the construction of a more just and equitable society.

From this point of view, universities have the power to shape responsible citizens, produce scientific knowledge, conduct research that considers all stakeholders, participate in identifying and solving social problems, and transfer

knowledge. Through research, teaching, and community engagement, higher education institutions can generate knowledge that not only explains reality but also proposes innovative solutions to social problems.

On the other hand, Gaete (2010) says that the transformational university approach is achieved by incorporating social behavior into university activities and proposes the following perspectives:

**Comprehensive training:** of students developing their skills and values through a continuous process with the aim of achieving their full potential, preparing them to successfully face all the difficulties they will surely encounter in the course of their training. Similarly, Gutman (2001) considers that values are not born with people, but are a set of attitudes and emotions that are strengthened in daily life and must be managed in a dynamic and uninterrupted process to improve the student's social relationships with their environment.

In the same vein, Ceballos and Quintero (2016) state that "education in recent times, in moral terms, requires constant innovation on the part of teachers, so that they can address the processes of modern change in which students must orient their actions towards better connections in their daily lives" (pp.120). It can be said that citizenship education is the best way to lead students to live together democratically, respecting others and tolerating differences.

**Research:** incorporating all actors involved in the issue, emphasizing social aspects without undermining economic ones. In this sense, Gibbons et al. (1997) comment that "those who solve problems, those who identify them, and strategic intermediaries have to work constantly with knowledge resources maintained in other organizations, such as universities, government laboratories, consultancies, and other businesses (pp. 44)." Knowledge is therefore constructed by different actors, including universities, and this variety of knowledge contributes to the transformation of learners. Similarly, Leyva et al. (2021) point out that "scientific research is important and allows us to understand why things work the way they do. Access to this information enables human beings to adapt to their reality and continuously seek to improve their quality of life" (pp. 59). It should be noted that in order to increase the well-being of society, universities must use and communicate the knowledge they have acquired.

**Social leadership:** this is considered from two perspectives, the first as a personal quality and the second as a function of a company, organization, or society; the second is the most studied due to its effect on human groups. There are multiple definitions of leadership, but in general, it can be conceptualized as a process through which the leader influences their followers (Noriega, 2008). The leader is important in an organization because they guide the organization and human resources toward the achievement of strategic objectives.



The study of leadership is diverse. According to Burs (2018, as cited in Murillo, 2020), it is classified as transactional and transformational. The former refers to leadership where the behavior of followers is governed by rewards or punishments given by the leader according to expected performance, while the latter is a way of influencing followers to achieve goals that they could not achieve on their own. This leadership creates a connection between the leader and their followers that maximizes motivation and morale, fostering an environment of new behaviors, values, aspirations, and expectations.

Transformational leadership, according to this author,

"is a leadership style in which leaders encourage, inspire, and motivate employees to innovate and create changes that will help grow and shape the future success of the company. It is a management style designed to give employees more space to be creative, look to the future, and find new solutions to old problems. Employees on the leadership path will also be prepared to become transformational leaders through mentoring and training" (Maraboto, 2021 cited by Troche, 2022)

The goal of transformational leadership is the constant pursuit of change and the promotion of a positive and encouraging environment, guiding followers toward collective goals so that they can lead demanding processes of change and innovation.

Social action: According to Weber (1920), this refers to all types of human action that specifically focus on the actions of others, actions that can be carried out both in the present and in the future, that is, the response of a human being to the reality in which they live, voluntarily seeking the well-being of all, making decisions that dignify the daily life of the entire community.

Another author comments that social action originates

"from an interaction between individuals or groups, which in turn, individually or collectively, are characterized by their psychic system. This microenvironment that is generated is in contact with the complexity of the world, or rather with reality, in order to face it and maintain itself as an individual or group entity. The purpose of all action must be to be able to face or confront reality, to comprehend or understand the extreme number of relationships that are developed with that reality or complexity" (Lugo, 2005, pp.5).

In other words, as a product of the relationship between the organization and all the actors that make up the community, it is important to consider that in order to obtain common benefits, bonds must be created that unite the parties, leaving aside the scheme in which the institution sends a work team to the communities to collect data and then abandons them, in favor of a model of



horizontal integration between the organization and the community, where everyone seeks other alternatives to achieve the common good (Isea, 2018). . To achieve this, individual objectives must be put on the back burner in order to unify efforts to face uncertainty and chaos. In the same vein, it is important to mention that, despite the diversity of thoughts and ideas within the group, shared symbols, moral aspects, and values must be leveraged.

## Conclusions

Implementing university social responsibility from a transformational approach is not without its challenges. One of the main challenges is resistance to change within the organizations themselves, where traditional structures and practices often prevail, limiting their ability to adapt to changing social needs. Likewise, a lack of resources and pressure from sectors that promote individual objectives can hinder the transformation of social groups.

USR, understood from a transformational approach, has the potential to be a driver of social change. Universities, as centers of knowledge and training, have the capacity to influence society in a profound and lasting way. By integrating USR into their mission and vision, universities not only fulfill their ethical duty, but also position themselves as key agents in building a more just, equitable, and sustainable world. To achieve this, it is essential that universities adopt a proactive and committed approach that promotes inclusion, equity, and social well-being in all areas of their work.

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