Reflection on responsible social innovation from the optics of higher education

Reflexión sobre innovación social responsable desde la óptica de la educación superior

Reflexão sobre a inovação social responsável a partir da óptica do ensino superior

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Abstract

Introduction: This reflection article presents an analysis of innovation with a social and responsible focus from the perspective of higher education. **Objective:** Likewise, it offers a reflection on the emerging concept of Responsible Social Innovation from the perspective of Higher Education, considering an interdisciplinary approach. **Methodology:** The research was conducted using a phenomenological design, employing qualitative techniques following an analytical and interdisciplinary approach. A reflection was carried out based on a systematic review of the literature, where theoretical foundations were identified to enable the reflection from the standpoint of Higher Education. **Results:** The findings show that Responsible Social Innovation is an evolving concept grounded in innovation and social responsibility theories. It also highlights how universities act as change agents, driving such innovations through the creation of startups, business models, and processes with a responsible orientation. **Conclusions:** The theoretical limitations of Responsible Social Innovation complicate the understanding of this approach. Contributions are needed to promote the generation of models and tools in the design of strategies with this perspective. Universities must design policies that promote innovations with this focus in order to address global issues.

Keywords: educational environment; interdisciplinary approach; higher education; innovation; social responsibility.
JEL: A22; A29; B59; M14; 032.

Resumen

Introducción: Este artículo de reflexión presenta un análisis en torno a la innovación con un enfoque social y responsable desde la postura de la educación superior. **Objetivo:** Ofrecer una reflexión sobre el emergente concepto de Innovación Social Responsable desde la óptica de la Educación Superior considerando un enfoque interdisciplinario. **Metodología:** La investigación se realizó mediante un diseño fenomenológico, empleando técnicas cualitativas siguiendo un enfoque analítico e interdisciplinario. Se llevó a cabo una reflexión partiendo de una revisión sistemática de la literatura, donde se identificaron las bases teóricas que permitieron la reflexión desde la postura de la Educación Superior. **Resultados:** Los hallazgos demuestran que la Innovación Social Responsable es un concepto en construcción que encuentra fundamento en las teorías de la innovación y la responsabilidad social. Además, se menciona como las universidades son un actor de cambio que impulsa este tipo de innovaciones a través de la creación de emprendimientos, modelos de negocios y procesos con orientación responsable. **Conclusiones**: Las limitaciones teóricas sobre Innovación Social Responsable

complica la comprensión de este enfoque, se requiere de contribuciones que impulsen la generación de modelos y herramientas en el diseño de estrategias con esta perspectiva. Las universidades deben diseñar políticas universitarias que promuevan innovaciones con este enfoque que garantice la atención de las problemáticas globales.

Palabras claves: ambiente educacional; enfoque interdisciplinario; enseñanza superior; innovación; responsabilidad social.

JEL: A22; A29; B59; M14; 032.

Resumo

Introdução: Este artigo de reflexão apresenta uma análise da inovação com uma abordagem social e responsável a partir da posição do ensino superior. **Objetivo**: Oferecer uma reflexão sobre o conceito emergente de Inovação Social Responsável na perspectiva do Ensino Superior considerando uma abordagem interdisciplinar. **Metodologia**: A pesquisa foi realizada através de um desenho fenomenológico, utilizando técnicas qualitativas seguindo uma abordagem analítica e interdisciplinar. Foi realizada uma reflexão a partir de uma revisão sistemática da literatura, onde foram identificadas as bases teóricas que permitiram a reflexão a partir da posição do Ensino Superior. **Resultados**: Os resultados demonstram que a Inovação Social Responsável é um conceito em construção que encontra fundamento nas teorias de inovação e responsabilidade social. Além disso, menciona-se como as universidades são um ator de mudança que promove este tipo de inovação através da criação de empreendimentos, modelos de negócios e processos com orientação responsável. **Conclusões**: As limitações teóricas sobre Inovação Social Responsável dificultam a compreensão desta abordagem; são necessárias contribuições que promovam a geração de modelos e ferramentas na concepção de estratégias com esta perspectiva. As universidades devem desenhar políticas universitárias que promovam inovações com esta abordagem que garanta atenção aos problemas globais.

Palavras-chaves: ambiente educacional; abordagem interdisciplinar; ensino superior; inovação; responsabilidade social.

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245

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXVI N°1, 243-274 – January - June 2025
Universidad de Nariño

Introduction

Globalization has introduced multiple transformations in the business sector, raising concerns among entrepreneurs about the impact of commercial activities on the social, economic, and environmental environment. Innovation in the business context is manifested as a mechanism through which original and creative ideas are conceived, leading to the optimization or creation of entirely new products, processes, or services. This process involves not only continuous improvement but also the capacity to transform the business environment with innovative solutions that address market needs and foster competitiveness. Schumpeter's contributions allowed innovation to be considered a driving factor for the economic development of countries (Schumpeter, 1935; 1947a), impacting organizational changes and social value (Schumpeter, 1909; 1947b). The current focus of Social Innovation (SI) is directed towards creating novel solutions to address social and environmental problems to improve collective well-being. This approach is linked to sustainability, leading to the concept of Responsible Social Innovation (RSI), which seeks to face social challenges from an ethical and sustainable perspective. According to Ziegler (2017), SI develops jointly, while Freire et al. (2019) emphasize its role in sustainability. Ascanio et al. (2023) stress the need for innovative solutions to be responsible in order to address the complexities of modern societies.

According to Hernández et al. (2016), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is a key reference in the field of SI. The OECD has established a set of principles that encourage innovation among individuals, businesses, and governments, promoting the development of innovative solutions that contribute to collective well-being. These principles not only seek to foster innovation at the institutional level but also provide key instruments for designing public policies that promote research and development in countries, strengthening the capacity to respond to social and economic challenges (González et al., 2023).

The generation and application of innovation entails a complex process, as noted by Rodríguez (2022) since it is influenced by various factors, such as uncertainty, the regulatory environment, technological transformation, economic components, social issues, and competitiveness between countries. To better understand this complexity in the context of RSI, it is crucial to identify emerging trends in science and technology. According to Bitencourt et al. (2024), this analysis enables the creation of inventions that not only contribute to improving

246

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXVI N°1, 243-274 – January - June 2025
Universidad de Nariño

society but also promote economic development and optimize the commercial dynamics of the environments in which they are implemented. This comprehensive approach ensures that SI remains relevant in the face of contemporary challenges, driving sustainable solutions.

Over a decade ago, during the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were established, an ambitious global agenda consisting of 17 goals with a 2030 horizon. This agenda aims to address critical global issues such as poverty, climate change, and inequalities. Within the SDGs, innovation plays a key role, as it is seen as an essential tool to address these challenges and ensure sustainable and inclusive development globally (Uzcátegui, 2016).

Innovation is viewed as a driving force for creative solutions that foster balanced and inclusive growth. In this context, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognizes innovation as an essential means to achieve sustainable development and promote peace. UNESCO provides countries with tools to facilitate the formulation of policies and regulatory frameworks that support innovation. In this regard, collaboration between universities, governments, and the private sector is encouraged to carry out projects that address global needs (Han et al., 2024).

Particularly in Latin America, innovation has become a promising strategy to boost economic and social development in the countries, addressing the severe issues of inequality and poverty in the region. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has referred to SI intending to design sustainable alternatives, foster innovation ecosystems that include investment in Research and Development, support for startups, and emerging technologies (Alvarado and Rodríguez, 2008). Currently, universities play a fundamental role in generating knowledge and driving scientific and technological development, aiming to train professionals capable of transforming the world (Bautista et al., 2021). Promoting innovation is one of their essential functions, and their commitment to social progress requires them to implement strategies that enable graduates from various disciplines to act with a perspective aligned with SI. Thus, universities become promoters of innovation, ensuring the generation of new knowledge and its transfer into solutions addressing global challenges (Gatica et al., 2015). This approach not only enriches academic training but also contributes to social well-being and sustainable development. Universities assume a social

247

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXVI N°1, 243-274 – January - June 2025
Universidad de Nariño

commitment to promoting innovation, which involves ensuring quality education (Clara and Vega, 2021), integrating emerging technologies (Romero et al., 2020), fostering inclusive education (Sánchez, 2023), and adopting a social and sustainable perspective. From an interdisciplinary approach, this reflection article aims to provide an understanding of the concept of RSI from the perspective of Higher Education, where understanding RSI will help generate university policies that promote innovation.

Methodology

This research was designed using a qualitative approach (Sánchez and Murillo, 2021), which was structured into four clearly defined phases. First, following the guidelines of Garcés and Duque (2007), a systematic literature review (Rodríguez et al., 2015) was conducted. This review involved the collection and analysis of scientific articles, books, and conference papers, among others, intending to find evidence regarding the emergence of RSI as a variable under construction, in the context of social responsibility and sustainability (Adomako & Nguyen, 2024; Martínez et al., 2025).

Secondly, seminal documents were contrasted with updated information, especially in relation to the discourse on social and responsible innovations. This analysis was developed using the constructivist approach proposed by Alcaraz (2003), which emphasizes the interpretation and meaning of content.

Thirdly, a deep reflection was carried out, following an analytical approach (Orantes, 2023), which allowed for the generation of relevant conclusions about the topics discussed. Finally, in the fourth phase, the implications of RSI in various contexts were established, and an analysis was conducted on how universities promote innovation with an ethical and conscious approach, fostering social responsibility and sustainable development.

Reflection

Universities, as agents of change, have sought to integrate social responsibility, sustainability, technology, and sustainability into their curricula and academic programs to address the social, economic, and environmental needs of their surroundings. This social commitment is manifested in their core functions through transversal objectives that include equity, diversity, inclusion, and sustainability, thereby offering quality and accessible education for all. As a result, Responsible Social Innovation (RSI) has been incorporated into

248

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXVI N°1, 243-274 – January - June 2025
Universidad de Nariño

the global vision of universities, through their functions in teaching, research, outreach, and extension, making significant efforts to address local, regional, national, and international issues. This proactive approach not only seeks to train competent professionals but also to contribute to sustainable development and the improvement of social conditions through innovation.

According to Vallaeys (2021), universities represent a powerful lever for SI, as students, academics, and scientists have the responsibility to innovate socially and responsibly in all processes necessary to meet the SDGs. This approach involves the co-creation of solutions to social and environmental problems, adopting a scientific perspective and a global vision while acting at the local level. Romero et al. (2018) argue that SI is part of a systemic process that encompasses the dissemination of innovation knowledge across various areas, strengthening the linkage between universities and businesses. RSI drives the formulation of public policies focused on innovation and the adoption of technologies. In this context, universities emerge as key actors, as their role in education and research allows them to make significant contributions to this approach. Recent research by Maden (2024), Mohammed & Mohammed (2024), Menter (2024), and Gustafsson et al. (2023) shows that RSI has been responsibly integrated into the strategies of universities. These studies highlight the need to foster innovation and mechanisms that ensure its implementation.

Responsible Social Innovation: concepts, models, and value creation

It is undeniable that the current social, economic, and environmental challenges present significant complexity and multidimensionality. RSI aims to address these global challenges, and to achieve this, universities must equip individuals with the competencies and skills needed to meet the demands of the context. In this regard, it is essential to conceptually understand the term "innovation," which is why Table 1 presents various definitions of this concept.

249

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXVI N°1, 243-274 – January - June 2025
Universidad de Nariño

Table 1

Definitions of innovation

Concept	Author (s)	Definition
Innovation	Schumpeter (1909)	An economic development engine driven by "entrepreneurial spirit" that introduces new combinations and generates "creative destruction" processes.
	Drucker (1985)	The specific effort of providing resources with a new capacity to generate money.
	Christensen (1997)	A process through which a company introduces a product or service that creates a new market and changes how existing markets operate.
Social innovation	Murray et al. (2011)	Refers to innovation in the creation of products and social outcomes, regardless of where they originate.
	Shier & Handy (2015)	Represents a comprehensive model of social transformation, emphasizing how nonprofit direct services can generate significant social impact.
Reponsible social innovation	Herrera et al. (2018)	A process of developing and applying creative solutions that address social problems ethically and sustainably.
	Magro (2009)	An iterative and collaborative process of implementing creative and sustainable solutions to address social problems ethically, inclusively, and equitably.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

According to Alejos (2015), RSI is defined as a transparent framework in which actors and innovators collectively take responsibility for the ethical, sustainable, and social aspects of innovation and its products. On the other hand, Herrera et al. (2018) conceptualize it as a process focused on the development and application of creative solutions that address social problems ethically and sustainably. Thus, RSI presents itself as a concept that seeks to provide alternatives to global problems from a social and sustainable perspective, encouraging universities to adopt a global vision.

250

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXVI N°1, 243-274 – January - June 2025
Universidad de Nariño

RSI is a concept in development that finds its foundations in SI. According to Vargas (2021), for the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), SI is a relatively new term derived from the context of a capitalist economy. In this regard, universities play a central role by mediating between the private sector and society, promoting joint collaborations to address the contemporary challenges faced by society. Table 2 presents relevant theoretical contributions to this approach.

Table 2
Theoretical contributions to the concept of SI

Author (s)	Contributions
Hernández et al. (2016)	A process developed within a community, involving teamwork towards a common goal and the empowerment of its members.
Prada et al. (2017)	A solution to social problems, where various actors from the context—government, society, and the business sector—intervene to create a new product that leads to the well-being of the community.
Pérez & Lutsak (2017)	SI revolves around cultural and social change aimed at local development, through a network policy involving the state to promote a sustainable social economy.
Jaillier et al. (2020)	Consists of cooperation and synergy for progress generation, in the collective understanding of interested communities, transforming the context with a sense of humanity, culture, and identity.
Maestre et al. (2021)	SI is related to social entrepreneurship, social enterprise, social change to improve the quality of life of a community, and human empowerment for generating creative ideas in social issues for sustainable development.
Pastor & Balbinot (2021)	Contributes to improving quality of life and local development. It arises from the interest in satisfying the human needs of a community through collaboration and sustainability, in such a way that it is replicable in other communities to foster change and well-being.
Valadez et al. (2023)	SI requires collective learning through the intervention of various actors to provide innovative solutions to complex social problems.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Hernández et al. (2016) propose that innovation is the expression of creativity, a product of invention intended to satisfy human needs within a given economy. This view illustrates

251

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXVI N°1, 243-274 – January - June 2025
Universidad de Nariño

how contributions from Durkheim, Weber, Marx, Schumpeter, Howaldt and Schwarz, Drucker, Freeman, the Oslo Manual, and the European Commission's Green Paper on Innovation have enabled the generation of new approaches to the field of innovation today. RSI is a concept with multiple definitions but generally refers to the generation of solutions for global problems, being closely linked to social economy, social enterprises, and business sustainability. In the university context, RSI is related to the ability of educational institutions to address environmental challenges through the training of human capital with a global, social, and sustainable perspective. Several studies have demonstrated universities' efforts to materialize RSI (Göransson et al., 2022; Greene, 2021; Jordan & Mas, 2022; Mdleleni, 2022; Milley & Szijarto, 2022; Pelagallo et al., 2021; Petersen & Kruss, 2021).

In the study by Jurado and Morán (2019), the results of implementing an Interdisciplinary Rural Internship Program with an RSI approach in Chile were presented. 53.3% of university students believe that the best way to learn about innovation is through community programs. Moreover, 76.6% indicate that rural areas require RSI to implement improvement projects for children and single-mother families. However, the results of this study show the lack of commitment from all stakeholders, particularly governmental authorities, who limit the scope to strengthen cooperation and relationships between communities.

Ortega and Marín (2019) conducted a study in Colombia that implemented a Cultural Innovation Living Labs Program, where entrepreneurship projects with a cultural focus were developed, taking into account the ideology and idiosyncrasy of the involved communities. The main objective of the program was to generate knowledge and incorporate science and technology while respecting the cultural particularities of each community. However, the authors concluded that the lack of public policies on RSI education limits the formation of professionals with this vision in universities.

In Spain, Martínez et al. (2019) conducted a study that shared experiences of SI applied to a community, focusing on social finance, urban gardens, consumer groups, self-managed spaces, and alternative energies. The study highlighted three key aspects: first, initiatives that promote community autonomy; second, the promotion of inclusion, diversity, and empowerment; and third, the encouragement of collaboration and democracy within the community. Additionally, the researchers emphasized the importance of the participation of

252

governments, society, and the business sector in generating knowledge, strategies, and resources for implementing actions in solidarity communities. It is noted that RSI is not exclusive to vulnerable communities but represents an innovation model applicable to societies at any socioeconomic level, promoting sustainable development and social cohesion in various contexts.

RSI develops in universities as a university strategy aimed at addressing social issues. According to Herrera and Suárez (2021), RSI in universities is based on three key elements: first, fostering research with a humanistic approach to generate knowledge; second, teaching as a central element for sharing information and knowledge about communities; and third, linking and extending between universities, society, and the business sector.

Continuing with the analysis, Mendoza et al. (2020) mention that there is a lack of teaching on RSI that fosters human dignity, the transformation of society and reality, innovation, research, knowledge management, interaction and engagement with the context, community organization, social commitment, and leadership with a global vision. In this sense, Cordero (2022) discusses the creation of RSI schools as part of a public policy aimed at training professionals with a social and sustainable vision. In these schools, students will be encouraged to develop the ability to identify the potential of communities and manage collective needs to address their problems and those of other societies, using science, technology, and innovation to contribute to emerging economies and strengthen sustainable economic development. Hernández et al. (2023) propose RSI models (Table 3).

Table 3

Social Innovation (SI) models

Author (s)	Model name	Description
Deffuant (2002; 2005)	Individual-Based Model for Innovation Diffusion	Requires change agents who effectively communicate the impact of innovation with a sense of social value.
Mumford and Moertl (2003)	Mumford and Moertl Model	The development of social innovation consists of three stages: 1) Generation of creative ideas, 2) Implementation of the idea, and 3) Putting the idea into action.

253

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXVI N°1, 243-274 – January - June 2025
Universidad de Nariño

Mulgan and Albury (2003)	Public Sector Innovation Model	Understanding the existing social dynamics in a given context. Knowledge management, resource allocation, and public policy implementation are key to solving problems.
NESTA (2006)	Local Social Innovation Model	Characterized as a societal need, leadership, organizational culture, and resources that promote the sustainability of the context.
Quebec Network	Quebec Network Model of Social Innovation	SI requires a trigger, a method, and an objective, along with the efforts of a community that shares common interests.
Alvarado and Rodríguez (2008)	Rodríguez and Alvarado Model	Four key aspects: 1) Identifying the problem, 2) Implementing the idea and accessing resources, 3) Learning and knowledge generation, and 4) Consolidating social innovation.
West (2009)	Innovation Communities Model (ICM)	SI fosters three key elements: learning, creativity, and research. Innovation communities require talents and skills, entrepreneurial spirit, research, innovation, diversity, leadership, and motivation.
Wheatley and Frieze (2011)	Wheatley and Frieze Model	SI is characterized by a community in a state of emergency, requiring networks, a community with shared interests, and agents who support the process.
Bates (2011)	Bates Model	In SI, the entrepreneur plays a key role, where a creative idea requires research, innovation, and implementation.
European Commission (2013)	European Commission Model	SI requires the generation of the idea, implementation, prototyping, and the actual impact of prototypes.
ALMOLIN; Moulaert et al. (2013)	Alternative Model of Local Innovation	SI identifies problems, involves interested actors, and focuses on collaboration and coordination for joint work.

254

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXVI N°1, 243-274 – January - June 2025
Universidad de Nariño

Cajaiba (2014)	Integrated Perspective Model	SI can be carried out through the identification of the problem, generation of creative ideas as a possible solution, initiative, and sustainability.
TRANSIT Haxeltine et al. (2016)	Transformative Social Innovation Model	SI is carried out through the design of strategies and initiatives to solve problems in a given context.
TEPSIE (2016)	TEPSIE Model	Requires the participation of various stakeholders, empowering its members, and exercising values that the stakeholders share.

Source: Prepared by the authors based on information from Hernández (2023).

The multiple models of SI and trends toward sustainability encourage a rethinking of the concept towards a definition that includes both social and responsible elements, i.e., RSI (Responsible Social Innovation). From the perspective of Higher Education, it refers to an approach of applying innovation that concerns the long-term social, economic, and environmental impact. Strategies that promote this include applied research, social responsibility, social entrepreneurship, and strategic alliances with other universities, businesses, and governments. In this way, RSI, as an emerging concept, drives universities to strengthen their core functions, linkages with various sectors, and the design of effective and achievable strategies.

Universities promoting RSI create value through actions aimed at solving social problems, which positively impacts the formation of professionals with a humanistic approach, focused on addressing social, cultural, economic, and environmental issues in a global and capitalist context. However, the main challenge universities face when implementing RSI lies in the effectiveness and sustainability of these actions. The increase in global problems and the effects of globalization restrict the scope of university initiatives. Nevertheless, many public and private universities worldwide have integrated RSI as a central and cross-cutting theme, aiming to train professionals capable of identifying problems and proposing creative, innovative, and ethically responsible solutions.

255

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXVI N°1, 243-274 – January - June 2025
Universidad de Nariño

University Social Responsibility (USR) and Responsible Social Innovation (RSI)

Innovation, although conceived as a mechanism to promote social welfare, has not always produced beneficial effects. For this reason, its link with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) becomes crucial (Alejos, 2015). In the context of universities, CSR translates into University Social Responsibility (USR), a concept that emerges as an alternative for development in a stage characterized by a new paradigm of learning and knowledge management throughout life. This approach recognizes social responsibility as a fundamental principle for building inclusive societies and fostering sustainable development in all countries in the region (Valarezo and Túñez, 2014, p. 85). In this sense, USR becomes an essential element for universities to implement innovation effectively.

USR acts as a catalyst for innovation because, when developing solutions and alternatives to the problems of the environment, it is done from a social and sustainable perspective. The traditional approach to USR seeks to reposition the university within society, integrating its core functions (management, teaching, research, and outreach) with its mission, values, and social commitment (Vallaeys et al., 2009). In response to the agenda of the SDGs and sustainability principles, universities have found it necessary to incorporate environmental, social, and economic components, which are parallel to the dimensions of CSR. Huerta and Gaete (2017) argue that USR ensures sustainability, while Bajo (2015) maintains that there is a conceptual connection between USR and sustainability.

Several studies have evidenced the relationship between USR and RSI (Chang & Chen, 2020; Hernández et al., 2018; Hsieh et al., 2019; Sasaki & Horng, 2023). Ibarra et al. (2020) conducted a study in which they argue that USR in Latin America represents a paradox, emphasizing that CSR should begin within Higher Education, and universities should commit to implementing interinstitutional programs aimed at promoting professional ethics. They also advocate for an education that fosters skills and competencies to face conflicts, as well as a proactive university culture and management to meet the future needs of society. The relevance of USR lies in its potential to generate a positive impact on contemporary societies through interaction with the environment, applied research, commitment, and social leadership.

In the contributions of Vasilescu et al. (2010), a model is proposed that highlights the need for universities to take an active role in promoting RSI, integrating ethical principles and social values into their strategies and practices. In this regard, it is suggested that to face

256

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXVI N°1, 243-274 – January - June 2025
Universidad de Nariño

contemporary challenges, universities must adopt an interdisciplinary approach that includes collaboration with various social actors, the creation of training programs that promote community skills, and the implementation of projects addressing local problems. This approach will not only strengthen the link between universities and society but also contribute to the formation of professionals committed to social welfare and sustainable development.

Santos et al. (2020) point out that the adoption of socially responsible practices significantly improves customers' perception of service quality. They emphasize that companies integrating CSR into their strategy comply with ethical standards and also generate more trust and loyalty in their consumers, emphasizing that RSI is not only an ethical component but also a key factor for improving performance and competitiveness in the service sector.

From a different perspective, Santana (2022) argues that USR is based on a reflective process that motivates the observation of communities to identify the problems they face and to provide fair, equitable solutions grounded in values that promote social justice among all members. Similarly, Villarreal et al. (2022) highlight that USR promotes collective welfare, as well as culture, identity, sustainability, and social justice. This contribution is related to the three missions of universities: teaching, research, and outreach to various social actors. To achieve this, universities must be seen as agents of change that, through ethical behavior, a strong commitment to human rights, quality policies, foresight, and transparency, can positively influence social problems.

Ethics, therefore, is an essential component of USR, as it facilitates the effective implementation of human rights within the university. Rubio et al. (2022) argue that other elements, such as the development of competencies, institutional coherence, the culture of legality, transparency, inclusion, and sustainability, are fundamental for social responsibility, which is directly related to competitiveness. From a different perspective, La Cruz et al. (2022) examine USR through the lens of marketing, conceptualizing this approach as a driver that propels the positioning of the brand and institutional image.

USR has a significant impact in various areas; from an economic perspective, it promotes growth and economic development. In the legal field, it regulates the human rights of the community, while, from an ecological perspective, it influences environmental sustainability and natural resource management. According to Rodríguez (2024), USR has

257

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXVI N°1, 243-274 – January - June 2025
Universidad de Nariño

gained even more relevance due to the 2030 Agenda, which seeks to integrate learning with community service, foster socio-historical development, and facilitate the transfer of values, as well as ethical and moral principles. All of this contributes to the training of integral professionals committed to the common good, who carry out social actions in communities that need support to progress.

As noted, USR constitutes one of the strategies employed by universities to address the needs of society, which demonstrates a conceptual connection with RSI. According to Alejos (2015), understanding innovation as a process implies recognizing that there is no single model to follow; instead, each institution develops its own system through learning and the implementation of best practices, experimenting with new approaches, and maintaining those that prove effective. In the case of universities, innovation models have been created that encompass everything from teaching-learning processes to those related to outreach with businesses and government entities. Thus, USR is presented as a model through which universities incorporate innovation from a social and sustainable perspective, that is, aligned with RSI.

The approach proposed by Lord et al. (2018) emphasizes the importance of redesigning university curricula to train professionals with a focus on SI and positive change. This implies that future professionals should not only possess technical competencies but also creative, ethical, and social skills that enable them to address complex problems from an interdisciplinary perspective. Through pedagogical approaches that integrate practical learning, collaboration with communities, and a commitment to sustainability, educational programs can prepare university students to be agents of change.

The relationship between RSI and USR is both close and complementary, as both aim to generate a positive impact on society, though they do so from different approaches. This distinction allows for reflection on how universities should carry out actions that contribute to the expected impact of both concepts (Bolz & Bruin, 2019; Dryjanska et al., 2022; Morawska, 2022; Puente et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 2014). The link between USR and RSI is defined in their approach to solving environmental problems. Table 4 presents the elements that emerge from this interrelation.

258

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXVI N°1, 243-274 – January - June 2025
Universidad de Nariño

Table 4

Elements that arise from the relationship between USR and RSI

Elements	Effect it generates	Theoretical basis that supports it
Promotion of sustainability	Sustainability has been adopted in university plans and agendas worldwide as part of the objectives and actions undertaken by all stakeholders. The positive effect generated has been reflected in modifications to traditional processes, promoting responsible innovations aimed at reducing environmental impact and fostering sustainability between academia and society in general.	Grande (2023); Miquelajauregui et al. (2022).
Quality of education	The intentions of USR as a driver of education for all have generated concerns about ensuring quality in education; this will ensure that innovations developed from academia will effectively address problems in the environment.	Carretón et al. (2023); Zafra et al. (2018); Clara and Vega (2020).
Responsible research	The generation and application of knowledge is one of the core functions of universities. USR and RSI have driven scientists and researchers to materialize these terms, creating models, mechanisms, and even experiences regarding actions taken by universities to address global problems responsibly.	Netessine (2022); and Burke et al. (2024).
Knowledge transfer	The university is a bridge between innovation and society. There has been a need for the transfer of knowledge and technologies developed in its classrooms and laboratories, which impact the industry, thereby impacting economic development. The means through	Thomas et al. (2021); Sánchez et al. (2023).

259

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXVI N°1, 243-274 – January - June 2025
Universidad de Nariño

	which universities have transferred knowledge have enabled the formation of professionals capable of innovating responsibly, ethically, and sustainably, addressing major global problems.	
Social commitment	USR is characterized by the social actions undertaken by universities; this has led to a closer relationship with the communities where responsible innovations have been implemented, impacting economic and sustainable development. Cohesive communities benefiting from responsible innovations have been the result of efforts to combine USR and RSI.	Dagiliūtė et al. (2018); Clara et al. (2019); Sainz et al. (2020).

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Thus, it becomes evident that USR acts as a driving force for innovation in educational institutions. In light of this reflection, universities are encouraged to strengthen their actions and interventions in order to effectively address social problems. It is necessary to implement mechanisms that facilitate the proper adoption of the RSI vision, especially in public universities in Latin America, where bureaucratic processes often hinder innovation and limit effective attention to the previously mentioned issues. The variety of approaches to RSI presents a challenge for universities; a strategy to address it is to adopt an interdisciplinary approach that combines appropriate resources, inclusive policies, and a firm ethical commitment to society.

Impact of Responsible Social Innovation on the community

The emergence of innovations with a social and responsible vision leads organizations to design innovative solutions that address social, environmental, and economic challenges ethically and sustainably. The generation of RSI has a positive impact on the community and the environment, promoting inclusion, equity, and collaboration among various stakeholders, such as organizations, governments, and civil society. As mentioned, this type of innovation,

260

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXVI N°1, 243-274 – January - June 2025
Universidad de Nariño

unlike traditional innovation, sustainably seeks the well-being of society, ensuring that everyone benefits equitably, thus driving the integral development of the community.

Barnett et al. (2024) state that innovations with a social and responsible focus promote the improvement of urban conditions for people, achievable through planned policies with intersectoral collaboration and leadership aimed at social equity and community well-being. On the other hand, Dahlin et al. (2023) indicate that responsible innovations impact the reduction of inequalities, which involves the exacerbation of racial, gender, and class divisions. This is achieved through the design of structural mechanisms aimed at reducing implicit biases and promoting cooperation and cohesion within societies, thus driving development and well-being for all. Gallagher (2018) recognizes that RSI fosters creative interaction, human relationships, empathy, and mutual respect, which strengthens social bonds and promotes greater inclusion and equity within communities. In this sense, Eizaguirre (2016) insists that innovations with a social and responsible purpose can drive local economic development by creating solidarity economies, through the implementation of public policies that promote inclusive and sustainable projects focused on collaboration and social cohesion within communities as responsible nodes, clusters, and sustainable hubs that drive local economies.

From another perspective, Hou (2024) shows how RSI and service design can improve public services by generating an ethical model that is mindful of the environment. These models foster user-centered solutions, increasing the accessibility, efficiency, and quality of government services (Sancino et al., 2023). Regarding environmental sustainability, RSI has a significant impact. According to Khattak (2023), this type of innovation has driven a form of innovation known as "green innovation," which has benefited communities by making them more sustainable with a vision based on the responsibility of decisions. Sustainable practices not only depend on changes in environmental thinking but also on technological innovations that minimize ecological impact (Javed et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2023).

There is evidence that RSI finds its origins in universities, which, as knowledge generators, drive innovations with other perspectives, such as more ethical and conscientious innovations. According to Cobos (2024), RSI in collaboration with universities fosters collaborative models that address social and environmental problems. These initiatives promote a positive impact on society by connecting academic knowledge with local needs, improving sustainability and community well-being. Through these models, universities contribute to inclusive and responsible solutions, strengthening their role as agents of social

261

change (Burke et al., 2024). The focus of RSI in universities is driven by entrepreneurship and business models within communities, particularly at the local level. Menter (2024) proposes that universities expand their role as anchor institutions, becoming more involved in creating social solutions that respond to the demands of modern society. In this sense, Menter (2024) states that entrepreneurial universities are evolving from a focus on technological innovation to a mission that prioritizes RSI.

Conclusions

Innovation has significantly transformed industries, governments, and universities, introducing changes that have renewed organizational processes. Sustainability and the 2030 Agenda have driven universities to develop innovative approaches that integrate social, responsible, and sustainable aspects. In this sense, this reflection has examined various perspectives from the university, pointing out how trends promote Responsible Social Innovation (RSI), and showcasing two important currents that have facilitated the emergence of RSI. The first refers to innovation models; the contributions of Schumpeter, Durkheim, Weber, and Drucker have formalized innovation as an imperative need that contributes to the economic development of countries. Disciplines such as economics, management, and sociology support this statement, also highlighting how social-oriented innovation has contributed to reducing global issues such as poverty, inequality, hunger, and climate change. Thus, the arrival of RSI at universities is not surprising, as universities acquire the commitment to promote these concepts to address the emerging problems troubling society.

The second current links RSI with University Social Responsibility (USR), two concepts that, although different, maintain a significant conceptual connection. Both pursue a common goal: offering solutions and alternatives to global problems. It was highlighted how USR acts as a catalyst for innovation in universities, emphasizing the importance of involving all stakeholders to cohesively drive creative and innovative solutions to current social challenges. In this sense, USR presents itself as a fundamental approach that universities must explore and adopt when seeking to innovate in a socially responsible manner.

The analysis of these currents helped identify a key strategy for universities to address current issues: interdisciplinary work. The collaboration of different disciplines can drive actions that contribute to regional and local problems, through a methodology that ensures the implementation of innovation. In this way, interdisciplinary work consolidates itself as an

262

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXVI N°1, 243-274 – January - June 2025
Universidad de Nariño

essential means for the tangibility of RSI. Universities, as knowledge generators, play a central role in promoting these collaborative efforts, enriching the analysis and resolution of social problems.

RSI is not a utopia; it is a concept that, although still under construction, becomes tangible every time universities, governments, and the private sector come together to address the challenges of a global, dynamic, and changing world. Thus, universities, particularly in Latin America, must rethink their internal processes, as these often hinder innovation and engagement with the surrounding issues. Future directions will focus on the development of educational models that systematically integrate RSI into curricula and institutional management. This includes studying pedagogical methodologies that promote the development of competencies in RSI, as well as creating theoretical frameworks that address intersectoral collaboration among universities, businesses, governments, and communities. Additionally, how universities can lead the transition toward sustainable development models, through the generation of applied knowledge and the implementation of projects that respond to the SDGs, followed by analyzing internal governance mechanisms to overcome bureaucratic barriers and facilitate the adoption of innovative approaches with an ethical and social commitment.

Ethical Considerations

This study did not require ethical approval as it was based on a documentary review.

Conflict of Interest

All authors made significant contributions to the document and declare that there is no conflict of interest related to this article.

Author Contribution Statement

Miguel Ángel Clara Zafra: Conceptualization, Methodology, and Formal Analysis.

Susana Céspedes Gallegos: Research, Supervision, and Resources.

José Luis Sánchez Leyva: Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft, and Writing: Review & Editing.

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263

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXVI N°1, 243-274 – January - June 2025
Universidad de Nariño

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265

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266

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267

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268

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269

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270

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271

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273

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