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# UNIVERSITY SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF STUDENTS FROM A CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

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## SUMMARY

The objective of this research is to describe university students' perceptions on university social responsibility (USR) strategies with a focus on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) enrolled in a religious university in Chile. This research considers a non-probabilistic sample composed of 316 students from various academic programs enrolled in a university that claims to include religious principles in its decisions. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was applied, coefficients of in-

ternal consistency were measured, and statistical differences were examined. The results show statistical variations by sex and age. It is concluded that young people value the strategies implemented by universities on USR and SDGs, especially those that encourage participation with a social orientation. Finally, it is necessary to develop research that delves into the core values promoted by Catholic universities for a better understanding of the phenomenon under study.

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## Introduction

University Social Responsibility (USR) is understood as the ethical and social commitment of higher education institutions with their environment (Romero-Argueta *et al.*, 2020). It is a multifaceted concept that varies across studies, addressing local and global challenges while aligning with university missions (Acuña-Moraga *et al.*, 2022). It emphasizes the importance of understanding stakeholder perceptions, particularly

among students, to inform effective USR strategies that incorporate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Fauzi *et al.*, 2023).

The UN's SDGs highlight global challenges and encourage actions promoting equity, inclusiveness, and lifelong learning (Angelaki *et al.*, 2024). These principles link to various educational approaches, offering opportunities for integrating USR and SDGs in higher education (Severino-González *et al.*, 2022a). These goals highlight

the need for an integrated approach that addresses the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development. Due to the scarcity of studies investigating this intersection, this work seeks to fill this gap in the literature, considering the practical relevance for the higher education system and the development of the territories (Castro *et al.*, 2022).

This research focuses on undergraduate students' perceptions at a Catholic university in Chile

regarding USR strategies and their alignment with the SDGs. Catholic universities aim to merge faith and science, addressing societal challenges through USR while fostering values such as social justice and inclusion (Poncini, 2024).

The study poses the question: What is the perception of university students about USR strategies focused on the SDGs? It aims to describe these perceptions and test hypotheses regarding socio-demographic differences (H0

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## KEYWORDS / Religion / Religious Education / Sustainable Development Goal / University / University Social Responsibility /

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## RESPONSABILIDAD SOCIAL UNIVERSITARIA Y OBJETIVOS DE DESARROLLO SOSTENIBLE: DESAFÍOS Y OPORTUNIDADES DESDE LA PERSPECTIVA DE LOS ESTUDIANTES DE UNA UNIVERSIDAD CATÓLICA

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### RESUMEN

*El objetivo de esta investigación es describir la percepción de los estudiantes universitarios sobre las estrategias de responsabilidad social universitaria (RSU) con énfasis en los objetivos de desarrollo sostenible (ODS), que están matriculados en una universidad religiosa de Chile. Esta investigación considera una muestra no probabilística compuesta por 316 estudiantes de diversas carreras académicas matriculados en una universidad que afirma incluir principios religiosos en sus decisiones. Se aplicó un análisis factorial exploratorio (AFE), se midieron*

*coeficientes de consistencia interna, y se examinaron diferencias estadísticas. Los resultados muestran variaciones estadísticas según sexo y edad. Se concluye que los jóvenes valoran las estrategias implementadas por las universidades sobre RSU y ODS, particularmente aquellas que promueven la participación con un enfoque social. Finalmente, es necesario desarrollar investigaciones que profundicen en los valores que promueven las universidades católicas para una mejor comprensión del fenómeno en estudio.*

## RESPONSABILIDADE SOCIAL UNIVERSITÁRIA E OS OBJETIVOS DE DESENVOLVIMENTO SUSTENTÁVEL: DESAFIOS E OPORTUNIDADES NA PERSPECTIVA DOS ESTUDANTES DE UMA UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA

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### RESUMO

*O objetivo desta pesquisa é descrever a percepção de estudantes universitários sobre as estratégias de Responsabilidade Social Universitária (RSU), com foco nos Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável (ODS), de estudantes matriculados em uma universidade religiosa no Chile. A pesquisa utiliza uma amostra não probabilística composta por 316 estudantes de diferentes cursos, todos matriculados em uma universidade que afirma integrar princípios religiosos em suas decisões. Foi aplicada uma Análise Fatorial Exploratória (AFE), calcularam-se*

*coeficientes de consistência interna e examinaram-se diferenças estatísticas. Os resultados indicam variações significativas por sexo e idade. Conclui-se que os jovens valorizam as estratégias implementadas pelas universidades em relação à RSU e aos ODS, especialmente aquelas que promovem a participação com foco social. Por fim, destaca-se a necessidade de desenvolver pesquisas mais aprofundadas sobre os valores promovidos pelas universidades católicas para uma melhor compreensão do fenômeno em estudo.*

and H1). This research is essential for developing strategies that effectively address the interconnected social, economic, and environmental challenges faced by educational institutions (Massaro 2023).

### Methodology

The focus of this study is quantitative, and the design is descriptive (Peña-Acuña *et al.*, 2024). This work analyzes the phenomenon of USR from the SDGs considering the opinion of students through a quantitative scale in a religious university.

### Participants

The non-probabilistic, convenience sample comprises 316 university students from a

higher education center in south-central Chile. This sample is representative of the population considered in this study. Key sociodemographic characteristics considered include sex, age, years of study, origin, volunteering participation, and knowledge of USR (Table I).

### Instrument

The instrument used was validated by expert researchers in the areas of sustainability and USR and consists of two sections: the first includes demographic questions (name, age, sex, and career) to confirm participants are students at the Catholic University of Maule. The second section contains 23 statements across

four dimensions of the USR scale: 1. Broad and transformative academic training, 2. Socio-environmental connection, 3. Research with a social focus, and 4. Institutional management and transformative administration (Table II). Responses are measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

### Procedure and analysis strategies

The instrument was distributed via a Google Forms® link through email and social media in the second half of 2023. Respondents decided to participate voluntarily, by accepting informed consent. After data collection, the database was

exported to Microsoft Excel® and transferred to SPSS v18 for analysis.

The analysis strategy involved exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using Varimax principal components extraction, followed by descriptive statistics and measurement indicators. Reliability was assessed through Cronbach's Alpha for internal consistency. Finally, statistical differences were analyzed based on the sociodemographic characteristics of the university students.

### Results

This section presents the findings based on the analysis strategy. It details the results of the exploratory factor analysis (EFA), followed by descriptive

TABLE I  
SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

Characteristic	Criteria	Percentage (%)
Sex	Masculine	45
	Feminine	55
Age	From 18 to 24 years old	80
	From 25 to 31 years old	20
Permanence	From 1 to 3 years	42
	From 4 to 6 years	52
	From 7 to 9 years	6
Territory (origin)	Urban	68
	Rural	32
Volunteering (participation)	Yes	12
	No	88
Knows USR	Yes	35
	No	65

TABLE II  
UNIVERSITY SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY SCALE

Variables	Affirmation
V1	The courses I take in my degree are up-to-date and respond to social needs.
V2	In the development of my courses, I have the opportunity to participate in projects, programs or social activities.
V3	The university directs my academic training to the service of society.
V4	The university offers the possibility of taking virtual subjects.
V5	The university is prepared to adapt to new global contexts.
V6	The university promotes that I carry out research that responds to the objectives of sustainable development.
V7	The university promotes the realization of multidisciplinary research with a social focus.
V8	The university has initiatives that allow me to develop actions of innovation and social entrepreneurship.
V9	The university promotes university volunteering.
V10	The university organizes conferences, forums, and/or activities related to sustainable development.
V11	The university promotes healthy eating practices and physical and mental care.
V12	Participation in social responsibility projects and programs is encouraged at my university.
V13	The university has agreements with organizations that promote social development (State, NGOs, International Organizations, companies, among others).
V14	The university provides me with support to apply for scholarships, exchanges, or internships.
V15	The university has communication strategies that highlight its actions in the face of social problems.
V16	The university considers social and environmental commitment in its institutional mission.
V17	The university has an office that coordinates and advises on matters of social responsibility.
V18	The university carries out the election processes of authorities in a transparent and democratic manner.
V19	The university provides free and open access to its documents, norms, and procedures.
V20	The university disseminates its environmental policy to the university community.
V21	The university encourages actions in the face of society's environmental problems.
V22	The university has deposits to classify the different types of waste (glass, plastic, paper, others).
V23	The university promotes the efficient use of water consumption, energy, and care of green areas.

statistics, central tendency measures, and consistency indicators for each dimension. Finally, it explores the findings in relation to the sociodemographic characteristics of university students.

#### *Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)*

The EFA includes the application of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett sphericity tests. Regarding the KMO= 0.919 was obtained and in relation to the Bartlett sphericity test, the values are  $\chi^2= 2917.547$ ,  $gl = 136$  and  $p < 0.000$ . These values allow us to point out that the reduction of variables through EFA is adequate according to the data set. Regarding the extraction of principal components, the Varimax method was used, because it allows a more precise understanding of the variables that make up each dimension. Therefore, the factor structure is as follows: 1. Volunteering and sustainable development: V9, V12, V10, and V8, 2. Commitment and service to society: V16, V3, V5, and V6, 3. Participation with a social focus: V1, V2, V4, V19, and V7 4. Protection and conservation of the environment: V22, V23, V11, and V21 (Table III).

Regarding the internal consistency analysis, in each case the Cronbach's alpha coefficient exceeds the minimum acceptable value of 0.7. The values for each dimension are as follows: 1. Volunteering and sustainable development= 0.814, 2. Commitment and service to society= 0.850, 3. Participation with a social focus= 0.810, and 4. Protection and conservation of the environment= 0.806. All of which shows that the scale has good internal consistency (Ferrando and Lorenzo-Seva 2014).

#### *Proposal for a scale of USR with a focus on the SDGs*

The following section presents the scale for measuring the perception of USR

TABLE III  
ROTATED COMPONENT MATRIX

Variables	Dimension			
	Volunteering and sustainable development	Commitment and service to society	Participation with a social focus	Protection and conservation of the environment
V9	0.796			
V12	0.737			
V10	0.633			
V8	0.612			
V16		0.774		
V3		0.762		
V5		0.683		
V6		0.531		
V1			0.715	
V2			0.713	
V4			0.661	
V19			0.578	
V7			0.500	
V22				0.776
V23				0.766
V11				0.579
V21				0.490
Explained variance (%)	20.292	16.555	15.752	14.645
Cronbach's Alpha	0.814	0.850	0.810	0.806

strategies with a focus on the SDGs, which allows analyzing the opinion of students regarding the strategies developed by universities that seek to create value from the principles of USR and the challenges of the SDGs. The scale is composed of 17 variables grouped into four dimensions (Table IV).

Consequently, the conceptualization of each of the dimensions of the USR measurement scale with a focus on the SDGs, which allows for clarification of the epistemological limits and the scope for its proper use.

In relation to dimension 1. Volunteering and sustainable development: The administration of the educational experience, which promotes learning linked to the needs related to sustainable development, that include actions relevant to society (Sarmiento-Peralta *et al.*,

2021; Cammarota *et al.*, 2024). This is achieved through the implementation of teaching and learning strategies that contribute to the university-society link (Severino-González *et al.*, 2019a,b; Effendi 2023). In addition, it includes aspects related to extracurricular actions that seek to promote the comprehensive development of the student (Flores-Fernandez *et al.*, 2022).

Regarding dimension 2. Commitment and service to society: The university contemplates teaching processes that promote social and environmental commitment among its educational actors (Arroyave *et al.*, 2021; Hernández Alcaraz *et al.*, 2024). The above must be consistent with the institutional mission and vision, which allows academic training to be directed at the service of society, installing tools for continuous coping that promote local

and global challenges (Ouragini and Louzir-Ben Hassine, 2024).

Regarding dimension 3. Participation with a social focus: The participation that the educational experience contemplates is characterized by its contemporaneity and relevance to society (Palomares-Ruiz *et al.*, 2024; Lillo-Viedma *et al.*, 2023). This includes curricular activities that encourage students' desire to satisfy social needs due to their transcendental scope (Adel *et al.*, 2022; Ramirez Lozano *et al.*, 2024). Likewise, it encourages the realization of multidisciplinary research with social meaning and coherence, which includes sustainable opportunities that arise from the territory (Sarmiento-Peralta *et al.*, 2024).

Finally, regarding dimension 4. Protection and conservation

of the environment: HEI must provide spaces that allow the development of actions that specifically benefit the environment and society (Gallardo-Vázquez *et al.*, 2020; Hafezi *et al.*, 2024). This includes strategies such as recycling, efficient use of resources, and care for the environment (Severino-González *et al.*, 2022b; Monteiro *et al.*, 2024). In addition, it contemplates healthy eating and the care of physical and mental health (Torres Bernal *et al.*, 2024).

#### Descriptive statistics

In Table V, the means, medians, and standard deviations (SD) of each of the dimensions that make up the measurement scale can be observed. In relation to dimension 1. Volunteering and sustainable development, it can be identified that the highest value is found in V10, due to the assessment that students give to the development of activities related to the holding of conferences, forums, and/or events that include the challenges of sustainable development (mean= 4.313; median= 4; SD= 1.570). On the other hand, in relation to dimension 2. Commitment and service to society, it can be identified that the highest assessment is found in V3 (mean= 4.421; median= 4; SD= 1.688), a product of the efforts that the university develops in terms of academic training oriented to the service of society.

Likewise, regarding dimension 3. Participation with a social focus, the highest value expressed by students is found in V1 (mean= 4.500; median= 4; SD= 1.614), due to the availability of updated courses that respond to social needs. Similarly, in relation to dimension 4. Protection and conservation of the environment, the highest value is located in V11 (mean= 4.256; median= 4; SD= 1.689), due to the promotion that the university develops in topics related to healthy eating, physical and mental care.

TABLE IV  
PROPOSAL FOR A SCALE OF MEASUREMENT OF USR WITH A FOCUS ON THE SDGS

Dimension	Variable	Affirmation
1. Volunteering and sustainable development	V9	The university promotes university volunteering.
	V12	Participation in social responsibility projects and programs is encouraged at my university.
	V10	The university organizes conferences, forums, and/or activities related to sustainable development.
	V8	The university has initiatives that allow me to develop actions of innovation and social entrepreneurship.
2. Commitment and service to society	V16	The university considers social and environmental commitment in its institutional mission.
	V3	The university directs my academic training to serve society.
	V5	The university is prepared to adapt to new global contexts.
	V6	The university encourages me to carry out research that responds to development objectives.
3. Participation with a social focus	V1	The courses I take in my degree are up-to-date and respond to social needs.
	V2	In the development of my courses, I have the opportunity to participate in social projects, programs or activities.
	V4	The university offers the possibility of taking virtual subjects
	V19	The university provides free and open access to its documents, rules and procedures.
	V7	The university promotes the realization of multidisciplinary research with a social focus.
4. Protection and conservation of the environment	V22	The university has deposits to classify the different types of waste (glass, plastic, paper, and others).
	V23	The university promotes the efficient use of water and energy consumption and the care of green areas.
	V11	The university promotes healthy eating practices and physical and mental care.
	V21	The university encourages actions to address society's environmental problems.

TABLE V  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Dimension	Variable	Mean	Median	SD
1. Volunteering and sustainable development	V9	3.655	4	1.436
	V12	3.693	4	1.383
	V10	4.313	4	1.570
	V8	4.203	4	1.701
2. Commitment and service to society	V16	3.994	4	1.621
	V3	4.421	4	1.688
	V5	4.022	4	1.684
	V6	4.339	4	1.682
3. Participation with a social focus	V1	4.500	4	1.614
	V2	4.171	4	1.689
	V4	4.329	4	1.650
	V19	4.389	4	1.646
	V7	4.266	4	1.727
4. Protection and conservation of the environment	V22	4.133	4	1.819
	V23	4.212	4	1.592
	V11	4.256	4	1.689
	V21	3.930	4	1.664

*Inferential analysis*

This section presents the results of exploring differences according to non-parametric statistical tests due to the non-normal distribution of the data. In relation to the above, the Kruskal-Wallis H test and the Mann-Whitney U test are applied. Consequently, significant differences are only found according to the socio-demographic characteristics of university students: sex and age.

In Table VI, the mean, median, standard deviation (SD), and p-value for each variable according to sex can be observed. It is possible to identify that there are significant differences in variables that constitute the following dimensions: 1. Volunteering and sustainable development (V8), 2. Commitment and service to society (V6), and 3. Participation with a social focus (V1, V2, and V7). In relation to the above, the dimension that presents the greatest number of statistical differences per dimension is 3. Participation with a social focus. In all cases, the highest ratings are expressed by women. However, the highest value is found in dimension 3. Participation with a social focus, particularly in V1 (mean= 4.810; median = 4; SD= 1.499), because women give them to the implementation of actions that promote the taking of updating subjects in coherence and with a focus on the social needs of educational actors and the environment.

In Table VII, the mean, median, standard deviation (SD), and p-value are found according to age. It is possible to identify that there are significant differences in variables that constitute the following dimensions: 1. Volunteering and sustainable development (V9 and V12) and 3. Participation with a social focus (V1 and V2). In each of the cases, the highest values are expressed by the group of students who declare to be between 18 and 24 years of age. However, the highest

TABLE VI  
MEAN, MEDIAN, STANDARD DEVIATION (SD) AND P-VALUE ACCORDING TO SEX

Dimension	Variable	Feminine			Masculine			p-value
		Mean	Median	SD	Mean	Median	SD	
1. Volunteering and sustainable development	V9	3.656	4	1.428	3.500	4	1.438	0.079
	V12	3.695	4	1.382	3.549	4	1.471	0.151
	V10	4.322	4	1.569	4.261	4	1.592	0.517
	V8	4.206	4	1.696	3.930	4	1.674	0.007
2. Commitment and service to society	V16	3.989	4	1.562	4.000	4	1.697	0.936
	V3	4.592	4	1.598	4.211	4	1.774	0.075
	V5	4.109	4	1.729	3.915	4	1.626	0.284
	V6	4.672	4	1.506	3.930	4	1.797	0.000
3. Participation with a social focus	V1	4.810	4	1.499	4.120	4	1.674	0.000
	V2	4.454	4	1.661	3.824	4	1.664	0.001
	V4	4.494	4	1.587	4.127	4	1.709	0.057
	V19	4.443	4	1.674	4.324	4	1.614	0.514
	V7	4.609	4	1.637	3.845	4	1.748	0.000
4. Protection and conservation of the environment	V22	4.075	4	1.893	4.204	4	1.728	0.532
	V23	4.264	4	1.594	4.148	4	1.593	0.569
	V11	4.270	4	1.690	4.239	4	1.692	0.801
	V21	4.080	4	1.552	3.746	4	1.780	0.058

TABLE VII  
MEAN, MEDIAN, STANDARD DEVIATION (SD) AND P-VALUE ACCORDING BY AGE

Dimension	Variable	Feminine			Masculine			p-value
		Mean	Median	SD	Mean	Median	SD	
1. Volunteering and sustainable development	V9	3.751	4	1.463	3.270	4	1.260	0.012
	V12	3.779	4	1.336	3.349	4	1.526	0.041
	V10	4.328	4	1.576	4.254	4	1.555	0.628
	V8	4.221	4	1.727	4.127	4	1.601	0.570
2. Commitment and service to society	V16	3.957	4	1.572	4.143	4	1.813	0.468
	V3	4.451	4	1.648	4.302	4	1.846	0.666
	V5	4.059	4	1.667	3.873	4	1.755	0.419
	V6	4.344	4	1.649	4.317	4	1.821	0.969
3. Participation with a social focus	V1	4.680	4	1.580	3.778	4	1.560	0.000
	V2	4.277	4	1.686	3.746	4	1.646	0.020
	V4	4.281	4	1.701	4.524	4	1.424	0.321
	V19	4.395	4	1.604	4.365	4	1.817	0.964
	V7	4.352	4	1.716	3.921	4	1.744	0.064
4. Protection and conservation of the environment	V22	4.047	4	1.794	4.476	4	1.891	0.092
	V23	4.130	4	1.559	4.540	4	1.693	0.097
	V11	4.213	4	1.674	4.429	4	1.748	0.321
	V21	3.988	4	1.639	3.698	4	1.756	0.179

value is found in dimension 3. Participation with a social focus, particularly in V1 (mean= 4.680; median= 4; SD= 1.580), since students who are between 18 and 24 years of age, due to the favorable perception that is given

to activities that cultivate the updating of knowledge in coherence with the different social needs that the communities have, have a higher value than those who are between 18 and 24 years of age.

## Discussion

The analysis of USR and SDGs presents challenges that can be leveraged by higher education institutions (HEIs) to address the needs of diverse stakeholders. This research identifies key action areas for designing strategies that integrate SDG challenges with USR values, emphasizing the need for plans that reflect the concerns of educational communities. In Catholic universities, it is crucial to incorporate the Social Doctrine of the Church.

USR encompasses multiple perspectives and dimensions, including commitment to others and the environment, personal value discovery, and socially responsible management (García-Ramos *et al.*, 2016; Rababah *et al.*, 2021). This study specifically focuses on four dimensions relevant to the SDGs: volunteering and sustainable development, commitment and service to society, participation with a social focus, and protection of the environment.

The analysis highlights differences in how men and women engage with USR dimensions, such as volunteering, social commitment, and environmental protection. These differences may be attributed to variations in social roles, cultural expectations, and personal values, as supported by previous research (García-Ramos *et al.*, 2016; Rababah *et al.*, 2021). Developing initiatives that appeal to the strengths and interests of men and women, ensuring equal opportunities for participation and leadership, and promoting mixed-gender teams to encourage diverse perspectives and collaborative problem-solving are essential.

The findings align with socially responsible actions and the challenges posed by the SDGs, potentially addressing social and environmental issues (Fauzi *et al.*, 2023; Ouragini and Louzir -Ben Hassine, 2024). Moreover, USR includes elements such as prosociality and character education, informed by the encyclicals of Pope Francis (Severino-González *et al.*, 2022c). The research reveals statistically significant differences based on sex and age, while previous studies highlighted variations related to university tenure and volunteering (Sarmiento-Peralta *et al.*, 2021; Severino-González *et al.*, 2023). These insights underscore the importance of tailored strategies for different interest groups.

## Conclusions

The study of University Social Responsibility (USR) in educational contexts highlights key areas related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This research explores university students' perceptions of USR strategies at a religious university in Chile, offering insights for future initiatives.

Understanding stakeholder perspectives is essential for creating frameworks that align with the action objectives of the dicastery for promoting integral human development and the teachings of pope Francis. This approach underscores the importance of incorporating the views of those impacted by university policies and addressing broader societal challenges.

The findings have practical implications for educational and policy leaders, promoting values such as empathy, solidarity, and respect for people and the planet—principles central to the Social Doctrine of the Church. An experiential education model can further enhance students' engagement with critical social and environmental issues, thereby supporting the SDGs.

Given the diverse challenges faced by universities, it is vital to establish effective platforms for addressing contemporary societal issues. Future research should expand its focus on USR and the SDGs within university management and quality education, utilizing varied methodologies and broader samples to enhance understanding and improve strategies for social well-being and environmental stewardship.

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