

Social responsibility of Spanish universities for sustainable relationships

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Abstract

As institutions committed to society, universities communicate their responsible behavior and their impacts on the environment and community through University Social Responsibility (USR) and sustainability reports. This paper analyzes USR management in the 50 higher education institutions that belong to the Spanish public university system and their commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda. A descriptive methodology was followed to carry out a document review and content analysis of their social responsibility and sustainability reports, as well as their institutional development plans. The results show that both the conceptualization and management of USR as a policy is very heterogeneous between universities and by regions. There is little evidence that USR policies are deeply rooted in a government framework and that the contribution of public universities to the 2030 Agenda is incipient. Although the relationship with internal and external audiences is represented in the documents, there are weaknesses in the relationship with mixed interest groups. Responsible communication is presented as a mechanism for the integration and promotion of the SDGs in universities and as a manifestation of their relationships with stakeholders.

Keywords

Communication; Responsible communication; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Agenda 2030; Public relations; University social responsibility; Sustainability; Stakeholders; University system; Universities; Quality education; Gender equality; Decent work; Economic growth.



1. Introduction

The study of the relationship between organizations and their publics covers a wide range of assumptions that go beyond the original business sphere. Universities, as institutions of higher education, have been adapting to the social, cultural and economic changes that have taken place over the years. In this sense, this research is based on the approaches proposed by **Grunig and Hunt** (2000) regarding the relationship of the organization with the publics of the community, who will be classified from the managerial perspective of public relations (**Míguez-González**, 2007) and for whom University Social Responsibility (USR) is developed. **Vallaey**s (2006) considers that Social Responsibility is a strategy of ethical and intelligent management of the impacts generated by the organization in its human, social and natural environment. In its evolution, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) was adapted and applied in the educational field, mainly in higher education, resulting in what is known today as University Social Responsibility (USR).

On the one hand, USR emanates from Corporate Social Responsibility, in that it derives from concepts developed in the business world: corporate philanthropy (management theories), satisfaction to interest groups (stakeholder theories), the creation of a sustainable society (agency theory), the legitimacy that publics grant to the institution resulting from its behavior (legitimacy theory), social responsibility as an institutional policy (institutional theory) and sustainable competitiveness (resources and capabilities theory) and, all this, linked to the social function that universities have (**Pérez-Ramírez et al.**, 2018).

On the other, the concept of sustainability refers to meeting the needs of the present without compromising the needs of the future. Sustainable development requires a holistic approach that takes into consideration environmental concerns along with economic development (UN).

Thus, the development of social responsibility starts from assessing the impacts of corporate or institutional behavior on its stakeholders and aims to achieve sustainable management in three dimensions: economic, social and environmental (**Bom-Camargo**, 2021).

It is therefore of interest to analyze the way in which Spanish public universities communicate the impact of their social responsibility in order to establish sustainable links in their relations with their publics, as a way of contributing to sustainable development.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. University Social Responsibility (USR)

The origin of the conceptualization of University Social Responsibility (USR) can be found in the theoretical-practical contributions of a group of scholars who are part of the Chilean project *Universidad Construye País* ("University Builds Country") and the *Latin American Universities Network*, proposed by the *Inter-American Initiative on Ethics, Social Capital and Development*, in 2000 (**Vallaey**s, 2014; **Vallaey**s; **Álvarez-Rodríguez**, 2019; **Ibarra-Uribe**; **Fonseca-Bautista**; **Santiago-García**, 2020). This network developed a socially responsible university model based on the four types of impacts that are generated by higher education institution (**Vallaey**s, 2014; 2021):

- internal (related to work climate and environment); -teaching-related (on students);
- research-related; and
- social.

In recent years, Spanish universities have faced the need to create management models based on social responsibility, which involves the development of strategic plans and social responsibility reports, as well as the incorporation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into their institutional behavior and communication policy. In this sense, the concept of social responsibility has expanded from the corporate sector to other types of non-profit organizations that are committed to serve their community. In the case of universities, social responsibility is an ethical and smart strategy to manage their impacts in their human, social and natural environments. It is the responsibility for the way in which its decisions and/or activities impact or are capable of impacting both society and the environment by following an ethical and responsible behavior (**Vallaey**s, 2006; 2021). The RSU redefines the university between the duality of prioritizing economic development or the search for social development (**Ibarra-Uribe**; **Fonseca-Bautista**; **Santiago-García**, 2020).

Since its inception, the Spanish University System has had a clear mission: to provide a public higher education service. However, the university assumes a role that goes beyond the production and dissemination of knowledge (**Ali et al.**, 2021) leading it to contribute both to social welfare and to the economic progress and cohesion of the society. Therefore, it could be said that

"social responsibility takes on a deeper meaning when it is taken to the context of universities, which from the moment of their creation were conceived by their nature as development and social welfare management entities" (**Torres-Castaño**; **Sánchez-Vásquez**, 2014, p. 73).

The concept of corporate social responsibility is clearly associated with different aspects related to the business world, such as financial goals, competitive advantages, ethics and value creation (**Barnett**; **Salomon**, 2006; **Gholami**, 2001; **Porter**; **Kramer**, 2006; **Wines**, 2008; **Pérez-Ramírez et al.**, 2018; **Severino-González et al.**, 2022), while social responsi-

bility is related to the activities and projects that organizations develop in their community and derives from the expressive activities that organizations undertake to show their goodwill towards stakeholders (**Grunig; Hunt, 2000**). When it comes to establishing relationships that aim to have a positive impact on the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the community (**Barroso; Castillo-Esparcia; Ruiz-Mora, 2023**), universities have assumed their responsibility by incorporating the fundamental principles of sustainability in their strategic plans as a method of survival and growth (**Simancas-González; García-López, 2019**). In this sense, as Vallaey's clarifies that

“USR is not just solidary outreach, but a policy for the entire university: central administration, teaching, research and outreach” (**Vallaey's, 2014, p. 109**).

Therefore, with a business origin (**Pérez-Ramírez et al., 2018**), social responsibility is susceptible to be applied to the operation of other organizations, such as the university, as one of its tasks is to forge relationships with society through teaching and research (**Alvarado-Lagunas; Morales-Ramírez; Ortiz-Rodríguez, 2017**).

There is no universally agreed-upon definition of, nor unified measurement criteria for, university social responsibility. However, its definition must respond to the university-environment binomial, with special emphasis on its function at the service of society (**Aldeanueva-Fernández; Jiménez-Quintero, 2013; Flores-Fernández et al., 2022**). According to **Larrán-Jorge et al. (2012)**, one of the reasons that hinder the implementation of social responsibility strategies in universities is precisely the lack of indicators that measure the performance of university activity.

For Vallaey's, USR is understood as:

“a policy for the continuous improvement of the University towards the effective fulfillment of its social mission through four processes: ethical and environmental management of the institution; formation of responsible and solidary citizens; production and dissemination of socially relevant knowledge; social participation in the promotion of a more humane and sustainable development” (**Vallaey's, 2008, p. 209**).

For his part, Santana points out that,

“USR can be defined as the integral and strategic management of the impacts that the substantive functions of teaching, research and outreach generate on university's stakeholders, for the purpose of promoting social justice and sustainable human development, while responding to the demands of the knowledge society” (**Santana-Murcia, 2022, p. 17**)

In any case, socially responsible management is not limited to the corporate environment. Universities must understand this type of management as agents that contribute to the economic and social development of their environment (**Aldeanueva-Fernández; Arrabal-Sánchez, 2018**) and for the benefit of their community.

The literature related to USR has undergone a great increase since the latter part of the 1990s (**Gaete-Quezada, 2023**). However, and despite the scarce theoretical foundation on USR, its approach from different contexts and disciplines (**Pérez-Ramírez et al., 2018**) and its linkage to concepts such as

“University Community (Civic/Public) Engagement (UCE), Outreach, Scholarship of Engagement (SOE), University Social Responsibility (USR), Civic Engagement, Public Engagement and Community University Partnership” (**Esfi-jani; Hussain; Chang, 2012, p. 1**),

show the responsible behavior of universities.

Given the importance of creating firm, consistent, coherent and adequate USR plans, universities need to communicate their results through specific reports aimed at informing the institution's stakeholders about the institution's commitments to sustainable development and its economic, environmental and social impacts (*Foro de los Consejos Sociales de las Universidades Públicas de Andalucía, 2009*). However, given the voluntary nature of these reports, not all universities openly publicize their achievements and failures.

Currently, many Spanish universities have implemented a social responsibility model directly related to their strategic positioning and have left its management in the hands of a specific office or department within their institutional structure (**Alba-Hidalgo, 2007**). The management model and scope of USR and sustainability policies vary across universities and a large number of them integrate these policies within their management model (**Benavides, 2012; González-Alcántara et al., 2016**). In fact, they are considered “USR Universities” when they make USR manifest in their Strategic Plan, their official website or in any other public document, showing that social responsibility is integrated in their management and governance model; “Pre-USR Universities” carry out isolated and punctual responsible actions and “Non-USR Universities do not present any type of action in terms of social responsibility” (**González-Alcántara et al., 2016**).

For this reason and given the great prominence that sustainability has taken in the recent legislative framework of universities, it is necessary to carry out an in-depth and updated analysis of the USR of the Spanish public university system as a way to contribute to sustainability.

96% of Spanish public universities include social commitment as a transversal axis in their strategic plans

2.2. The 2030 Agenda and sustainability in the university environment

The *United Nations Development Program (UNDP)* is the *UN's* global development network that advocates for change, by giving countries the knowledge, experience and resources they need to help people build a better future. Its mission is to end poverty and build democratic and lawful governance, and inclusive institutions. This agency works in 170 countries and territories to help them eradicate poverty, reduce inequalities and exclusion and build resilience so they can achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

<https://www.undp.org/es>

In the preface to the *Report of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN, 2020)*, its president, Jeffrey D. Sachs, defines

“sustainable development as socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable economic development (...) a holistic concept, involving economics, social justice, and environmental management (...) [that] requires basic scientific knowledge and applied technical knowledge” (p. 6).

In this sustainable context, the 17 SDGs (Figure 1) are a universal call to action to eradicate poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. To this end, the creativity, knowledge, technology and financial resources of all nations are needed to achieve the SDGs in all contexts.

<https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>

Recently, considering that creating a climate of trust facilitates coexistence and the exchange of opinions and that the truth should always be the first version of the facts, the *Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management* launched the public call to add a new goal to the 2030 Agenda: the SDG 18 on responsible communication for dialogue between companies, public institutions and citizens.

<https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>

In the following days, the media reported on a series of companies and organizations that endorsed this initiative to educate people as agents of change, to report and share clear information and spread awareness:

- *Ferrovial*
- *Telefónica*
- *Ilunion*
<https://dirigentesdigital.com/empresa/las-empresas-hablan/ilunion-comunicacion-social-adhiere-ods-comunicacion-responsable>
- *Prodigioso Volcán*
<https://www.prodigiosovolcan.com/proyectos/contribuir-a-los-ods-a-traves-de-la-comunicacion-clara>
- *DKV*
<https://cat.dkv.es/corporativo/noticias/dkv-se-adhiere-la-iniciativa-de-crear-el-ods-18-comunicacion-responsable>
- *Dircom*
<https://www.dircom.org/2023/02/02/dircom-se-suma-a-la-propuesta-de-crear-el-ods-18-por-una-comunicacion-responsable>
- *Sociable*
<https://www.soziabile.es/soziabile-se-suma-creacion-ods-18-comunicacion-responsable>



Figure 1. Sustainable Development Goals.

<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/news/communications-material>

The SDG 18 on responsible communication is the sum of the following ideas: open dialogue about global challenges, such as climate change, poverty reduction and democracy; consider dialogue as the most powerful weapon; freedom of opinion and press; ethical approach to organizational and institutional communications, based on facts; fight against fake news and any kind of propaganda; educate individuals to use their ‘communication powers’, especially through social media; public and private support for rigorous journalism; support diversity at the deep level and equality of genders; empathy to those who suffer from hunger, poverty, lack of opportunities, war, forced migrations and discrimination; positive and inclusive language. Overall, communicating progress on the achievement of the SDGs is part of sustainable development itself and contributes to it; but also, responsible communication is the tool that makes stakeholder participation in management and governance models visible through dialogue, information and transparency with stakeholders (**De-Andrés-del-Campo; González-Martín, 2012**).

In the field of higher education, the *Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge* of the Government of Spain has published a guide (*SDSN, 2017*) for universities to address the most pressing global challenges: ending poverty, promoting economic prosperity, social inclusion, environmental sustainability, peace and good governance for all people by 2030.¹

<https://www.miteco.gob.es/es/ceneam/recursos/pag-web/empezar-ods-universidades.aspx>

The social commitment of universities has been inherent in the legislations that have regulated the Spanish university system in recent years. However, it is the recent *Organic Law of the University System (LOSU) (España, 2023)* which explicitly addresses the relationship of the university with sustainability and the SDGs.

Article 2 of this law broadly points out that the Spanish university system must provide a public higher education service. However, the norm clarifies some issues and establishes the guidelines that apply to them as references to consider (article 2.3):

“human and fundamental rights, democratic memory; the promotion of equity and equality, the advancement of sustainability, the fight against climate change and the values associated to the Sustainable Development Goals”.

Article 18 on social and territorial cohesion states that universities must encourage the participation of the entire university community in activities and projects that are related, among other issues, to the SDGs. To this end, in addition to promoting volunteering work and ensuring the creation of climate-sustainable campuses, as internal goals, universities must share their knowledge with society to face the climate emergency and its effects. To do this, universities must be involved in the equitable, inclusive and sustainable economic and social development of their environment and contribute to reversing the depopulation dynamics of some territories, favoring the creation of quality jobs and improving the welfare standards of the territory in which they operate.

On the other hand, Article 30 on international university cooperation for solidarity and development, the *Organic Law of the University System* states that

“Universities will carry out activities aimed at the fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals”.

For its part, Article 56 on budget and funding system considers budget allocations to ensure the environmental sustainability of universities. This new legal framework involves regulating the role universities play in the achievement of the sustainable development of the societies in which they operate for the benefit of their stakeholders and themselves. The law divides the SDGs in four dimensions (*SDSN, 2017, p. 2*):

- learning and teaching;
- research;
- institutional governance, management policies and community outreach; and
- social leadership.

Research, however, has highlighted two basic difficulties for the achievement of the sustainable university: the budget, as a tangible aspect, and the understanding of the concept of social responsibility among the members of the university community.

While social responsibility must take into consideration the stakeholders that affect or are affected by organizations (**Ibarra-Urbe; Fonseca-Bautista; Santiago-García, 2020**), USR must not only respond to the expectations and demands of the surrounding stakeholders (**Rasche; Esser, 2006; Wiltshier; Edwards, 2014**) and universities must take the lead in affirmative and useful activities for the sustainable development of their community in collaboration with stakeholders (**Cabedo et al., 2018; Chile; Black, 2015; Grunig; Hunt, 2000; Wiltshier; Edwards, 2014**) and as part of their strategic plans (**Rasche; Esser, 2006**).

Activities on human rights, fair employment practices, stakeholder issues and community relations are common, but their social impact is minimal and does not contribute to the scientific progress that is needed. Hence, to make a positive impact, universities must integrate social responsibility initiatives into their administrative

“Despite the growing involvement of universities, the reality shows a great variability in their content, management, implementation and communication”

policies and management processes (Ali *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, the bidirectional link between universities and their environment lies in a model that establishes USR as a transversal policy that underlies their behavior to meet stakeholder expectations and their strategic plan for all essential internal and external functions. For their success, universities need to engage all stakeholders,

“both internal and external –from university leaders to professors, students and university partners” (SDSN, 2020, p. 11).

3. Objectives

Based on the growing incorporation of social responsibility policies in Spanish public universities, as well as their increasingly necessary association to the SDGs proposed by the UN, and from the premise of co-responsibility between the university and the public with shared social goals, continuously redefined and agreed upon based on the relationships established between them (De-Andrés-del-Campo; González-Martín, 2012), this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How do Spanish public universities include social responsibility policies in their strategic plans?

RQ2. Is there a clear commitment on the part of Spanish public universities to social responsibility that allows them to articulate sustainable relationships with their audiences?

RQ3. To what extent do Spanish public universities incorporate the 17 SDGs proposed by the UN into their institutional behavior and communication policy?

Thus, the main objective focuses on analyzing the way in which Spanish public universities disseminate the impact of their social responsibility and establish sustainable links in their relations with their publics.

Three specific objectives derive from the main research objective:

1. Contextualize USR in higher education structures and policies and establish the dimensions of social responsibility in Spanish public universities.

2. To find out whether Spanish universities are manifestly committed to the social responsibility and sustainable development of the 2030 Agenda.

3. Identify the specific stakeholders and SDGs that are addressed in USR reports.

4. Methods

To achieve the previous objectives, we use a descriptive method based on the content analysis of the reports and plans of university social responsibility and sustainability of the 50 public universities operating in the Spanish territory.

<https://www.crue.org/universidades>

As Sierra-Bravo (2007) points out, document analysis is the detailed examination of the content of a set of documents that are treated as a whole and that later derives towards the use of the content analysis technique.

The information was collected through institutional web pages following several procedures:

1) A purpose-created methodological tool (Table 1) that centers the analysis on two dimensions:

- Dimension 1. Refers to USR or sustainability as a university policy and establishes whether the commitment to social responsibility has been made through a specific plan or strategy.
- Dimension 2. Considering that sustainability reports are an effective, systematic and transparent communication tool for universities to report on their responsible actions for sustainable development and management (González-Alcántara *et al.*, 2016), this dimension covers the manifest commitment of universities' USR or sustainability reports to the 17 SDGs established by the UN in 2015. It also includes a reference to the goal on responsible communication, which is not an official SDG, but is being proposed as such by the *Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management*.

2) Secondary sources: Information was extracted from Elsevier's *The Times Higher Education Impact Rankings 2022* and Dyntra, a global collaborative transparency platform that works on the measurement and management of the open government in organizations for the Civil Society.

https://www.timeshighereducation.com/rankings/impact/2022/overall#!/page/0/length/25/locations/ESP/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/undefined

<https://www.dyntra.org/indices/universidades>

The information gathered from these sources allows us to contextualize and establish a starting point for the situation of Spanish public universities in terms of their evolution in terms of sustainability.

“ Only 59.2% of the universities make reference to communication as a responsible university management policy ”

Table 1. Research variables

Dimension 1	
V1. University	
V2. Does it have a RS department or equivalent?	1. Yes; 2. No
V3. Who controls this department?	1. University; 2. Foundation; 3. Social Council; 4. Private Companies; 5. Other
V4. Is SR addressed in the university's strategic plan?	1. Yes; 2. No
V5. Does the strategic plan address SR in the area of research?	1. Yes; 2. No
V6. Does the strategic plan address SR in the area of teaching?	1. Yes; 2. No
V7. Does the strategic plan address SR in the area of outreach?	1. Yes; 2. No
V8. Does the university have a USR/sustainability plan? (González-Alcántara et al., 2016)	1. Yes; 2. Only isolated actions; 3. None
V9. Concepts of USR activity	1. Social Responsibility; 2. Sustainability; 3. Both
Dimension 2	
V10. Has the university published a USR/sustainability report? (González-Alcántara et al., 2016)	1. Yes; 2. No
V11. What is the tear of the latest USR/sustainability report?	1. Annual; 2. Biennial; 3. None
V12. What bodies are involved in USR management?	1. Vice-rectorate-central areas; 2. Schools-Centers; 3. Technical services or units; 4. Administration
V13. Stakeholders addressed in USR report? (post-analysis coded)	1. Teaching and Research Staff; 2. Administration and Services Staff; 3. Students; 4. Enterprises; 5. Public Institutions; 6. NGOs or Social Associations; 7. Local or regional government; 8. Suppliers; 9. Gypsy community; 10. Muslim community; 11. Disabled people; 12. LGBTQI+ community; 13. Women; 14. Families; 15. Other universities; 16. Society in general
V14. Areas of application of USR? (adapted from SDSN, 2017)	1. Stewardship; 2. Teaching; 3. Research; 4. Outreach
V15. 2030 Agenda	1. SDG1; 2. SDG2; 3. SDG3; 4. SDG4; 5. SDG5; 6. SDG6; 7. SDG7; 8. SDG8; 9. SDG9; 10. SDG10; 11. SDG11; 12. SDG12; 13. SDG13; 14. SDG14; 15. SDG15; 16. SDG16; 17. SDG17; 18. Responsible Communication (SDG18)

The analysis was conducted during March 2023. SPSS 28 was used for data processing.

5. Results

5.1 University strategic plan and USR/sustainability plan

At a structural level, 60% of Spanish public universities have a vice-rectorate or specific service to develop social responsibility. The Social Council stands out among the agents involved in its development, together with the university (Figure 2).

Responsibility is part of the university's strategic plan in 96% of cases. Regarding the concepts addressed in the USR activity, social responsibility or commitment appears in 59.3% of universities while sustainability begins to be glimpsed in 18.5% of cases. Of the universities, 22.2% implement a USR model that combines social responsibility and the contribution to sustainable development.

The university bodies involved in USR management (Figure 3) are schools and centers, vice-rectorates or central units dependent on the rectorate, as well as management and technical units or services.

According to the classification of USR as a university policy in the *University Social Responsibility Report: from knowledge to action*, 98% of universities develop socially responsible activities. Of them, 54% are USR universities (i.e., they have implemented a USR or sustainability policy, plan or strategy) while 44% are pre-USR universities (i.e., they develop isolated social responsibility activities). Only 2% are non-USR

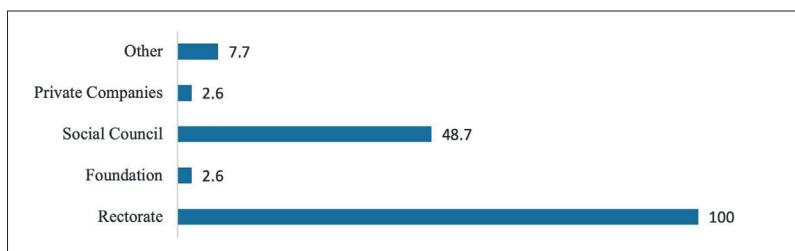


Figura 2. Agents involved in USR management (%)

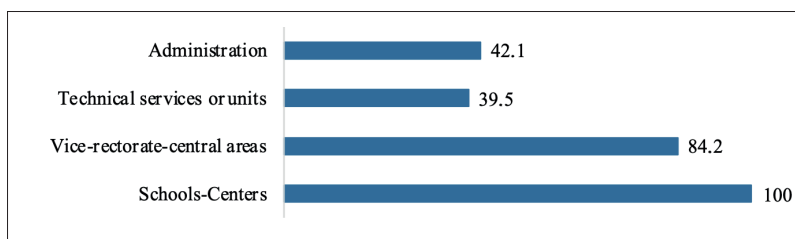


Figure 3. University bodies involved in the development of USR (%)

universities because they do not implement any social commitment action (Figure 4).

The universities with USR or sustainability plans that stand out by autonomous communities are those from Andalusia (25.9%), Madrid (22.2%), Catalonia (14.8%) and Galicia (11.1%).

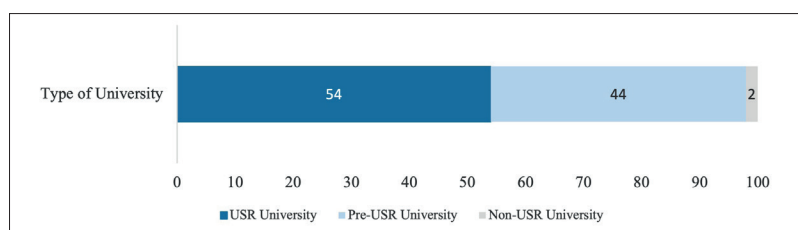


Figure 4. Types of responsible universities (%)

With regards to the areas of action considered in the universities' USR/sustainability plans or strategies, it should be noted that although there is a wide representation of the dimensions of research (80%), teaching (86.7%) and outreach (83.3%), the internal dimension of social responsibility only appears in 65.4% of the universities.

Table 2 classifies Spanish public universities into USR Universities, Pre-USR Universities and Non-USR Universities.

Table 2. Crosstabulation University*Type of responsible university

		USR University	Pre-USR University	Non-USR University
Autonomous University of Barcelona	UAB	X		
Autonomous University of Madrid	UAM		X	
University Carlos III	UC3	X		
University Complutense	UCM		X	
University of A Coruña	UDC		X	
University of Alcalá	UAH	X		
University of Alicante	UA	X		
University of Almería	UAL	X		
University of Barcelona	UB	X		
University of Burgos	UBU	X		
University of Cádiz	UCA	X		
University of Cantabria	UNICAN	X		
University of Castilla La Mancha	UCLM		X	
University of Córdoba	UCO	X		
University of Extremadura	UEX		X	
University of Girona	UdG		X	
University of Granada	UGR	X		
University of Huelva	UHU	X		
University of Jaén	UJAEN	X		
University of La Laguna	ULL	X		
University of La Rioja	UNIRIOJA		X	
University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria	ULPGC	X		
University of León	UNILEON		X	
University of Lérida	UDL		X	
University of Málaga	UMA		X	
University of Murcia	UM		X	
University of Oviedo	UNIOVI	X		
University of Salamanca	USAL		X	
University of Santiago de Compostela	USC	X		
University of Sevilla	US		X	
University of Valladolid	UVA		X	
University of Vigo	UVIGO	X		
University of Zaragoza	UNIZAR		X	
University of País Vasco	EHU	X		
International University of Andalucía	UIA	X		
International University Menéndez Pelayo	UIMP			X
University Miguel Hernández	UMH		X	
National University of Distance Education	UNED	X		

		USR University	Pre-USR University	Non-USR University
University Pablo Olavide	UPO	X		
Polytechnic University of Cartagena	UPCT		X	
Polytechnic University of Catalonia	UPC	X		
Polytechnic University of Madrid	UPM	X		
Polytechnic University of Valencia	UPV		X	
University Pompeu Fabra	UPF	X		
Public University of Navarra	UPNAV		X	
University Rey Juan Carlos	URJC	X		
University Rovira i Virgili	URiV		X	
University of Las Islas Baleares	UIB		X	
University of Valencia	UV		X	
University Jaume I	UJI		X	
Total	50	27	22	1

The analysis (Table 3) shows a statistically significant and moderate correlation ($\Phi = .386$, $p = .024$), with a *Chi-square* value of 7.437 and significance $p = .024$, between university type and contribution to the 2030 Agenda. That is, universities that implement USR, via plans or isolated actions, are more involved in sustainable development.

5.2. USR and sustainability reports

After verifying that the management of USR and sustainability is in an incipient phase as part of university policy, the results show that 78% of universities have at some point published a report on social responsibility or sustainability (Figure 5).

While some universities have published these reports since they first made their social commitment, which was generally followed by environmental and sustainability commitments, the oldest report refers to the academic year 2011-2012 and was issued by the *University of Córdoba*. Other universities also stopped publishing these reports in the following academic years. The number of reports corresponding to the 2020-2021 academic year, which coincides with the Covid-19 pandemic, is outstanding, just like the decrease (almost seven percentage points) in publications in the following academic year (2021-2022).

Considering the stakeholder types that are benefited by USR actions (Table 4), the internal stakeholders with the largest presence in the university reports are the Teaching and Research Staff and the Administration and Services Staff (97%) and the student body, which appears in 100% of the reports. With regards to external stakeholders, committed and sustainable relationships focus on companies and public institutions, in all cases; third sector organizations and the local and regional governments (94.7%); and society in general (around 97%). Relationships with other universities are less prominent while suppliers are the least represented. On the other hand, the groups that represent the social commitment to equity

Table 2. *Chi-squared* test and symmetrical *Phi* measurement

Test and measurement	Value	GI	Significance
Pearson's <i>Chi-square</i>	7,437*	2	,024
<i>Phi</i>	,386		,024
Contingency coefficient	,360		,024

* 4 cells (66.7%) have expected count smaller than 5. The minimum expected count is .14.

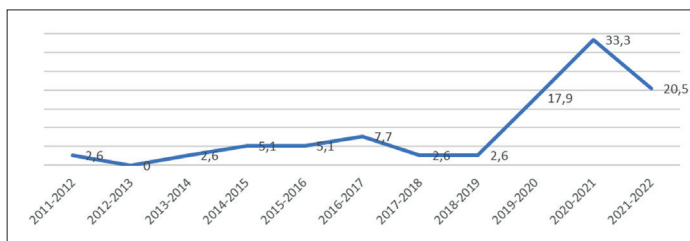


Figure 5. Publication of USR or sustainability reports (%)

Table 4. Stakeholders addressed in USR reports (%)

Internal stakeholders	
Teaching and Research Staff	97.3
Administration and Services Staff	97.3
Students	100
External stakeholders	
Enterprises	100
Public institutions	100
NGOs or Social Associations	94.7
Local or regional government	94.7
Suppliers	57.9
Other universities	73.7
Society in general	97.4
Mixed stakeholders	
Gypsy community	15.8
Muslim community	7.9
Disabled people	92.1
LGBTQI+ community	44.7
Women	97.4
Low-income families	78.9

Note. The publics in Table 4 have been codified after the analysis of the social responsibility reports.

and diversity are, in this order: women, disabled people, low-income families, the LGBTQ+ population, and the Gipsy and Muslim communities.

In terms of the areas of action of USR, the results indicate that its development covers research (97.4%), teaching (94.7%) and outreach (92.1%), while the internal dimension, in terms of stewardship (labor and environmental management), reaches a lower presence (78.9%).

Although the analysis is not robust (more than 20% of the cells have expected count smaller than 5, it is interesting to note the statistically significant relationships found between certain stakeholders and the area of application of social responsibility included in university reports. The contents that refer to USR in outreach present a statistically significant, moderately high association ($\Phi = .562$, $p = .001$) with a *Chi-square* value of 11.982 and a significance level of .001. There is also a significant correlation, although moderate ($\Phi = .368$, $p = .023$) with a *Chi-square* value of 5.147 with a significance level of .023, between USR in outreach and third sector companies, as well as local or regional government. On the other hand, the development of USR in the internal sphere is significantly and moderately associated ($\Phi = .345$ and $p = .036$) with the Teaching and Research Staff and the Administration and Services Staff, with a *Chi-square* value of 4.405 and a significance level of .036.

5.3. The 2030 Agenda

Since 2007, when the Andalusian public universities began a project to develop a proposal for a social responsibility report for the university system of this community (*Foro de los Consejos Sociales de las Universidades Públicas de Andalucía*, 2009), more and more universities include in their social commitments the contribution to the development of the 2030 Agenda. To achieve this goal, inter-university networks have been created, such as the *Working Group of the Interuniversity Council of Catalonia (CIC)*. Since 2019, this network has been working in this line, showing universities' interest in incorporating USR and SDGs in their institutional plans through strategies that are common to the entire Catalan university system (*ACUP*, no date; *Gencat*, 2021).

Moreover, in 2021, the three Galician public universities started a project whose purpose was to provide the university system of this community with knowledge and tools on the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, through the implementation of the *First Strategic Plan of the Galician Network of University Cooperation for Development 2020-2030 (Cooperación Galega*, 2021), for the achievement of the SDGs.

Continuing with the network of universities, in the Valencian Community numerous activities and actions have been proposed to provide its university system with contextualized knowledge about the 2030 Agenda and the 17 SDGs. This is the case of the online course titled "SDGs in the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations: Challenges of the Sustainable Development Goals" (*GVA*, 2017), which was offered in 2017 within the framework of the agreement between the Valencian Public Universities and the *Generalitat*.

Worldwide, the *Impact Rankings 2022* is a sustainability tool that, since 2019, assesses the progress made by universities in the achievement of the SDGs. The only requirement to participate is that the university must offer undergraduate or graduate studies¹⁴. This ranking of global performance evaluates four broad areas of university activity (research, stewardship, outreach, and teaching) in relation to the SDGs (*The Times Higher Education*, 2022), which serves to trace the evolution of Spanish public universities in terms of sustainability (Figure 6).

https://www.timeshighereducation.com/rankings/impact/2022/overall#!/page/0/length/25/locations/ESP/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/undefined

There are 16 universities that do not report their data to the 2022 Impact Ranking, such as the *University of Castilla La Mancha (UCLM)*, *University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ULPGC)*, *International University of La Rioja (UNIR)*, *University of Huelva (UHU)*, *University of Extremadura (UEX)* *University of León (UNILEON)*, *University of Zaragoza (UNIZAR)*, *International University of Andalucía (UIA)*, *International University Menéndez Pelayo (UIMP)*, *University of Córdoba (UCO)*, *University of Cantabria (UNICAN)*, *Polytechnic University of Cartagena (UPCT)*, *University of Illes Balears (UIB)*, *Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM)*, *Pablo Olavide University (UPO)* and *University of País Vasco (EHU)*. In the opposite case, the universities reporting

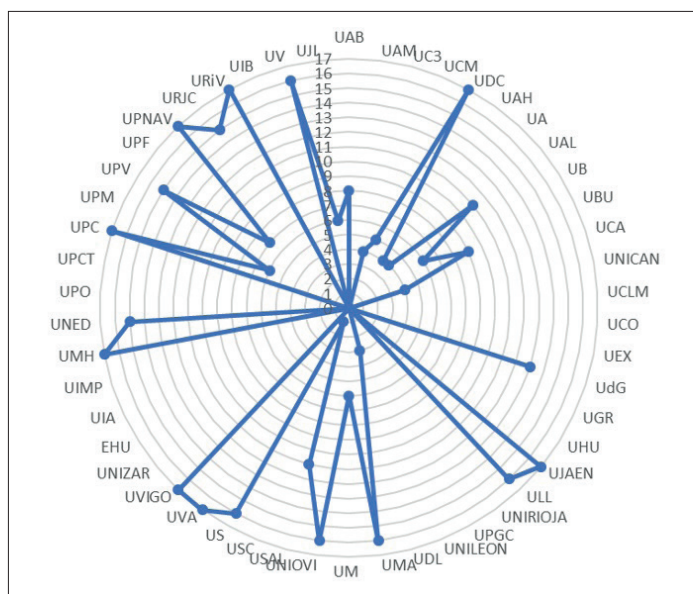


Figure 6. Sustainable Universities of the Impact Ranking 2022.

Note: Based on data from the *Impact Ranking 2022*.

https://www.timeshighereducation.com/rankings/impact/2022/overall#!/page/0/length/25/locations/ESP/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/undefined

the 17 SDGs are the *University of La Coruña (UDC)*, *University of Jaén (UJAEN)*, *University of Valladolid (UVA)*, *University of Vigo (UVIGO)*, *Miguel Hernández University (UMH)*, *Polytechnic University of Catalonia (UPC)*, *Public University of Navarra (UPNAV)* and *Rovira i Virgili University (URIV)*.

Our analysis, on the other hand, shows that 86% of universities contribute to the development of the SDGs, according to the content of their USR or sustainability reports, which provide detailed information on the contributions of universities to the different SDGs (Figure 7).

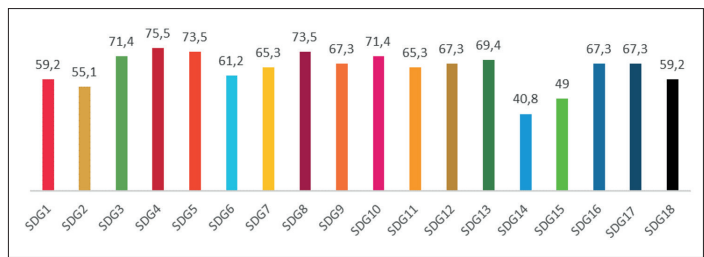


Figure 7. Contribution of universities to the achievement of the SDGs

In this sense, *quality education* (SDG 4) is present in 75% of cases, closely followed by *gender equality* (SDG 5; 73.5%) and *decent work and economic growth* (SDG 8; 73.5%), *good health and well-being* (SDG 3; 71.4%) and *reduced inequality* (SDG 10; 71.4 %). Other SDGs, like 6, 7, 9, 12, 13, 16 and 17, are present in between 60% to 69% of cases. The percentage of universities that work to contribute to the achievement of the rest of the SDGs is below this threshold. With regards to the inclusion of communication as a responsible university management policy, it appears in 59.2% of the USR and sustainability reports.

These results establish a ranking of universities that contribute to the SDGs of the 2030 Agenda. The first quartile of the sustainability ranking is occupied by 29 universities (58%), led by the *Autonomous University of Madrid*, the *Carlos III University*, the *University of Alcalá*, the *University of Cádiz*, the *University of Jaén*, the *University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria*, the *University of Vigo*, the *National University of Distance Education* and the *Pompeu Fabra University*. Five universities (10%) are in the second quartile (Q2) of sustainability and other three institutions (6%) are in the third quartile (Q3), while 13 universities (26%) have not yet incorporated a USR model in their management plans (Table 5).

Table 5. Sustainable Development Goals in universities (n)

University	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18		
UAM	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	18	Q1
UC3M	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	18	
UAH	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	18	
UCA	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	18	
UJAEN	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	18	
ULPGC	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	18	
UVIGO	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	18	
UNED	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	18	
UPF	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	18	
UBU	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		17	
UNICAN	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	17	
UCO	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		17	
UGR	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		17	
ULL		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	17	
UNIOVI	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		17	
USAL	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		17	
UIA	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		17	
UPC	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		17	
UPNAV	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		17	
URJC	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		17	
UAB	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x		16	
UB	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x		16	
UNIZAR	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x		16	
UPM	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x			16	
UDC			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		15	
UMH		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x		15	
UDL	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x			14	
UMA	x		x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x		14	
UPCT	x		x	x	x			x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	14	

University	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
EHU			x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x		12
UHU			x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x					x	x	x	11
UV	x	x	x	x	x			x		x		x	x			x		x	11
UJI			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x			x		x	11
UM	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x									x	10
UCM	x			x	x			x		x	x	x	x				x		9
UDG			x	x		x	x	x				x	x				x	x	9
URIV				x	x					x						x	x	x	6
UAL																		x	1
US																		x	1
UVA																		x	1
UPV																		x	1
UCLM																x			1
UA																			
UEX																			
UNIR																			
UNILEON																			
USC																			
UIMP																			
UPO																			
UIB																			

However, significant differences can be observed when comparing our results with data from the *Impact Rankings 2022* (*The Times Higher Education, 2022*). For example, the *UAB* formally communicates 16 SDGs, but it only appears in 8 SDGs of the *Impact Rankings*; the *UM* communicates 10 SDGs, but only appears in 6 SDGs; the *UAH* communicates 18 SDGs, but only appears in 4 SDGs; and the *UPCT* communicates 14 SDGs, but does not appear at all. In contrast, the *UDG* communicates 9 SDGs, but only appears in 13 in the *Impact Rankings*; and the *UCA* communicates 18 SDGs, but only appears in 9. Therefore, some universities have not reported any information on their contribution to the 2030 Agenda while others have communicated their commitment to the SDGs in excessive or deficient manners (Figure 8).

6. Discussion and conclusions

USR has become a necessary policy for action and constant improvement in Spanish public universities (Aldeanueva-Fernández; Arrabal-Sánchez, 2018; Simancas-González; García-López, 2019; Vallaeys, 2014). So much so, that 96% of the universities under study include social commitment as a transversal axis in their strategic plans. However, despite the growing involvement of universities, either individually or in groups, there is great variability in terms of their management, implementation and communication of USR. In fact, 60% of Spanish public universities have a vice-rectorate for social responsibility, although many universities have been incorporating sustainability as a function to be developed as part of their social responsibility, and others, as an independent objective in relation to sustainable development and the environment.

Despite the results indicate that most Spanish public universities have developed USR models (Benavides, 2012; González-Alcántara et al., 2016), not all of them consolidate USR management in the same departments and, although they

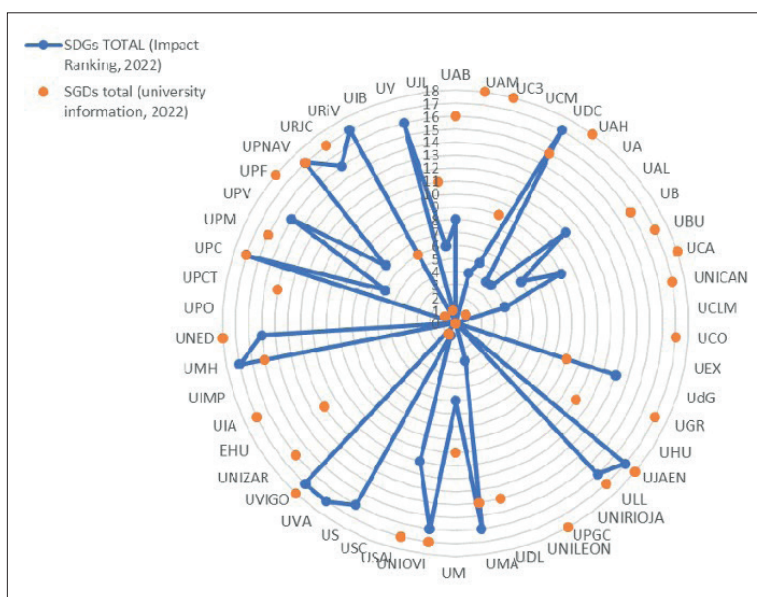


Figure 8. Comparison between institutional communication and communication in *Impact Ranking* (Agenda 2030).

Note: Based on the *Impact Ranking 2022*. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/rankings/impact/2022/overall#!/page/0/length/25/locations/ESP/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/undefined

depend on the administration, Social Councils also play a crucial role in a significant number of responsible universities, in line with previous studies (**Alba-Hidalgo**, 2007).

Among the key concepts universities address in USR management (isolated actions or plans), social responsibility takes center stage, while sustainability is just beginning to emerge. Most universities have a USR plan, policy or strategy (54%), but there is in fact not so much difference between them and those universities that only develop isolated activities of USR (44%). Therefore, it can be concluded that the number of universities that have integrated the concept of USR in their management model is practically the same as those that promote and disseminate USR but have not implemented it into their institutional development policies. In this sense, there has been a clear decline in the data since 2014. Despite the number of public universities in Spain has varied minimally (52 in 2014 and 50 in 2023), their typology, based on their level of social responsibility, has done so substantially. In 2014, 35 of the 52 Spanish public universities were considered USR, 16 were pre-USR and 1 was Non-USR (**González-Alcántara et al.**, 2016), while the analysis of the 50 universities concludes that 27 are USR, 22 are Pre-USR and, still just 1 is Non-USR.

With regards to the areas where USR is implemented (**Vallaey**, 2014), although the impacts seem clear in the areas of research, teaching and outreach, USR is much less internalized in the area of stewardship, which involves the management of employment and environmental policies.

Therefore, the data have allowed us to contextualize and conceptualize USR in the structure as well as the strategic policy or institutional management model of universities, and to identify the areas where it is implemented, which is the first specific objective of this research.

The role of universities is key to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the targets encompassed in its 17 SDGs (**Alba-Hidalgo; Benayas-del-Álamo; Blanco-Portela**, 2020). With regards to the manifestly committed of Spanish universities to social responsibility and sustainable development of the 2030 Agenda, which is the second specific objective of this research, USR and sustainability reports show that they are necessary instruments to disseminate the evolution of their social and sustainable commitment as defined in their USR plans (*Foro de los Consejos Sociales de las Universidades Públicas de Andalucía*, 2009), thus achieving this objective. However, there is great variability in terms of their creation, continuity and content. Some universities, despite being pioneers, stopped publishing USR reports completely, while others stopped communicating their USR actions after the 2020-2021 academic year, just after the Covid-19 pandemic. Since it has not been possible to know the periodicity of this medium across all universities, it cannot be concluded whether the decrease in the number of USR reports after this stage is due to the lack of continuity or to the extension of reporting periods (biennial periodicity, for instance).

The analysis also shows that USR universities are more involved in the development of the goals of the 2030 Agenda. In general, 86% of the universities under study favor, to a greater or lesser extent, the development of the SDGs, prioritizing quality education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), good health and well-being (SDG 3), and the reduction of inequality (SDG 10). In this sense, although the number of universities per autonomous community is very different, there is an evident involvement of the different autonomous communities in the promotion of social responsibility models that seek to improve the quality of universities and their contribution to the SDGs. The networks that autonomous communities have been created around social responsibility and sustainability coincide with the results of our study, and in this regard the universities of Andalusia, Madrid, Catalonia and Galicia show important progress in socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable economic development (*SDSN*, 2020).

From the communicational point of view, the social responsibility reporting model proposed for the Andalusian university system has already pointed out that, despite the efforts to develop activities and structures directly related to social responsibility, USR is not highlighted in relation to the different stakeholders (*Foro de los Consejos Sociales de las Universidades Públicas de Andalucía*, 2009). This situation still needs to be improved since only 59.2% of universities refer to communication as a responsible management policy. According to Simancas-González and García-López,

“university plays a fundamental public service role, with a double function: to achieve greater social valuation of the university and accountability, in terms of return and transparency” (**Simancas-González; García-López**, 2022, p. 220).

Therefore, as an exercise of the responsibility resulting from their character as public institutions, it is essential for public universities to communicate their value as agents in the dialogue between companies, institutions and citizens (*Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management*), and as promoters of the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda. In this sense, universities' responsible management cannot evolve correctly if social responsibility is not perceived as a neuralgic point of their institutional policies.

Likewise, the heterogeneity of USR reports is also evident in the stakeholders they address, which responds to the third specific objective. Social responsibility must take into account the stakeholders of the institutions

“ The heterogeneity of USR reports is also evident in the audiences included in them ”

“ The commitment acquired by the Spanish publicly managed university system with a defined plan or strategy for social responsibility is still a pending task ”

(Ibarra-Uribe; Fonseca-Bautista; Santiago-García, 2020) and the results corroborate this with respect to internal and external stakeholders: internal stakeholders (teaching and research staff, administration and services staff and students) are clear protagonists, while external stakeholders appear to a lesser degree, with suppliers (57.9%) being the least represented group. However, looking at the stakeholders that can be found inside and outside the institution (mixed), the most absent in the reports is the Muslim community, followed by the Gipsy and LGBTQI+ communities, to the detriment of the SDG 10 (reduced inequality).

The results also indicate that the contents that allude to USR in the area of outreach are closely associated with the Third Sector and the local and regional government, while those that relate USR development to the internal sphere, focus on the teaching and research staff, and the administration and services staff.

Based on the previous and the new university regulatory framework, if universities must encourage activities aimed at the fulfilment of the SDGs and promote the participation of the members of their community for this purpose, it is concluded that:

- With respect to research questions 1 and 2, regarding the first dimension of analysis of this study, given that just over half of the universities analyzed here are considered USR universities, the Spanish public university system has yet to commit to social responsibility through master plan or strategy. Homogenization, unification and internalization of concepts and instruments is necessary to allow Spanish public universities to advance in a model of responsible and sustainable management with responsible communication policies. Moreover, to achieve responsible and sustainable relations with stakeholders, universities must consider all areas of activity (internal areas with impact on the members of the university community, and the areas of research, generation of knowledge and teaching with impacts on student training) including outreach. In addition, and related to the previous conclusion, the commitment of public universities with their internal, external and mixed stakeholders is substantial, which reflects their sustainable relationship with their communities and their conception of USR as a university-wide policy (Vallaey, 2014; SDSN, 2020) that contributes to the advancement of the 2030 Agenda through their main functions.
- Regarding the second dimension, the analysis highlights the difficulty to access the USR plans and reports of universities and to differentiate between plans and isolated actions. While some universities present their specific actions as if they were continuity plans, others present reports whose content clearly accounts for the commitment acquired in the form of a plan or strategy. This confusion of content and content presentation makes it extremely difficult to analyze the real situation of universities with respect to USR and their social commitment to the incorporation of the SDGs into their strategic plans. This is because, despite the fact that a large percentage of universities (86%) contribute to the development of the SDGs, 13 institutions have not yet made the commitment to the 2030 Agenda. This conclusion allows us to answer research question 3.

To conclude, the analysis, results and conclusions presented allow us to highlight the limitations of the research that coincide with the barriers encountered in the implementation of USR (González-Alcántara *et al.*, 2016) such as the lack of access to information or the lack of specific performance indicators for the elaboration of USR reports. On the one hand, the absence or lack of a consolidated institutional USR policy makes it difficult to access its results in most universities and, on the other hand, there is no model or guide for university social responsibility reporting.

Therefore, the analysis of variables that respond to the indicators described in the literature serves as a premise for future studies that analyze the responsible actions of universities in relation to the dimensions and audiences. In addition, we believe that the entrepreneurial origin of SRU and the lack of financial resources are, among others, some barriers (González-Alcántara *et al.*, 2016) that hinder a culture of SR in universities that moves away from the mentality of economic benefit. Aspects that should be included in the subsequent study with the application of a mixed methodology.

7. Note

1. The guide is called "Getting started with the SDGs in universities. A guide for universities, higher education institutions, and the academic sector". It was developed in 2017 by the *Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Australia / Pacific*. The Spanish edition has produced in collaboration with several members of the *Spanish Network for Sustainable Development (REDS)*, the *Autonomous University of Madrid*, the *University of Cantabria*, the *University of Deusto* and *ASYPS*.

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Despite the fact that a large percentage of universities (86%) contribute to the development of the SDGs, 13 institutions have not yet made a commitment to the 2030 Agenda

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