Engagement of social work students concerning sustainable development, social responsibility, and their roles

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Abstract*– As the world is trying to achieve sustainable development goals, it's essential to integrate social responsibility and sustainable development in all areas of knowledge, therefore universities play a vital role in this process through education, research, and outreach. The aim of this paper is to present the engagement of social workers on sustainable development and social responsibility. This research is a qualitative method combining participatory action research with educational research, where each construct and dimensions were identified with the students. The results of this study show that social work students shared their experiences in the field of social responsibility and for this reason, a prominent level of engagement was achieved with the "people" dimension and lower connection with organizational ethic and economics benefic dimensions, regarding Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Students encourage actions with quality education, poverty eradication, health, and well-being, linked with the humanistic and social approaches. It is confirmed that the implementation of innovation pedagogy using teaching-learning strategies, based on participatory action research, contributes to a critical awareness of the challenges of sustainable development, encourage and engagement aiming to become change agents.

Keywords: Sustainability, social responsibility, pedagogy, teaching, learning

I. Introduction

Universities play a vital role in society. Through their educational function, they contribute to a country's economic development by training professionals, future entrepreneurs, and leaders equipped with knowledge, skills, and ethical and responsible capacities to act as agents of change [1,2]. As the world is trying to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs) it's essential to integrate social responsibility and sustainable development in all areas of knowledge.

When discussing teaching, it is crucial to consider the role of educators, as they are key to ensuring that social responsibility and sustainability education significantly impacts students.

Universities must provide adequate training for educators [3] regarding these topics, because of their crucial role in knowledge transfer to different groups of society

According to Reference [4], the success of teaching-learning strategies on social responsibility depends on the methodologies adopted by universities. Teachers might have the knowledge, students might have the interest and university resources, but if the teaching-learning techniques and methodologies are not the right ones, knowledge transfers can´t be achieved.

Social responsibility and sustainable development education aims for students to understand their role in transforming society, recognizing their ability to influence their communities and future development. In this context, educators must not just transfer knowledge but also foster a critical mindset in students. This is where critical pedagogy plays a crucial role. It seeks to empower, inspire, and challenge societal structures, enabling students to transform their environment while promoting personal and societal growth [5,6].

Critical pedagogy encourages classroom engagement, questioning societal realities, and analyzing social contexts aiming for students to become agents of transformation within these contexts. 5,6].

For students, Service Learning as part of critical pedagogy combines theoretical learning with methodological application through real-life experiences, fostering teamwork, social values, and skills that contribute to both personal and professional growth [7].

This aligns with what Reference [8] propose in their manual for incorporating the 2030 Agenda and SDGs into higher education considering the incorporation of SDGs in all substantive functions of university: teaching, research and

outreach. They advocate for experiential education focused on action to solve societal problems through innovation, implementing social project-based learning to foster pro-sociality and transformative change in students.

As reviewed earlier in the document, different authors propose teaching methods to approach the teaching-learning of sustainable development and social responsibility, however all of them include an action component.

For social workers in Spain, the knowledge of sustainable development and social responsibility is no longer optional as the European Union is highly regulated on sustainable matters, but according to Reference [9], Spain would not reach the European SDG average. And as identified during the observation phase of this research, there are skills, yet not necessary theoretical knowledge on the subject between students.

Therefore, this paper aims to design and validate an action research methodology that combines multiple research approaches and critical pedagogical perspectives to foster high levels of engagement among Social Work students in learning processes related to sustainability and social responsibility.

Grounded in critical pedagogy and complemented by participatory, and transformative learning approaches, the study explores how collaborative and reflective educational practices can strengthen students' active involvement, critical awareness, and commitment to social and environmental challenges. In doing so, the paper contributes a methodological framework that connects sustainability education with socially engaged learning processes in Social Work education.

II. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Universities role on sustainable development

The irrational use of natural resources, along with soil, air, and water pollution, has accelerate climate change, affecting not only an environmental level but all elements of social spaces, therefore an imbalance are being experienced not only environmental(planet), but also economic(profit) and social(people) making the social challenges increasingly complex, rapid, unpredictable, paradoxical, and tangled. [1]

It is necessary to act with social responsibility, both individually and collectively, across different sectors, to become aware of our actions and the implications of our decisions, which will generate social, economic, and environmental impacts. [2,3]

Universities play a central role in promoting sustainable development and social responsibility, since they serve as a channel for equipping professionals with the appropriate competencies and generating the knowledge needed to find innovative solutions to the challenges facing humanity. Socially responsible universities encourage their substantive functions (teaching, research and outreach) to address world challenges on the path toward sustainability. [1,8]

To achieve the 2030 Agenda that includes sustainable development, participation is needed at the global, regional, and local levels, with a multistakeholder approach and educational institutions actively collaborating including within their work agendas the subject and seeking innovation in their educational processes to promote meaningful and experiential learning that fosters social innovation. [2,3]

Reference [8], propose a model to incorporate sustainable development in universities management and teaching, the model is presented in figure 1 and the mold presents two drivers for sustainable development in education, the first one is educational demands, and the other is social and environmental urgency. Also, the model highlights that these drives are integrated across the core functions of university, but it adds an extra one: management. This ¨new¨ function represents that it's not just about what universities give to society but also the way it manages internally topics like labor, waste management, providers, etc.

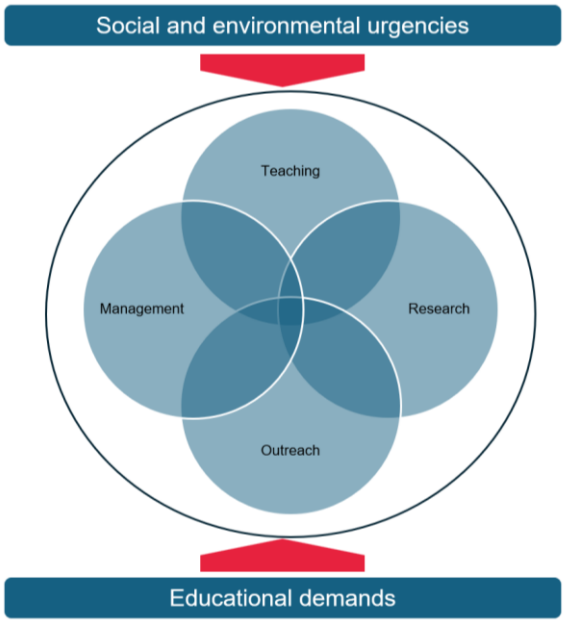


Fig. 1: Model of university sustainable development integration

2.2 Critical pedagogy and sustainable development

Critical pedagogy is an educational approach that questions traditional teaching structures and promotes education oriented toward social transformation. This

approach goes beyond knowledge transfer by encouraging students to become critical subjects capable of analyzing and challenging social, economic, and environmental urgent situations. Reference [6] emphasizes the need to transform educational systems in response to global challenges such as inequality, environmental crises, and digitalization and demonstrates that critical pedagogy can serve as a tool for reducing inequalities and strengthening social awareness

Within the context of sustainability education, this approach becomes particularly relevant because it promotes reflective and experiential learning processes that enable students to understand the interconnection between social, economic, and environmental issues while fostering citizenship committed to sustainable development and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Service Learning (SL), as part of the critical pedagogy, has become one of the most relevant pedagogical methodologies for operationalizing social responsibility and sustainable development within universities. Service Learning integrates community service with academic instruction and critical reflection, fostering social responsibility among students because it promotes meaningful interaction between students and communities while encouraging the development of social competencies. [7]

SL responds to contemporary educational demands by connecting academic learning with real societal needs, allowing students to apply disciplinary knowledge to address social and environmental problems in collaborative and transformative ways in concordance with the model presented in figure 1.

III. Material and Methods

3.1. Data sources

To achieve the objectives, two in-person workshops were conducted with social work students, reaching 112 participants. During the workshops, students shared their experiences related to social responsibility while being exposed to content, interactions and concluding with a co-creation process. Simultaneously, educational research was conducted to explore the teaching and learning methods employed. The Sli.do tool was used to foster interactions, facilitate activities, and capture the students' voices. During the workshops one of the researchers was collecting data via observation.

3.2. Study methods and constructs.

Sustainability, social responsibility and social workers roles are the main constructions. This study is qualitative in nature and combines participatory action research with educational research. For each construct the dimensions were identified with students.

Participatory action research involved students as individuals impacted by the teaching-learning process in creating solutions for their community, leveraging the transdisciplinary approach inherent to their field of study. [10]

According to Reference [11] the use of participatory action research on educational research fosters awareness of the context and allows students to address a sustainable development challenge within their career. When using this method, interventions are tailored to the realities of the students as part of the community they live in making their constructions more sustainable and impactful. Reference [12] identified that action-oriented knowledge is used when addressing sustainability issues.

Regarding educational research, the tools and dynamics developed are analyzed to understand the effectiveness of the pedagogical strategies employed [13]. Both methods allow the development of critical pedagogy.

The data were collected during workshops and the steps were:

- Observation: Before the intervention, three researchers visited the classes where the workshop was conducted and joined the students as listeners and observers in the classroom.
- Workshop design: The students were part of different courses, so the Corporative Social Responsibility (CSR) and sustainable development information was adapted according to the course the students were on.
- Nudge selection: five interventions per section were designed to collect data in categories such as: SDG, CSR, Role of Social worker.
- Challenge: A final challenge so that students integrate their career knowledge into a sustainable development problem was created.

All the students participated in the workshops, so no sample calculation was needed as it was a census. The study method is present in Figure 2:

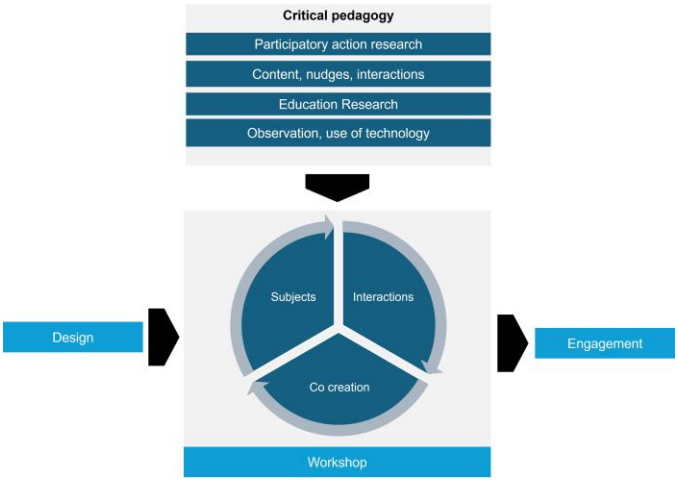


Fig. 2 Research models applied during the study.

3.3 Analysis

A multistep analysis took place. The first step was to understand the city context as were all the researchers are foreigners and understand the current state of the perception of students about their role and sustainable development. To gather this information, the researchers participated as students and took two classes and analyzed the information about the role of social workers around the campus, the data collected during this stage is considered as the pre-evaluation.

In the next step, researchers analyze how sustainability and CSR learning take place, to design the workshop with the nudges and interventions required to gather information. To do so, practical epistemology analysis as recommended by Reference [14] took place to identify the best methodology to engage students and prepare activities.

The third step was the observation during the workshop to ensure a correct analysis of the information; three researchers were in the classroom and as one spoke the others took notes on the environment and interactions between students. This is the post evaluation stage.

The four step was the frequency analysis of the data collected during the workshop using the tool sli.do. For this step, the Sankey diagram, word clouds were used to represent the frequencies and concurrent of different dimensions in the constructs of the study.

The fifth and decisive step was the documentation and qualitative analysis of the results.

IV. Results

4.1. Context and pedagogy

At Table 1 the summary of context, pre perceptions and pedagogy collected during the previous and workshop observation are present.

The observation process allows the researchers to comprehend the reality of students and their initial understanding of social responsibility, sustainable development, and their role as social workers in the community.

TABLE I
ELEMENTS IDENTIFY DURING OBSERVATION

Construct	Elements
Context	Nationalities
	Observable Behaviors
Sustainable development	Sustainable development goals
Social responsibility	Dimensions
Social worker role	Social

To summarize the frequent observations, about the context the class was composed of Spaniards with some exchange students. There was a low participation in class, a lot of talking, fewer questions, when asked by the professor the students respond without hesitation.

The city and the university have information around campus about sustainable development. It is part of Spain and Malaga´s public agenda.

The social dimension of sustainability was the one present during the observation.

Around the university information about the career was displayed including a few references about social responsibility in the context of social work.

4.2. Sustainable development

When the students were presented with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) they prioritize three SDGs to solve most of societal issues. These three priorities are: quality education, followed by no poverty and good health.

The top three selections of students are part of the people dimension of sustainability according to the United Nations and it's in line with student's field of study. As social workers, their aim is to search for solutions for the main societal issues affecting their community.

For a better understanding of the meaning of these SDGs, and they link to social work and sustainable development, the definitions of Reference [15] are presented:

- Quality education: ensure inclusive and equitable and quality education and promote for everyone.
- No poverty: end poverty in all its forms everywhere considering poverty is a multidimensional problem around the world.
- Good health and wellbeing: ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all people of all ages

These three objectives are linked to caregiving practices and according to Reference [16], professions such as social workers and nursing had been historically related to caregiving because of cultural perspectives and interpretations of the role.

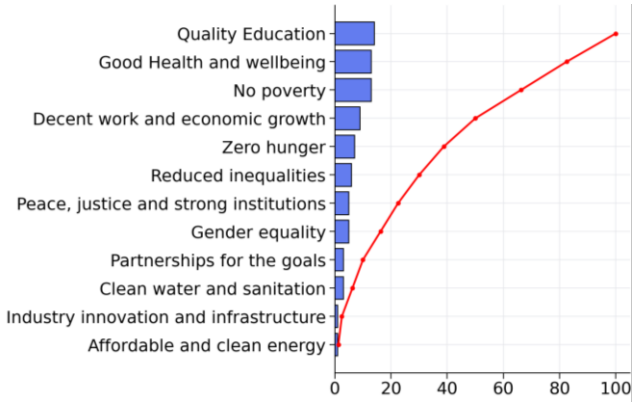


Fig. 3: Priority of sustainable development goals according to students

4.3 Social Responsibility and Social workers role

For figure 4, all information was normalized using a 100% base to facilitate visualization.

As shown in Figure 4, the people's dimension is the most frequent with 29% of the students identifying this as a part of social responsibility. People's dimensions represent the social aspect of sustainable development.

Partnerships are the second most frequent with 18% and it represents the collaborative work to achieve sustainable development and third planet dimension with 16% which represent the environmental aspects of sustainable development. On the other hand, only 4% of students identify ethics and profit as part of social responsibility, both dimensions are critical on the classical sustainability theories.

Reference [17] considers profit and ethics as the base on which social responsibility is built and for Reference [18], ethics is the dimension always must be present when speaking about social responsibility and social innovation.

Reference [19] is the most well know social responsibility theory and it recognizes three dimensions that need to be together even if there is friction between them and they are: social (people), planet (environmental) and profit(economic).

When asked about the role of social workers, 30% of students link it to people, 20% to social change. Previous research about the role of social workers identified the potential of the profession to generate social change, but they also identify that the role of social workers could be taken for granted according to the cultural position of the career in the country or region. [17]

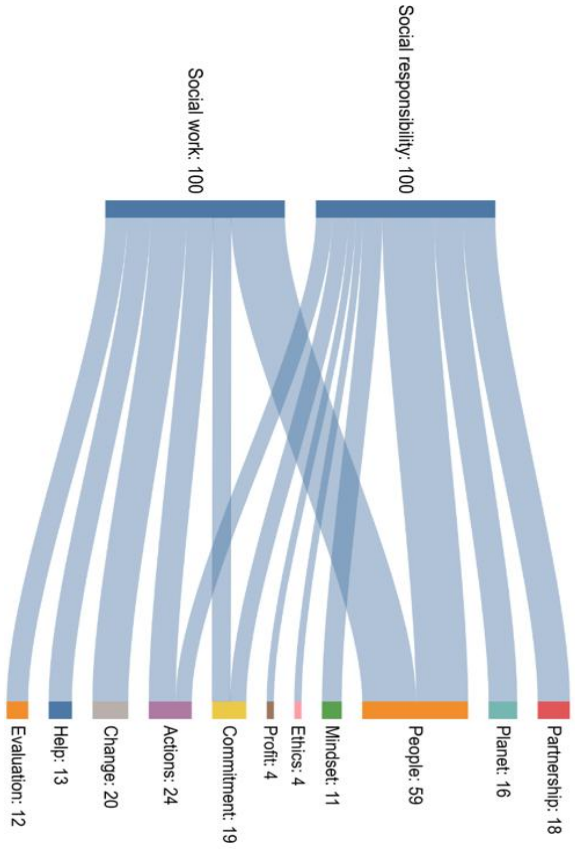


Fig. 4: Co-occurrence between CSR and social workers role

The intersection between social responsibility and social work is seen at dimensions such as people, commitment, and actions. A few verbatims about the intersection between social worker role and social responsibility according to students are:

¨The social worker reflects their social responsibility, as we must be responsible with society behaving with ethics, discipline, and justice¨

¨ Both are looking for people's wellbeing and the development of social projects ¨

¨ CSR and social work are commitments and Will to transform society ¨

¨Both promote changes for social good¨

4.4. Tool results

As mentioned in section II, slido was the tool used during action research. This tool allows professors to interact with the audience in real time, in this case the audience were the students and during the interactions [20].

Three types of questions were used:

- Open test: allow students to write paragraphs about a topic.
- Word cloud: students introduce three words to identify a concept and as a result the most frequently used words get bigger.
- Multiple choice: different options are presented and students select the one they prefer.

According to Reference [21], using different types of questions is a teaching strategy which allows not only reflection but, argumentation, explanation, definition of concepts, description and justification contributing to the development of skills related to the topic of the class as it is a bidimensional technique.

On figure four, the percentages of answers by type of question are presented. Word cloud was the type of question that received more answers in both sessions reaching over 80% of engagement, followed by multiple choice with 63% and finally open text with 60%.

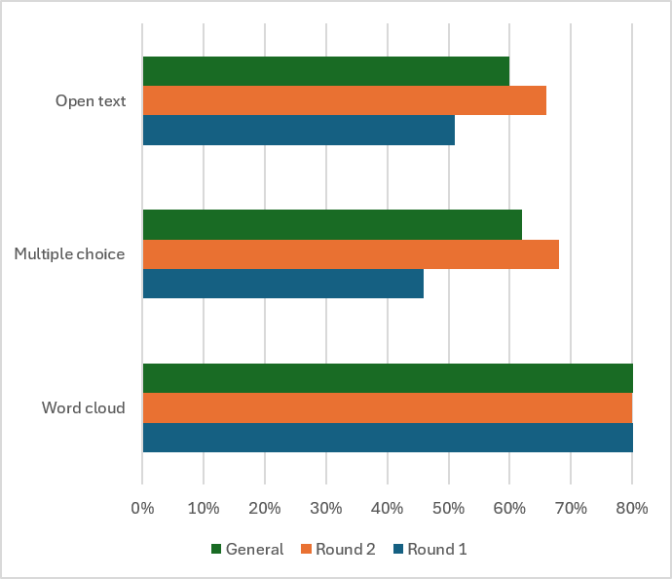


Fig. 5: Percentage of answer by type of questions and sessions(rounds)

V. DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that social work students shared their experiences in the field of social responsibility while theoretical content was being delivered, thereby fostering participation in a co-creation process.

In this process, the importance of the teacher in promoting critical awareness in each student through innovative teaching methods was identified. This aligns with the findings of Reference [7], who emphasize the significance of learning applied to real experiences to train the transformative agents that society expects.

It is essential that teachers implement participatory methodologies, such as the Sli.do tool used in this study, which succeeded in generating active reflection among students, but also reflected the challenges faced by teachers in relation to the level of participation of their students in the classroom, since the objective is to empower, inspire, and question social structures. [5,6]

This low level of participation has an impact on critical awareness, reflecting the need to place greater emphasis on teaching, even when sustainability content is present in the educational context.

Under this premise, the need to continue strengthening the connection between theory and practice was also identified, through strategies such as service learning that allow students to apply their knowledge in real scenarios and develop transformative skills for society [7].

The verbatim quotes reflect an understanding of the role of the social worker as a person who must act with ethics, discipline, and justice, with the primary goal of being promoters of change for social good.

It is extremely important to generate a sense of ethical and social commitment. An important level of identification was achieved with the “people” dimension of social responsibility and the role of the social worker, although a lower connection was observed with dimensions such as organizational ethics or economic benefits, which could represent an area for improvement to broaden the comprehensive vision of CSR.

In relation to the Sustainable Development Goals, which seeks quality education, poverty eradication, health, and well-being, they generate an understanding consistent with the humanistic and social approach of social work students. It is here that it is important to generate education in action proposed by Reference [8], where social issues are addressed with a focus on critical awareness.

Finally, it is confirmed that the implementation of teaching-learning strategies that apply innovative types of

pedagogy, based on participatory action research, contributes to a critical awareness of the challenges of sustainable development.

Therefore, universities are called upon to generate academic programs that promote the co-creation of content, under the application of theoretical content linked to the social context. It is essential to integrate social responsibility and sustainable development into all areas of knowledge, as proposed by Reference [8].

VI. Conclusions

This study shows that the implementation of innovation pedagogy using teaching-learning strategies, based on participatory action, contributes to a critical awareness of the challenges of sustainable development, encourage and engage students to become a change agent for social good and show that social work is linked to people as the axis of action, same humanistic and social principle that applies to social responsibility and Sustainable Development Goals.

It is relevant to highlight the importance of the teacher, so that this implementation process is carried out efficiently and generates the expected engagement, hence the value of the tools used.

This research provides practical evidence so that universities can promote the engagement of students using Sli.do tool and generate active reflection and participation with the objective of empowering, inspiring and questioning social structure, goals base of participatory methodologies and agrees with previous studies of References [5,6].

It is recommended to integrate social responsibility and sustainable development into all areas of knowledge in the universities as a transversal subject and foment critical pedagogy through participation actions, which will allow students to put into practice the knowledge acquired, the development of soft skills and their engagement and comprehensive training for a sustainable future.

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