

Strategic Planning and Governance for the 2030 Agenda: A Case Study of University Social Responsibility in Higher Education

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Abstract

The transition of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) into proactive agents for the United Nations' 2030 Agenda requires a profound transformation in institutional governance and communication. This article analyzes the design and foundation of a Strategic Plan for University Social Responsibility (USR) at the Department of Economic Sciences, National University of San Juan (Argentina). Grounded in the historical legacy of the 1918 University Reform, the study positions of the Argentine public university are critical laboratories for decolonizing global sustainability narratives through the lens of social justice and knowledge democratization. The proposed Strategic Plan serves as a communicative and navigational tool to shift from fragmented outreach activities to systemic institutional learning, offering a replicable framework for HEIs in Latin America and beyond.

Keywords: social responsibility, 2030 Agenda, strategic planning, higher education governance, sustainable development goals.

Introduction

Over the last decade, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have shifted from being mere transmitters of knowledge to becoming critical actors in the fulfillment of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Filho et al., 2025; Iliško, 2019). In this context, University Social Responsibility (USR) should not be understood simply as an extension of charitable activities, but as an ethical and effective management model that permeates all substantive university functions: education, research, internal management, and social outreach (Cabanzo et al., 2025; Vallaes, 2020).

The analysis of USR within the Latin American context (Arias-Valle et al., 2024; 2025; Filho et al., 2021), and specifically in Argentina, offers fundamental lessons for

global theory due to the historical nature of its public universities, characterized by the legacy of the 1918 University Reform (Arias-Valle & Marimon, 2025; 2024).

Unlike sustainability models from the Global North, which often focus on operational efficiency and corporate reporting, the Argentine experience integrates the "extension" (outreach) function as an inalienable political and social pillar (Ackers & Grobbelaar, 2022; Castillo & Roberts, 2024). This particularity allows for the observation of unique tensions between a resilient institutional bureaucracy and the urgency of responding to profound socio-economic crises, turning the university into an actor of social cohesion that transcends technical training (Borsatto et al., 2024; Cioccolanti et al., 2026).

In the case of the Department of Economic Sciences at UNSJ, the study of governance for the 2030 Agenda reveals how USR must act as a mechanism of resistance and transformation against linear economic models that have deepened regional inequalities. Therefore, this context serves as a critical laboratory for understanding that sustainability in higher education is not merely as an environmental goal, but as tool for the democratization of knowledge and social justice, providing an "impact management" perspective that is essential for decolonizing global sustainability narratives (Cabanzo et al., 2025; Leal Filho et al., 2019).

However, despite rhetorical progress, many faculties of economic and social sciences still face a significant gap between their institutional declarations and the actual integration of sustainability into their organizational culture and curricula (Abdou & Ammar, 2025; Finatto et al., 2023). The central challenge is not only *what* is taught, but *how* the institution is governed to be consistent with the values of the 2030 Agenda (Ferguson & Rooft, 2020; Iliško & Heasley, 2024). This governance process requires strategic planning that transcends traditional administration, focusing on institutional learning that transforms faculty, administrative staff, and students into agents of change (Pactwa et al., 2024; Papadimitriou & Schiffecker, 2023).

This article analyzes the design and foundation of a USR Strategic Plan for the Department of Economic Sciences at the National University of San Juan (UNSJ), Argentina. Based on a participatory self-diagnosis using the USR goals and indicators methodology for Latin America, this research identifies the existing tensions between current bureaucratic structures and the imperatives of sustainability (Arias-Valle & Marimon, 2025; Borelli & Cardoso, 2025).

The research problem focuses on the lack of a governance framework capable of systematizing isolated social responsibility initiatives, thereby enabling effective alignment with the SDGs—particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) (Drissi et al., 2025a; Filho et al., 2025). Through a mixed-methods approach (qualitative and quantitative), this study proposes that USR strategic planning acts as a governance tool that facilitates the transition from reactive management to proactive and sustainable management (Arias-Valle & Marimon, 2024; Bautista Chamizo et al., 2023).

The objective of this work is to propose a strategic management model for the institutionalization of the 2030 Agenda within the field of economic sciences, providing evidence on how educational institutions can redesign their internal governance to respond to the socio-environmental demands of the 21st century. It is argued that only through coherent and transversal management can a truly transformative and sustainability-oriented faculty and professional training be guaranteed.

Literature Review

The Evolution of the University Mission toward Sustainability

The contemporary university is undergoing a transformation driven by social, economic, and environmental shifts that redefine its role (Filho et al., 2024; Saad et al., 2026). Institutions are no longer expected merely to train professionals or produce scientific knowledge; they must now assume an active commitment as key agents for sustainable development and social cohesion (Bilbokaitė et al., 2024; Bush et al., 2025). This evolution has consolidated what is known as the university's "fourth mission": the integration of social responsibility into institutional strategy (Pfeifer & Helming, 2024; Ruano-Borbalan, 2024). In this context, higher education acts as a driver of social, political, and economic change, promoting general well-being through ethical and transparent management (Ragazou et al., 2025; Shaffril et al., 2025).

University Social Responsibility (USR): From Philanthropy to Impact Management

USR has emerged as a management paradigm that transcends the traditional view of social responsibility as an isolated or philanthropic outreach activity (Achkar, 2025; Ali et al., 2021). According to Vallaey (2019, 2020), USR is a policy of continuous improvement aimed at the responsible management of the impacts the university generates across four fundamental dimensions: organizational, educational, cognitive, and social impacts.

This approach proposes that the university must be a self-reflective organization that learns from its own processes to better serve the common good (Astuti et al., 2025; Rahman et al., 2026). Thus, USR becomes an institutional "immune system" that ensures coherence between sustainability discourse and daily practice in management and teaching (Agustina et al., 2022; Finatto et al., 2023).

University Governance and the 2030 Agenda

The incorporation of the 2030 Agenda's SDGs requires universities to redesign their governance structures to allow for the transversal integration of sustainability—meaning its implementation across all institutional levels and functions rather than as an isolated departmental task (Drissi et al., 2025b; Holst et al., 2024). University strategic leadership must align the institutional mission, vision, and values with principles of ethics, equity, and environmental respect (Chamizo et al., 2023; Filho et al., 2023).

Recent literature highlights that effective governance for sustainability involves:

Stakeholder Engagement. Recognizing and valuing the expectations of internal interest groups (faculty, students, administrative staff) and external stakeholders—such as local government agencies, NGOs, business sectors, and the local community—to legitimize institutional policies (Adhikari & Shrestha, 2023; Núñez-Canal et al., 2026).

Transparency and Accountability. Implementing public monitoring mechanisms that ensure the institution progresses toward more responsible models (Biancardi et al., 2023; Laili et al., 2025).

Knowledge Co-creation. Transforming the university into a "social innovation laboratory" where solutions to global challenges are co-created through action-research and strategic partnerships (SDG 17) (Adnan et al., 2024; Filho et al., 2024).

The Vallaey's Model as a Tool for Transformation

The Vallaey's model, adopted in this research, proposes a continuous improvement cycle based on four steps: institutional commitment, self-diagnosis, compliance, and reporting (Vallaey's, 2019; 2009). This framework allows for the identification of gaps between current management and sustainability ideals. Consequently, strategic planning is not merely an administrative exercise but a lever for structural change that permeates the education of critical citizens and the production of socially relevant knowledge (Agustina et al., 2022; Borelli & Cardoso, 2025).

Research Design and Approach

The research follows a mixed-methods approach, with a predominance of qualitative and quantitative methods. A descriptive, cross-sectional design was adopted within the participatory action-research paradigm, aimed at diagnosing and designing a USR strategic plan. This approach not only enables the measurement of perceptions but also transforms institutional governance through the self-reflection of its stakeholders.

Measurement Framework

The study utilized Vallaey's impact management model and the methodology of the Latin American USR Network (URSULA). The performance of the Department of Economic Sciences (DCE) was evaluated through four analytical axes that provide a holistic view of university governance:

Organizational Management. Work climate, environment, and ethics.

Academic Training. Integration of the SDGs into the curriculum and ethical training.

Knowledge Production and Management Social relevance of research.

Social Engagement Outreach projects and community links.

Population and Sampling

A non-probabilistic convenience sampling was used, segmenting the DCE stakeholders. The final integrated sample (**N = 432**) ensures representativeness with a margin of error of $\pm 5\%$ and a confidence level of 95%:

Table 1.

Distribution of the Study Sample and Data Collection Instruments by Stakeholder Group

Stakeholder Group	Sample Size (n)	Instrument Applied
Students	285	University Social Responsibility (USR) Survey (5-point Likert Scale)
Academic Staff	84	Pedagogical Practices Questionnaire
Administrative Staff	38	Organizational Climate and Management Assessment
Graduates	25	Professional Impact Interview

Source: Own elaboration

Qualitative Research Design and Methodology

Qualitative Sample and Setting "The qualitative phase of the study was conducted at the Department of Economic Sciences (DCE) of the National University of San Juan (UNSJ) in Argentina. To ensure a deep understanding of the institutional reality, a purposive sampling (non-probabilistic) technique was employed to select 25 key informants for semi-structured interviews. The sample consisted of graduates and administrative staff with at least five years of tenure. This group was chosen because they represent 'internal stakeholders' often marginalized in strategic decision-making, yet they possess critical operational knowledge of the university's daily management. These participants provide a counter-narrative to the official discourse, helping identify the 'implementation gap' regarding sustainability objectives."

Data Collection Procedures and Researcher Role "Data collection involved semi-structured interviews designed to capture subjective experiences regarding University Social Responsibility (USR). During this process, the researchers adopted a reflexive and neutral stance, acting as facilitators to encourage open dialogue while maintaining professional distance to minimize social desirability bias. The relationship with participants was established through institutional channels, ensuring that all were informed of the research goals and provided informed consent."

Data Analysis: Thoroughness and Depth "To ensure the depth and thoroughness of the analysis, the qualitative data were processed using Thematic Analysis. This involved a multi-stage coding process: (1) literal transcription of interviews, (2) initial open coding to identify recurring themes, and (3) axial coding to categorize findings into the four impact dimensions of Vallaeys' model: organizational, educational, cognitive, and social. Finally, data triangulation was performed by contrasting interview testimonies with the institutional Strategic Plan and quantitative survey results to validate the findings."

Instruments and Reliability

Structured surveys adapted from the "USR Self-Diagnosis Guide" (Vallaeys et al., 2009) were applied. Two main techniques were employed to ensure methodological triangulation:

Structured Surveys. Adapted from the "USR Self-Diagnosis Guide," utilizing Likert-type scales to quantify perceptions of transparency, inclusion, and environmental commitment. The instrument's reliability was previously validated under the standards of Vallaeys et al. (2009).

Documentary Analysis. A systematic review of curricula and internal regulations was conducted to contrast institutional discourse with empirical evidence.

To validate the internal consistency of the Likert scale items, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (α) was applied, yielding the following reliability results:

- Organizational Management Axis: $\alpha = 0.82$ (Good).
- Academic Training Axis: $\alpha = 0.88$ (Very Good).
- Social Engagement Axis: $\alpha = 0.79$ (Acceptable).

Data Processing and Strategic Prioritization

Quantitative data were processed using statistical software (SPSS) to identify compliance gaps. Subsequently, an SDG Prioritization Matrix was implemented, allowing the detected impacts to be cross-referenced with the 2030 Agenda targets. This technical procedure enabled the selection of SDGs 4, 8, 16, and 17 as the transversal axes of the proposed Strategic Plan.

Ethical Safeguards

The study complied with international research ethics protocols, guaranteeing voluntariness, anonymity, and data confidentiality, under the supervision of the regulations of the National University of San Juan.

Results

The results are structured according to the four axes of the Vallaey's model, integrating findings from the participatory self-diagnosis and the documentary analysis. These results allowed for the identification of critical points for the proposed USR Strategic Plan.

The identification of themes and patterns was conducted through a cross-case analysis of the 25 interviews. Following the principles of Thematic Analysis, the data were organized into three overarching thematic clusters that emerged consistently across the discourse of graduates and administrative staff:

1. **Institutional Invisibility.** A recurring pattern where administrative staff perceive their role as purely operational, feeling excluded from the university's social mission.
2. **The 'Extensionist' Gap.** A theme identifying that while the university promotes outreach, these activities are centralized in teaching staff, creating a disconnect with graduates.
3. **Fragmented Sustainability.** A pattern showing that stakeholders recognize isolated green actions but do not perceive a transversal 'University Social Responsibility' policy.

Organizational Management and Institutional Climate

The diagnosis revealed a favorable perception regarding the work climate, yet a significant weakness in transparency and the communication of sustainable processes.

- **65% of respondents** stated they were unaware of the existence of a formal institutional environmental policy.
- **Documentary analysis** confirmed the absence of a systematized waste management and energy efficiency system within the Department of Economic Sciences (DCE).

Academic Training: The Curricular Challenge

This axis is critical to the sustainability mission. The results indicate that:

- While there is a clear intention among faculty to address ethical issues, the integration of the SDGs into the curricula remains fragmented and unsystematic.

- **Students perceive** that social responsibility training is "theoretical" and lacks practical application in real-world business environments.
- A need for specific faculty training in **Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)** methodologies was identified, as current content focuses predominantly on linear economic growth.

Research and Knowledge Management

Regarding scientific production, a gap was observed between academic research and the needs of the local environment:

- **Less than 20%** of the research and undergraduate theses produced in the DCE over the last three years are directly aligned with the challenges of the 2030 Agenda (specifically SDGs 8 and 12).
- There is a lack of institutional incentives for **interdisciplinary research** that addresses complex sustainability issues.

Social Engagement: From Outreach to Co-creation

The results indicate that university outreach is perceived as a series of "isolated activities" (lectures, one-off events) rather than long-term impact programs.

- There is a high potential for engagement, as 80% of the external stakeholders consulted positively value the technical role of the DCE but demand greater involvement in sustainable local development projects.

Overall USR Performance Diagnosis: A Baseline for Strategic Governance

The initial phase of the diagnostic process yielded a multidimensional view of the current state of USR within the Department of Economic Sciences. To facilitate a holistic understanding of these results, the data was normalized and plotted onto a radar chart (see Figure 1). This visualization allows for the identification of structural imbalances between the institution's four substantive pillars.

Figure 1.

USR Axis Performance at the Department of Economic Sciences (Scale 1–5).



Source: Own elaboration

As evidenced by the graphical distribution, the institutional profile is characterized by an asymmetrical development. The Organizational Management axis shows the highest degree of maturity (3.8), reflecting a solid administrative culture and a positive workplace climate. However, this high score contrasts sharply with the Research & Knowledge Management axis (1.8), which represents the most significant deficit. This "contraction" in the radar area suggests that while the university functions efficiently as an organization, it has not yet succeeded in aligning its scientific production with the pressing challenges of the 2030 Agenda.

Furthermore, the scores for Academic Training (2.5) and Social Participation (2.1) reveal an intermediate state of "discursive commitment." Although sustainability is recognized as a value, its operationalization in the technical curricula of economic sciences and in systemic outreach programs remains fragmented. The radar chart clearly identifies that the "Opportunity Gap" for the Strategic Plan lies in the urgent need to bridge the distance between administrative efficiency and social relevance, ensuring that governance for sustainability becomes a transversal reality rather than an isolated effort.

Identification of Strategic Priorities (SDGs)

Based on the cross-analysis of identified impacts, it was determined that the strategic planning must prioritize four key objectives where the DCE has the greatest capacity for transformation:

- **SDG 4 (Quality Education):** Curricular reform and faculty training in USR.
- **SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth):** Promotion of regional economies and business ethics.
- **SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions):** Transparency and participatory governance.
- **SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals):** Strengthening the network of territorial stakeholders.

Materiality Analysis and SDG Prioritization

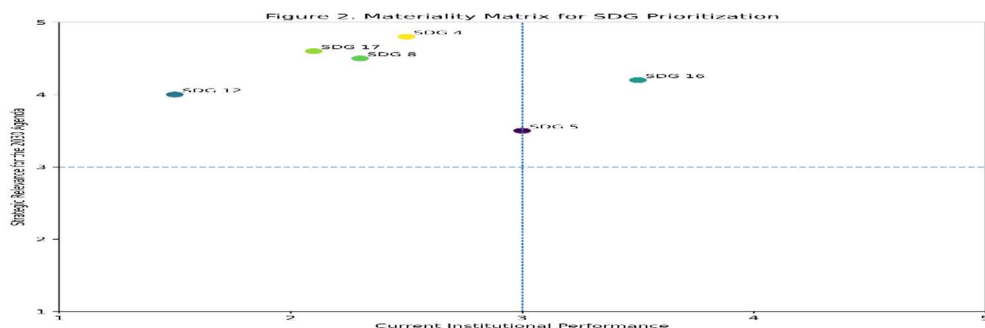
The identification of priority SDGs was conducted through a materiality matrix analysis (see Figure 2), which cross-references current institutional performance with strategic relevance for the 2030 Agenda. This methodological approach allows the institution to move beyond a generic commitment to sustainability toward a focused governance model based on high-impact areas.

As illustrated in the matrix, the SDGs located in the upper-right quadrant—specifically SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals)—represent the strategic priorities of the proposed plan. These goals exhibit a significant "performance gap": while they are considered of maximum relevance for the professional profile of economic sciences, their current implementation is perceived as insufficient.

Conversely, SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) is positioned in the "Strength" quadrant, reflecting a solid administrative base that serves as a foundation for governance. The matrix justifies the concentration of resources and efforts on the "Strategic Priorities" quadrant, as these goals are the primary levers for transforming the department into a laboratory for social innovation. This prioritization ensures that the Strategic Plan addresses the most critical tensions identified during the diagnostic phase, moving from a fragmented approach to a systemic integration of the 2030 Agenda.

Figure 2.

Materiality Matrix for SDG Prioritization at the Department of Economic Sciences.



Source: Own elaboration

Discussion

The research reveals that, although the DCE possesses a declared institutional commitment to social responsibility, there is a significant "implementation gap" between discourse and operational management (Arias Valle et al., 2021a; 2021b; Rahman et al., 2026). This disconnection is characteristic of many higher education institutions attempting to transition toward sustainability models without a profound reform of their governance (Arias-Valle & Marimon, 2024a; Biermann et al., 2023).

The findings in the DCE highlight an implementation gap that, according to Andrades et al. (2024), is a recurring phenomenon in European HEIs, where sustainability is often declared in the mission statement but fails to be fully integrated into control systems and operational management. This gap between discourse and practice is clearly manifested in findings that coincide with Holst (2023) suggesting that sustainability governance tends to be top-down, often excluding administrative actors who are vital for energy efficiency and waste management.

Furthermore, the asymmetrical profile shown in the diagnosis - characterized by solid organizational management but deficient knowledge production in sustainability—reflects the tensions identified by Arias Valle and Marimon (2025; 2025a) in Argentine universities. In these contexts, academic research still struggles to decouple from linear economic models in order to adopt circular and social economy approaches. DCE students' perception of purely theoretical ethical training reinforces the need for a transition toward SDG 4 which, according to UNESCO (2017) guidelines, requires the university to cease acting in a fragmented manner and operate instead as a laboratory for social innovation.

Finally, the strategic prioritization of SDGs 4, 8, 16, and 17 within this Strategic Plan acts as a governance mechanism to institutionalize the 2030 Agenda. This aligns the Case of San Juan with best practices from universities in Chile and Colombia that have successfully transformed isolated outreach into long-term territorial impact programs (Bedoya-Dorado et al., 2022; Marín & Berkes, 2010).

The identification of these SDGs as priority axes allows the DCE to focus its limited resources on areas where social impact is maximized (M. B. Arias-Valle & Marimon, 2025b; Huepe, 2024). By aligning research and outreach with these objectives, the university stops acting fragmentedly and begins to operate as an integrated system,

reducing institutional entropy and increasing social relevance (Alfirević et al., 2023; Borsatto et al., 2024).

It is acknowledged that one limitation of this study is its focus on a single department, which hinders the full generalization of the results. However, as a case study, it provides a replicable roadmap for other social science faculties in Latin American contexts. Sustainability in higher education is not a final destination but a continuous process of institutional learning, where strategic planning serves as the necessary compass (Arias-Valle, 2023; Rahman et al., 2026).

Conclusions

The implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Higher Education cannot rely on isolated efforts or individual goodwill; rather, it requires a governance architecture that institutionalizes sustainability across all its dimensions. This research demonstrates that USR strategic planning constitutes the ideal vehicle to transition from a university that merely imparts sustainability content to an institution that lives and manages it coherently. By adopting the impact management model, the Department of Economic Sciences positions itself not only as a center for technical training but as an agent of social change capable of aligning its internal mission with global challenges.

One of the most revealing findings of this study is the necessity of integrating administrative staff as a fundamental actor in the sustainability value chain. The structural exclusion of this group from training and social participation processes represents a barrier to inclusive governance; therefore, the proposed strategic plan seeks to bridge this gap, ensuring that administrative management serves as the primary testimony of institutional ethics. Furthermore, curricular relevance emerges as a critical challenge, where SDG 4 must act as a transformative axis to decolonize economic sciences from exclusively rent-seeking models, orienting them instead toward the social economy and decent work.

In conclusion, the proposed USR Strategic Plan should not be understood as an end in itself, but as the beginning of a continuous cycle of institutional learning. Sustainability demands a reflexive university, capable of diagnosing its own shortcomings and redesigning itself in the face of the demands of a complex environment. This work provides a replicable framework for action for other institutions in Latin America, maintaining that true educational transformation occurs when strategic planning becomes the compass that guides the university community toward a more just, equitable, and socially responsible development.

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