

Education for Sustainable Development as the Basis of Responsible Citizenship: Socio-Legal Approach, Inclusion and University Governance

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ABSTRACT:

The research aimed to analyze the legal regulations and institutional mechanisms that determine the incorporation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) into university curricula, emphasizing educational inclusion, attention to special educational needs (SEN), and institutional governance. Methodology: A qualitative approach with a documentary and interpretive design was adopted. The corpus of analysis comprised five key instruments articulated at normative levels: international (UNESCO's ESD 2030 Programme), national (Peru's University Law No. 30220), and institutional (Educational Model, University Social Responsibility Regulations, and the curriculum of the Law and Political Science program at the National University of Barranca). Qualitative content analysis was employed, based on three a priori analytical categories: normative dimension-University Social Responsibility, curricular-pedagogical dimension, and inclusive dimension-human rights. Results: Although there is a formal framework within institutional policies for University Social Responsibility (USR), in practice sustainability operates in a declarative and fragmented manner. In the curricular sphere, Education for Sustainable Development is limited to isolated subjects (such as Environmental Law) without achieving effective mainstreaming or lacking methodological guidelines for inclusive education or mandatory budget allocation. Conclusion: It is essential to move beyond paternalistic approaches through a regulatory framework that formalizes ethical integration, universal accessibility, and mandatory budget allocation in university governance.

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1. Introduction

Higher education institutions cannot ignore socio-environmental problems; they must promote knowledge generation aimed at training citizens who are aware of current ecological and social challenges (Álvarez-Vanegas et al., 2024; Gomes, 2025). Moving beyond traditional teaching requires evaluating whether current sustainability courses are genuinely effective, necessitating curricular adjustments and clear regulatory frameworks that foster ethical leadership (Fonseca et al., 2018; García et al., 2018). Since the UN Brundtland Report (1987), sustainable development has been central to the global agenda; however, translating these principles into academic practice remains a challenge (Murga-Menoyo, 2013). Public universities must actively promote Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) rather than function as degree factories, fostering critical thinking, humanistic environmental stewardship, and legal protection of the environment (Beltrán-Llavador et al., 2014; Mijatović, 2026; Vlasjuk & Mayer, 2016).

International frameworks strongly support this imperative, particularly Target 4.7 of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 within the 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2015). This standard mandates training students in competencies for sustainable development, human rights, gender equality, and active citizenship (Carney & Carty, 2024; UNESCO, 2021). When aligned with ESD operational goals, Target 4.7 functions both as a quality indicator and as a regulatory axis for university governance (Supple et al., 2025). From a socio-legal perspective, fulfilling the right to higher education requires mandatory alignment with international human rights standards, integrating sustainability and universal accessibility into institutional management and academic offerings (Jakob, 2020).

Integrating sustainability into university education demands an interdisciplinary dialogue, particularly between law and pedagogy.

University Social Responsibility (USR) acts as a central governance axis (Vallance et al., 2011), requiring cross-cutting strategies, robust ethical commitments, and educational models that drive structural curriculum reform (Castro & Leal, 2023; Suárez, 2025). Furthermore, USR must transcend voluntary or welfare-based actions to become a mandatory requirement embedded in strategic plans and internal regulations (Gaete Quezada, 2011; Vallaes, 2007, 2018). Crucially, ESD must prioritize educational inclusion and human rights, eliminating physical, methodological, and attitudinal barriers for individuals with special educational needs (SEN) to guarantee socio-environmental justice.

Despite growing literature on ESD, significant structural, regulatory, and pedagogical barriers persist. Transcending technocratic views requires preserving the human element of teaching (Alonzo-Sainz, 2021; Aznar Minguet, 2010), enhancing teacher training, and upgrading institutional infrastructure (Martínez Ávila & Valdés Medina, 2023; Vásquez, 2014). Currently, university efforts often remain restricted to isolated subjects or campus greening workshops without achieving true curricular transversality or transforming professional ethics (Antúnez et al., 2017; Martínez-Valdés et al., 2025; Plata-Rangel & Holguín-Aguirre, 2022). Although active learning and environmental law principles (such as prevention and precaution) provide legal grounding for sustainability, implementation is frequently hindered by teacher overload and a lack of clear pedagogical guidelines (Blanco et al., 2026; Frank & Ricci, 2023; Moposita-Chimbo et al., 2026). Therefore, integrating ESD into university governance must be formalized as an ethical, deontological, and legally binding duty (Masias, 2025; Vallaes, 2018).

Based on the foregoing, this study addresses the following research question: How does Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) underpin the formation of responsible and inclusive citizenship within higher education? To

answer this, the general objective is to analyze the legal regulations and institutional mechanisms that determine the incorporation of ESD into university curricula. Specifically, this study examines how the ethical-legal cross-cutting nature of the university curriculum contributes to social responsibility, attention to diversity, and professional ethics, analyzing official pedagogical management documents to identify how internal regulations formalize the graduate profile regarding socio-environmental and inclusive educational demands.

2. Methodology

The article adopted a qualitative, theoretical-legal, descriptive-interpretive approach, with a documentary research design and a hermeneutic-interpretive orientation. This approach allowed for the substantiation of the established objectives and dimensions, the theoretical and conceptual foundation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), the formation of responsible university citizens, the socio-environmental inclusion approach in the university, the regulatory framework and instruments of pedagogical management, the formal prescription of the graduate profile and socio-environmental requirements, and educational inclusion in university regulations.

The population was comprised, at a first level, of guidelines and policies from international organizations; at a second level of national regulations governing Peruvian higher education; and at a third level, of academic documents and plans from the professional schools of the National University of Barranca, Lima Region, Peru. The sample was selected using non-probability, purposive, and convenience sampling. The selection was strategic, taking into account the importance, legal validity, and impact on the educational profile and university academic management.

The inclusion criteria included: current regulations; relationship to ethics; environmental management; university social responsibility; and the characteristics of UNAB's regulations as well as those of higher education in Peru. The exclusion criteria included: repealed institutional regulations, operational plans without pedagogical-financial components, and administrative management tools not linked to university social responsibility or educational inclusion.

The final corpus consisted of five (05) fundamental documentary sources that articulate the theoretical, normative and institutional aspects of the proposed research.

Table 1: Corpus of documentary analysis according to level of normative and curricular alignment

Analytical Level	Analysis Document	Validity / Scope	Population Represented	Selected Sample (Unit of Analysis)
International (DOC-01)	Education for Sustainable Development Programme (ESD 2030) (UNESCO)	2020 – 2030	UNESCO's international guidelines and alignment framework.	Framework for the implementation of the ESD Programme for 2030.
National (Macro) (DOC-02)	University Law No. 30220 (MINEDU - Peru)	2014 – Current	Regulatory framework of university higher education in Peru.	Articles 6, 124 and 125 of Law No. 30220.
Institutional (Meso)	Institutional Educational Model	2024 – 2025	Pedagogical and institutional	Current Institutional Educational Model.

(DOC-03)	(UNAB, Res. No. 379-02-UNAB)		management documents of UNAB.	
Normative (Meso) (DOC-4)	Regulations on University Social Responsibility (UNAB, Res. No. 379-02-UNAB)	Current	Internal regulations for University Social Responsibility at UNAB.	Current General Regulations for Solid Waste Management.
Curriculum (Micro) (DOC-05)	Curriculum and Study Plan - Professional School of Law (UNAB)	2025	Curricular frameworks of the professional schools of UNAB.	Curriculum 2025 of the Professional School of Law.

Note. Prepared by the author based on the qualitative-documentary methodological design of the study .

For the conceptual approach and coding of the documentary corpus, the research was structured around three analytical categories constructed a priori, grounded in the conceptual framework of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and university responsibility. The first category, the Normative Dimension and University Social Responsibility (USR), examined the legal mandates, budget allocations, and ethical and environmental management mechanisms required by higher legislation and institutional regulations. The second category focused on the design of the graduate profile, ensuring that sustainability, ethics, and socio-environmental competencies are integrated across the curriculum, as their implementation would otherwise be merely a bureaucratic formality. The third category, the Area of Inclusion and Human Rights, analyzes whether the legal framework, inclusion policies, professional ethics, and the defense of the rights of vulnerable groups are being implemented effectively and efficiently.

For the documentary analysis, the data obtained was processed using a qualitative approach. All the information was entered in an organized manner into a digital format, which allowed for a structured approach to the work, considering relevant and pertinent quotes, as well as the analyzed categories derived from the research objectives. This also facilitated maintaining objectivity when processing the information obtained.

The research was structured in several phases: first, relevant documentation was selected that met the criteria required at the various international, national, and institutional levels. Second, the selected documentation was analyzed to identify the most significant data for the study, which were then entered into the analysis matrix under the corresponding study categories. In the final stage, the guidelines established by UNESCO, the University Law, and the internal regulations of UNAB were compared. This process allowed for the determination of gaps and the effective degree of mainstreaming of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in its university curriculum.

For the analysis, the documents were compared, taking into account their data and cross-referencing them to support the findings. Likewise, maintaining a record of the sources was essential to ensure the study's transparency. The evaluation of UNAB serves as a benchmark for other universities in similar situations.

As this study was based on a review of the institution's records, no human participants were involved, and informed consent forms were not required, since the data was obtained from the transparency portal, which is publicly accessible. The quotations were quoted verbatim to avoid misinterpreting the regulations, and there are no conflicts of interest that could affect the interpretation of the data. Furthermore, the study

was conducted with the authorization of the National University of Barranca.

3. Results

Analysis of the documentary database allowed for the identification of the level of integration of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) at the National University of Barranca (UNAB). The results were structured according to three fundamental categories:

1. Regulatory Alignment and University Social Responsibility

At the national level, the law mandates that universities assume social responsibility, environmental management, and human rights, requiring them to allocate at least 2% of their budget to CSR projects (DOC-02). Internally, UNAB formally assumes this commitment by defining CSR as the ethical management of its impacts (DOC-04). However, the institution's CSR regulatory framework is not aligned with the professional degree programs, which differs from international guidelines (DOC-01).

2. Curricular Transversality and Educational Profile

UNESCO promotes ethical behavior, respect for the law, and teaching practices oriented towards Education for Sustainable Development (DOC-01). UNAB claims to comply with the principles linked to sustainable development as a central axis of its graduates' profile (DOC-03). However, if we evaluate the curriculum of only the professional degree in law and political science, non-compliance with this statement is evident because only the Environmental Law course exists (DOC-05). Consequently, a lack of integration is demonstrated.

3. Inclusion, Deontology and Human Rights

The reviewed documents agree on promoting ethical training focused on human rights and attention to vulnerable populations (DOC-01, DOC-02). Although the University Social Responsibility regulations (DOC-04) and the Law graduate profile (DOC-05) mention a commitment to social justice and diversity, the university lacks methodological guidelines to direct their application in the classroom (DOC-03). This lack of specific regulations limits the practical application of these values in the teaching and learning process.

Table 2: Synthesis of findings in the documentary corpus and its alignment with the EDS

Document Analyzed	Document Analyzed	Key Quote / Evidence	Categorical Diagnosis
DOC-01	ESD 2030 Programme (UNESCO)	"Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) must be integrated across all educational levels, empowering students with ethical values, legal knowledge, and transformative skills..."	It demands a comprehensive institutional transformation that articulates ethics, law, and pedagogy.
DOC-02	University Law No. 30220 (MINEDU)	"Universities promote social responsibility... environmental management..."	Establish a mandatory legal mandate with allocated budget (minimum 2%) for RSU and inclusion.
DOC-03	Institutional Educational Model (UNAB)	"integrating ethics, environmental commitment and sustainable development across the educational profile..."	It declares sustainability as a cross-cutting theme, but lacks mechanisms for practical application.

DOC-04	RSU Regulations (UNAB)	"Ethical and effective management of the impact generated by the university..."	It maintains a welfare-oriented approach that is not integrated into the curriculum content.
DOC-05	Law Curriculum (UNAB)	"To train lawyers with technical expertise, professional ethics, and socio-environmental commitment..."	Sustainability is limited to the subject of Environmental Law, without achieving real transversality.

Note. Categorical analysis derived from the documentary analysis matrix.

4. Discussion

The results show a clear difference between what the National University of Barranca (UNAB) states in its documents and what it actually teaches in the classroom. Although the educational model (DOC-03) and the University Social Responsibility standard (DOC-04) indicate that ethics and the environment are cross-cutting themes, the Law curriculum (DOC-05) reduces sustainability to a single Environmental Law course. This lack of integration aligns with the findings of various authors in the region, who note that universities often address these topics in isolation without achieving a real impact across the entire degree program.

This gap between the norm and practice deviates from international and national goals. While UNESCO (DOC-01) calls for a comprehensive transformation of the institution, and Law 30220 (DOC-02) mandates a budget for this area, UNAB maintains its social responsibility activities with a welfare-based approach (DOC-04). Scientific literature criticizes this stance, arguing that true social responsibility involves adapting educational content to address the problems of the surrounding community, not merely carrying out external community outreach projects.

In law school, having a course on the topic is insufficient (DOC-05). Experts point out that inclusion and environmental protection must be addressed in all subjects as principles of professional conduct. Without clear pedagogical guidelines (DOC-03), the teaching of sustainability is left to the discretion of each

professor, hindering the consolidation of the projected graduate profile. The main challenge is not creating more regulations but ensuring that institutional policies are reflected in daily classroom practice.

Among the study's limitations, its exclusively qualitative and documentary approach stands out, focusing on analyzing the prescribed regulatory and curricular framework (DOC-01 to DOC-05) without evaluating direct pedagogical practice in the classroom or the perceptions of educational stakeholders. Furthermore, limiting the study to the National University of Barranca and the Law program (DOC-05) restricts the generalizability of the results to other institutions or disciplines. Therefore, it is suggested that future research complement this analysis with empirical field studies.

5. Conclusion

While there is a normative concordance between the international standard (DOC-01), the national law (DOC-02), and the internal regulations of UNAB (DOC-03, DOC-04), in reality this is not the case, since the budget stipulated in the Law is neither visualized nor defined in institutional and pedagogical management. Therefore, it is a priority for the competent authorities, in the case of UNAB, the Organizing Committee, to implement the necessary conditions to ensure compliance with Article 125 of Law 30220 (DOC-02), allocating no less than 2% of the annual budget to University Social Responsibility (USR) and environmental management projects (DOC-04).

Sustainability training within Law is fragmented, limiting Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) to the Environmental Law course (DOC-05) without achieving cross-cutting integration. Therefore, the Curriculum Restructuring Directive should be approved so that the Professional School of Law incorporates mandatory socio-environmental and ethical content into the public, private, and professional conduct subjects of the 2025 Curriculum (DOC-05).

University Social Responsibility (USR) maintains a welfare-based approach and lacks pedagogical guides (DOC-03, DOC-04) to guide teachers on how to develop inclusion and ethics in the classroom. Therefore, it is essential to establish Pedagogical Guidelines for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) that require

updating syllabi with ethical and environmental evaluation criteria, linking pre-professional internships and theses (DOC-05) with applied USR programs.

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7. Author Declaration

Originality: The authors confirm that the submitted manuscript constitutes original research.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest with respect to the publication of this article.

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