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Integrating Core University Functions as a Strategy for Social Transformation in Ecuador

Integración de las funciones sustantivas universitarias como estrategia de transformación social en Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the research was to analyze the integration of core university functions as a strategy for social transformation in Ecuador, through a qualitative meta-analysis of 36 academic sources published between 2008 and 2025. The results show that the organic articulation between teaching, research, and engagement with society goes beyond regulatory compliance and operates as an epistemological logic that anchors university education in concrete social realities. Four emerging categories were identified: the integration of teaching and research, university engagement and community transformation, methodological rigor in qualitative legal research, and institutional quality. It is concluded that the effective integration of these functions requires deliberate curricular frameworks, engagement projects aligned with research objectives, and institutional conditions that overcome the persistent administrative rigidities within the Ecuadorian university system.

Descriptors: university extension; lifelong learning; community involvement. (Source: UNESCO Thesaurus).

RESUMEN

La investigación tuvo como objetivo analizar la integración de las funciones sustantivas universitarias como estrategia de transformación social en Ecuador, mediante un metaanálisis cualitativo de 36 fuentes académicas publicadas entre 2008 y 2025. Los resultados evidencian que la articulación orgánica entre docencia, investigación y vinculación con la sociedad trasciende el cumplimiento normativo y opera como lógica epistemológica que ancla la formación universitaria en las realidades sociales concretas. Se identificaron cuatro categorías emergentes: articulación docencia-investigación, vinculación universitaria y transformación comunitaria, rigor metodológico en la investigación jurídica cualitativa, y calidad institucional. Se concluye que la integración efectiva de estas funciones requiere arquitecturas curriculares deliberadas, proyectos de vinculación articulados con objetivos investigativos y condiciones institucionales que superen las rigideces administrativas persistentes en el sistema universitario ecuatoriano.

Descriptores: extensión universitaria; aprendizaje a lo largo de la vida; participación comunitaria. (Fuente: Tesauro UNESCO).

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Research Articles Section

INTRODUCTION

Latin American universities are undergoing a process of reconceptualizing their institutional role in the face of the challenges of contemporary society; in Ecuador, this reconceptualization has been formalized through regulatory frameworks that establish three interdependent substantive functions: teaching, research, and engagement with society, whose organic integration is not merely a bureaucratic imperative but responds to an epistemological logic that links academic knowledge with the transformation of the social realities in which the university operates.

Viewed from the field of law and legal sciences, the articulation of these three functions takes on a particular dimension, since university legal education cannot be conceived apart from the social contexts in which law operates as an instrument of regulation, a guarantor of rights, and a mechanism for conflict resolution; hence the integration of teaching, research, and outreach not only enriches the educational process but also anchors it in the concrete reality of the subjects of law whom graduates of legal programs will serve professionally.

The body of scholarly literature on this issue has documented the benefits of this integration with increasing systematicity; in this regard, it has been noted that university outreach acts as a catalyst for endogenous development when linked to rigorous research processes (Atencio-González, 2024); complementarily, recent research on the Latin American context confirms that universities' shared responsibility in the territories where the institution operates strengthens both the social relevance of education and the quality of research processes (Aviña-Godínez et al., 2024); specifically in the case of Ecuador, several studies have analyzed the scope and limitations of university outreach as a driver of social transformation (Luján-Johnson et al., 2025; Verdezoto-Reinoso et al., 2025).

However, the same literature also documents structural tensions that hinder the effective integration of these functions, including the compartmentalization of the curriculum between teaching and research and outreach projects, the absence of institutional mechanisms that recognize and evaluate integration as a dimension of academic quality, and the persistent gaps between the teaching methodologies used

in law classrooms and the demands of research practice in complex social contexts (Eenmaa et al., 2022; Land & Organick, 2022).

When it comes to law programs, this set of gaps is particularly significant, given that legal research requires a robust methodological foundation that integrates, at the same time, the traditions of legal dogmatics, the qualitative approaches characteristic of the social sciences, and the tools of empirical legal analysis; in this regard, Villamar (2021a; 2021b) has documented the epistemological particularities of legal research in Ecuadorian universities; Meanwhile, Nizama Valladolid and Nizama Chávez (2020) have addressed the relevance of the qualitative approach in this field; in turn, Witker (2008) argued, more than a decade ago, for the need for integrative legal research that overcomes the divisions between legal dogmatics and the social sciences.

Against this backdrop, the research focused on analyzing the integration of substantive university functions as a strategy for social transformation in Ecuador.

METHOD

The methodological process was framed within the interpretive paradigm of scientific research, employing a qualitative documentary design and a qualitative meta-analysis strategy; this design approach enabled the systematization, critical analysis, and synthesis of contributions from a selected sample of scientific publications, with the aim of generating new knowledge through the integration of prior knowledge documented in the available academic literature, as established by Cornejo Cancino and Salas Guzmán (2011) and Sandín-Esteban (2000) in their respective characterizations of qualitative meta-analysis.

Regarding the delimitation of the corpus, the unit of analysis consisted of scientific articles, chapters, and academic texts published in indexed journals and peer-reviewed publications between 2008 and 2025; the delimitation of this period was based on the criterion of encompassing the most representative developments in the academic debate on substantive university functions in the Latin American context, including the period preceding and following the regulatory changes implemented in Ecuador since the Organic Law on Higher Education of 2010.

Based on these criteria, the final corpus included 36 academic sources, distributed according to four selection criteria: (a) direct thematic relevance to the substantive functions of universities, legal education, or qualitative research; (b) publication in peer-reviewed journals; (c) geographic coverage focused on Ecuador and Latin America, with selective inclusion of internationally recognized Anglo-Saxon literature; (d) availability of the full text for analysis; texts without identified authorship, undergraduate theses not published in indexed journals, and non-scientific popular sources were excluded.

The processing of sources was organized into three sequential stages. In the first, termed inventory and characterization, a bibliographic matrix was developed that recorded for each source the year of publication, authorship, journal of publication, country of origin, central theme, and stated methodological approach; in the second stage, corresponding to open thematic coding, recurring thematic clusters were identified through an iterative process of analytical reading, grouping the texts according to their conceptual and empirical affinity; in the third stage, termed categorical synthesis, the identified clusters were consolidated into four emerging categories that constituted the organizational structure of the results.

The rigor of the analytical process was ensured through the criteria of credibility, transferability, and dependability characteristic of qualitative research, according to the parameters established by Noreña et al. (2012); credibility was strengthened through the triangulation of sources; transferability, through the dense description of the context of production of the analyzed documents; and reliability, through the systematic recording of the analytical and decisions adopted at each stage; similarly, considerations of ethical reflexivity were addressed in the handling of sources, in line with the approaches of von Unger (2021), respecting copyright and avoiding the attribution of statements not supported by the original texts.

In line with the object of study, the perspective adopted fell within the tradition of qualitative legal research, which recognizes the need to integrate the methodological tools of the social sciences with the epistemological requirements specific to legal knowledge, as argued by Melet-Padrón (2018) and Nizama Valladolid and Nizama Chávez (2020); this integration was consistent with the

interdisciplinary nature of the subject of study, which spanned the fields of university pedagogy, the sociology of law, and higher education policy.

ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

The results are organized around four emerging categories derived from the thematic coding process; each category condenses a set of theoretical positions and empirical evidence that allow for an understanding, from different angles, of the phenomenon of the integration of substantive university functions as a strategy for social transformation in Ecuador.

Table 1. *Distribution of analyzed sources by emerging category.*

Emerging category	No. of sources	Representative authors	Main thematic focus
Integration of teaching and research	9	Castro-Sánchez et al. (2025); Parada-Trujillo et al. (2025); Milanés-Gómez et al. (2019)	Teacher training and educational research
University engagement and community development	13	Verdezoto-Reinoso et al. (2025); Luján-Johnson et al. (2025); Tamayo et al. (2020, 2021)	Social transformation and community engagement
Methodological rigor and qualitative legal research	8	Nizama and Nizama (2020); Melet-Padrón (2018); Cornejo and Salas (2011)	Methodology, validity, and qualitative approach
Institutional quality and Ecuadorian higher education	4	Zambrano-Noboa et al. (2023); Orellana-Navarrete et al. (2025); Fabara-Garzón (2016)	Quality, regulation, and institutional transformation

Note. Prepared by the authors based on the analyzed document corpus (n = 34).

Table 1 shows that an initial review of the distribution of sources by category reveals that university engagement and community development account for the largest volume of academic output (n = 13), which reflects the growing interest of the Latin American scientific community in this aspect of the university's mission; Legal education and methodological research, although with a smaller number of sources, exhibit high conceptual density given the specialized nature of the included texts; in contrast, the category of institutional quality, with four sources, constitutes the area with the lowest specific output, suggesting a gap in the literature regarding mechanisms for evaluating functional integration in Ecuadorian universities.

Category 1. The Relationship Between Teaching and Research in University Education

The relationship between teaching and research has been the subject of systematic analysis in the literature on Latin American higher education; from the perspective of teacher education, Castro-Sánchez et al. (2025) argue that research not only

constitutes a pillar of knowledge production but also serves as the foundation for the transformation of university pedagogical practice, in the sense that faculty members who conduct research also modify their teaching practices; This perspective is consistent with the arguments of Fabara-Garzón (2016), who documented the challenges of university teacher education and teaching practice in Ecuador, noting that the dissociation between research and teaching represents one of the main obstacles to the quality of the Ecuadorian higher education system.

Along the same lines, the professionalization of teaching through a new university curriculum was analyzed by Milanés-Gómez et al. (2019) in the context of the University of Guayaquil; this study identified the integration of formative research and pedagogical practice as a determining factor in the improvement of academic processes. From the specific field of legal education, Parada-Trujillo et al. (2025) proposed a framework of methodological pathways for formative research in law that transcends the instrumental conception of research as a mere curricular requirement; for, according to these authors, well-articulated formative research builds an epistemological culture that permeates all levels of the educational process.

The implications of this integration take on more precise contours at the operational level, where Zambrano-Noboa et al. (2023) analyzed the current state of the Ecuadorian higher education system and its conditions for quality improvement, finding that the universities with the greatest progress in quality indicators are precisely those in which research processes are systematically integrated with the curricular management of teaching; This finding aligns with the argument put forth by Orellana-Navarrete et al. (2025), who maintain that Ecuadorian universities have real potential to become agents of social innovation, but only if they succeed in bridging the gap between scientific production and professional training.

From the perspective of comparative law, Land and Organick (2022) examined curriculum design in law schools with the aim of transferring theoretical learning to clinical practice, emphasizing that the integration of classroom instruction and research requires a deliberate curricular architecture rather than the mere juxtaposition of courses; Meanwhile, Eenmaa et al. (2022), in their critical analysis of legal teaching methods in development contexts, questioned the legitimacy of

methodologies that reproduce epistemological hierarchies between formal legal knowledge and the knowledge of the communities with which law students work.

Category 2. University Engagement and Community Transformation

Engagement with society constitutes the axis through which the university projects its social function into the territories where it operates; from the Ecuadorian context, Verdezoto-Reinoso et al. (2025) examined engagement as a factor in universities' competitive positioning, concluding that institutions with greater community outreach exhibit better indicators of social relevance and, simultaneously, greater recognition by local stakeholders; In a similar vein, Luque-Espinoza de los Monteros et al. (2025) reviewed social engagement processes in Ecuadorian higher education, identifying gaps between the current regulatory framework and actual institutional practices.

Delving deeper into the conceptual foundations of this relationship, Luján-Johnson et al. (2025) addressed the relationship between university research and society in Ecuador through a conceptual review that identified the main theoretical frameworks underpinning engagement; these authors established that effective engagement requires an institutional architecture that connects research projects with the demands and needs of communities, moving beyond the notion of engagement as a service activity disconnected from scientific knowledge; In a complementary vein, Méndez-Bravo (2021) assessed the socioeconomic impact of university engagement, demonstrating that projects integrated with research activities generate a greater territorial impact than those conceived exclusively as service extension.

Table 2. *Dimensions of university engagement in Ecuador identified in the analyzed literature.*

Dimension	Central characteristic	References
Normative-regulatory	Legal framework establishing the mandatory nature of university engagement as a substantive function evaluated by the university accreditation system	Tamayo et al. (2020); Zambrano-Noboa et al. (2023)
Community-territorial	Projects targeting vulnerable populations, with an emphasis on rural and intercultural areas	Tamayo et al. (2021); Navarro-Martínez (2018); Guartán-Tumbaco et al. (2023)
Epistemological-research	Production of situated knowledge based on the articulation between academic research projects and social needs identified in the territory	Luján-Johnson et al. (2025); Méndez-Bravo (2021); Aviña-Godínez et al. (2024)
Management-technological	Information and control systems for monitoring substantive engagement processes and measuring the social impact generated	de la Rosa-Martín and Brito-Vallina (2024); Merchán-Riera (2025)
Socioeconomic	Measurable impact of engagement projects on indicators of local development, entrepreneurship, and community well-being	Méndez-Bravo (2021); Ramírez-Aguirre et al. (2025)

Note. Prepared by the author based on the analyzed documentary corpus.

In Table 2, the picture drawn by these dimensions shows that university outreach in Ecuador is a multidimensional phenomenon that transcends the provision of specific community services; the epistemological-research dimension, less frequently addressed in previous studies but with a growing presence in recent literature, points toward a conception of community engagement as a space for the production of situated knowledge, which has direct implications for the curriculum design of law programs; the normative-regulatory and management-technological dimensions present more consolidated developments in the literature, while the socioeconomic dimension remains the least explored in terms of specific measurement instruments for the Ecuadorian context.

Regarding the concrete practice of projects, Tamayo et al. (2020) analyzed the relationship between outreach projects and learning processes, concluding that outreach acts as a setting for experiential learning when it is organically integrated into curriculum planning, not when it is presented as a complementary activity disconnected from the classroom; from rural areas, Tamayo et al. (2021) documented the specific conditions that strengthen outreach in contexts of high geographical and social complexity, noting that the relevance of projects depends on universities' ability to engage with local knowledge without subordinating it to conventional academic frameworks; In turn, Guartán-Tumbaco et al. (2023)

incorporated the communicational dimension, demonstrating that community participation in outreach projects strengthens the empowerment of local actors when mechanisms for ongoing feedback are in place.

A particularly relevant example for the Ecuadorian context is provided by Navarro-Martínez (2018), who analyzed the case of the Intercultural University of Chiapas, whose community engagement model integrates the epistemological perspectives of indigenous communities into the very design of academic projects; this experience is particularly relevant to the Ecuadorian context, where law programs face the challenge of articulating formal legal knowledge with the customary legal systems of indigenous communities; on the technological front, de-la-Rosa-Martín and Brito-Vallina (2024) described the development of an automated system for monitoring substantive engagement processes, demonstrating that institutional management of engagement requires tools to monitor the alignment between project objectives, activities, and impacts.

Regarding the measurement of the effects generated in communities, Riera-Vázquez et al. (2018) proposed conceptual categories to assess the degree of social transformation generated by academic projects, whose approaches allow for the operationalization of the concept of social transformation beyond quantitative indicators of participation; along the same lines, Ramírez-Aguirre et al. (2025) documented the implementation of outreach projects in the field of early childhood intervention, demonstrating how well-coordinated university- y initiatives can influence local public policies and generate measurable impact on the well-being of the served populations.

Category 3. Methodological Rigor in Qualitative Legal Research

The quality of legal research depends, to a decisive extent, on the rigor with which the methodological criteria specific to the chosen approach are applied; in the field of qualitative research, Cornejo Cancino and Salas Guzmán (2011) established that rigor cannot be equated with the replicability characteristic of experimental designs, but must be evaluated using specific criteria that address the epistemological coherence of the research process; In a similar vein, Sandín-Esteban (2000) proposed a shift from objectivity as a criterion of validity toward criteria of

epistemological solidarity that recognize the constructivist nature of qualitative knowledge.

Applying these approaches to the legal field, Melet-Padrón (2018) argued that qualitative research offers suitable methodological tools for studying legal phenomena in their sociocultural dimension, overcoming the limitations of legal positivism to capture the plurality of meanings that social actors attribute to norms and institutions; Nizama Valladolid and Nizama Chávez (2020) developed this perspective by proposing a qualitative research project model applied to the law thesis seminar, which incorporates rigor criteria as an evaluable dimension of the research training process; Meanwhile, Vibhute (2022), drawing on a comparative review of legal research methodology, noted that the diversification of methodological approaches in law responds to the growing complexity of legal phenomena in pluralistic societies.

Table 3. *Criteria of rigor in qualitative legal research according to the analyzed literature.*

Rigor criterion	Operational description in legal research	Theoretical references
Credibility	Consistency between empirical data collected in legal contexts and the resulting theoretical interpretation; verifiable through triangulation of normative, jurisprudential, and doctrinal sources	Noreña et al. (2012); Cornejo and Salas (2011)
Transferability	Possibility of applying the research findings to legal contexts other than the one studied, through a dense description of the original normative and institutional context	Sandín-Esteban (2000); Melet-Padrón (2018)
Dependency	Stability and consistency of the analytical process throughout the study; documentation of the methodological decisions adopted and the interpretive sources consulted	Noreña et al. (2012); Nizama and Nizama (2020)
Confirmability	The possibility that another researcher can confirm the results based on the documented data and analytical procedure; linked to the legal researcher's reflexivity	von Unger (2021); Sandín-Esteban (2000)
Epistemological coherence	Consistency between the adopted paradigm (interpretive, critical, or positivist), the chosen methodological approach, and the data collection and analysis techniques employed	Villamar (2021a; 2021b); Bonilla-Montenegro (2010); Witker (2008)

Note. Prepared by the author based on the analyzed documentary corpus.

Taken as a whole, the rigor criteria identified in Table 3 constitute a system for evaluating methodological quality that must operate in an integrated manner; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are not independent criteria, but rather complementary dimensions of a coherent research process; in the context of legal education, their incorporation into research seminars helps

foster a methodological culture among law students that goes beyond the mere application of data collection techniques, guiding them toward a reflective and ethically committed scientific practice; epistemological coherence emerges, in this framework, as a cross-cutting criterion, as it determines the validity of all the others.

From the perspective of paradigmatic debates in the Ecuadorian context, Villamar (2021a; 2021b) documented the particularities of the object of legal research in Ecuadorian universities, noting that the tension between positivist paradigms and critical and interpretive approaches constitutes one of the central debates in the methodological training of lawyers; Bonilla-Montenegro (2010), for his part, offered an analysis of paradigms in legal theory that allows for the historical contextualization of this debate, demonstrating that the transformations in the conception of law have generated new imperatives for legal research, including the need to incorporate approaches that capture the social, political, and cultural dimensions of the legal phenomenon; Along the same lines, Witker (2008), in his proposal for integrative legal research, anticipated the urgency of transcending disciplinary boundaries to address the complexity of the legal phenomenon from multiple methodological perspectives.

Added to this is the ethical dimension of the research process, developed by von Unger (2021) in the context of historical social research, whose approaches are equally relevant for legal research committed to social transformation; according to this author, ethical reflexivity is not a procedural add-on to the research process, but a constitutive dimension of knowledge production in the social sciences; the use of new technologies in legal research has also been the subject of critical analysis, as Neubauer and Rosen (2022) examined the transition from traditional methods to digital legal research tools, while Stepka (2022) addressed the impact of artificial intelligence on the legal profession; both authors agree that the technological transformation of research requires a reconfiguration of the methodological competencies developed in university education.

Category 4. Institutional Quality and the Transformation of Ecuadorian Higher Education

The institutional quality of Ecuadorian higher education has been analyzed from multiple perspectives in recent literature; Zambrano-Noboa et al. (2023) provided

an updated assessment of the Ecuadorian university system, identifying the coordination of core functions, ongoing faculty development, and the modernization of curricular frameworks as key factors for quality improvement; For the purposes of this study, this analysis is relevant in that it allows us to understand the institutional conditions under which the integration of teaching, research, and outreach occurs or is hindered.

Linked to this issue, the interpretation of community engagement as a driver of synergy between academia and digital transformation was proposed by Merchán-Riera (2025), who argued that the digitization of university processes opens new possibilities for the social outreach of academic knowledge; along the same lines, Orellana-Navarrete et al. (2025) examined the possibilities and limitations of Ecuadorian universities as agents of social innovation, noting that their transformative potential is constrained by rigid administrative structures, insufficient funding for applied research, and poor coordination among academic departments; overcoming these limitations requires, according to the authors, the design of institutional policies that encourage the integration of core functions.

From an ethical-evaluative perspective, Weinhardt (2020) offered insights on the use of big data in institutional evaluation processes, relevant to the design of university quality monitoring systems in Ecuador; his arguments warn that the digitization of university evaluation systems can lead to distortions in the understanding of academic quality when quantitative indicators are applied to processes that are essentially qualitative in nature, such as the social transformation generated by community engagement; this warning connects with the proposal by Riera-Vázquez et al. (2018) to develop specific conceptual frameworks for measuring community development that go beyond conventional indicators of coverage and participation.

A joint examination of the sources comprising this category points to a convergent conclusion from the perspective of legal education: improving university quality in Ecuador cannot be limited to compliance with formal accreditation indicators, but must translate into real transformations in teaching, research, and community engagement practices that influence the training of legal professionals with the capacity to contribute to social development; this constitutes the core of the

argument that the category contributes to the systemic analysis of the integration of substantive functions.

DISCUSSION

From an epistemological standpoint, the analyzed literature agrees that the dissociation between substantive functions is rooted in the disciplinary tradition that conceived the university as a space for the transmission of pre-existing knowledge , relegating research to specialized centers and outreach to extension departments with no organic connection to teaching; this tradition, whose influence on Ecuadorian universities has been documented by Fabara-Garzón (2016) and Milanés-Gómez et al. (2019), generates curricular and administrative structures that hinder the mainstreaming of research and outreach into everyday educational processes.

In the face of this institutional legacy, the proposal for integrative legal research formulated by Witker (2008) offers an epistemological solution to this dissociation by positing that legal knowledge is constructed at the intersection of dogmatics, empirical analysis, and critical inquiry; this integrative conception is consistent with the most recent developments in qualitative legal research methodology, insofar as Melet-Padrón (2018) and Nizama Valladolid and Nizama Chávez (2020) recognize the plurality of methodological approaches as a condition for the social relevance of legal knowledge; for the training of legal professionals, this implies designing educational pathways that progressively integrate research competencies with community engagement projects, so that students simultaneously develop the skills of a researcher and those of a legal practitioner committed to their social context.

With regard to engagement projects, the available evidence on university engagement in Ecuador shows that the most effective projects are those that link research objectives with concrete community interventions, moving beyond the traditional, welfare-oriented model of outreach, as noted by Luján-Johnson et al. (2025) and Tamayo et al. (2020); this model of research-based engagement is particularly relevant for law programs, whose projects can focus on identifying gaps in access to justice, analyzing the effectiveness of legal norms in vulnerable contexts, or designing conflict resolution mechanisms adapted to the cultural and social realities of communities; In this vein, the experience documented by Navarro-

Martínez (2018) at the Intercultural University of Chiapas demonstrates that this approach is not only desirable but also practically feasible when the institution commits to building genuine ties with the communities with which it works.

One area that the literature tends to address insufficiently is the dimension of rigor criteria in the context of applied legal research; works such as those by Cornejo Cancino and Salas Guzmán (2011), Sandín-Esteban (2000), and Noreña et al. (2012) have developed frameworks for evaluating the methodological quality of qualitative research, but their systematic application in Ecuadorian legal studies remains limited; the transfer of these frameworks to the context of legal research constitutes a task that methodology programs in law schools must prioritize in their educational offerings; furthermore, the incorporation of ethical reflexivity, in the sense proposed by von Unger (2021), adds a dimension that links methodological rigor to legal researchers' commitment to the values of justice and equity.

Closely linked to the above, the institutional quality of Ecuadorian universities emerges from the literature as a determining factor in the integration of substantive functions that cannot be resolved exclusively through curricular reforms; in this regard, Verdezoto-Reinoso et al. (2025) and Orellana-Navarrete et al. (2025) agree that the administrative structures of Ecuadorian universities exhibit rigidities that hinder the integrated management of teaching, research, and outreach; Overcoming these rigidities requires not only the institutional will of university authorities but also the design of incentives that promote interdepartmental collaboration and the recognition of research outreach as a primary academic activity, comparable to scientific publication in faculty performance evaluation systems.

In line with these institutional transformations, the digital dimension—as the context in which university functions currently unfold—introduces new challenges and opportunities for functional integration; in this regard, Merchán-Riera (2025) and Stepka (2022) note that digital platforms expand the scope of university outreach and offer tools for the dissemination of legal knowledge among communities that have historically had limited access to the services of academic institutions; however, as Neubauer and Rosen (2022) and Weinhardt (2020) warn, the digitization of legal research also raises ethical and methodological questions that are no ly resolved by

the mere adoption of new technologies, but rather require systematic reflection on the limits and responsibilities of academic knowledge in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

The integration of the substantive functions of the university namely, teaching, research, and engagement with society constitutes a viable and necessary strategy for social transformation in the Ecuadorian context, provided that its articulation transcends mere regulatory compliance and is consolidated as an epistemological framework that cuts across educational processes; the foregoing takes on a particular dimension in the legal field, given that the training of socially committed jurists requires overcoming the dissociation between legal dogmatics, the empirical analysis of law, and the qualitative approaches characteristic of the social sciences.

However, the documentary analysis conducted shows that such integration does not occur spontaneously, but rather requires deliberately constructed institutional conditions: curricular frameworks that incorporate formative research as a structuring axis, engagement projects aligned with specific research objectives, and quality assessment systems that recognize social relevance as a substantive dimension of university performance. Added to these conditions, as an unavoidable requirement, is the application of criteria of methodological rigor namely, credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and epistemological coherence that guarantee the scientific validity of the knowledge produced at the intersection of academia and communities.

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