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Integrating Intellectual Capital and University Social Responsibility: Pathways to Institutional Empowerment in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: Contemporary universities face increasing demands for transparency, social commitment, and academic excellence in increasingly complex and competitive environments. In this context, intellectual capital, university social responsibility, and institutional empowerment emerge as fundamental pillars for the strategic development of higher education institutions. This study aimed to analyze the importance of intellectual capital and social responsibility in universities as a strategic factor for empowerment in higher education. The bibliometric phase, based on publications indexed in Scopus, revealed sustained growth in global scientific production on these topics, as well as geographical and thematic gaps. The systematic review included 35 rigorously selected articles. It confirmed that intellectual capital strengthens organizational learning and innovation, that social responsibility improves institutional legitimacy and social relevance, and that empowerment fosters participatory governance and adaptability. The findings show that the interaction between these elements generates synergistic effects that improve institutional performance and support the development of more resilient and socially engaged universities. This study contributes to the theoretical consolidation of these constructs and offers empirical evidence that can guide university management policies and strategies. Future research should focus on regional comparative studies and longitudinal analyses to evaluate the long-term impact of integrated management approaches in diverse institutional contexts.

Keywords: university social responsibility, intellectual capital, institutional empowerment, systematic review.

I. INTRODUCTION

Universities today face a significant challenge, as they must address numerous social, economic, and technological changes that often challenge their traditional models and demand the implementation of new forms of organizational responsibility, knowledge management, and structural flexibility [1, 2]. Due to the ever-increasing need to provide support for global sustainability, the knowledge economy, and the pressure of performance metrics [3], intellectual capital has become a vital component for differentiating institutions, ensuring their survival, and generating value in a highly competitive world [4-6]. Simultaneously, the growing

and constant demands of regulatory bodies and society require higher education institutions to fulfill certain social and ethical commitments, considering the application of social responsibility principles in their culture and governance [7, 8].

In this landscape of uncertainty and complexity, institutional empowerment emerges as a highly relevant analytical category, given that it refers to the capacity of universities to develop, reconfigure their decision-making structures and exercise strategic control [9, 10]. It is important to highlight the unanimous opinion regarding the importance of social responsibility, intellectual capital, and empowerment. However, there is a lack of sufficient research addressing these pillars from a holistic perspective that is, from a perspective that explains how they systematically influence and interrelate with university performance. This is because, on the one hand, some researchers focus on knowledge production and economic approaches centered solely on efficiency [11]. Others, on the contrary, prefer to focus on adopting critical frameworks to challenge the commodification of higher education and support participatory models based on solidarity [12, 13].

In this study, institutional empowerment is defined as a dynamic organizational capacity through which universities collectively develop the ability to exercise strategic agency, reconfigure governance arrangements, and align decision-making processes with institutional values and societal responsibilities. Unlike broad or normative uses of the term, empowerment is not equated with mere autonomy or formal authority. Rather, it refers to the institution's capacity to mobilize intellectual resources, foster inclusive participation, and sustain purposeful action across organizational levels. This definition positions empowerment as a relational construct, emerging from the interaction between knowledge assets, governance practices, and socially responsible orientations.

It is important to distinguish institutional empowerment from related but conceptually distinct constructs. Autonomy refers to the formal degree of independence granted to universities by external authorities, while governance quality concerns the effectiveness and transparency of decision-making structures. Institutional performance, in turn, captures measurable outcomes such as productivity, rankings, or efficiency. Empowerment differs from all three insofar as it is neither a structural condition nor an outcome, while a process-based organizational capability that enables institutions to actively shape their strategic trajectories. In this sense, empowerment operates as both a mediating capacity and an ongoing institutional process, linking intellectual capital and social responsibility to sustained institutional agency rather than short-term performance gains.

Despite theoretical progress, the field of study lacks research that addresses these constructs from a comparative perspective and is based on solid scientific evidence. Specifically, there is a lack of bibliometric studies that would allow for mapping global trends in the scientific output of this thematic triad, considering the identification of specialized journals, patterns by country, lines of research, institutional affiliations, and types of articles. In this respect, the use of the Scopus database recognized for its high quality is a vital methodological tool because it facilitates obtaining information on the density, evolution, and dispersion of knowledge generated on the topics in question [14].

The main objective of this research is to analyze the importance of intellectual capital and social responsibility in universities as a strategic factor for empowerment in higher education. The analysis involves a bibliometric study of research indexed in Scopus. Considering the proposed objective, the following questions are posed: What trends and perspectives emerge from the scientific literature indexed in Scopus regarding intellectual capital, social responsibility, ¿and institutional empowerment in universities? How does intellectual capital operate in universities as a strategic factor for value creation and academic sustainability? What is the role of social responsibility in institutional development within higher education?

Previous literature has demonstrated that these three axes exert a certain influence on innovation capacity, institutional resilience, and social legitimacy. Researchers have also identified geographic areas and thematic gaps in scientific production, thus opening up more possibilities for formulating academic cooperation strategies and conducting future research. Overall, this research provides a solid conceptual foundation and highly relevant empirical evidence, which can inform strategic management decisions and the design of public policies in higher education institutions worldwide.

II.RELATED WORKS

Intellectual capital has been addressed by various authors as a construct that articulates three components: relational capital, structural capital, and human capital. The contributions of [15] and [16] constituted a starting point for reflecting on the topic because they argued that the value of entities depends considerably on intangible resources. Based on these approaches, it was identified that the analysis extended to the university sphere. Studies show that universities, as knowledge-intensive organizations, need to develop and implement an articulated management of the dimensions of intellectual capital [17-19]. Along these lines, they relate human capital to the development of student competencies, research capacity, and educator qualifications [20]; they link structural capital to technological infrastructures, institutional frameworks, and management systems [21]; and, finally, they express relational capital through links with the environment, cooperation networks, and strategic alliances [22].

Based on the literature, the consolidation of these components produces positive effects because it strengthens knowledge transfer to society, promotes pedagogical innovations, and optimizes levels of scientific productivity. Similarly, researchers have documented that higher education institutions with consolidated intellectual capital structures demonstrate a greater capacity to respond to highly competitive environments and to align their institutional strategies with long-term sustainability [23, 24].

In parallel, recent literature incorporates university social responsibility as a key element in student empowerment and the development of critical citizenship. Studies associate this approach with institutional practices aimed at strengthening interaction with the community, promoting participation in community projects, and consolidating social impact mechanisms that amplify the transformative influence of universities [30, 31]. Thus, social responsibility is seen as an element that complements the dimensions of intellectual capital and contributes to building capacity for students to participate in decision-making processes, develop their own initiatives, and integrate into broader collaborative networks.

However, a review of the literature reveals that many studies maintain partial approaches and privilege isolated dimensions of intellectual capital or social responsibility. This tendency limits the recognition of the systemic interdependence between their components and prevents a full understanding of how both factors influence processes of empowerment and institutional strengthening.

Methodologically, a low level of consensus persists regarding techniques for measuring intellectual capital in universities [25-29]. This is because some studies use quantitative indicators such as patents, scientific output, or positions in international rankings—while others adopt qualitative approaches focused on examining social impacts, governance models, or cultural dynamics. The coexistence of these approaches has enriched the field, but it has also created difficulties in establishing comparisons and has prevented the consolidation of a comprehensive evaluation framework. A similar situation is observed in the study of social responsibility, where conceptual developments and measurement strategies exhibit significant heterogeneity.

Taken together, the evidence shows significant progress in the conceptualization of intellectual capital and social responsibility, as well as their relationship to institutional and student empowerment. At the same time, it reveals gaps that require critical review and integrative proposals. Therefore, the analysis of available works provides input that clarifies key achievements, defines unresolved tensions, and guides the present study. Based on this foundation, it is possible to formulate an interpretive framework that contributes to a deeper understanding of the role that intellectual capital and social responsibility play in academic sustainability, value creation, and the empowerment processes that strengthen the university's mission.

III. MATERIALS Y METHODS

This research was conducted in two phases: the first stage consisted of a bibliometric analysis, and the second, a systematic literature review [30, 31]. This methodology was designed to analyze the importance of intellectual capital in universities as a strategic factor for value creation and academic sustainability. To this end, the distribution, evolution, and thematic density of three essential constructs social responsibility, intellectual capital, and institutional empowerment were also considered within a university context.

During the first phase, bibliographic information was retrieved and processed from the Scopus database, recognized for its multidisciplinary coverage, its use in knowledge metrics studies, and its editorial quality control [32]. In this sense, the following search equation focused on the university context is suggested: (TITLE-ABS-KEY (“intellectual capital” AND “social responsibility” AND “Institutional empowerment”) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (university AND universities)) AND (LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD, “intellectual capital” AND "Social Responsibility" AND “Institutional empowerment”) OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD "University" AND “Sustainability”) OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD, "Universities")).

The researchers exported a total of 2,931 initial documents, which were organized in Excel for cleaning and subsequent analysis using Python (with the pandas, scikit-learn, and matplotlib libraries). This process was carried out to generate visualizations and metrics related to temporal evolution, affiliated institutions, distribution by country, subject areas, indexed journals, and article types. An initial screening was performed, discarding 315 records due to duplication or incomplete metadata, resulting in a preliminary total of 2,616 documents. A filter was then applied based on title and abstract, excluding 2,420 articles that did not meet the thematic criteria, particularly those not focused on universities or directly related to any of the three constructs analyzed. Finally, 196 articles were selected for full evaluation, in order to confirm their rigor and relevance (Figure 1).

The researchers then conducted a systematic review of the retrieved documents to select the most relevant and methodologically rigorous studies for a thorough qualitative analysis. This procedure was developed using the PRISMA guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses), ensuring traceability and transparency in the source selection and exclusion stages.

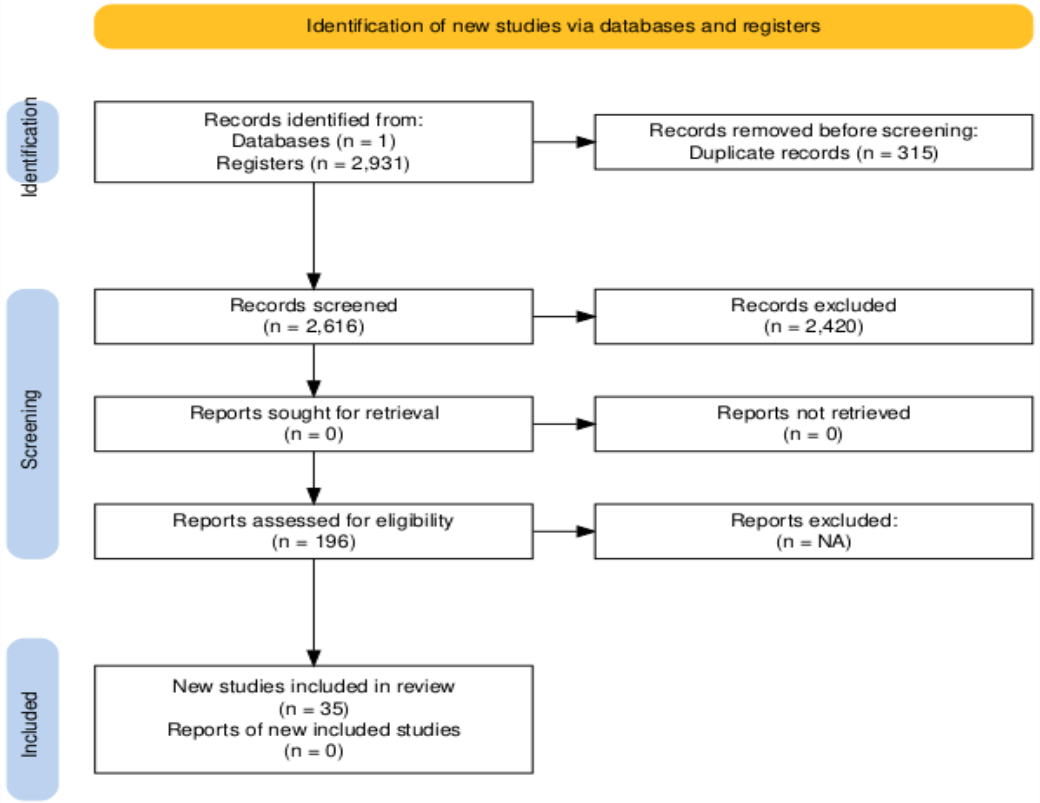

FIGURE 1. PRISMA flowchart.

To this end, inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to ensure the relevance, pertinence, and currency of the selected research. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (i) research specifically focused on higher education institutions, (ii) studies addressing one or more constructs from a theoretical or empirical perspective

with a clear conceptual definition, and (iii) publications from journals indexed in Scopus and subject to peer review. The exclusion criteria were as follows: (i) duplicate studies, (ii) articles focused on educational levels other than university, and (iii) works without access to the full text or with methodological deficiencies.

The final selection of 35 scientific articles constituted the qualitative corpus of the study and was subjected to an in-depth thematic analysis. Qualitative data coding and organization were supported by computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (Atlas.ti), which facilitated the systematic identification of patterns and relationships across the selected studies. Although certain automated functions were used to assist in data organization, all coding decisions, thematic interpretations, and analytical judgments were conducted and validated by the researchers. Additionally, general-purpose digital tools were employed solely to support text organization and clarity during the writing process. At all stages, analytical control, conceptual interpretation, and theoretical integration remained the exclusive responsibility of the research team.

IV. RESULTS

1. BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS

Figure 2 shows the evolution of Scopus-indexed publications regarding intellectual capital, institutional empowerment, and social responsibility between 2000 and 2025. During these years, researchers observed sustained growth; however, notable variations were observed between the different sections.

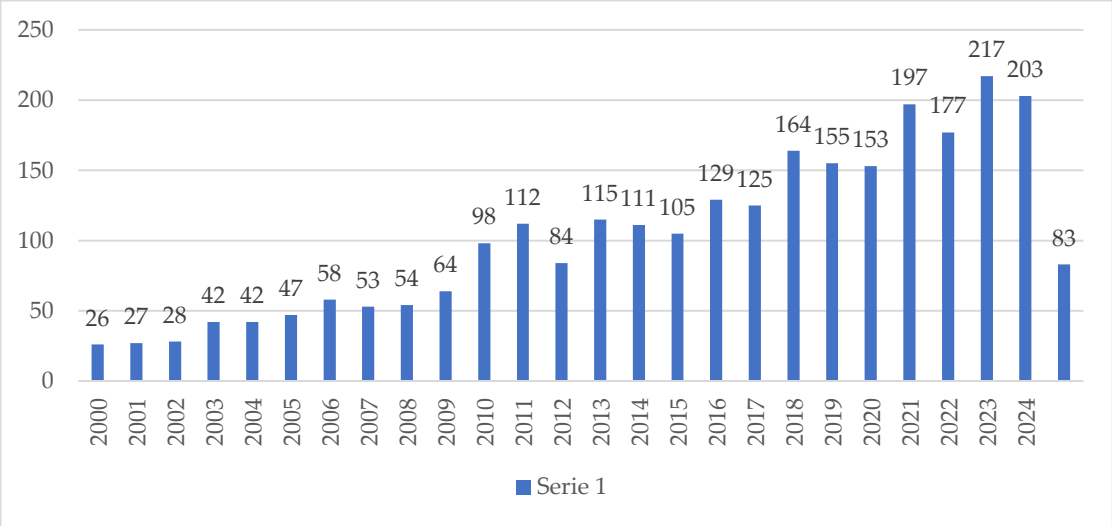

FIGURE 2. Annual publication frequency.

During the first five years, scientific output remained low and relatively constant. In 2000, 26 publications were recorded, a number that increased to 47 in 2005. The trend showed a more notable increase in 2006. By 2010, the number of studies had almost doubled compared to the previous five years, reaching a total of 98 research projects. This change demonstrates a growing academic interest in the topic, particularly related to knowledge management, sustainability, and public policy. Between 2011 and 2015, annual output fluctuated between 84 and 115 documents. The peak year, 2013, saw 115 publications, followed by a slight decrease in subsequent years. During this period, these fluctuations reflect adjustments in thematic approaches and publishers' priorities, rather than a genuine decline in interest in the topics.

Between 2016 and 2021, researchers identified a more marked and sustained increase in academic output. In 2016, 129 publications were recorded, and by 2021, this figure had risen to 197. This surge can be attributed to the consolidation of conceptual frameworks and their growing application in interdisciplinary research. At the same time, the global context played a role, as institutions had to address greater demands for transparency, legitimacy,

and knowledge management in increasingly complex environments. However, the peak was reached in 2023, with 217 publications. In 2024, the volume decreased slightly to 203, but no significant change in the overall trend was evident. By 2025, the number had dropped to 83 publications, although this reduction was likely due to the year not yet having ended and the available data being incomplete.

The bibliometric analysis also allowed us to identify the scientific journals with the most publications related to institutional empowerment, social responsibility, and intellectual capital (Figure 3). This finding complements the identified temporal evolution and facilitates the identification of the main spaces for academic dissemination on the aforementioned topics.

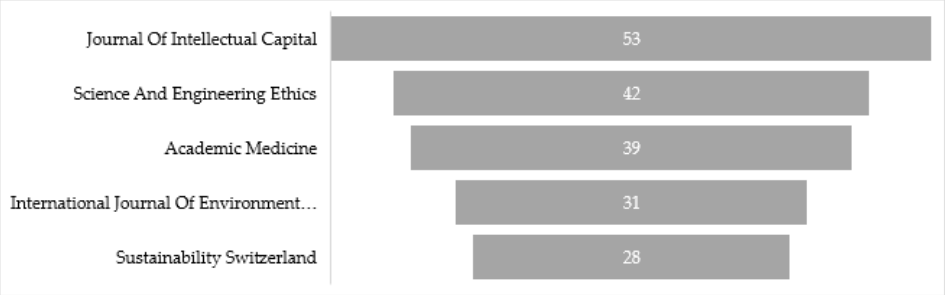

FIGURE 3. Impact of publication in journals

First, the Journal of Intellectual Capital stands out with 53 publications, solidifying its position as the leading reference source in this field, thus reflecting the relevance of intellectual capital in the reviewed study. Second, Ethics in Science and Engineering ranks second with 42 articles, demonstrating a close relationship with these topics and the ethical dilemmas in technological and scientific contexts. Third is Academic Medicine, with 39 publications, which reveals a significant intersection between medical training, institutional ethics, and knowledge management.

The International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health lists 31 publications, suggesting a growing interest in addressing public health from sustainable and institutional perspectives. Sustainability Switzerland and the Proceedings of the European Conference on Knowledge Management (ECKM), on the other hand, each have 28 publications and stand out for combining sustainability and knowledge analysis from a multidisciplinary approach.

The Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics and the Journal of Dental Education each have 23 publications. Their presence reaffirms the importance of educational and ethical analysis within the institutional framework. Finally, the International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education and the Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal each have 19 publications. All of this confirms that institutional empowerment impacts debates on sustainability and bioethics in higher education.

In summary, the results present evidence of a diversity of disciplinary approaches and validate the cross-cutting nature of social responsibility, intellectual capital, and institutional empowerment. At the same time, the researchers demonstrate that scientific production is not focused solely on a single area, but rather is distributed across publications that address multiple dimensions: organizational, ethical, environmental, and educational.

Similarly, the analysis identified the universities with the highest rates of scientific output on the topics studied (Figure 4). This information is crucial, as it allows us to recognize the academic centers that lead research in social responsibility, intellectual capital, and institutional empowerment within a regional and global context.

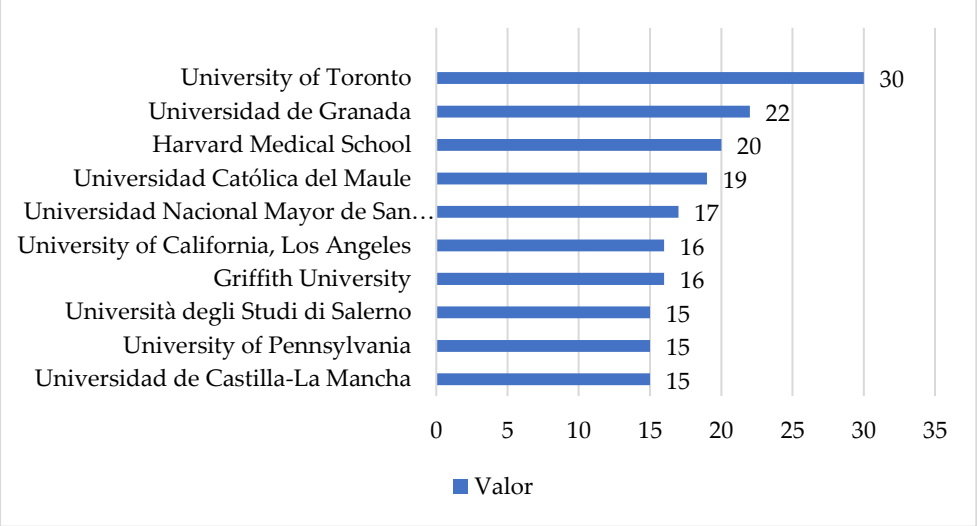

FIGURE 4. Presence of universities in the publication.

The University of Toronto leads the list with 30 publications, consolidating its position and leadership in knowledge production related to institutional ethics and knowledge management. Following closely behind is the University of Granada with 22 contributions, positioning itself as the most influential Spanish-speaking institution in this thematic area. This highlights the active role of European higher education institutions in the academic debate on governance and sustainability.

Harvard Medical School ranks third, with 20 publications. This highlights a close relationship between the ethical dimension and the topics analyzed in the areas of health sciences and medicine. It is followed by the Catholic University of Maule, with 19 studies, and the National University of San Marcos, with 17. These educational institutions stand out for their commitment to promoting research in Latin America, where institutional strengthening is of particular importance in the face of structural challenges.

Other universities demonstrating significant participation include the University of California, Los Angeles, and Griffith University. Both have 16 publications, highlighting a notable presence of Anglo-Saxon institutions in the scientific field. Following this, three institutions achieve the same level of productivity with 15 publications each: **the** University of Pennsylvania, the University of Salerno, and the University of Castilla-La Mancha, thus highlighting the geographical diversity of academic contributions.

Thus, the researchers found that the institutional distribution of scientific output shows a balanced picture among higher education institutions in Europe, North America, and Latin America. This pattern reflects that analyses of intellectual capital, institutional consolidation, and social responsibility come from a variety of academic and cultural contexts, making it possible to enrich the debate and contribute from diverse perspectives to overcome the challenges of current management.

The bibliometric review allowed researchers to determine the geographical distribution of scientific output in terms of intellectual capital, institutional empowerment, and social responsibility. This revealed relevant patterns in the origin of academic contributions (Figure 5). In absolute numbers, the United States ranks first with 793 publications, thus consolidating its role in the generation and international dissemination of knowledge. This academic preeminence reflects not only the strength of its research and university systems but also an advanced scientific infrastructure, consistent funding, and strategic coordination between the government, academia, and the private sector. The United Kingdom ranks second with 246 publications, data that demonstrate a strong tradition in the development of institutional management and ethical approaches, primarily emphasizing organizational sustainability and public governance. Spain ranks third with 234 publications, showing consistent growth in academic output, especially in institutions that prioritize higher education, social innovation, and collaborative management models.

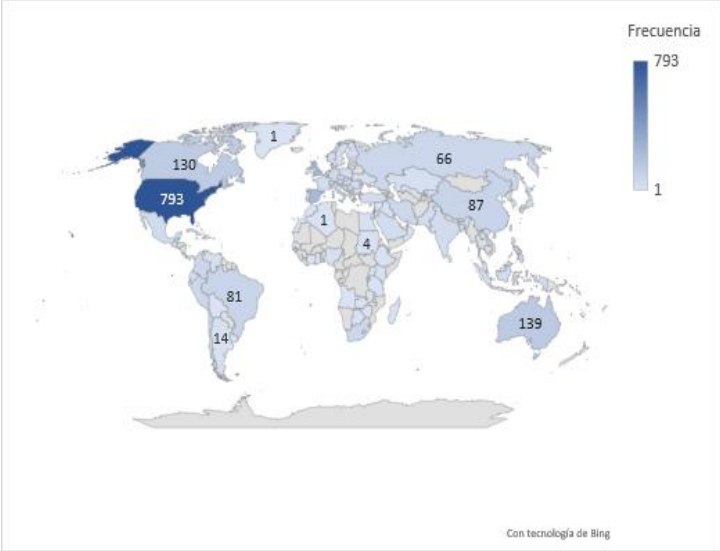

FIGURE 5. Countries with the greatest impact on publications.

At a second level of participation, the countries that stand out are Australia (139), Canada (130), and Italy (116), whose publications have been consistent in recent years. These countries are characterized by sharing a number of features, such as competitive university systems, public policies that promote transparency, and regulatory frameworks that demand accountability from private and public entities. This group constitutes intermediate centers of scientific production that, while not matching the volume of the global leaders, play a key role in the development of theoretical frameworks and methodologies that strengthen applied research.

Latin America also shows significant participation, although with notable differences between countries. Brazil (81), Colombia (68), Peru (57), Chile (54), and Mexico (48) stand out for having the highest number of research projects at the regional level, reflecting the increasing integration of these topics into state and university research agendas. This progress is linked to recent processes of institutional strengthening, the implementation of public policies focused on inclusion and equity, and citizen demands for greater transparency. In this context, institutional empowerment emerges as an essential tool for addressing the structural gaps that limit sustainable development. Simultaneously, institutions are promoting social responsibility as a cross-cutting principle in administrative, health, and educational management.

Asia, on the other hand, showed remarkable growth, led by China with 87 publications, followed by Iran (60), India (40), Saudi Arabia (37), Taiwan (36), and Malaysia (36). These countries, several of which are considered emerging economies, have begun to more definitively incorporate the principles of social responsibility and intellectual capital into their scientific and educational institutions. This situation reflects, in part, the implementation of internal reforms through which higher education institutions are attempting to improve their governance mechanisms, enhance their academic competitiveness, and consolidate their position as regional leaders in research. Although their output levels have not yet reached those of the most developed nations, the progress they have made so far projects a geopolitical repositioning in the area of specialized knowledge.

Central and Eastern Europe also show a significant presence, particularly through Russia (66), Poland (34), Romania (34), Portugal (34), and Ukraine (19). These nations have undergone a series of institutional transitions and significant reforms in their higher education systems throughout their history. These environments foster the development of research focused on optimizing public management, improving organizational performance evaluation, and strengthening professional ethics. Meanwhile, the Nordic nations such as Finland (29), Sweden (26), Norway (23), and Denmark (20) maintain a sustained academic output, which is based on institutional transparency, democratic governance models, and social welfare. These countries, which stand out for their high levels of social cohesion and quality of life, provide valuable perspectives on the effective integration of knowledge, public policy, and social responsibility.

Africa, the Caribbean, and certain areas of Central America have a more limited, though equally significant, presence. South Africa (63) ranks first, followed by Egypt (10), Nigeria (13), Ethiopia (9), and Ghana (6). These nations face a landscape where they must confront various structural challenges that affect their scientific output. These include political instability, institutional fragility, and unequal access to resources. Nevertheless, both researchers and universities are making significant efforts to consolidate lines of work focused on promoting inclusive higher education, institutional strengthening, and local capacity building. In the Caribbean, countries such as Cuba (8), Jamaica, El Salvador (7), and Costa Rica (2) stand out for their emerging scientific production, demonstrating a gradual process of integration into the global academic arena.

Table 1 presents the distribution of document types identified through bibliometric analysis and a systematic review of intellectual capital, institutional empowerment, and social responsibility, using records extracted from the Scopus database. The predominant document type is the scientific article, with 2,298 records, representing 78.40% of the total. These results highlight the importance of this type of publication as the primary means of academic dissemination in the field of study.

Conference papers occupy second place, with 207 entries (7.06%), followed by reviews, with a total of 170 documents (5.80%). Researchers also reported a significant number of book chapters (147; 5.02%). In addition to the above, editorials (37; 1.26%), notes (36; 1.23%), short studies (14; 0.48%), letters (12; 0.41%), full books (8; 0.27%), and errata (2; 0.07%) were also found, though in smaller quantities. These results suggest that researchers focus on the topics analyzed, particularly empirical and conceptual publications in article format. In contrast, other formats show a marginal presence in the literature indexed in Scopus.

Table 1. Type of documents.

Guy	Frequency	Percentage
Article	2298	78.40
Conference presentation	207	7.06
Review	170	5.80
Book chapter	147	5.02
Editorial	37	1.26
Note	36	1.23
Brief survey	14	0.48
Letter	12	0.41
Book	8	0.27
Erratum	2	0.07
Total	2931	100

Regarding research areas, it was established that the social sciences account for the largest number of publications, with a total of 1,381 documents (Figure 6). This reflects a strong focus on research about intellectual capital, institutional empowerment, and social responsibility from organizational and social perspectives. The field of medicine ranks second, with 941 publications, demonstrating a growing interest in studying these topics within contexts related to health and the management of healthcare systems.

Likewise, the areas of business, accounting, and administration account for 534 publications, reflecting a direct connection between these concepts and administrative practices in a corporate environment. Following these areas is nursing with 274 documents, in contrast to the humanities and arts, with 248 studies, suggesting an interdisciplinary approach that combines social, cultural, and ethical aspects in academic analysis.

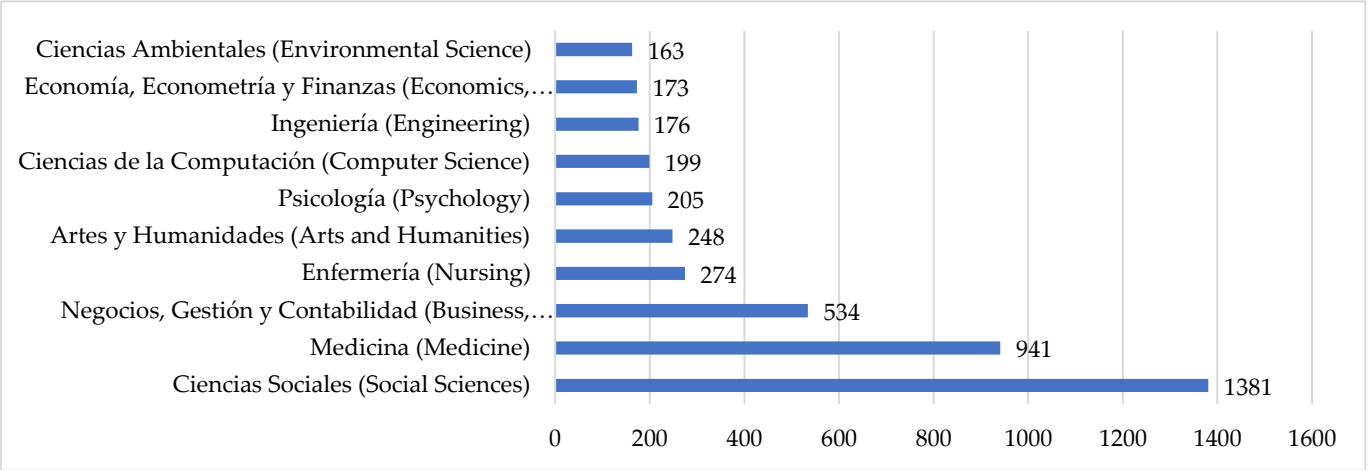

FIGURE 6. Areas with the highest number of investigations.

Similarly, researchers identified 205 documents in psychology, an area that provides relevant knowledge about the individual and collective factors that influence social responsibility and empowerment processes. Computer science, for its part, registered 199 publications, demonstrating a line of research focused on the use of technological resources for knowledge management and institutional innovation. In the field of engineering, researchers identified 176 studies. Meanwhile, in the areas of economics, finance, and econometrics, 173 works were recorded, demonstrating an interest in linking social responsibility and intellectual capital with organizational and economic efficiency. Finally, environmental science contributed 163 publications, thus reaffirming the importance of incorporating a sustainable perspective into the organizational empowerment process.

Beyond describing publication trends, the bibliometric analysis provides critical insights into the structural limitations of the existing literature. The strong concentration of publications in North America and Western Europe, combined with the dominance of journals focused on performance measurement and managerial efficiency, reveals a theoretical bias toward instrumental and outcome-driven perspectives. While social responsibility and intellectual capital are frequently examined as drivers of organizational performance, their role in enabling institutional empowerment particularly as a governance and agency-building process remains under-theorized. Moreover, the relatively lower visibility of contributions from the Global South suggests that context-sensitive understandings of empowerment, shaped by institutional fragility, inequality, and resource constraints, are systematically underrepresented in dominant theoretical models.

The bibliometric mapping directly informed the selection and analytical focus of the 35 studies included in the systematic review. Rather than relying solely on citation counts or journal impact, the selection process was guided by the identification of underexplored intersections highlighted by the bibliometric analysis—particularly studies that explicitly connect intellectual capital, social responsibility, and institutional empowerment within higher education contexts. Priority was given to works that moved beyond descriptive indicators and engaged with governance dynamics, institutional processes, or context-specific challenges, including those emerging from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. In this sense, bibliometrics functioned not as an end in itself, but as a diagnostic tool that revealed fragmentation, guided theoretical sampling, and shaped the integrative interpretation developed in this study.

2. SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The importance of intellectual capital in universities

The systematic literature review identified relevant similarities regarding the role of intellectual capital as a strategic approach in higher education institutions. The reviewed literature suggests that knowledge, acting as an intangible asset, is not limited solely to its operational function, making it a fundamental structural factor for

ensuring institutional development. Within this framework, intellectual capital functions in two ways: as a complement to material resources and as a guiding force, thus enabling its effective utilization in the face of the challenges confronting higher education [33].

The authors agreed that intellectual capital encompasses three fundamental components: human capital, relational capital, and structural capital [34-37]. These elements are characterized by not acting independently; rather, their true value is realized when applied within a management model focused on promoting organizational learning. Consequently, a university can reach its full potential if it recognizes that its most valuable resources lie in its people, its relationships with its environment, and the systems that support its operations. Human capital, first and foremost, refers to the body of knowledge, skills, and experience possessed by administrative and academic staff. Its importance lies in the fact that it is the primary source of innovation, scientific output, and critical thinking [38, 39]. However, this type of capital does not develop autonomously, as it requires an institutional environment conducive to promoting ongoing training, active participation, and high-quality research within a university setting. Thus, a university that invests in its human capital enhances its capacity to transform knowledge into social value. Second, structural capital consists of internal processes, information systems, regulations, technologies, and institutional coordination mechanisms. This component ensures that researchers can preserve the knowledge they generate, keep it accessible, and reuse it to address new challenges [40]. At this point, it should be emphasized that when universities develop organized and coherent structures, they have the capacity to systematize their experience, facilitate decision-making, and maintain the continuity of their strategic objectives. Third, there is relational capital, which encompasses the relationships the institution establishes with external actors, such as other academic institutions, businesses, public bodies, and civil society organizations. These relationships broaden the institution's horizons, reinforce the relevance of professional training, and enrich academic practice [41, 42]. They also enable the university to address societal demands and adapt its research, outreach, and teaching activities to the specific needs of its surrounding environment.

In general, these three elements constitute a dynamic system that generates sustainable results only when management is strategic and intentional. The research consulted shows that universities that consider these elements clearly and consistently achieve a higher level of innovation, strengthen their social legitimacy, and consolidate a more robust institutional culture [43, 44]. On the other hand, those university educational entities that neglect any of these aspects often face structural limitations that hinder their development.

Based on the findings reviewed, it is clear that managing intellectual capital requires more than institutional will. In other words, it also requires evaluation mechanisms, clear policies, a genuine commitment to academic quality, and appropriate incentives. It also implies a shift away from traditional approaches focused on formal indicators and the adoption of a more nuanced perspective that recognizes the value of knowledge in all its forms. In this way, the university acts both as a transmitter of knowledge and as a manager and producer of intangible capital.

2.2 The role of social responsibility in the development of higher education institutions

Furthermore, studies have confirmed that university social responsibility (USR) is no longer considered a complementary dimension, as it has become a structural element of institutional development. The most relevant research argues that today's universities cannot limit themselves to fulfilling traditional research and teaching functions, but must also assume an active role in order to address the social, ethical, and environmental challenges affecting their immediate and global environment [45, 46].

The studies analyzed demonstrate that universities have an obligation to understand that social responsibility is not an isolated activity or a philanthropic action, but a cross-cutting practice capable of guiding an institution's culture, involving the entire university community, and defining institutional priorities. Therefore, CSR implies a sustained ethical commitment to social equity, human development, and environmental sustainability [47, 48].

Similarly, the authors have emphasized that a socially responsible higher education institution not only trains competent professionals but also compassionate, ethical, and critical citizens. In this respect, social responsibility practices must be integrated into a variety of elements, such as internal management mechanisms, research,

curriculum, and community engagement [49, 50]. This integration allows universities to transform their knowledge into concrete actions and actively contribute to collective well-being.

One of the most noteworthy contributions identified in the literature is that USR strengthens institutional legitimacy and optimizes the relationship between the university and its environment. When higher education institutions promote initiatives to address real social problems such as educational exclusion, inequality, environmental degradation, or violence they improve their reputation and expand the networks of trust that the community has with them [51-53]. This interaction also influences their educational processes, as it allows students to develop skills in real-world contexts, thereby increasing the value of their professional training.

Similarly, the research analyzed reveals that USR requires participatory governance structures, evaluation systems, and clear institutional policies to measure the social impact of the actions undertaken. Universities that have successfully consolidated a culture of social responsibility typically have inter-institutional programs, community consultation mechanisms, and specialized offices, as these serve to maintain sustained coordination of efforts [54,55]. These experiences have demonstrated that social responsibility is not solely dependent on specific events but rather demands long-term planning, monitoring, and commitment.

On the other hand, the findings have also revealed that the development of institutions is considerably dependent on a university's capacity to actively participate in solving the problems of its context. In this scenario, social responsibility acts as a link between social needs and academic knowledge. Strengthening this link by universities not only becomes more relevant but also more resilient to changes in the political, cultural, and economic environment [56].

2.3 The importance of institutional empowerment in university success

Another aspect discovered during the review of the articles was that institutional empowerment is an essential condition for universities to achieve their objectives legitimately and effectively. The reviewed research agrees that this concept refers both to the capacity to exercise authority and to a form of management based on shared decision-making, responsible autonomy, and the strengthening of internal capacities to adapt to constantly changing contexts [57, 58].

Indeed, institutional empowerment manifests itself when universities develop a strong organizational culture, foster the active participation of their stakeholders, and establish mechanisms that promote transparent and informed decision-making. According to various studies, these conditions have strengthened academic leadership, consolidated institutional identity, and optimized governance processes [59, 60]. Consequently, empowered universities not only operate with greater autonomy but also articulate their strategic objectives more clearly.

Furthermore, the authors' review argues that institutional empowerment is not merely a spontaneous attribute; rather, its emergence stems from a continuous process requiring several elements, such as rigorous planning, a political vision, and a genuine commitment to organizational development. This process involves the university community and its authorities, and in turn, demands structural conditions to guarantee participation, meritocracy, and equity in decision-making [61]. When these conditions are met, institutional leaders can strengthen internal cohesion and enhance the institution's capacity to address external challenges.

The studies analyzed also highlight that institutional empowerment directly impacts university success, which is understood as the optimization of academic indicators and the comprehensive strengthening of the educational, social, and research mission. Universities that achieve empowerment build more inclusive regulatory frameworks, develop more flexible structures, and implement more coherent policies, which is reflected in more effective resource management and higher quality services [62, 63].

On the other hand, institutional empowerment allows higher education institutions to assume a more dynamic role in the public sphere. This position offers several advantages because it enhances the university's standing and provides the opportunity to influence the design of public policies and the educational agenda. In this sense, empowered institutions do not depend solely on an external regulatory framework; instead, they develop proposals, act as benchmarks, and generate applied knowledge for social transformation [64].

Additionally, researchers have warned that institutions cannot maintain empowerment if they lack an ethical perspective on institutional power. Exercising autonomy must be oriented toward achieving the common good and based on various principles such as transparency, academic responsibility, and accountability. Respect for these principles ensures that institutional power ceases to be an administrative tool and becomes a means to build sustainability, trust, and legitimacy [65].

V. CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that the main trend and perspective emerging from the scientific literature indexed in Scopus is the need for an integrated and strategic management approach to intellectual capital (IC), institutional empowerment (IE), and USR. Universities that achieve this convergence strengthen their academic performance, increase their organizational resilience, and consolidate their social legitimacy. The integration of these three aspects is not simply a sum of components, but rather produces synergistic effects that enhance the transformative capacity of university entities [6, 42]. Furthermore, universities that combine these pillars foster a more coherent management model, better prepared to face the current challenges of higher education. Bibliometric analysis allowed researchers to contextualize these links within a global trend, whose sustained growth of publications in the last twenty years shows that the interest is not circumstantial, but responds to a profound transformation in academic priorities, which coincides with the findings of [35], who argue that integrative approaches allow for more effective knowledge management in complex and changing scenarios.

Beyond identifying convergence trends, this review proposes a conceptual integration model explaining how intellectual capital and university social responsibility jointly enable institutional empowerment. In this model, intellectual capital provides the internal knowledge base, organizational routines, and relational assets necessary for strategic action, while university social responsibility functions as a governance mechanism that aligns these resources with societal expectations and public value creation. Institutional empowerment emerges not merely as an outcome, but as a mediating capacity that transforms intellectual resources into sustained institutional agency, legitimacy, and adaptive governance. This integrative perspective resolves the fragmentation observed in prior studies by positioning empowerment as the mechanism through which knowledge and responsibility become institutionally actionable.

A critical synthesis of the reviewed literature reveals the coexistence of at least three dominant schools of thought that remain insufficiently integrated. The first adopts a normative perspective, portraying intellectual capital and university social responsibility as ethical imperatives aligned with good governance and institutional legitimacy. A second, predominantly empirical stream focuses on performance-oriented outcomes, examining these constructs through measurable indicators such as rankings, employability rates, or research productivity. A third, more instrumental approach conceptualizes IC and USR as managerial tools aimed at enhancing competitiveness and resource optimization. While each perspective contributes valuable insights, the literature rarely engages in systematic dialogue across these schools, resulting in conceptual fragmentation and theoretical silos that limit cumulative knowledge development.

The review also exposes persistent contradictions and methodological biases that remain largely unaddressed. While normative studies emphasize empowerment as participation and inclusiveness, empirical research often operationalizes it narrowly through governance efficiency or performance metrics, creating conceptual inconsistencies. Moreover, an excessive reliance on quantitative indicators and cross-sectional designs reinforces a short-term, outcome-driven understanding of institutional change, obscuring the dynamic and processual nature of empowerment. As a result, the literature struggles to explain how empowerment actually emerges over time, how conflicts between academic autonomy and external accountability are negotiated, and why similar IC–USR configurations produce divergent institutional outcomes across contexts. These unresolved tensions highlight the need for integrative, longitudinal, and multi-level analytical frameworks capable of capturing institutional complexity.

Regarding how intellectual capital operates in universities as a strategic factor for value creation and academic sustainability, the systematic review acknowledges that intellectual capital is considered a strategic resource of structural value. Institutional knowledge not only functions as an operational tool but also acquires fundamental

importance for institutional development. A variety of authors were identified who agree that relational capital, structural capital, and human capital do not operate in isolation; on the contrary, they reach their maximum potential when managed deliberately and in a coordinated manner. A university capable of recognizing and strengthening these components optimizes its capacity to innovate, make informed decisions, and respond appropriately to societal needs, thus ensuring its academic sustainability through the continuous generation of value [37, 36].

Regarding the role of social responsibility in institutional development within higher education, the results show that CSR has transcended being a complement to institutional management to become a structural axis. It is not enough to implement isolated actions; it is necessary to incorporate CSR into internal policies, curriculum design, and community engagement. A university that acts with social responsibility not only educates competent professionals but also critical and engaged citizens [46, 49]. This practice strengthens relationships with social actors and improves institutional reputation, as Chen and Vanclay [51] argue, becoming an essential driver of institutional development and legitimacy.

Furthermore, the researchers present how institutional empowerment can be interpreted in contexts of transformation and competitiveness, considering it an indispensable condition for universities to develop autonomous, inclusive, and proactive management. The reviewed research agrees that institutional empowerment involves much more than just the exercise of authority, as it refers to an organizational culture capable of distributing leadership, promoting participation, and consolidating institutional identity. The emergence of empowerment is not spontaneous, but rather requires solid structures, a political vision, and a collective commitment [57, 56]. In this way, universities achieve greater internal cohesion and gain a greater capacity to influence the public agenda, crucial elements for differentiation and competitiveness in a constantly changing environment.

This review advances the literature by conceptualizing institutional empowerment not as a static organizational attribute, but as a dynamic institutional process. Empowerment unfolds through iterative interactions between governance structures, strategic knowledge management, and socially responsible decision-making. Rather than being limited to authority delegation, empowerment represents an evolving institutional capability that enables universities to reconfigure resources, negotiate external pressures, and exercise collective agency over time. This dynamic understanding addresses conceptual tensions in the literature, where empowerment has been inconsistently treated as either a managerial practice or an organizational outcome.

Based on the integrative analysis, this study advances several theoretical propositions. First, the strategic alignment of intellectual capital and university social responsibility positively influences institutional empowerment by enhancing governance coherence and decision-making autonomy. Second, institutional empowerment mediates the relationship between integrated knowledge management and institutional performance outcomes, such as resilience, legitimacy, and innovation capacity. Third, the absence of such integration weakens empowerment processes, leading to fragmented governance and reduced societal impact. These propositions open a research agenda that calls for longitudinal, multi-level, and comparative studies to empirically test empowerment as a mediating and dynamic institutional capability.

The integrative findings of this review also have strategic implications that can be operationalized through measurable indicators. The alignment of intellectual capital and university social responsibility can be assessed through governance-related metrics such as the degree of stakeholder participation in decision-making bodies, the formal integration of social responsibility into strategic plans, and the institutionalization of knowledge-sharing mechanisms. Similarly, institutional empowerment may be empirically observed through indicators such as decision-making autonomy across organizational levels, adaptability of governance structures, cross-unit collaboration intensity, and the continuity of socially oriented initiatives over time. These measurable dimensions provide a basis for translating the proposed conceptual framework into evaluative tools that allow universities to monitor empowerment as an evolving institutional capability rather than as a static performance outcome.

Taken together, the empirical and bibliometric evidence allow us to conclude that university management based on the convergence of intellectual capital, institutional strengthening, and university engagement in work (UEWW) is not only desirable but also necessary. This integrated approach provides an effective response to the

challenges of today's world within the university context and overcomes the limitations of fragmented analyses that treat these concepts separately. By adopting a relational perspective, universities can strengthen their capacity for innovation, project themselves more effectively on a global scale, and increase their social relevance. As a direction for future research, it is recommended that empirical studies be conducted to evaluate the impact of this integration on specific indicators, such as graduate employability or educational innovation. Likewise, it would be valuable to develop comparative analyses among underrepresented regions, such as rural Latin America or sub-Saharan Africa, and to design longitudinal studies to observe the evolution of these practices over time. Rather than offering prescriptive recommendations alone, this review contributes a theoretical framework that repositions institutional empowerment as the central mechanism linking intellectual capital and social responsibility within contemporary university governance.

From a critical perspective, the analysis developed in this study highlights both the potential and the limitations of current approaches to university management. While the integration of intellectual capital, social responsibility, and institutional empowerment offers a robust alternative to fragmented and performance-driven models, it also exposes the tension between strategic coherence and contextual diversity. The dominance of instrumental metrics risks oversimplifying empowerment processes, particularly in institutions operating under conditions of structural constraint or limited autonomy. Consequently, the framework proposed here should not be interpreted as a universal prescription, but as an analytical lens that foregrounds institutional agency, contextual sensitivity, and long-term capacity building as central challenges for contemporary higher education governance.

VI. FUTURE RECOMMENDATION

Future research should focus on analyzing differences in intellectual capital, university social responsibility, and institutional empowerment across regions, using long-term studies to identify changes over time. Developing methods that link quantitative data with qualitative perspectives, such as combining bibliometric mapping with case studies, can enhance explanations. Research should also explore how these elements interact with governance reforms, digital transformation, and global sustainability initiatives to better understand the role of universities in social progress. Including underrepresented regions through collaborations, transnational networks, and joint publications will support comparative studies of institutional models and management practices. Finally, efforts should aim to develop policy frameworks that translate academic research into practical decision-making tools, fostering more resilient, inclusive, and socially impactful universities.

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Conceptualization, C.E.C.C.; methodology, R.J.A.A. and R.O.S.; validation, XM.C.V.M., W.L.Ch.C. and H.Q.B.; formal analysis, F.F.G.Q.; investigation, A.P.S.; data curation, R.O.S.; writing—original draft preparation, R.O.S.; writing—review and editing, C.E.C.C., and M.V.V.M.; visualization, R.J.A.A., and H.Q.B.; supervision, F.F.G.Q., and C.E.C.C.; project administration, C.E.C.C.; funding acquisition, A.P.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no potential conflicts of interest or such divergences linked with this research study.

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