



The state of citizen abilities in university students of Chile, Colombia and Mexico

El estado de las habilidades ciudadanas en estudiantes universitarios de Chile, Colombia y México

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ABSTRACT

The educational field proposes to develop the most qualified professionals in all senses, not only academically. This includes the formation of citizenship skills that students must possess in order to train the professionals of the future. To measure civic engagement in university students, three Latin American higher education institutions joined forces. These were the Universidad de los Andes (Colombia), the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (Chile), and the Tecnológico de Monterrey (Mexico); through these joint efforts, a citizenship laboratory was created. This article was descriptive in scope, and the general objective was to describe the state of citizenship skills in university students. The methodology consisted of formulating an instrument, specifically a survey, which integrated 42 items; it was divided into socioemotional, citizenship and global skills. Subsequently, the data were processed using the statistical program R. The most relevant findings are that there is an area of opportunity, especially in terms of their participation in student organizations, in order to exploit their abilities as much as possible.

Keywords: social-emotional learning, social competencies, social behaviour, citizenship education.

JEL classification: I0, I20, I21

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RESUMEN

El ámbito educativo propone desarrollar a los profesionales más capacitados en todos los sentidos, no únicamente de forma académica. Esto incluye la formación de habilidades ciudadanas que los estudiantes deben poseer, para formar a los profesionales del futuro. Para medir el compromiso cívico en los alumnos universitarios, se unieron tres instituciones de educación superior latinoamericanas. Estas fueron la Universidad de los Andes (Colombia), la Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (Chile), y el Tecnológico de Monterrey (México); por medio de estos esfuerzos conjuntos se creó un laboratorio ciudadano. El presente artículo tuvo alcance descriptivo y el objetivo general fue describir el estado de las habilidades ciudadanas en estudiantes universitarios. La metodología consistió en formular un instrumento, específicamente una encuesta, que integraba 42 ítems; fue dividido entre habilidades socioemocionales, ciudadanas y mundiales. Posteriormente, los datos fueron procesados mediante el programa estadístico R. Los hallazgos más relevantes consisten en que hay un área de oportunidad especialmente en cuanto a su participación en organizaciones estudiantiles, para poder explotar sus capacidades lo máximo posible.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje socioemocional, competencias sociales, comportamiento social, educación ciudadana.

Clasificación JEL: I0, I20, I21

INTRODUCTION

The education sector has as one of its objectives to train the professionals of the future in the best possible way, which is not exclusive to knowledge, but is added to a new notion of competencies to be developed (Alamri et al., 2021; Averill & Major, 2020; et al., 2022). The term “competence” is identified by various authors as a construct that integrates knowledge, psychological and manual skills, as well as the system of attitudes, beliefs, and values (Brundiers et al., 2021; Cruz et al., 2020; Oberländer et al., 2020; Silveyra et al., 2021).



Within this framework, a new value has been placed on citizenship skills, which proposes that the most important thing is to develop thinking qualities focused on going beyond classroom teaching (Lash, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021). For example, greater attention is given to producing knowledge and innovative ideas as a bridge between preserving humanity's cultural heritage and the future (Khoo & Jørgensen, 2021; Udvari & Vizi, 2023).

Similarly, citizenship skills are considered a system of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that facilitate harmonious coexistence in social contexts, as well as the ability to perform adequately within them. Therefore, they are not only part of a person's preparation needs for life but also constitute the basis for the correct exercise of citizenship; they allow the realization of socially agreed and valued values and principles (Chiba et al., 2021; Lauricella et al., 2020).

Higher education considers the training of future professionals, given that it is part of the new culture of considering integral well-being as part of modernity. The relationship is congruent insofar as the formation of students committed in different dimensions of their lives leads to conscious and active citizens in the society where they develop. This would allow them to explore their best versions and prepare for the professional world with all possible tools.

According to García and González (2014), the organization of this type of qualities is given from three perspectives: the social relations proper to a culture of peace; social participation and responsibility with democratic development; as well as the tolerant acceptance of the differences between self-identity, otherness and the growing plurality of social contexts. These three are essential for a healthy life and the educational institution where they are developed has a great relevance, being the second place where university students spend more time, after home.

This fact constitutes the reality of the great importance that the development in educational institutions has on the personal life of university students. Simultaneously, there is a risk of learning loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Donnelly & Patrinos, 2022; Harmey & Moss, 2023; Hevia et al., 2022). It is not just about losing information but refers to the loss of skills or knowledge that can occur when someone has a school disruption (Angrist et al., 2021; Clark et al., 2021; Kaffenberger, 2021). Thus, there is also a risk of neglecting the skills necessary for their comprehensive development should these not be properly addressed.

Similarly, Pakapol and Vanichwatanavorachai (2022) propose that the need to promote people's citizenship and socioemotional skills is directly related to the intention of spreading positive values and attitudes in society, with a view to the collective construction of a better world (Harvey et al., 2021; Snauwaert, 2020; Zembylas & Loukaidis, 2021). This means that the education sector has a responsibility to make students aware that they inhabit a multicultural society and consequently develop skills for equity, creative conflict resolution, and awareness of their role as global citizens (Kester, 2023; Pakapol & Vanichwatanavorachai, 2022; Rubin & Cervinkova, 2020).

To this end, three Latin American universities joined forces: Universidad de los Andes, Colombia; Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile; and Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mexico. Together, they submitted a proposal to the Novus Triad Fund, which aims to promote educational innovation in the Latin American context through the creation of a laboratory for citizenship education.

The relevance of this article is based on the specific situation of each of the countries involved. In Colombia, Sánchez and Callejas Callejas (2020) conducted a study aimed at understanding how families took part in university processes from their participation, which allowed them to identify close relationships between performance in the family and academic spheres. Therefore, there must be a correct balance in the way young university students relate to these two spheres of their lives, which are the ones that most help their formation, without ignoring that there are areas of opportunity between the union of these spheres.

On the other hand, regarding the relationship with the democratic system, in Mexico there is evidence that high school students do not identify the basic characteristics that make up democracy. There is, in turn, a predominance of studies dedicated to teachers' beliefs and opinions; as towards a lesser emphasis on the educational practices themselves and the need to strengthen citizenship education (Dyrness, 2021; Quintana-Susarte, 2022). Considering that this student body is approximately 15 years old, and the legal voting age in Mexico is 18, it is worrying that there is a lack of knowledge about issues that make up their citizenship, and decision-making may be affected due to a lack of information.

A study conducted by Godoy et al. (2022) at the University of Santiago de Chile was based on the student curriculum to find the objectives of global citizenship of students. As part of the main findings, it was found that the curricular bases do not explicitly and structurally understand global citizenship education, so its attention is

discretionary and subject to the performance of the faculty (Godoy et al., 2022). Nevertheless, it is important to incorporate topics focused on global citizenship to educate students in new contexts aimed at globalization and modernization. These issues can be addressed through citizenship competencies, which involve accompanying the process of peaceful, responsible participation; critical and respectful insertion in contexts of diversity; as well as the transcendence of such culture in terms of community, local, and national boundaries so that a true citizen of the world is formed (González-Valencia et al., 2020; Sant et al., 2022).

The present article aims to unveil the state of citizenship skills in university students, specifically by studying their sense of community. This involves family, university, social responsibility, and/or solidarity. Likewise, the construction of active and participatory citizenship at local, national, and global levels. In order for young university students to develop their full capacity and exploit their human talent, it is necessary to understand how developed these skills are.

METHODOLOGY

In order to carry out this text, mixed research was conducted. From the quantitative part, an instrument was created that included 42 items on a Likert scale, in other words, a survey, which collected pertinent information about the three dimensions considered: Socioemotional Skills, Sense of Community, and Global Citizenship. This was done to employ statistics, with the goal of constructing results that were applicable to reality, and its construction was supported by similar and previous studies (Ariza et al., 2021; Coopmans et al., 2020; Evagorou et al., 2023).

Responses were completely anonymous to respect ethical principles; but descriptive statistics collected data about the age, gender, and university belonging to the respondents, as will be presented below. On the other hand, for the elaboration of the statements, the qualitative part was considered, which consisted of an exhaustive literature review about the needs, feelings, and specific realities of the students; in that sense, a cross-sectional study with correlational scope was carried out to find a relationship between the different variables considered.

The study's objective was to describe the state of citizenship skills in university students, for which a research hypothesis was first defined. This hypothesis was: The students of the participating universities need to strengthen their citizenship skills for the well-being of society. On the other hand, the null hypothesis was: The students of the participating universities do not need to reinforce their citizenship skills for the welfare of society.

The profile of the participants was chosen with a purposive sample by convenience, as well as non-probabilistic, under a specific quality, that of being a university student of one of the three participating universities. A sample of 400 students was foreseen, of which 399 answered the survey. The data obtained were incorporated into the R statistical software to perform the descriptive statistics of the respondents, as well as to search for the correlation between the items considered by means of the Chi-square statistic of the same quantitative program.

RESULTS

As mentioned, the survey consisted of 42 items; however, for the purposes of this article, the most relevant items were selected based on the literature and the variables encompassing the three dimensions. The statements that represent these dimensions and that were considered in the results were the following: "I look for moments to take care of my emotional well-being"; "I feel part of a family and/or friends network that I trust"; "I feel part of the university community"; "I participate in collectives, student organizations or other similar groups at my university"; "I consider that world problems affect me and are also my responsibility"; and "To participate through institutionality (voting, militancy, politics, etc.) to change something that I believe is unjust or detrimental to the common good for me is...".

For the presentation of the results, we went on to divide, according to descriptive statistics, to give information about the participants. They were then presented by gender to consider the variation in responses under this criterion. The data about the descriptive statistics on the profile of the participants can be seen in the following table:

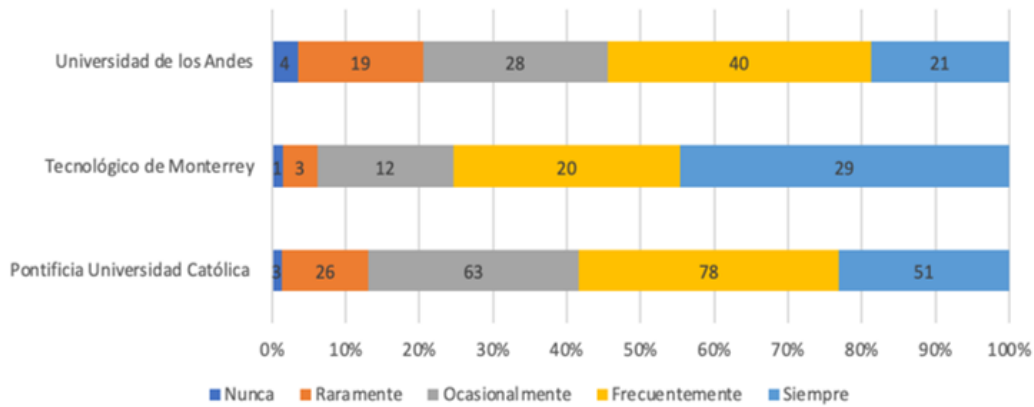
Table 1.
Descriptive statistics of the participants

Variable	Category	Students (n=399)	
		No. of responses	Representation
Age	Between 16 and 18	47	12%
	Between 19 and 21	244	61%
	Between 22 and 24	91	23%
	More than 25 years	17	4%
Gender	Female	225	56%
	Male	170	43%
	Another	4	1%
University	Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile	221	55%
	Universidad de los Andes	112	28%
	Tecnológico de Monterrey	66	17%

Source: own elaboration.

Description by University

Figure 1.
Regularity with which college students seek moments to take care of their emotional well-being



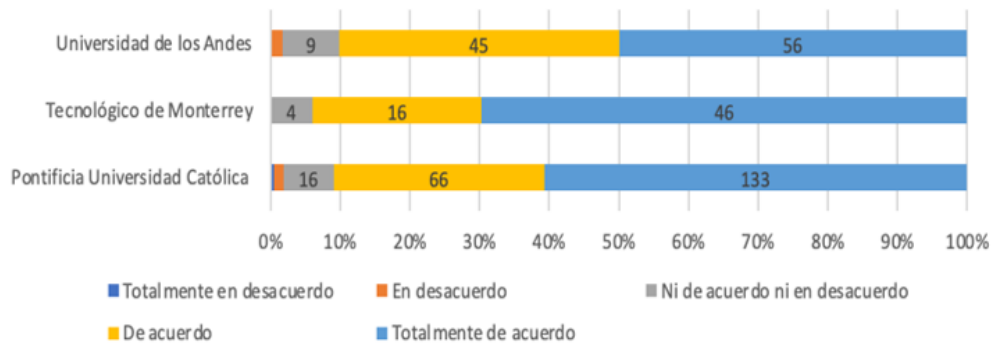
Source: prepared by the Citizen Laboratory of the Novus Triad Fund.

Note: the figure appears in its original language.

According to the above graph, at the Universidad de los Andes, 4% answered “Never”, but the predominant response at this university was “Frequently” (34%). At Tecnológico de Monterrey, more than 60% of the respondents answered “Always”, while at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, the answers were divided between “Occasionally” and “Frequently”.

Ideally, students would dedicate greater efforts to the preservation of their well-being, so it is positive that the majority of respondents identified with the statements “Occasionally”, “Frequently” and “Always”. However, these results should be contextualized according to the sample size in order to achieve a better understanding of them.

Figure 2.
Intensity with which students feel part of family and/or friend networks they trust

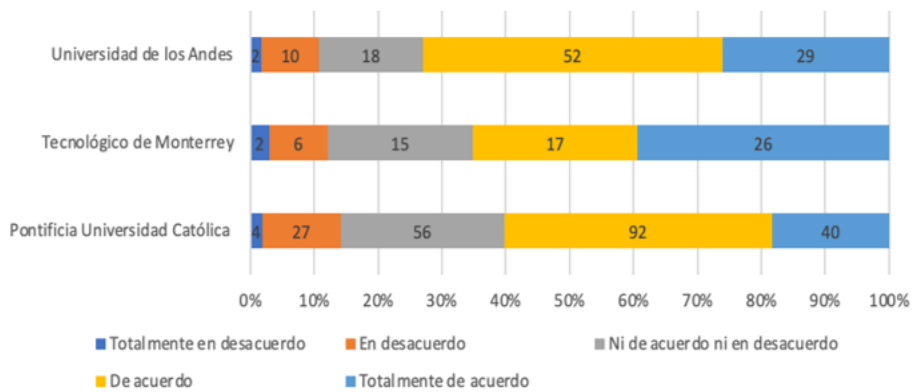


Source: prepared by the Citizen Laboratory of the Novus Triad Fund.

Note: the figure appears in its original language.

70% of the students at Tecnológico de Monterrey responded that they “Totally agree” as to whether they feel part of these networks; responses that are very fruitful regarding their sense of belonging, confidence, and comfort. In the case of Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 60% of the students also answered “Totally agree”, and 30% of them answered “Agree”, which is equally positive. In the case of Universidad de los Andes, 50% “Totally agree” ,and 30% “Agree”. In general terms, these results were overwhelmingly positive.

Figure 3.
Intensity in which students feel part of the university community



Source: Novus Tríaada Fund citizen laboratory.

Note: the figure appears in its original language.

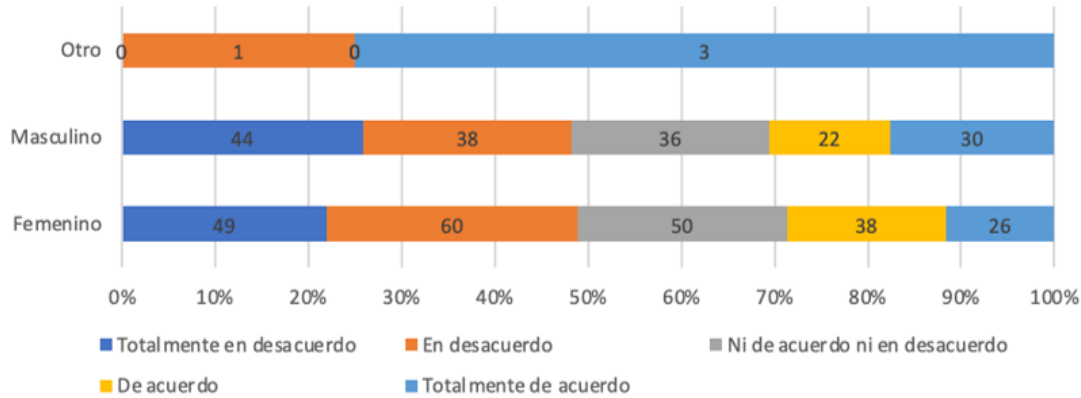
Most respondents who answered “Agree” were from the Universidad de los Andes, with approximately 43%. Those who indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed were from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. Regarding the Tecnológico de Monterrey, 40% of its students responded “Totally agree”. Although the results were positive, they were more divided compared to graph 2, which measured their membership in family and friendship networks. In this case, membership in the university community did have “Strongly disagree” responses in all three universities, although these percentages were extremely low and not representative. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the percentage who do not feel part of the institution where they develop.

Description by gender

In the male case, most respondents answered that they “Strongly Disagree” with the statement (26%), so those who identify with that gender do not participate in student groups or similar. On the other hand, those who identify with the female gender responded, 27%, that they “Disagree”. The responses were negative, but in the male gender it was more categorical; on the other hand, in the “other” gender “Totally agree” predominated with 75%.

Figure 4.

Intensity in which students participate in collectives, student organizations, or other similar groups at the university to which they belong

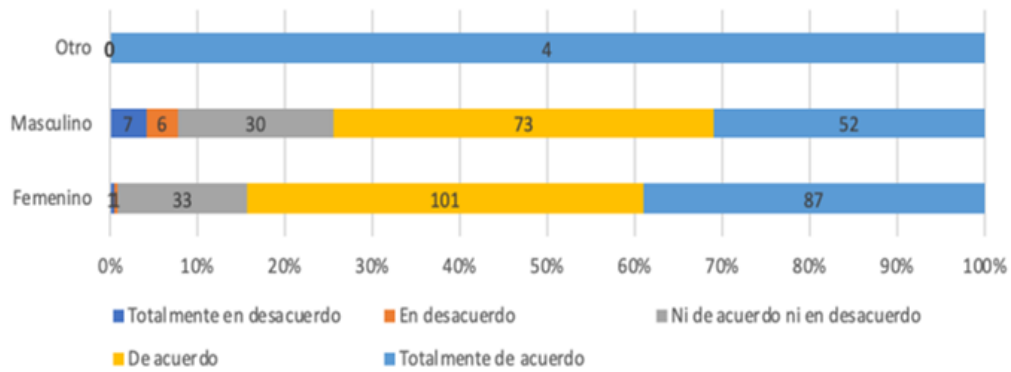


Source: prepared by the Novus Triad Fund citizen laboratory.

Note: the figure appears in its original language.

Figure 5.

Intensity with which students feel that global issues affect them and are their responsibility



Source: Novus Tríaada Fund citizen laboratory.

Note: the figure appears in its original language.

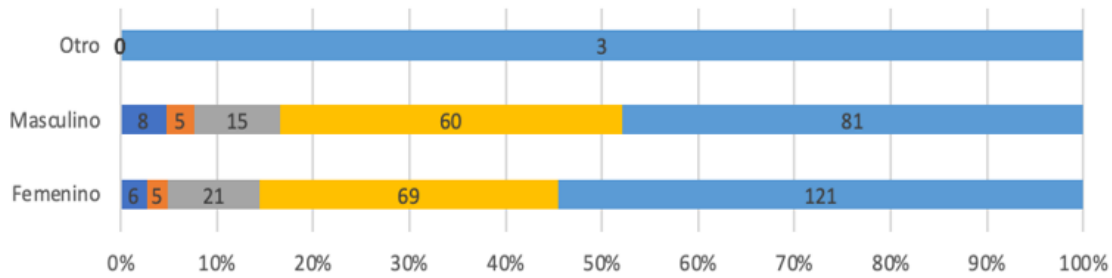
100% of respondents of the “Other” gender agreed “Strongly agree”. Regarding the female gender, the most voted response was “Agree”, with 45%, although there were also responses of “Totally agree” (39%). In the male case, with 52%, the most repeated response was “Agree”, although, going to the other extreme, there were also responses of “Strongly disagree” (5%). This last finding is interesting since, as was found in the literature review, although the percentage is low, to consider oneself oblivious to global issues indicates a lack of awareness of the effects of one’s own actions on the environment and vice versa, which can have a negative impact, without considering the repercussions.

Of the “Other” gender, all considered it “Very important”. In the case of the female gender, 55% voted “Very important”; 30% that it is “Important”; 10% that it is “Moderately important” and 5% considered it “Not very important” and “Not at all important”. What was found in the male gender is that 48% consider it “Very important”; 35% that it is “Important”, 10% that it is “Moderately important”; 2% that it is “Not very important” and the remaining 5% that it is “Not at all important”.

These are relevant findings based on figure 6, given that, despite being located at the “very important” end of the scale, there are also individuals who do not consider it as such. This fact suggests that not all respondents are convinced of the importance of institutionality for the common good, a disturbing situation in terms of global citizenship. This would be a primary aspect to take up again later; for now, as observed in the bibliographic review, up to this moment, the educational sector has not considered the incorporation of citizenship as a mandatory topic, but rather it is taken as a suggestion.

Figure 6.

Importance given by university students to participate through the institutional framework to change something they to be unjust for the common good



Source: Novus Tríada Fund citizen laboratory.

Note: the figure appears in its original language.

DISCUSSION

Given that the education sector has the task of considering the integral well-being of all its students, it is necessary that higher institutions devote efforts to study the circumstances in which their students find themselves (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020; Ruggeri et al., 2020). Therefore, monitoring the citizenship skills they possess is pertinent to know which areas need to be reinforced so that these are addressed in the classroom without double discourses and with an adequate conception of them (Pais & Costa, 2020). In the Latin American case and specifically in the countries studied, the bibliography reflected that there were opportunities for reinforcement, but they had not gone into depth about which ones (Kleba & Reina-Rozo, 2021).

To answer the research question: What are citizenship skills like in the students of the participating universities? The results of the citizen laboratory of the Novus Triad Fund were taken up, which proposes to use three dimensions to determine what integrates the sense of citizenship in university students. In trying to explain these qualities in the participating universities, it was found that there is an important sense of what makes up citizenship, but it is not entirely developed. Likewise, there are areas of opportunity that were presented in the results.

Regarding the university of origin, the most relevant result was the intensity with which students feel part of the university community since there were resounding refusals in all three institutions. It should be emphasized that this result was not a majority; however, there were overwhelmingly positive responses to a similar question about the intensity with which students feel part of family or friendship networks. This implies that students have divided opinions about their university organizations, but they are personally clear about where they are a part. As the literature provided, there must be a balance between feelings of comfort at home and at the university, so at all three universities, this is an issue for improvement for students to strengthen their sense of belonging (Ahn & Davis, 2023; Pedler et al., 2022).

Concerning gender, one result that stood out among those recorded was the intensity with which students participate in collectives, student organizations, or similar groups at their university of origin. This was relevant when contrasted with the fact that there is interest in taking action in collectives, but only when these are civil society and/or non-governmental. This was verified in one of the correlations presented. In this case, when the groups are university groups, the majority of the male gender responded that they totally disagree with participating in these organizations. Similarly, as for the female gender, they answered that they disagreed, which implies that there is a resistance of the university students studied to be members of student groups. This can also be related to the above, that they do not have a reinforced sense of belonging in their educational institutions due to the fact that they do not feel a connection with these university collectives.

Certainly, there is a space for invigorating citizenship skills in the respondents, and it can be assumed that the system of causes that stops their talent is in the universities where they develop. This is important because they are three different higher institutions, but the results presented reflect that there are possibilities to improve university membership and also citizenship skills. Likewise, this paper is relevant for application in higher institutions and to discover what weaknesses they present, but there is a need to consolidate a sense of belonging in the university community and, subsequently, to encourage students to participate in their associations (Ahmadi, 2023; de Bie, 2022).

Therefore, the results should not be generalized to the rest of Latin America; future lines of research could consider the rest of the countries in the same region. By doing so, a more in-depth comparative study could be carried out, and it would be possible to find which quality should be reinforced the most in the specific case of each country. In addition, creating a citizen laboratory jointly among different countries allows the methodology used to be replicated, being a milestone in discovering what university students in each country need to take full advantage of their capabilities.

In short, the research hypothesis is reinforced because the results achieved and their discussion in comparison with the literature consulted allows affirming that the students of the participating universities need to reinforce their citizenship skills for the welfare of society. In addition, there is a need for a better conceptualization of citizenship skills, their relationship with the curriculum, and the potential to promote well-being and a sense of belonging. These aids favor the fulfillment of the mission of the modern university, social development, and the preparation of future generations of professionals to build a better world.

CONCLUSIONS

Education for the exercise of ethical citizenship committed to social development should be based on preparing individuals and groups to feel part of diverse communities from the earliest ages. Based on the objectives that are common to humanity, the overcoming of present and future challenges, and an increasingly marked orientation towards diversity, it is important to build spaces to develop these skills.

In addition to the skills for active participation, it is necessary to educate so that people can establish emotionally responsible relationships in all spheres of life. In this way, we invest in the future of possible world citizenship from the micro and macro contexts; hence, universities should be committed to these goals, both in their classrooms and university processes and in their relations with the society in which they are located.

The study concluded that it is necessary to achieve greater clarity with respect to the needs of citizenship education, its projection in an integrated curriculum, and greater awareness of the relevance of these skills for professionals in today's society. In addition, there is a need to reinforce strategies aimed at promoting a sense of belonging to groups and communities on the part of university students since, in addition to contributing to their integral development, it constitutes an important basis for the development of professional competencies and integration into the world of work.

In the future, complex mixed studies are recommended that favor the construction of a clearer image of the systems of needs in university education, their association with citizenship skills, and the construction of practical experiences. The latter represents the main line of research, as it will allow the transformation of contexts; hence, future research that combines diagnosis and intervention from interdisciplinary perspectives and whose core is the educational agents themselves, hand in hand with their participation, is recommended.

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