

Training University Students in Social Responsibility. A Qualitative Study on a Practicum of a Social Subject

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Abstract

The subject "Social Responsibility" is designed to instil a commitment to Sustainable Development Goals among future professionals. The social practicum of the subject consists of 50 hours of service at associations attending the most vulnerable. The aim of this study is to analyse the meaning of this practicum on the lives of alumni who are now working professions. A phenomenological qualitative study was conducted with the participation of 20 people who met the inclusion criteria. The sample was collected using convenience and snowball sampling. The average age was 32 and 60% of the participants were women. Data analysis was carried out in line with Giorgi's (1997) proposal and according to COREQ (2007) guidelines to ensure the quality of the study. The participants indicated that the practicum was a very significant experience in their lives, in which they discovered values such as empathy, justice and respect. They also developed greater social awareness, especially their sensitivity towards the vulnerable or those with disabilities, while also helping them to be more open-minded towards other realities and, in general, to mature. Finally, the participants noted that they learned to regard their profession as a service to society.

Keywords

Sustainable development goals, social responsibility, higher education, social subject, qualitative research

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Formar Universitarios/as Socialmente Responsables. Un estudio Cualitativo sobre el Prácticum de una Asignatura Social

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Resumen

La asignatura “Responsabilidad Social” busca formar futuros profesionales comprometidos con los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible. El prácticum de esta asignatura consiste en 50 horas de servicio en asociaciones que atienden a personas en riesgo de exclusión social. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar el significado de este prácticum en la vida de los universitarios egresados que se encuentran ya desempeñando su profesión. Se realizó un estudio cualitativo fenomenológico en el que participaron 20 personas que cumplían los criterios de inclusión. Se accedió a la muestra por propósito y por bola de nieve. La edad media fue 32 años y el 60% de los participantes fueron mujeres. Se realizó el análisis de datos siguiendo la propuesta de Giorgi (1997) y siguiendo la guía COREQ (2007) para garantizar la calidad del estudio. Los participantes expresaron que este prácticum fue un momento muy significativo en su vida en el que descubrieron valores como la empatía, la justicia, y el respeto. Consolidaron su conciencia social, especialmente la sensibilidad hacia personas con discapacidad o con riesgo de exclusión social. Les ayudó a tener una mentalidad más abierta a otras realidades y, en general, a madurar. Afirman, por último, que empezaron a ver la profesión como un servicio a la sociedad.

Palabras clave

Objetivos de desarrollo sostenible, responsabilidad social, educación superior, asignatura social, investigación cualitativa

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Events such as the Covid 19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and migration crises highlight the fragility of our societies. The United Nations General Assembly in 2015 established 17 global goals to achieve a better and more sustainable future for both developed and developing countries (United Nations, 2015). These goals will not be achieved without the commitment of governments, the private sector and civil society. In this regard, the contribution of education is expected to be significant (UNESCO, 2016). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) require a change in the way of thinking of social actors of the present and, above all, of future generations. This change in thinking will lead to an improvement in attitudes towards reality and in social behaviours. It is not only necessary for compulsory education to assume this commitment, but also for higher education, whose role in the progress of societies is key.

The aim of all education is to make the human being more human in the broadest sense of the term: a person who unfolds all their potential and brings into play their capacities. The University should be oriented towards this aim and provide students with the means to achieve it.

The education provided by the University must be comprehensive and integrating, that is to say, it must prepare professionals with high technical and academic qualifications and, at the same time, people of integrity and committed to others and to their environment.

What is Social Responsibility at University Level?

As a part of this comprehensive education, we understand social responsibility as a formative objective that goes beyond voluntary social action or altruistic help to others. It is based on the recognition of others as valuable beings, with an inalienable ontological dignity, regardless of their context.

García-Ramos et al. (2016) define the *construct* of University Student Social Responsibility, hereinafter RSEU, as the integration of attitudes and knowledge in real-life situations in commitment to others based on the conviction that one's actions have a positive or negative impact on the world around them.

A socially responsible university student is one who has been able to make a personal discovery of values; who is socially aware, that is, is aware of the impact of their action on their social environment (De Dios, 2018); who values commitment to others; and who considers their profession as a vocation of service to society. Thus, it is necessary to promote skills such as empathy, critical spirit, rigorous discernment, creativity to provide solutions, and teamwork to be able to implement them.

Insofar as the university student has an internalised understanding of the human being; recognising the value of the individual beyond mere personal circumstances, free of any discrimination on the basis of race, gender, age, origin, physical or psychological condition, culture or beliefs, they will become a socially responsible professional. In this way, the University can make a concrete contribution to the achievement of SDG 10: reducing inequalities.

In Latin America (Martínez-Arroyo, 2021), we discover a long tradition in the social training of university students from the perspective of education for global citizenship (Arellano-Vaca, 2022). The websites of prestigious universities such as Oxford, Sorbonne, Yale, Harvard, the Munich Institute of Technology show concern for the transfer of knowledge to society, for social rights and environmental sustainability, however, they do not show evidence that the focus of their social concern is on the most disadvantaged communities. Catholic universities expressly state their commitment to the disadvantaged in society and present initiatives that seek to train their students in social justice. Some notable institutions in this area are Georgetown University and Notre Dame University. In Spain, Deusto University and the CEU San Pablo University offer students various national and international volunteering experiences, cooperation programs and even initiatives for social transformation from the academic sphere.

The Subject of Social Responsibility and Social Practicum

The Universidad Francisco de Vitoria (Madrid, Spain), inspired by its humanist ideology, opted since its foundation (1993) for a social subject. Every degree program at the university includes this compulsory cross-cutting course designed to instill in students fundamental values such as justice and social responsibility. 30 years after the introduction of the subject, excellent results in internal quality assessments and excellent evaluations by alumni and alumni recruiters have led to the consolidation of this subject in all degree programs. The course accounts for 6 ECTS credits (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) and consists of a theoretical module and a practical module (practicum). The course offers an analysis of the relation between society and solidarity, exploring theme such as human dignity, responsibility, human law and the common good, respect for difference, immigration, tolerance, etc. with a focus on the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Students also have an opportunity for personal growth through first-person engagement in social projects through a social action practicum integrated into the course. This practicum consists of 50 hours of work over the academic year working with an NPO attending to the needs of the most vulnerable in our society, including those with disabilities, at-risk children and young people, the elderly, hospital patients, prison inmates, the unemployed, immigrants or refugees, the homeless, etc. (De la Rosa et al., 2022).

The objective of this practicum is to facilitate the student's personal experience of encountering others who live in realities different from their own, and that this moves them to consider their profession as a means of contributing to the common good. The proposal made to them when they encounter these realities, is to experience first-hand the possibility to transform their immediate environment, by giving part of their time and themselves (Giménez et al., 2020). The practicum is thus closely associated with the notion of learning/service, providing social content to the students' academic studies (Escofet & Rubio, 2017).

Background

There have been several studies measuring university students' levels of social responsibility using quantitative methodologies (Fonseca et al., 2019; Arango-Tobón et al., 2014; Bustamante

& Navarro, 2007; Navarro et al., 2010). Ayala-Rodriguez et al. (2019) qualitatively analysed students' representations of university social responsibility. It should be stressed that these studies were not associated to any particular course or social activity. Thus far, we have not found any qualitative studies that analyse the practicum experience of a curricular social subject, such as Social Responsibility. An exhaustive search on the *Web of Sciences* (WOS) and *Scopus* databases was carried out in order to find such studies (1 June to 20 June 2022), with no results found.

However, to enrich this research, we will consider qualitative studies on Social Work practices and qualitative studies on the experience of student volunteers with disadvantaged groups. Given that both are similar experiences to ours and can shed light on the results.

Studies on Social Work practices value cultural humility as an essential skill for students to mitigate the power imbalance between those who help and those who are helped (Zhu et al., 2023). They show the importance of managing prejudice and handling emotional responses when living with disadvantaged groups (López-Humphreys et al., 2023). Interaction with these populations lead students not only to greater awareness of inequality, but also to a greater commitment (Larson & Allen, 2006).

Studies on the experience of university volunteers have shown that volunteering helps them improve their active listening skills (Finkelstein & Orr, 2021) and, in general, their communication skills (Parravicini et al., 2021). Growing close to people who are part of a vulnerable group increases their empathy (Finkelstein & Orr, 2021; Primavera, 2014). Volunteering also often involves overcoming difficulties and hard times that they must learn to manage (MacNeela, & Gannon, 2014; Kilgo et al. 2015). Developing these life skills helps them feel more purposeful (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020) and more self-confident (Kilgo et al. 2015; Parravicini et al., 2021). All this contributes to it being a rewarding experience (MacNeela, & Gannon, 2014; Parravicini et al., 2021). The volunteering experience generates in the student a greater sensibility towards social issues such as poverty, violence or injustice (Sydnor et al., 2014) and a deeper sense of responsibility (Astin & Sax, 1998). The positive effects of volunteering on the university student can last at least 5 years (Sax et al., 1999).

This Study

This study is a continuation of two previous studies. In 2009, De la Calle-Maldonado measured the impact of a Social Responsibility course through a quasi-experimental study that found statistically significant differences among students after taking the course. Reig-Aleixandre et al. (2022) studied the impact of this course on those who had taken it years before and were now working professionals. The results found significant differences in favour of those who took the course both in terms of general social responsibility and in their perception of values and their understanding of their profession as a service. However, the quantitative results did not shed sufficient light on the impact of the course on the students, nor did they clarify the meaning of the experience in the students' lives. A qualitative approach is required to analyse the overall impact of the course.

Our aim is to describe the experience of the social practicum that make up the subject Social Responsibility, in the graduate who is currently a professional. The research question we intend

to answer is: What role do social practices play in the education for social responsibility at university?

The novelty of this study lies in the uniqueness of this practicum linked to a subject whose purpose is to promote social responsibility. Degrees centred around Social Work also have traineeships or field work, however, they do not have the same aim as this practicum as they only affect students who already have a vocation for social service. There are studies that analyse the methodology, implementation, or evaluation of these practicums. The difference lies in the fact that the subject Social Responsibility and its practicum are designed for university students of any degree. Their aim is to promote social awareness regardless of their future profession.

Its relevance lies in the need to strengthen the responsibility of each professional towards society, in the historical context in which we find ourselves.

Method

A phenomenological qualitative study was conducted, designed for 26 participants in 20 personal interviews and a 6-person focus group. The unstructured, in-depth interviews were prepared with a series of initial questions: “Did the social action practicum favour the discovery of personal values?”; “Did it help you become more socially aware?”; “Did it encourage you to regard your profession as service?”; “Did the practicum contribute to you becoming a socially responsible professional?”. A focus group was also conducted because of the wealth of information this type of interactive activity can provide (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005).

The inclusion criteria (Vallés, 2009) for these participants were: 1. To be a UFV alumni who took the Social Responsibility course. 2. To have done the social action practicum of this course. 3. To be currently working. 4. To have been working for at least two years. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling; that is, those who due to geographical proximity were able to attend the interview in person. We also used snowball sampling, as some participants in turn put us in contact with other participants. The participants of the *focus group* were selected based on their perceived ability to interact and communicate relevant information (Carpenter, 2008). Participants were contacted by email. The interviews were conducted in cafeterias offering a quiet and private atmosphere. The *focus group* was conducted online using the Zoom application. The interviews had an average duration of 40 minutes. The *focus group* lasted approximately 75 minutes.

Only 16 people could be interviewed, 3 were unable to participate for personal reasons, 1 due to illness. The *focus group* consisted of only 4 people, as 1 person was unable to attend for personal reasons and 1 due to technical reasons. Although it was not possible to conduct the study with the intended number of participants (the final sample consisted of only 20 people), but the study continued nevertheless given that, according to Turner-Bowker et al. (2018), some 92% of relevant information is collected by the fifteenth interview. More importantly, data saturation was achieved by the 15th participant although a one further interview was conducted as planned. The average age of the participants was 32, meaning that an average of 12 years had passed since the participants took the Social Responsibility course. Twelve of the participants were women (60%) and the participants had studied 10 different degree programs.

In their practicum, five attended at-risk children or adolescents, four worked with the homeless, four with persons with some form of disability, four with the elderly, one with a person having an illness, and one with a person in drug rehabilitation (Table 1). This diversity ensured the heterogeneity of the sample, considered an important requirement of the research.

Table 1
Sociodemographic Data of the Participants

Person	Mode	Gender	Age	Area of Study	Current work	Place of Social Practicum
1	Interview	F	24	Journalism	News agency	At-risk children
2	Interview	F	26	Journalism	Communications agency	People with intellectual disabilities
3	Interview	F	30	Education	Psycho-pedagogical clinic	Accompaniment of patients
4	Interview	M	26	Fine Arts	Company, animation studio	People with intellectual disabilities
5	Interview	M	43	Education	School teacher	Homeless people
6	Interview	M	31	Design	Freelance designer	Homeless people
7	Interview	M	35	Law + BA	Multinational automaker	At-risk adolescents
8	Interview	F	32	Law + BA	University professor	People with intellectual and physical disabilities
9	Interview	F	24	Marketing	Marketing firm	At-risk children
10	Interview	F	24	Architecture	Architecture studio	The elderly
11	Interview	F	41	Law	Administrator in a large company	The elderly
12	Interview	M	24	Journalism	Charity organisation	People in drug rehabilitation
13	Interview	F	25	Journalism	Communications agency	At-risk children
14	Interview	F	37	Journalism + Humanities	UNICEF	Homeless people
15	Interview	M	27	Audio-visual Comm.	Administrator in a large company	Homeless people
16	Interview	M	30	Audio-visual Comm.	Cinema scriptwriter	People with intellectual disabilities
17	F. Group	F	35	Law	University professor	At-risk children
18	F. Group	F	36	Education	School teacher	At-risk adolescents
19	F. Group	F	42	Law	Administrator in a large company	The elderly
20	F. Group	M	40	Business Administration	Professional in a company	The elderly

The interviews were conducted by NRA, professor of the Social Responsibility course who was not the professor of any of the participants. At the start of the interview, the professor informed the participants of the aims of the study, without mentioning that she was a professor (unless directly asked) to prevent any conditioning of the responses of interviewees. Audio recordings were made of both the interviews and the *focus group*. sessions. The interviewer

also took fieldnotes on non-verbal aspects of the interviews. After the transcription of the recordings, these were sent to the interviewees for approval.

The data was analysed following the recommendations of Giorgi (1997), dividing the data processing into five phases: 1) Collection; 2) Literal transcription of the interviews and reading; 3) Breakdown of elements to identify units of meaning; 4) Organisation and enumeration using a coding process; and 5) Synthesis and summary of the data. There were no predetermined codes or categories prior to the analysis; an inductive process was followed (Brantlinger, 2005). The transcripts were given an initial reading to catch their overall meaning. A second, closer reading identified the units of meaning within each interview. These were labelled and compared with those from other transcriptions. Once the coding process was complete, the units were grouped into common meanings (sub-categories) which were in turn grouped (categories) (Table 2). The analysis was conducted by three researchers. ATLAS.ti software was used for the coding process.

Table 2
Summary of the Coding Matrix

Some units of meaning	Sub-categories	Categories
“Give the best of oneself”	Excellence	Discovery of personal values
“See injustice, value justice”	Justicia	
“A person like you”	Respect	
“Think of others”	Generosity	
“It could be me”	Empathy	Social awareness
“You’re more committed”	Commitment	
“Include them in my life”	Inclusion of disability	
“Need to transcend the self	Overcoming selfishness	
“Impatience makes us blind to others	Patience	
“I was born for this”	Profession as vocation	Professionalism
“It’s my way of contributing”	Profession as service	
“Person-focussed”		
“Helps to relativise your problems”	Maturity	General
“You value things you’ve overlooked”		
“You see things differently”	Open-mindedness	
“Rewarding experiences”	Satisfactory experience	
“You have to leave your comfort zone”	Effort	
“I see how I’ve grown”	Perception over time	
“You’ve made a contribution”	Obligation	

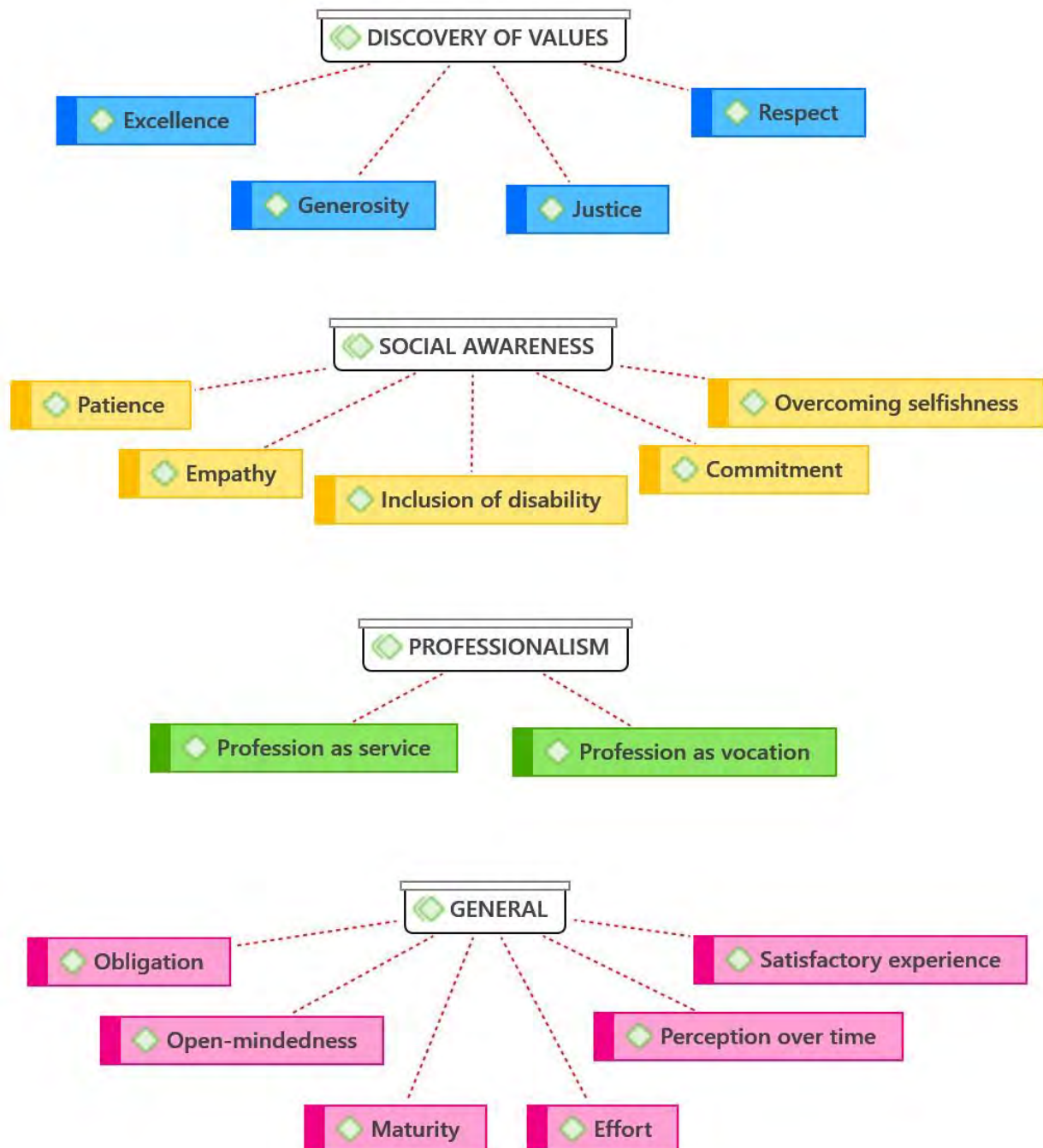
This study has been guided by Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies (COREQ-guide) (Tong et al., 2007), outlining 32 points to be taken into consideration in the conduct of qualitative research, many of which have been explained above. The study included multidisciplinary triangulation of researchers and verification by participants to ensure the credibility and transferability of the results with a detailed description of the research

methodology. Regarding research reflexivity, both NRA and CDC were professors of the course Social Responsibility, and it was important for a third researcher, JMGR, not a professor of the course, to participate in the analysis process.

Results

The results of the data analysis can be grouped into four broad categories and various subcategories.

Figure 1
Organisation of Categories and Subcategories by Atlas ti



Discovery of Personal Values

The participants spoke of the practicum as a fundamental experience in discovering certain values, referring specifically to excellence, justice, respect and generosity. Excellence refers to “... giving the best of yourself” (Participant 20). Six participants made mention of the need for *justice*. The course allowed them to see the realities of exclusion first-hand: “You think superficially that life is fair but with this course I discovered that it’s not so. When you see the situation: those children are born into, with limited possibilities, you see the injustice”

(Participant 9); "...the worst thing is the injustice. I ask myself why others don't have the opportunities that I have had" (Participant 5). The participants also emphasised the need for *Respect*, with one remarking on how respect is developed by approaching others without prejudice: "They are another person, just like you, with problems and needs just like yours. Then you realise that everyone always deserves respect. You cannot engage with someone without respect" (Participant 11). The value of *generosity* was mentioned five times. One of the participants remarked on the importance of this value: "Nor only focussing on your own goals. You must think of and be aware of others" (Participant 1). Another noted that the course helped them internalise this value: "The course puts you in a situation where you have to put other people first instead of thinking of yourself, your work, your exam, your breaktime. I think that is really valuable" (Participant 3). It helped them in the growth of their values: "Such hard life situations put you in front of what is important: relationships, helping each other, empathising" (Participant 2); "I think my values have been strengthened by seeing other volunteers giving without asking for anything in return" (Participant 16).

Social Awareness

The participants also spoke of empathy and commitment as ethical values and therefore may coincide in two different categories. During the interviews, participants also referred to impatience and selfishness as two elements which are contrary or inhibit social awareness. We will analyse each of these codes. Six comments were made referring to *Empathy*. Participants remarked on the importance of putting oneself in the place of another, who may live in entirely different circumstances. There were twelve comments about *commitment*, referring to how personal commitment is an essential part of social responsibility. The majority commented that they try to be committed and engaged with those around them and, as far as possible, to society more generally. Four participants explicitly stated how the course in Social Responsibility spurred their social commitment: "I think the course made me more socially committed. Specifically, I've become more aware of the needs of others" (Participant 13). Further, one commented "The course helps you relate better to the real world and to others. (...) Unconsciously, you become more sensitive and more committed" (Participant 16). As can be seen, these three comments refer to greater sensitivity and social awareness, leading to greater social engagement and commitment. The issue *inclusion of disability* appears frequently, with four participants making specific reference to the course in terms of inclusions. One explained that the course helped to overcome prejudices towards this collective: "The experience also helped me to overcome my prejudices and to become more inclusive. Currently, I don't work with anyone with disabilities, but should that ever happen I think I will treat them like everyone else and with respect" (Participant 4). Many spoke of how they experienced a change in their way of dealing with people with disabilities. The interviews also shed light on aspects which contradict or at least condition social awareness. Five participants reflected on how *impatience* inhibits our social awareness. "The principal enemy of social awareness is the quick pace of life, without time to reflect on things. We become isolated from real life" (Participant 12). Related to this theme, some mentioned how *selfishness* weakens our social awareness. Six references were found for this code, with one making the following observation: "Sometimes

we live enclosed in our own selves, in my likes and dislikes in my own needs. We consume our energy in this way without thinking about others” (Participant 12).

Meaning of Profession

Three participants referred to *Profession as vocation*. “I am fulfilled by my work. In my case it’s a vocation. Not only a way to make money. I have a job I enjoy and that I consider a mission. An educational mission” (Participant 8). Regarding *Profession as service*, there were comments for each interview as participants were specifically asked about this aspect. Thirteen participants not only agreed but explained their motivations. Half agreed with the notion of *Profession as service* due to the nature of the work itself: “...I produce audio-visual content. I am contributing to the culture” (Participant 4). Others referred to the meaning they give to their work: “I wouldn’t want to go to work only to make money. In the end you’d burnout, get depressed” (Participant 9). Two participants viewed work as a way to improve their society: “You have to learn a lot and put the person in the centre of your work” (Participant 3). Finally, another interviewee compared themselves to other architects who did not take the course: “In an architectural project, I always immediately focus on the people who will live or enjoy the space, their needs and interests ... how old they are, what preferences they have, etc. Many of my colleagues immediately focus on the characteristics of the space, the materials, the profitability” (Participant 10). It helped them in the growth of their values: “Such hard life situations put you in front of what is important: relationships, helping each other, empathising” (Participant 2); “I think my values have been strengthened by seeing other volunteers giving without asking for anything in return” (Participant 16).

General

The interviewees and the focus group were asked what the experience of the practicum meant for them. This broadly generic question produced a wealth of different answers although the participants coincided on a number of aspects: maturity, open mindedness, a satisfactory experience, but which required effort. The code *Maturity* appears four times in the interviews, with participants noting that exposure to a different, broader reality is mind-opening, leading to maturity. “I think it’s good the university offers this course at that particular time, at the start of maturity, when you begin to make your own way and make your own decisions” (Participant 11). The process of individual maturation involves giving things their proper value, while diminishing the importance of things that don’t have value. “You live life in a better way. You learn to relativise things that are not really important” (Participant 5).

One of the first affirmations of several participants was that the practicum was a “reality check” (Participant 8). There are seven comments with the code *Open mindedness*, revealing the instructiveness of experiencing new and different realities. “... It opens your mind. You realise that there is a lot more out there than what you know. (...) There’s no greater selfishness than to live locked up inside the four walls of your own self” (Participant 10).

The participants explained that the social practicum ultimately gave them a great deal of *satisfaction*. There were six specific references, the most illuminating being: “It surprises you.

You get a lot back from giving. Even if not, you feel happy to have done some good” (Participant 2).

There were also four specific comments on the *Effort* the practicum required, the difficulty in experiencing hard social realities they were not accustomed to: “I thought it was very heavy. The practicum was a shock for me. I lived in a rose-tinted world, and I had to face the realities of poverty and suffering” (Participant 17).

The *perception over time* of the practicum is different from when it was a recent experience, according to four participants. “You see it differently when you’re taking the course from the way you see it over time. Now I have a more mature perspective, and I see that it benefitted me in the way I see life and the people around me. I feel more solidarity and responsibility to others” (Participant 10).

The *obligatory nature of the practicum* was a controversial issue at some moments and so it was particularly interesting to analyse the opinions of the participants in this regard. It should be noted that participants were not asked directly about this issue, but it was they themselves who spoke of this. The participants commented that they were initially unhappy that the practicum was obligatory but later changed their opinion after the experience of dealing with those in need: “In the end everyone was happy with the practicum. If it hadn’t been obligatory, they wouldn’t have done it. These are exactly the people who need to be more aware, those who wouldn’t do it voluntarily” (Participant 14).

Table 3

Summary of the results

Research questions	Results
Did the social action practicum favour the discovery of personal values?	Yes. The course helped the participants to discover the fragility of social justice, the value of generosity, how essential it is to treat everyone with respect and the importance of excellence in one’s own actions.
Did it help you become more socially aware?	Yes. The course contributed to developing greater empathy for others, with greater personal commitment and awareness of the importance of inclusion of those with disabilities. They perceived that self-involvement; selfishness and the hurried pace of life inhibit social awareness and engagement.
Did it encourage you to regard your profession as service?	Yes. The course helped participants to see other as the focus and purpose of their professions. They regard their profession as service to others and society, seeing it as their vocation.
Did the practicum contribute to you becoming a socially responsible professional?	Yes. Participants observed that while the experience initially required a great deal of effort it was profoundly satisfying. The social practicum helped them to be more open and aware of reality. They also learned to value what they have, relativise problems and to mature. They also noted that over time they came to realise the impact the experience had on them and that it was good the practicum was obligatory because, although they now regard it as a valuable experience, few of them would have done it voluntarily or on their own initiative.

Discussion

The results of the study, on the one hand, give continuity to the findings found in similar research both in those that investigate the practicum in Social Work and in those that analyse Volunteering in university students. On the other hand, it obtains novel results that may benefit Higher Education.

The results show that, thanks to social practices, the university students approached social environments of vulnerability and suffering. This forced them to overcome and manage their emotions as occurred in previous studies (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020; Lopez-Humphreys et al., 2023). They empathised with the difficulties and needs of these people and developed the necessary skills to accompany and help them (Finkelstein & Orr, 2021; Primavera, 2014; Zhu et al., 2023). They perceived that respect and cultural humility are two keys to accessing disadvantaged groups as in previous research (Larson & Allen, 2006; Zhu et al., 2023). In terms of social awareness, the practicum contributed to seeking to forge a personal commitment and sensitivity towards people with disabilities and their inclusion (Larson & Allen, 2006; Sydnor et al., 2014). On the other hand, this research, like previous ones, shows that the practicum/volunteering helped students to see the person as the centre of their professional performance (MacNeela, & Gannon, 2014, Parravicini et al., 2021).

The participants stated that the experience contributed to having a more open mind to reality and to overcoming prejudices (Larson & Allen, 2006; Lopez-Humphreys et al., 2023); also to valuing more what they have, to relativising certain problems, to gaining personal confidence, in short, to acquiring life skills (Astin & Sax, 1998; Kilgo et al. 2015; Parravicini et al., 2021). Despite being an experience that required effort at the beginning, it was deeply motivating and satisfying (MacNeela, & Gannon, 2014; Parravicini et al., 2021).

In regard to the novel contributions of this research, we should stress, firstly, that the practicum in this subject enabled a greater personal discovery of values, specifically: to notice the fragility of social justice, the value of generosity, the need to always treat others with respect and the importance of excellence in one's own actions. It also helps to perceive haste and selfishness as obstacles to such social awareness. Secondly, the students showed a perception of the profession as a service to society and some also as a vocation. Both contributions may be due to the fact that the practicum experience was enriched by the theoretical body of the subject. Thirdly, it was evident that over time, the impression that this experience left on them has remained. Twelve of the twenty participants had taken the course over more than 10 years prior. This increases the length of time that Sax et al. (1999) reported for the duration of the positive effects of volunteering, which they put at 5 years. Finally, it was noted that the fact that social work placements were compulsory, was very positive, as was a valuable experience, but few would have done it on their own initiative.

In short, the social internships enable collaboration encounters with NPOs in which learning spaces are generated that are different from the traditional ones. These results show how students significantly increase their degree of Social Responsibility after taking the subject and their practicum, which contributes to the achievement of SDG target 4.7.

Given the qualitative nature of the research, the data cannot be generalised. Nevertheless, it is possible to extrapolate the findings to the entire university student population (Teddlie & Yu, 2007).

Conclusion

In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, we see a greater need and urgency in promoting social education which incorporates an essential pillar of individual responsibility and the recognition that our acts have social consequences. Education is an essential part of the discovery of personal values, social awareness and commitment to others. It is therefore fundamental that all stages of education include and are informed by social awareness and solidarity. University is the ideal moment to achieve these goals given the particular stage of maturity of students. University students must be encouraged to view their future professional careers as an opportunity to serve others and to contribute to society rather than merely a means to earn a living. Justice and the common good can only be furthered by instilling a profound sense of social responsibility among future professionals. The Universidad Francisco de Vitoria (Madrid) has been imparting the course in Social Responsibility for 30 years, and over these years it has proved to be a valuable means to promote both social awareness and social commitment. This qualitative study shows that students grow and mature in their values, develop their social awareness and conscience and come to regard their profession as a means of serving society and others. Participants also affirmed that the course served to further their personal growth and maturity, opening their minds to reality. Thus, other universities are wholeheartedly encouraged to undertake similar social actions in their communities and, if possible, incorporate this experience within an academic framework or as a practicum of a course in social responsibility.

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