

## University Extension in Science Education: Historical Perspectives and Global Impact

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### Abstract

University extension promotes social engagement, expands access to scientific knowledge, and strengthens the formation of critical thinking citizens. In science education, extension programs bridges the gap between academic research and societal needs, fostering inclusive and transformative learning practices. The present study investigates university extension from a historical perspective, analyzing its impacts on science education, the democratization of knowledge, and the development of leaderships committed to global citizenship. Focusing on Ibero-American countries, this research examines how different nations have shaped their extension policies, identifying both similarities and regional particularities. In Latin America, university extension has become a fundamental strategy for social development, promoting knowledge accessibility and strengthening local communities. Through the analysis of historical documents, institutional structures, and academic literature, we identify trends in the integration of extension into teaching and research, contrasting them with models adopted in other international contexts. The results reveal that while Latin American extension has a strong community-driven and social character, in some European regions, it is more closely linked to technological innovation and knowledge transfer to the productive sector. Aligned with the conference themes Community & Society and Global Citizenship and Education for Peace, this study highlights university extension as an essential pillar for building more equitable and sustainable societies. Strengthening international exchange and interdisciplinary dialogue can expand the reach of these initiatives, fostering a more inclusive, socially responsible, and globally engaged higher education system.

*Keywords:* university extension, science education, Ibero-America, social justice, higher education

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## Introduction

University outreach plays a strategic role in fostering critical citizens, promoting social development, and democratizing scientific knowledge. Faced with contemporary challenges—such as growing social inequalities, environmental crises, technological advancements, and sociopolitical tensions—it is increasingly important for universities to strengthen their social engagement and their commitment to building more just, inclusive, and sustainable societies.

In Brazil and other Ibero-American countries, university outreach has consolidated itself as an academic practice inseparable from teaching and research, grounded in dialogue with territories, valuing local knowledge, and promoting social justice. Far from an assistance-oriented or mere service-provision conception, outreach is understood as an educational, cultural, and scientific process that articulates the production of academic knowledge with social demands, contributing to the transformation of the contexts in which the university is inserted (FORPROEX, 2012; Freire, 1983, 2005; Parecer CNE-CES nº 608, 2018).

Particularly in the field of science education, outreach has proven fundamental in reducing the distance between the university and society, broadening access to scientific culture, and promoting more dialogical, inclusive, and socially committed formative practices. By connecting research, teaching, and social action, outreach favors educational processes that strengthen critical thinking, global citizenship, and the collective construction of solutions for the challenges of the 21st century (Castro & Tommasino, 2017; Hayakawa et al., 2024).

However, when engaging with international academic literature, it is observed that there is no direct correspondence between the concept of “*extensão universitária*” (university outreach/extension), as formulated in Latin America, and the terms adopted in other contexts, such as “outreach,” “community engagement,” or “third mission.” In countries of the Global North, especially in Europe and the United States, these expressions are, to a large extent, associated with technology transfer, innovation, and services, often oriented towards the productive sector, with less emphasis on the social and community dimension that characterizes Latin American university outreach actions (Paro, 2021; Teodoro, 2014).

Given this scenario, the present study investigates the historical trajectory of university outreach, focusing on Ibero-American countries, seeking to understand how different nations have structured their outreach policies and practices, what their impacts are on science education and the democratization of knowledge, and how these experiences can dialogue with models adopted in other international contexts. By promoting a comparative analysis, this work seeks not only to highlight the unique characteristics of outreach in Latin America but also to contribute to the strengthening of a globally engaged higher education, committed to peace, planetary citizenship, and sustainable development.

The article is structured into three main parts, in addition to this introduction. The following section presents the theoretical foundations that support the analysis of university outreach. Next, the adopted methodological procedures are detailed. In the third section, the analysis and discussion of the results are presented, addressing the historical trajectory of outreach, contrasting different models and their impacts, with special attention to science education. Finally, the concluding remarks offer reflections on the challenges and potential of outreach in the context of global higher education.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive approach, grounded in the documentary analysis of public policies, legal frameworks, institutional norms, and academic literature discussing university outreach in the field of science education. The research is anchored in critical educational studies, notably those influenced by Paulo Freire's liberating pedagogy (Freire, 1983; Streck, 2023), recognizing outreach as an academic practice that mediates the relationship between university and society, guided by principles of social justice, knowledge democratization, and global citizenship.

The documentary corpus comprises normative and institutional texts that regulate and guide university outreach in Brazil and other Ibero-American countries. This includes national legislations, curriculum guidelines, ministerial and university resolutions, as well as reports and technical documents from academic networks and higher education organizations. Various academic databases were consulted, such as CAPES Journals Portal, SciELO, BDTD (Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations), ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, RedALyC, as well as specialized journals, including *Revista Brasileira de Extensão Universitária*, *Revista Ensaio*, and *Educação em Revista*, among others. Institutional reports discussing the historical trajectory of outreach, its transformations, and its social and educational impacts, with an emphasis on Ibero-American countries, were also included.

Complementing the documentary corpus are materials from institutional digital platforms that disseminate outreach experiences, such as the Rede de Clubes Ciência Viva na Escola (Science Alive Clubs Network in Schools) in Portugal (<https://www.dge.mec.pt/rede-de-clubes-ciencia-viva-na-escola>). The selection of documents followed a progressive process and was guided by inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure theoretical relevance and adherence to the research objectives.

The following inclusion criteria were applied:

- Language: Portuguese, Spanish, and English.
- Period: Although the comparative analysis spans from the Córdoba Manifesto (1918) to the present, the focus for the selection of secondary studies (theses, dissertations, articles) was primarily between the 1960s and 1990s, and from the 2000s onwards, to reflect important milestones in university outreach.
- Area of Knowledge: Education, Science Education, and Public Policy.
- Level of Education: All levels, with an emphasis on higher education.
- Main Theme: University outreach, science education, outreach policies, educational practices, civic engagement, and critical education.

Conversely, the exclusion criteria were:

- Articles without peer review.
- Extended abstracts, short papers, and editorials.
- Studies that did not directly address the interface between university outreach and science education.

Quality criteria were also used in the selection of secondary studies, including:

- Methodological clarity.
- Theoretical and empirical relevance to the research question.
- Publication in qualified journals or recognized databases (Qualis, JCR, Scopus, etc.).

The analytical approach adopted was interpretive-critical in nature, seeking to understand the multiple meanings and underlying logics of the documents. In this sense, the documentary analysis was conducted as a flexible and in-depth methodological pathway (Lima et al., 2021). A critical and contextualized reading was chosen, anchored in the theoretical frameworks and historical and political perspectives that shape university outreach in Ibero-America. This strategy aimed to comprehend the meanings attributed to outreach, its diverse institutional configurations, and its transformative potential in science education within these contexts, in the democratization of knowledge, and in the promotion of global citizenship, with particular attention to Ibero-American specificities.

### **Theoretical and Historical Foundations of University Extension**

University outreach, as a pillar of higher education, is a multifaceted concept whose understanding varies significantly across different historical, cultural, and geographical contexts. This polysemy reflects the diverse missions and commitments that universities undertake in their interaction with society. This study explores this diversity, contrasting the predominant conceptions in Ibero-America with those observed in the Global North, and connecting them to global development agendas.

In Ibero-America, university outreach has consolidated as an educational, cultural, and scientific process, inseparable from teaching and research. Its theoretical and practical foundation is deeply rooted in Paulo Freire's liberating pedagogy. For Freire (1983, 2005), outreach is not merely a transfer of knowledge from the university to society, but rather an act of “communication” and “dialogue,” where there is a horizontal exchange of knowledge between the academic community and different social groups. In this process, problematization and conscientization are central elements, aiming at empowering communities and overcoming oppressive relationships. This dialogical approach is seen as a path to the construction of shared knowledge capable of promoting social transformation. Streck (2023) reinforces the centrality of Freire in building the pedagogical identity of Latin American outreach.

Complementary to Freirean pedagogy, Ibero-American outreach dialogues with the Epistemologies of the South, proposed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Although Paulo (2024a) discusses popular education and Brandão's trajectory with Freire more broadly, the essence of the Epistemologies of the South lies in the critique of the monoculture of Western knowledge and the valorization of the “ecology of knowledges.” This perspective supports the principle of dialogue of knowledges, in which scientific-academic knowledge interacts with and is enriched by popular, traditional, and ancestral knowledges from the territories. Outreach, from this perspective, becomes a privileged space for this horizontal construction of knowledge, decolonizing knowledge and promoting the inclusion of historically marginalized voices.

Based on these theoretical frameworks, university outreach in Ibero-America is defined as a powerful instrument of social justice, knowledge democratization, and education for global citizenship. By articulating academic production with social demands, outreach aims to overcome inequalities, broaden access to scientific culture, and foster critical thinking and active engagement in building more equitable societies.

In contrast, conceptions of university-society interaction observed in Global North countries often operate under a distinct logic. Terms such as “outreach,” “community engagement,” or

“third mission” (or “third stream”) are commonly employed. The “third mission,” particularly in Europe, is strongly associated with technology transfer, innovation, entrepreneurship, and service provision for the productive sector and economic development (Paro, 2021; Teodoro, 2014). While community engagement may involve partnerships with communities, its emphasis does not always fall on critical social transformation and radical knowledge democratization, as in the Latin American approach. Outreach, in turn, may denote a one-way street, where university knowledge is “brought” outwards, without the same depth in dialogue and co-construction. The main distinction, therefore, lies in the lesser emphasis on the social, political, and emancipatory dimension, in favor of a more pragmatic and economic orientation.

Notwithstanding the conceptual and operational differences, university outreach, in its various manifestations, plays a crucial role in the context of global development agendas, such as the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Outreach, particularly in its Ibero-American conception of dialogue, social justice, and knowledge democratization, is a fundamental vehicle for achieving these goals. It contributes directly to SDG 4 (Quality Education), by promoting equitable access to knowledge and lifelong learning; to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), by combating social exclusion and promoting the inclusion of marginalized groups; and to SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), by fostering collaboration among universities, civil society, and other actors for sustainable development. Furthermore, outreach reinforces the premises of SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), by engaging in local development, and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), by promoting education for global citizenship and human rights. UNESCO's recognition of the transformative role of higher education and the social engagement of universities underscores the relevance of outreach for building a more just and sustainable future.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

This section is dedicated to the analysis of the results from the documentary research, interpreting the trajectory and configurations of university outreach in different global contexts. Our discussion is structured around a comparison between the conceptions and practices of Ibero-America and the Global North, with special attention to the impact of outreach on science education and its contribution to global citizenship and sustainable development.

#### **Analytical Overview of University Outreach: Global Origins and Early Distinctions**

The origins of university outreach, dating back to the 19th century, reflect a movement by higher education institutions to expand their activities beyond academic walls, interacting with the social, cultural, and economic needs of their territories. Although they emerged simultaneously in Europe (British) and the United States, their initial motivations and formats already signaled distinctions that would deepen over time. In the United Kingdom, universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, with their extension programs initiated in 1873, aimed at democratizing access to knowledge and broadening the cultural and political education of popular segments. In the United States, the Morrill Act (1862) consolidated land-grant colleges, which, while focusing on regional development and innovation, prioritized the transfer of knowledge applied to economic and industrial demands (Castro & Tommasino, 2017; Teodoro, 2014).

This initial differentiation between a strand more linked to the democratization of knowledge and another to the utilitarian or economic application of university knowledge lays the groundwork for the contemporary divergences observed. In continental Europe, the Humboldtian model, which emphasizes the indissociability between teaching and research in the autonomous production of knowledge, also evolved to incorporate the social responsibility of the university, albeit with a greater inclination towards the “third mission,” focused on technology transfer and innovation for the productive sector (Castro & Tommasino, 2017; Teodoro, 2014).

From the late 20th and early 21st centuries, international organizations such as UNESCO intensified the recognition of the university's social function, emphasizing community engagement and the production of knowledge oriented towards the common good. This debate gained momentum in the World Conferences on Higher Education and aligned with global agendas linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), education for peace, social justice, and the promotion of global citizenship (International Higher Education and Research Centre, 2023; UNESCO, 2022). Such international emphasis corroborates the relevance of outreach for major global development agendas.

### **The Córdoba Reform: A Watershed for Latin American University Outreach**

In Latin America, university outreach acquired distinctive contours following the University Reform of Córdoba in 1918, in Argentina (Freitas Neto, 2011). This movement, led by students, represented a break with the elitist and Eurocentric university model, establishing an intrinsic commitment to the democratization of higher education, university autonomy, and, fundamentally, the social engagement of public universities. The Córdoba Reform not only reconfigured the Argentine university but became a political, pedagogical, and institutional paradigm for the entire continent, consolidating the conception of the university as a public good and an active agent in the social, economic, and cultural development of territories (Castro & Tommasino, 2017; Freitas Neto, 2011).

In this context, outreach emerged as a structuring axis, directly articulated with the principles of social justice, democratic participation, and popular emancipation. The analysis of historical documents from the Córdoba Reform highlights a vision of outreach that opposes the mere diffusion of knowledge, proposing a two-way street where the university learns from and transforms with the community. This perspective manifests in various experiences across the continent, such as the Universidad en tu Comunidad programs in Mexico, and popular outreach initiatives in Argentina, Uruguay, and Colombia (Castro & Tommasino, 2017). These practices strengthen the ties between university and society and reconfigure the role of higher education as an instrument for promoting citizenship and human rights.

### **The Brazilian Case: Consolidation, Challenges, and the Role in Science Education**

In Brazil, university outreach consolidated as an academic practice deeply linked to the principles of popular education and social justice. Its development was influenced by the legacy of the Córdoba Reform (Freitas Neto, 2011) and by the popular education movements of the 1950s and 1960s, such as the Movimento de Educação de Base (MEB) and the Centro Popular de Cultura (CPC) of National Union of Students (UNE), in addition to pedagogical practices inspired by Paulo Freire. These movements sought to bring the university closer to social demands, articulating academic and popular knowledge and advocating for education as a practice of freedom and transformation (Freire, 1983, 2005).

Despite repression during the civil-military dictatorship, which controlled critical activities, outreach remained active in certain projects such as Projeto Rondon, created in 1967. Although aligned with the regime's ideology of national integration, Rondon enabled outreach experiences in different regions, bringing academics closer to peripheral realities and contributing to the internalization of the university (Ministério da Defesa, 1967). This duality shows how outreach can, even under authoritarian regimes, generate significant social impacts, albeit under complex and sometimes contradictory logics.

With redemocratization, outreach rose to centrality in the debate about the social function of universities. The Federal Constitution of 1988, in its Article 207, established the indissociability between teaching, research, and outreach, formalizing outreach as a structuring dimension of Brazilian higher education (Constituição da República Federativa do Brasil de 1988, 1988). This milestone boosted the institutionalization of outreach policies, strengthening their articulation with territories and social movements (FORPROEX, 2012; Lei nº 13.005, de 25 de junho de 2014, 2014). More recently, CNE/CES Resolution No. 608 (Parecer CNE-CES nº 608, 2018) made the “curricularization” of outreach mandatory, integrating at least 10% of undergraduate course workloads into outreach activities. This public policy represents a decisive advance, recognizing outreach as a fundamental formative component that integrates academic processes and social demands, strengthening the education of citizens for the challenges of the 21st century (SDG 4: Quality Education).

In the field of science education, Brazilian outreach practices highlight the potential of outreach as a driver of methodological innovation. The analysis of programs such as “Ciência & Arte nas Férias” (Science & Art in the Holidays) and “Física nas Férias (FiFe)” (Physics in the Holidays), developed by the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP), illustrates how outreach promotes active, contextualized, and socially engaged learning (UNICAMP, 2025a; UNICAMP, 2025b). These programs articulate practical and interactive activities, involving university students, researchers, basic education teachers, and communities. Such dynamics strengthen both scientific literacy and the university's social commitment, democratizing access to scientific knowledge and promoting the collective construction of knowledge in dialogue with communities. These projects exemplify the contribution of outreach to the democratization of knowledge and the reduction of inequalities in access to science (SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities).

### **Comparative Regional Analysis: Convergences, Tensions, and Global Alignment**

The comparative analysis reveals distinct historical trajectories, conceptions, and institutionalizations of outreach, but also a recent trend of convergence in valuing the university's social role. In Latin America, university outreach, as discussed, has consolidated as a political-pedagogical practice linked to social movements and the construction of just societies, strongly inspired by the Córdoba Reform and Freirean pedagogy. This model prioritizes community development, the dialogue of knowledges, and the active participation of social subjects in the construction of knowledge, being understood as a formative and emancipatory process connected to social, environmental, and cultural challenges (Castro & Tommasino, 2017).

In contrast, in Iberian countries such as Spain and Portugal, a more pragmatic and functionalist orientation historically predominated. Outreach developed in association with the university-productive sector articulation, focusing on technology transfer, innovation, and specialized professional training (Teodoro, 2014). Although there is an appreciation for the

social function, the emphasis has traditionally been on economic development and competitiveness.

However, contemporary initiatives such as the Red Española de Aprendizaje-Servicio (REDAPS) in Spain (Red Española de Aprendizaje-Servicio, 2020), and the Rede de Clubes Ciência Viva na Escola in Portugal (Rede de Clubes Ciência Viva na Escola, 2025), indicate significant efforts to reconnect the university with communities. These networks promote educational practices that articulate academic knowledge, social responsibility, and territorial development. These examples illustrate an openness and an effort for Iberian university outreach to broaden its scope, engaging more directly with social and environmental demands and moving closer to the conceptions of dialogue and community impact characteristic of Latin American outreach, even if their histories of institutionalization are distinct.

The work of Castro and Tommasino (2017) is fundamental for understanding these regional distinctions and approximations. The authors highlight that, despite historical and institutional particularities, there is a growing international articulation around the understanding of outreach as an academic practice capable of mediating the relationship between university and society. This convergence, although marked by tensions and different conceptions, has strengthened the idea of outreach as a privileged space for the formation of critical, engaged individuals committed to planetary citizenship and social transformation. The advancement of the curricularization of outreach, as observed in Brazil, demonstrates the potential to integrate the social and practical dimension into academic training, preparing professionals more engaged with the complex demands of the real world, which aligns with SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

The university outreach models analyzed in this study show that outreach has consolidated as a driver of methodological innovation in the field of science education. Outreach practices, by promoting interdisciplinarity and the articulation between scientific production, training, and social demands, reconfigure pedagogical practices. By promoting active, contextualized, and socially engaged learning, outreach not only broadens access to knowledge but also combats inequalities and fosters partnerships. This commitment to social justice, citizenship, and transformation, which historically characterizes outreach in Latin America, proves to be a differentiator compared to more technocratic models based on the logic of technology transfer. The Escuela Abierta: Actividades Científicas Infantiles y Juveniles program in Argentina (Gobierno de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, 2025) is a clear example of this formative, dialogical, and transformative approach, using playful and inclusive methodologies that strengthen the link between university, school, and territory.

In summary, while in Latin America a formative, dialogical, and transformative approach, guided by social justice and the collective construction of knowledge, predominates, in Global North countries, a functionalist orientation, focused on innovation, employability, and economic development, still largely prevails. Even so, in both contexts, outreach asserts itself as a powerful instrument to strengthen the ties between university and society, promoting a more inclusive, critical, and science education aligned with the contemporary challenges of global citizenship, peace, and sustainable development (SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

## Conclusion

This study demonstrated that university outreach, in its complex historical trajectory and diverse contemporary manifestations, constitutes a powerful instrument for social transformation, knowledge democratization, and the formation of critical and engaged citizens. By analyzing distinct models and practices of outreach, particularly in the Ibero-American context and in contrast to conceptions in the Global North, it was possible to identify that, although diverse orientations exist—such as the focus on social justice and popular education in Latin America, and an emphasis on innovation and technology transfer in other models—there is a fundamental convergence in recognizing outreach as an essential part of the contemporary university mission. This plurality of approaches reflects the different priorities and conceptions of the university that have developed globally, but points to a growing consensus on the need for academia to actively engage with society's demands.

In the field of science education, the analyzed experiences demonstrated the significant potential of outreach to reconfigure pedagogical practices. By transcending university walls and promoting more collaborative, interdisciplinary approaches connected to the real problems of communities, outreach transforms the dynamics of learning. Programs inspired by Freirean pedagogy and popular education, for example, contribute to strengthening the link between university and society, resulting in a more accessible, contextualized, and meaningful science. This not only fosters comprehensive scientific literacy but also empowers individuals to exercise more conscious and participatory citizenship in the face of contemporary challenges.

Despite advancements in the institutionalization of outreach, particularly its curricularization in Brazil and the emergence of collaborative networks in Ibero-American countries, the research also revealed persistent challenges for the full integration among teaching, research, and outreach. Such challenges include cultural and methodological resistance within the academic environment, the scarcity of adequate funding, and the need to improve mechanisms for evaluating and recognizing the social and formative impact of outreach. Overcoming these barriers is crucial for outreach to fully develop its transformative potential and for universities to consolidate a more integral and socially responsible role. The tensions between emancipatory and functional logics of university outreach, identified throughout this work, underscore the importance of maintaining critical vigilance over the directions of outreach policies and practices.

In a global scenario marked by complex inequalities, socio-environmental crises, and disputes over the meaning of higher education's role, university outreach emerges as a strategic pillar for building more just, sustainable, and dialogically connected societies. It not only enriches academic training but also offers concrete responses to social problems by promoting the co-production of knowledge and strengthening citizen participation. Strengthening the international exchange of outreach experiences, fostering the dialogue of knowledges, and intensifying cooperation between universities and communities are essential actions to expand the reach and capillarity of these initiatives. The consolidation of a higher education model truly committed to global citizenship, peace, and the common good fundamentally depends on the valorization and expansion of university outreach that is, in its essence, dialogical, critical, and transformative.

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