

University legal clinics: spaces for training and promotion of human rights¹

Consultorios jurídicos universitarios: espacios de formación y promoción de los derechos humanos

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Abstract

This research analyzes the transformative role of university legal clinics in advancing the practical training of law students and fostering human rights and access to justice. Employing a qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews with students, professors, and lawyers associated with the legal clinic at the National University of Chimborazo, Ecuador, were analyzed to identify critical themes. The findings emphasize three pivotal aspects: the enhancement of practical legal skills, the empowerment of underserved communities through legal education, and the operational challenges affecting clinic sustainability. Legal clinics not only bridge the justice gap by providing free services but also instill in students ethical awareness and a commitment to social justice. However, limited resources and high student turnover hinder case continuity and program stability. The study concludes by advocating for targeted institutional support, such as dedicated funding, expanded faculty involvement, and structured long-term internships, to enhance the clinics' operational capacity and ensure their dual mission of legal education and societal transformation is fulfilled. These measures are essential to consolidating legal clinics as enduring mechanisms for equitable access to justice and professional legal training.

Keywords: Legal clinics; practical training; human rights; access to justice; legal empowerment.

Resumen

Esta investigación analiza el papel transformador de los consultorios jurídicos universitarios en el fortalecimiento de la formación práctica de los estudiantes de derecho y en la promoción de los derechos humanos y el acceso a la justicia. Empleando una metodología cualitativa, se analizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas a estudiantes, profesores y abogados vinculados al consultorio jurídico de la Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo, Ecuador, con el fin de identificar temas clave. Los hallazgos destacan tres aspectos fundamentales: el desarrollo de habilidades legales prácticas, el empoderamiento de comunidades desatendidas a través de la educación jurídica y los desafíos operativos que afectan la sostenibilidad de los consultorios. Los consultorios jurídicos no solo cierran la brecha de acceso a la justicia mediante la prestación de servicios gratuitos, sino que también inculcan en los estudiantes una conciencia ética y un compromiso con la justicia social. Sin embargo, la limitación de recursos y la alta rotación de estudiantes dificultan la continuidad de los casos y la estabilidad del programa. El estudio concluye abogando por un apoyo institucional específico, como financiamiento dedicado, mayor participación del cuerpo docente y programas estructurados de pasantías a largo plazo, para mejorar la capacidad operativa de los consultorios y garantizar que cumplan su misión dual de educación jurídica y transformación social. Estas medidas son esenciales para consolidar los consultorios jurídicos como mecanismos sostenibles para garantizar el acceso equitativo a la justicia y la formación profesional en derecho.

Palabras clave: Consultorios jurídicos; formación práctica; derechos humanos; acceso a la justicia; empoderamiento legal.

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Introducción

University legal clinics have emerged as transformative spaces in the education of future lawyers, combining pedagogical innovation with a commitment to social justice (Odigie-Emmanuel & Dahiya, 2023). These clinics, typically affiliated with law schools, offer students a unique opportunity to apply classroom knowledge in real-world contexts while providing essential legal services to underserved communities. In a global context marked by social inequalities and economic barriers that hinder access to justice, legal clinics play a crucial role in addressing these challenges, fostering the development of socially conscious legal professionals, and contributing to more equitable societies (Romero Rodríguez, 2021).

While the global impact of legal clinics is well-documented (Malathesh et al., 2021; Schulze, 2020), this research focuses on their role and challenges within the Ecuadorian context, specifically at the National University of Chimborazo (UNACH). Ecuador faces unique socio-economic and institutional barriers that complicate the implementation and sustainability of such programs. Rural populations, indigenous communities, and low-income groups in Chimborazo encounter significant legal marginalization due to geographic isolation, systemic inequities, and limited legal resources (Alvarado-Vélez et al., 2024). These challenges position the UNACH legal clinics as a vital mechanism for addressing justice gaps in the region while simultaneously providing law students with essential experiential learning opportunities.

At the local level, the UNACH legal clinics fulfill a dual mission. It not only resolves immediate legal issues for vulnerable populations but also empowers individuals by educating them about their rights and equipping them with tools to navigate legal systems independently (Collaguazo Fiallo et al., 2024). This aligns with the broader objectives of clinical legal education, which emphasize not only the resolution of immediate legal issues but also the long-term empowerment of vulnerable populations (Díaz Rodríguez et al., 2021). However, operational challenges—such as high student turnover, insufficient supervisory resources, and financial instability—often limit the effectiveness and sustainability of these clinics.

From an educational perspective, legal clinics provide law students with invaluable experiential learning opportunities. Students engage directly with real clients, developing critical skills such as legal reasoning, problem-solving, negotiation, and ethical decision-making. More importantly, they gain a deep understanding of the human dimensions of legal practice and the transformative potential of the law in addressing systemic injustices (Schulze, 2020). These experiences not only prepare students for the professional demands of legal practice but also instill a strong sense of social responsibility. However, despite their recognized importance, questions remain about how such programs can be optimized to maximize their pedagogical benefits while also strengthening their social impact.

This research builds on existing literature while addressing a notable gap: the limited focus on the specific challenges and achievements of university legal clinics in the Ecuadorian context. While global studies have extensively documented the contributions of legal clinics to human rights and access to justice (Kotonya, 2023; Odigie-Emmanuel & Dahiya, 2023), there is a need for localized analyses that consider the unique socio-economic, cultural, and institutional conditions in countries like Ecuador. By examining the experiences of the UNACH legal clinics, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how such programs function within a resource-constrained environment and how they can be strengthened to achieve their dual educational and social missions.

Furthermore, the findings of this research aim to inform strategies for improving the sustainability and effectiveness of legal clinics in Ecuador. One area of focus is the relationship between institutional support and clinic outcomes. For instance, the allocation of dedicated funding, increased faculty involvement, and structured long-term internships could address existing challenges related to case continuity and resource limitations. Another critical aspect is the integration of clinic activities with broader university goals, particularly in the context of university social responsibility (Gaete Quezada, 2023). By positioning legal clinics as integral components of the university's mission, institutions can enhance their impact on both student education and community empowerment.

In this context, by situating the analysis within the UNACH legal clinic, this research analyzes the transformative potential of these programs to promote human rights, drive access to justice, and consolidate the principle of equality before the law. Ultimately, it underscores the vital role of legal clinics in the training of law students, with a particular focus on their capacity to promote human rights.

Legal clinics of law programs in the Ecuadorian context

University legal clinics are integral components of legal education, providing students with experiential learning opportunities while addressing pressing social and legal issues in their communities. In Ecuador, legal clinics play a dual role: they enhance the practical training of law students and function as critical mechanisms for promoting access to justice in a country marked by significant socio-economic inequalities and systemic barriers. However, these clinics face substantial challenges, including limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient institutional support, which hinder their ability to operate effectively and sustainably.

The resource limitations faced by legal clinics in Ecuador reflect broader structural issues within the country's higher education and judicial systems. Most clinics rely heavily on university budgets that are often insufficient to meet the growing demand for free legal services. Additionally, the lack of physical space and modern infrastructure limits the clinic's capacity to handle a larger volume of cases or to provide specialized services in areas such as family law or labor disputes.

Institutional support also remains limited, with clinics often operating with a small number of supervising lawyers or professors. This constraint places significant pressure on faculty members, who must balance their teaching responsibilities with their supervisory roles in the clinics. Furthermore, high student turnover, as students typically participate for only one semester or academic year, disrupts case continuity and affects the quality of service provided. These challenges highlight the need for targeted investments and structural reforms to ensure the long-term sustainability and impact of legal clinics in Ecuador.

The social and legal conditions in Ecuador present unique challenges that university legal clinics are uniquely positioned to address. The country faces persistent inequalities in access to justice, particularly for rural, indigenous, and low-income populations. Chimborazo, a predominantly rural province, exemplifies these challenges. Many residents face barriers such as geographic isolation, lack of knowledge about their legal rights, and limited access to affordable legal representation.

The UNACH legal clinics have responded to these issues by focusing on cases that reflect the specific needs of the local community. Family law cases, including child custody disputes and domestic violence issues, are among the most common. For example, in 2023, the clinic successfully represented rural women in custody cases, helping them navigate a complex legal process that they would have otherwise faced alone. Other prevalent cases include labor disputes involving unfair dismissal or wage theft, reflecting the precarious working conditions many individuals in Chimborazo experience. By addressing these cases, the clinic not only resolves immediate legal problems but also raises awareness among the local population about their rights and available legal remedies.

Beyond their educational and service-oriented functions, legal clinics in Ecuador act as agents of social change, tackling systemic issues within the country's judicial system. Ecuador's legal framework, while robust on paper, often fails to deliver equitable outcomes due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and a lack of resources in the judiciary. Legal clinics help bridge this gap by providing free legal representation to those who would otherwise be excluded from the justice system.

Furthermore, legal clinics in Ecuador operate within a complex socio-political landscape where poverty, marginalization, and political instability intersect. The UNACH clinic's work often involves navigating these challenges, such as addressing the legal needs of individuals affected by government policies or economic crises. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the clinic provided legal assistance to workers laid off without severance pay, ensuring that they could access labor protections guaranteed under Ecuadorian law.

Moreover, clinics serve as platforms for advocacy and systemic reform. By documenting patterns in the cases they handle, clinics can identify systemic failures and advocate for policy changes at both local and national levels. For example, recurring issues in labor law violations have led the UNACH clinic to collaborate with local labor unions and policymakers to strengthen enforcement mechanisms. These efforts underscore the potential of legal clinics to contribute to broader societal transformation by addressing the root causes of inequality and advocating for a more equitable legal system.

Methodology

To address the stated objective, this research adopted a qualitative methodological approach, as it seeks to deeply and

thoroughly understand how university legal clinics serve both a pedagogical and social function in promoting human rights and access to justice (Mitchell, 2023). The choice of a qualitative methodology responds to the need to capture the experiences, perceptions, and reflections of the actors directly involved in the functioning of legal clinics. In this way, the study aims to gain a broader understanding of the benefits and challenges associated with the training of law students and the legal assistance provided to communities.

This study is a field research project, as the data was collected directly in the natural setting of the legal clinics at the National University of Chimborazo in Riobamba, Ecuador. The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews, aimed at three key groups: law students, professors involved in supervising the legal clinics, and lawyers collaborating with these units. A total of 15 interviews were conducted: 7 with students, 5 with professors, and 3 with lawyers. The semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility, which facilitated in-depth exploration of topics of particular interest to the participants while maintaining a common guide to ensure the comparability of responses (Passley, 2021).

Unlike other qualitative approaches such as case studies or ethnography, semi-structured interviews offer the flexibility to explore participants' personal experiences and perceptions while maintaining a consistent framework to facilitate comparison across different perspectives. This method aligns with the study's objectives by enabling the identification of recurring themes and patterns related to the pedagogical and transformative roles of legal clinics. For instance, while a case study could provide an in-depth analysis of a single instance, it may lack the broader generalizability achieved by capturing multiple viewpoints from students, professors, and lawyers.

Similarly, while ethnography emphasizes cultural immersion, it may not provide the structured focus required to examine specific challenges such as resource limitations or operational sustainability. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed this research to strike a balance between depth and breadth, ensuring that both individual experiences and systemic issues were thoroughly analyzed. Furthermore, the study was guided by theoretical perspectives on experiential learning and legal empowerment, which informed the coding and interpretation of the data. By grounding the analysis in these frameworks, the research highlights how clinical legal education contributes to the broader goals of human rights promotion and access to justice, particularly in resource-constrained environments like Ecuador.

The selection process for participants was intentional and based on active participation in the UNACH legal clinics (Alvarado-Vélez, 2021; Verhofstadt et al., 2024). To ensure relevance, priority was given to those students who had completed at least two academic terms in the legal clinic, demonstrating sufficient practical exposure and familiarity with clinic processes. Professors were required to have a minimum of five years of experience in supervising clinical activities, ensuring an in-depth understanding of the clinic's pedagogical and operational framework. Lawyers were selected based on their direct involvement in advising and resolving cases within the clinic, with priority given to those specializing in areas of law most relevant to the community, such as family law, labor law, and human rights.

Demographic factors, including age, gender, and academic standing, were also considered to promote diversity within the sample. For instance, student participants represented different academic levels (third to fifth year), while efforts were made to include male and female participants to ensure gender balance. This approach provided a holistic view of the clinic's impact, capturing variations in experiences and perspectives across different roles, levels of expertise, and legal areas. The exclusion criteria eliminated individuals with insufficient or no active participation in the clinic during the study period to ensure data reliability and relevance. By incorporating these criteria, the study achieved a rich, diverse dataset that reflects the multifaceted nature of the clinic's educational and social contributions.

The study employed a cross-sectional design, collecting data over a defined period between June and October 2023. This approach was chosen to provide a snapshot of the experiences, challenges, and outcomes associated with the UNACH legal clinics during a specific timeframe, enabling the identification of key themes and patterns within a dynamic operational context. Additionally, the timeframe aligned with the academic calendar, ensuring active participation of students and faculty during the clinic's operational peak. Thus, this temporal framework enhances the relevance and reliability of the findings, providing a robust basis for analyzing the clinic's capacity to promote human rights, foster access to justice, and contribute to the professional development of law students. By situating the study within this defined period, the research offers a detailed and context-specific understanding of the clinic's immediate impact while

laying the groundwork for future investigations that could explore its long-term outcomes.

The semi-structured interviews were guided by a set of key questions and themes designed to align with the study's objectives, ensuring a systematic exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives within the UNACH legal clinics. For students, questions focused on their practical learning experiences, including the types of legal cases they handled, the skills they developed (for example, legal reasoning, negotiation, ethical decision-making), and their perceptions of the clinic's role in fostering social responsibility and promoting human rights. Professors were asked about their supervisory experiences, the challenges they encountered in mentoring students, and their views on the clinic's pedagogical effectiveness, including its ability to bridge the gap between legal theory and practice.

Lawyers were queried about their roles in case management, the nature of the legal issues prevalent in the community (such as family law, labor disputes, and human rights violations), and their insights into the clinic's impact on access to justice for underserved populations. Cross-cutting themes explored across all groups included perceptions of the clinic's operational challenges, such as resource limitations, student turnover, and institutional support, as well as its transformative role in addressing systemic social and legal inequalities. Additionally, participants were encouraged to share suggestions for improving the clinic's sustainability and effectiveness.

All interviews were conducted within a standardized timeframe, with each session lasting approximately 45 minutes. This consistent duration ensured uniformity in data collection, allowing participants sufficient time to provide in-depth responses while maintaining a manageable scope for analysis. The scheduling process was meticulously planned to align with the availability of students, professors, and lawyers, ensuring minimal disruption to their academic or professional responsibilities. Notably, no challenges related to time constraints were encountered during the data collection phase, as participants were able to engage fully in the interviews without external interruptions. This consistency in interview length and smooth scheduling contributed to the reliability and robustness of the data, providing a comprehensive basis for identifying key themes and patterns across the diverse stakeholder groups.

The transcription of the interviews was conducted by the author, ensuring that every detail of the conversations was accurately captured. To enhance the reliability of the data, the fidelity of the transcriptions was verified by the participants prior to analysis, allowing them to confirm or clarify any points as needed. This collaborative process ensured that the transcriptions were both accurate and reflective of the participants' intended meanings. For the qualitative data analysis, the software Atlas.ti was employed, utilizing its robust features to facilitate a systematic and in-depth examination of the transcribed data.

Specifically, the content analysis technique within this software was applied to identify recurring themes, patterns, and relationships across the dataset (Chatzi & Kourousis, 2024). This approach involved coding the data inductively, where categories emerged directly from the participants' responses, allowing for a nuanced understanding of their perspectives. The software's advanced tools for organizing and visualizing coded data provided a structured framework for interpreting the findings, ensuring rigor and transparency throughout the analytical process. This method was particularly suited to the study's objectives, enabling a thorough exploration of the pedagogical and transformative roles of the UNACH legal clinic. Subsequently, the codes were grouped into broad categories such as "practical training", "legal empowerment" and "challenges in implementation", which allowed for a coherent and meaningful structuring of the research findings.

The coding process was carried out rigorously to ensure both the validity and reliability of the analysis. Initially, an inductive approach was applied, allowing codes and themes to emerge directly from the data. To strengthen the reliability of the coding process, a two-step strategy was implemented. First, an inter-rater review was conducted, where a second researcher independently reviewed a subset of the coded data to ensure consistency and minimize potential researcher bias. Any discrepancies identified during this phase were discussed and resolved collaboratively, refining the coding framework for greater coherence.

Additionally, data triangulation techniques were employed by analyzing responses from multiple participant groups—students, professors, and lawyers—to identify convergence or divergence in perspectives, thus enhancing the robustness of the findings. To ensure data saturation, the coding process continued until no new themes or patterns emerged, confirming that the dataset comprehensively represented the participants' experiences and viewpoints. Furthermore, the preliminary results and thematic interpretations were reviewed by two legal education experts, who provided constructive

feedback to validate the relevance and accuracy of the findings. This multi-layered approach to coding, verification, and triangulation ensured the methodological rigor necessary for a high-impact academic study.

Any discrepancies or inconsistencies were resolved through discussion, ensuring consistency and rigor in the categorization process. As the study focused exclusively on an argumentative textual presentation, no visual presentations were planned for the data analysis. This decision aligns with the qualitative nature of the research, prioritizing in-depth narrative interpretations over numerical representations. By maintaining this approach, the analysis provides a rich, descriptive account of the pedagogical and transformative roles of the UNACH legal clinics, offering meaningful insights that are firmly rooted in the qualitative data.

Results

The results of this research reveal important findings about the transformative role of legal clinics in the training of law students and their impact on the promotion of human rights and access to justice. Through the content analysis of interviews conducted with students, professors, and lawyers involved in the UNACH legal clinics, three central themes were identified that highlight the significance of these spaces: the practical training of students, the legal empowerment of vulnerable communities, and the challenges in the implementation and sustainability of legal clinics.

Practical training of students

The first emerging theme, the practical training of students, highlighted that university legal clinics play a transformative role in the professional and personal development of law students, far beyond the acquisition of basic legal competencies. While students gain foundational practical skills such as legal research, drafting, client interviewing, and advocacy, the clinical experience also profoundly influences their professional identity, adaptability to complex legal challenges, and ethical awareness. Testimonies from participants enrich this analysis, providing concrete examples of how their time in legal clinics has shaped their growth as future lawyers.

First, legal clinics were shown to significantly contribute to the construction of students' professional identity. Participants frequently expressed how taking on the responsibility of representing real clients gave them a sense of purpose and confidence as future legal practitioners. One student remarked, "Working on real cases made me feel like a lawyer for the first time. I wasn't just studying theory; I was helping someone defend their rights." Another noted, "The clinic experience made me realize the responsibility lawyers carry—our role is not just to win cases but to fight for justice."

Second, the clinical environment fostered students' ability to adapt to uncertainty and complexity, preparing them to manage real-world legal practice. Legal clinics often deal with incomplete client information, evolving case dynamics, or resource constraints, which require students to develop critical problem-solving and flexibility. A supervising lawyer emphasized this point, stating, "Students learn that the law is not always straightforward. They have to think critically, adapt, and figure out solutions when faced with procedural or evidentiary challenges." A student corroborated this, saying, "I realized that being a lawyer means navigating unexpected obstacles. The clinic pushed me to think on my feet and taught me resilience." These reflections illustrate how clinical experiences challenge students to apply legal knowledge dynamically, fostering the skills necessary to thrive in the unpredictable nature of legal practice.

Furthermore, students developed a heightened sense of ethical and social responsibility through their engagement with clients, particularly those from underserved communities. Testimonies reveal how exposure to issues of inequality and injustice shaped their understanding of the social dimensions of law. One participant explained, "Helping people who couldn't afford legal services showed me the inequalities in our justice system. It motivated me to work for change." Another added, "The clinic experience taught me the importance of listening to clients with empathy. Many of them didn't just need legal help—they needed to feel heard and understood." These statements reflect how legal clinics foster ethical awareness and an enduring commitment to justice, preparing students to serve as both competent lawyers and advocates for societal change.

The clinical experience also strengthened students' interpersonal and communication skills, which are crucial for effective legal practice. Students emphasized how interviewing clients and explaining legal concepts in accessible terms

improved their ability to build trust and rapport. As one student noted, “It’s not enough to know the law—you have to make it understandable for the client. The clinic taught me to communicate clearly and with respect.” Supervisors similarly highlighted the collaborative nature of clinical work, where students worked in teams to analyze cases, draft arguments, and strategize legal solutions. A professor observed, “The teamwork required in the clinic mirrors the real legal profession. Students learn to rely on each other’s strengths, which is vital in practice.” These experiences provided students with essential communication and teamwork skills, aligning their training with the demands of professional legal environments.

Legal empowerment of vulnerable communities

The second theme highlights how legal clinics help close the justice gap, particularly for groups facing economic or social barriers. The lawyers interviewed emphasized that many of the cases handled in the clinic involved individuals who otherwise would not have been able to afford legal services. As one of the lawyers noted: “The clinic is often the only option for people to get legal assistance. We don’t just resolve their cases; we also explain their rights to them, which allows them to better defend themselves in the future”. This statement underscores the crucial role of legal clinics in the legal empowerment of individuals, which in turn reinforces the principle of equality before the law. Additionally, several professors pointed out that the clinics not only benefit the communities they serve but also raise students’ awareness of social realities and the importance of their role as future defenders of human rights.

Another essential finding is that these clinics foster legal empowerment by equipping clients with the tools to address future legal challenges independently. Participants in the study emphasized that beyond solving individual cases, the clinics dedicate significant effort to educating clients about their rights and the broader legal framework. This approach shifts the focus from merely providing a service to creating a sustainable impact, enabling individuals to better understand and assert their rights. For instance, several clients who received assistance later demonstrated the ability to advocate for themselves in subsequent legal situations. This empowerment aligns with the clinics’ mission to not only address immediate legal issues but also contribute to building a more informed and resilient citizenry.

Additionally, the role of law students in these clinics highlights the synergy between education and community service. Students reported that their participation allowed them to see firsthand the systemic inequalities affecting vulnerable populations. This experience was instrumental in shaping their understanding of the social dimensions of legal practice. By engaging with clients, students gained insights into the challenges faced by underserved groups, which in turn strengthened their ethical awareness and commitment to justice. Many students noted that working in the clinic deepened their appreciation for the importance of human rights and social equity in the legal profession, fostering a sense of social responsibility that is likely to influence their future careers.

Challenges in the implementation and sustainability of legal clinics

Despite the clear benefits they offer to both students and communities, the research revealed several difficulties in their operation. Professors and lawyers mentioned that the lack of financial and human resources is one of the main obstacles. “Sometimes we can’t assist everyone who seeks help because we don’t have enough supervising lawyers or time to dedicate to each case”, commented one of the supervising professors. Additionally, the high turnover of students, who usually participate in the clinic for one semester or one academic year, creates challenges in the continuity of cases, which can affect the quality of the assistance provided. Nevertheless, both professors and students expressed the need to strengthen these programs, emphasizing their educational and social value.

Finally, the results also suggest that legal clinics have great potential as agents of social change. Several participants noted that the cases handled not only provide immediate solutions to legal problems but also help raise awareness in communities about their rights and the legal mechanisms available to them. This long-term effect on individuals’ ability to defend themselves legally underscores the importance of clinics not only as spaces for practical learning but also as tools for social transformation. Additionally, students and professors agreed that their participation in the clinics fostered a sense of social responsibility and an ethical commitment to promoting justice.

Discussion

The research presented offers a qualitative analysis of the impact of university legal clinics on the practical training of law students and the promotion of human rights and access to justice. The three main themes identified provide a solid foundation for reflecting on the importance of these spaces in legal education and social transformation.

The results show that legal clinics are an essential component of the practical training of law students. This conclusion aligns with previous studies that highlight clinical legal education as an effective tool for acquiring practical skills (Escobar Soto et al., 2017; Hewitt & Yeatman, 2023; Joshi et al., 2022; Weinberg & Giddings, 2023). Through participation in legal clinics, students can apply theoretical knowledge to real-life situations, strengthening their ability to analyze, solve problems, and make ethical decisions. The opportunity to face real cases, as evidenced in the interviews, has a significant impact on the understanding of law and its practical application.

It is important to emphasize that this type of training not only benefits students in terms of acquiring technical skills but also fosters the development of ethical awareness and social commitment (Kotonya, 2023). This is reflected in the experiences of the interviewed students, who stressed the importance of learning to deal with real people, with complex problems that go beyond what is studied in textbooks. In line with the experiential learning proposed by Kolb (Haritha & Rao, 2024), students actively construct their knowledge and skills through practice, leading to deeper and more lasting learning. However, this finding also raises questions about how these spaces can be optimized to maximize practical learning, given that legal clinics are often limited by resources and time.

The legal empowerment of vulnerable communities emerges as a fundamental collateral impact of legal clinics. By offering free legal services, these clinics enable low-income individuals to access justice, a fundamental right often denied to them due to economic or social barriers. This result aligns with studies that point out that legal clinics play a vital role in reducing the justice gap, especially in developing countries (Franz, 2023; Issakainen et al., 2024; Kotonya, 2023; Soltani Mandolakani & Singleton, 2024; Todd, 2023; Tsai et al., 2023).

What this research adds to the debate is the dimension of legal empowerment, which goes beyond merely solving legal problems. Participants noted that not only were clients' cases resolved, but they were also provided with basic legal education that allowed them to better understand their rights and defend themselves in the future. This aspect has profound implications for public policy and the social role of universities, as it suggests that legal clinics not only address specific problems but also contribute to a broader cultural and social change by educating communities on how to use the legal system (Bengtsson & A'Court, 2023; Hardie, 2024; Hylton, 2024; Valencia-Arias et al., 2024; Vankov & Wang, 2024; Walker & Rawson, 2023). Despite this positive impact, it is necessary to reflect on how these programs could be expanded or replicated in other contexts to maximize their reach and sustainability.

Finally, despite the demonstrated benefits, legal clinics face significant challenges in their implementation and sustainability. The lack of financial and human resources was a recurring concern in the interviews with supervising professors and lawyers, which is consistent with the literature highlighting the need to improve institutional support for clinical legal education programs (Curryer & Edwards, 2024; Franz, 2023; Goodson et al., 2023; Kislova, 2023; Skead et al., 2020). These challenges limit the clinics' ability to serve more people and to provide a more comprehensive educational experience for students.

Additionally, the high turnover of students, who stay in the clinic for relatively short periods, creates difficulties in the continuity of cases. This problem, identified by several professors and lawyers, can affect the quality of services provided, as cases often require prolonged attention that exceeds the time students spend in the clinics. This finding suggests the need to implement strategies that allow for greater continuity, such as the creation of stable teams of supervisors and students, or the integration of longer internships. Likewise, there is a need for greater investment from educational and governmental institutions to ensure the long-term sustainability of these programs.

Conclusions

This research has allowed for the identification and analysis of the significant impact of university legal clinics in two

key areas: the practical training of law students and the promotion of human rights and access to justice. The results provide new perspectives on the transformative role these spaces play in legal education and society in general. The main conclusions drawn from the study are presented below.

First, legal clinics have proven to be a fundamental space for the practical training of law students, allowing them to acquire technical skills and develop an ethical awareness of the importance of their role in society. The direct experience in resolving real cases provides students with deep learning that complements the legal theory acquired in the classroom. This experiential learning approach strengthens the professional profile of future lawyers, not only in terms of technical skills but also in their commitment to justice and human rights. Therefore, it is concluded that legal clinics are an indispensable tool in legal education, which should be strengthened and promoted in law schools.

Second, legal clinics play a crucial role in the legal empowerment of vulnerable communities. By providing free legal services, the clinics not only solve immediate problems but also educate users about their rights, contributing to the strengthening of access to justice and the principle of equality before the law. The social impact of the clinics extends beyond the resolution of specific cases, as these spaces have the potential to generate cultural change by empowering individuals to use legal resources in the defense of their rights. This dimension of legal empowerment underscores the importance of clinics as agents of social change, particularly in contexts where economic barriers prevent many from accessing justice.

However, the research also reveals significant challenges in the implementation and sustainability of legal clinics. The lack of financial and human resources limits their ability to serve more people and to offer a more comprehensive educational experience for students. Additionally, the constant turnover of students and the lack of continuity in cases pose an obstacle to the long-term effectiveness of the clinics. To maximize their impact, it is essential that universities and public institutions provide greater support, both in terms of funding and human resources, which will allow these programs to grow and consolidate.

In summary, this research reaffirms the importance of legal clinics as key spaces for legal education and the promotion of human rights. However, it also highlights the urgent need to address the structural challenges that limit their operation. It is recommended that law programs, in collaboration with governments and other institutions, design strategies that ensure the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of legal clinics, so that they can continue to fulfill their dual pedagogical and social mission. Strengthening these programs will not only improve student training but also contribute to the building of more just and equal societies, where access to justice is a guaranteed right for all.

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Contribución del Autor

Autor	Contribución
Julio A. Alvarado-Vélez	Concepción y diseño, redacción del artículo y revisión del artículo. Adquisición de datos, análisis e interpretación

