Distributed Place Leadership in the Global South: An integrated strategic framework for public value at Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia (UCC)

Liderazgo distribuido en el sur global: un marco estratégico integrado para el valor público en la Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia (UCC)

Liderança Local Distribuída no Sul Global: Uma estrutura estratégica integrada para o valor público na Universidade Cooperativa da Colômbia (UCC)

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Abstract

This paper provides a strategic roadmap for the Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia (UCC) as it transitions towards its *Plan Estratégico Nacional 2030*. Against a backdrop of profound systemic stratification in Colombian higher education and the enduring legacy of internal conflict, the institution faces the dual imperative of deepening its territorial relevance while expanding its global engagement. Challenging traditional centre-periphery models, this analysis argues that for a private, multicampus, cooperative institution in the Global South, internationalisation must be reconceptualised not as a pursuit of reputational prestige, but as a structural mechanism for equity, resource mobilisation, and local problem-solving.

Drawing on the theoretical framework of Place Leadership, the paper audits UCC's current capacity—characterised by a decentralised network of 16 campuses across 19 cities and a student body primarily drawn from low and medium-low socioeconomic backgrounds. It identifies a strategic opportunity for UCC to function as a "Distributed Place Leader," linking fragmented regional innovation systems into a cohesive national network. The document concludes with a set of actionable policy recommendations focused on networked governance, inclusive internationalisation (Internationalisation at Home and Collaborative Online International Learning), and the consolidation of solidarity ecosystems. These strategies position UCC to lead not merely as an educational provider, but as a Civic University of Social Innovation, capable of driving territorial resilience and democratising access to the global knowledge economy.

Keywords: Civic university, multicampus governance, inclusive Internationalisation, social solidarity economy, territorial resilience, post-conflict reconstruction.

Resumen

Este documento ofrece una hoja de ruta estratégica para la Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia (UCC) en su transición hacia su Plan Estratégico Nacional 2030. En un contexto de profunda estratificación sistémica en la educación superior colombiana y el persistente legado de conflicto interno, la institución se enfrenta al doble imperativo de profundizar su relevancia territorial y, al mismo tiempo, expandir su compromiso global. Desafiando los modelos tradicionales de centro-periferia, este análisis argumenta que, para una institución cooperativa privada con múltiples campus en el Sur Global, la internacionalización debe reconceptualizarse no como una búsqueda de prestigio reputacional, sino como un mecanismo estructural para la equidad, la movilización de recursos y la resolución de problemas locales.

Basándose en el marco teórico del Liderazgo de Lugar, el documento analiza la capacidad actual de la UCC, caracterizada por una red descentralizada de 16 campus en 19 ciudades y un alumnado proveniente principalmente de estratos socioeconómicos bajos y medio-bajos. Identifica una oportunidad estratégica para que la UCC funcione como un "Líder de Lugar Distribuido", conectando sistemas regionales de innovación fragmentados en una red nacional cohesionada. El documento concluye con un conjunto de recomendaciones políticas prácticas centradas en la gobernanza en red, la internacionalización inclusiva (Internacionalización en Casa y Aprendizaje Internacional Colaborativo en Línea) y la consolidación de ecosistemas solidarios. Estas estrategias posicionan a la UCC para liderar no solo como proveedor educativo, sino también como una Universidad Cívica de Innovación Social, capaz de impulsar la resiliencia territorial y democratizar el acceso a la economía global del conocimiento.

Palabras clave: Universidad cívica, gobernanza multicampus, internacionalización inclusiva, economía social solidaria, resiliencia territorial, reconstrucción posconflicto.

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta um roteiro estratégico para a Universidade Cooperativa da Colômbia (UCC) em sua transição para o Plano Estratégico Nacional 2030. Em um contexto de profunda estratificação sistêmica no ensino superior colombiano e do legado persistente de conflitos internos, a instituição enfrenta o duplo imperativo de aprofundar sua relevância territorial e, ao mesmo tempo, expandir seu engajamento global. Desafiando os modelos tradicionais de centro-periferia, esta análise argumenta que, para uma instituição cooperativa privada com múltiplos campi no Sul Global, a internacionalização deve ser repensada não como uma busca por prestígio reputacional, mas como um mecanismo estrutural para equidade, mobilização de recursos e resolução de problemas locais.

Com base no arcabouço teórico da Liderança Local, o artigo avalia a capacidade atual da UCC — caracterizada por uma rede descentralizada de 16 campi em 19 cidades e um corpo discente composto principalmente por alunos de baixa e média-baixa renda. O documento identifica uma oportunidade estratégica para a UCC funcionar como uma "Líder Local Distribuída", conectando sistemas regionais de inovação fragmentados em uma rede nacional coesa. Conclui com um conjunto de recomendações políticas práticas focadas em governança em rede, internacionalização inclusiva (Internacionalização em Casa e Aprendizagem Internacional Colaborativa Online) e consolidação de ecossistemas de solidariedade. Essas estratégias posicionam a UCC para liderar não apenas como provedora de educação, mas como uma Universidade Cívica de Inovação Social, capaz de impulsionar a resiliência territorial e democratizar o acesso à economia global do conhecimento.

Palavras-chave: Universidade cívica, governança multicampi, internacionalização inclusiva, economia social solidária, resiliência territorial, reconstrução pós-conflito.

1. Introduction

The contemporary landscape of global higher education is defined by a persistent tension between the imperative for local relevance and the drive for global excellence. For the Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia (UCC), resolving this dichotomy is not merely an academic exercise but a central strategic necessity essential for its long-term sustainability and social legitimacy. As the institution transitions towards its *Plan Estratégico Nacional 2030*, it faces the complex challenge of deepening its territorial embeddedness in diverse and often vulnerable regions while simultaneously expanding its engagement with the global knowledge economy.

This paper argues that the traditional binary of local vs. global is obsolete for an institution of UCC's nature. Instead, the university must adopt an integrated approach where global connectivity serves as a lever for local development, and local engagement provides the empirical basis for global academic contribution. The following analysis contextualises this challenge within the specific realities of the Colombian higher education system and UCC's unique institutional footprint.

1.1 The Colombian context: systemic stratification and access gap

The Colombian higher education system is characterised by a sharp segmentation between a limited public sector and a diverse, market-driven private sector. While national coverage has expanded significantly, reaching approximately 57% in 2024, access remains highly stratified by geography and socioeconomic status. Elite private universities and competitive public universities concentrate research capacity, doctoral training, and reputational prestige in major urban centres like Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali. These institutions typically serve students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. In contrast, the access sector, within which UCC operates, plays a critical and distinct role in social mobility. This sector serves aspiring middle and lower-middle-class students who have historically been excluded from tertiary education due to financial barriers or geographic isolation. For these populations, higher education is the primary vehicle for economic advancement.

However, the system faces structural financial challenges, including the high dependence of private institutions on tuition fees and the historical volatility of student loan mechanisms like ICETEX (*Instituto Colombiano de Crédito Educativo y Estudios Técnicos en el Exterior*). In this environment, institutions like UCC navigate the tension between maintaining financial sustainability and fulfilling their social mission of expanding access to vulnerable populations.

1.2 The legacy of conflict and the regional imperative

Crucially, UCC operates within a national context defined by the legacy of over 50 years of internal armed conflict. Colombia has historically recorded one of the world's largest populations of internally displaced persons (IDPs), a demographic shift that has driven rapid, often unplanned urbanisation and the formation of poverty pockets in cities where UCC maintains a significant presence, such as Medellín and Bogotá.

This landscape of vulnerability is further compounded by the migration crisis. Colombia currently hosts approximately three million Venezuelan migrants and refugees, a demographic reality that places significant strain on social infrastructure, labour markets, and social cohesion, particularly in border regions like Arauca and Pasto where UCC operates. This population often lacks access to formal financial systems and higher education, creating a specific institutional void that the university is uniquely positioned to address.

Against this backdrop, the role of higher education in the regions changes from passive observer to active agent of reconstruction. UCC's campuses are located in

zones that have been epicentres of conflict, such as Arauca (bordering Venezuela), Apartadó (in the strategic Urabá region), and Barrancabermeja (oil capital). In these territories, the university functions as an institutional anchor— as a stable civil society organisation capable of convening diverse actors. This reality mandates that UCC's strategy goes beyond academic instruction to include active peacebuilding, social regeneration, and the rebuilding of trust in the state and civil society. In sum, the university becomes a safe harbour for dialogue and a laboratory for post-conflict reconciliation.

1.3 Institutional Identity and Structure

The context for this strategic analysis is UCC's unique institutional footprint, which distinguishes it from both elite research universities and purely vocational institutions. Operating as a multicampus system with a presence in 19 cities and impacting over 800 municipalities through its extension programmes, UCC functions as a decentralised knowledge network rather than a traditional centralised university. It serves a student body of approximately 38,000 individuals, with 90% belonging to low socio-economic groups.

This demographic and geographic profile presents a critical imperative: traditional models of internationalisation—often reliant on elite student mobility, high-cost English proficiency, and exclusive research networks—are structurally incongruent with the institution's mission and student body. Instead, the university requires an inclusive model that democratises access to global knowledge without necessitating physical displacement or prohibitive costs.

UCC's current strategic direction, *Seguimos Navegando Juntos*, and its specific legal identity as the auxiliary university of the social solidarity economy sector, provide a distinct ethical framework rooted in cooperation, mutual aid, and democratic management. Recent data indicates a shift from fragmentation to integration: between 2019 and 2023, UCC executed 131 multicampus research projects, suggesting that knowledge production is increasingly becoming a networked endeavour. In this respect, this paper provides a strategic input to guide the implementation of the 2030 plan, reframing internationalisation as a transversal enabler of public value and proposing a governance model that balances local campus autonomy with national connectivity. The paper proceeds by establishing the conceptual framework of Place Leadership against UCC's current strategic position, benchmarking against regional and international good practices, and concluding with policy recommendations for governance, research, and sustainability.

2. Conceptual framework: place leadership and redefining impact

To support the effective management of the strategy, it is necessary to link the university's mission in a robust theoretical framework that explains its role in regional development. This paper adopts the concept of place leadership, defined as the collaborative effort of mobilising a community's various stakeholders to achieve a shared vision for its development and well-being. This framework allows UCC to navigate the tension between its local obligations and global aspirations by redefining its role as an educational provider as well as an anchor institution that exercises leadership across organisational and disciplinary boundaries.

2.1. Place leadership in an asymmetrical context

Place leadership theory posits that leadership in regional development is often distributed rather than concentrated in a single formal authority. UCC operates in a distinctively asymmetrical context where political power and financial resources are concentrated in the Andean centre (Bogotá), while social needs and biodiversity resources are concentrated in the periphery (e.g., Amazonia, Pacific coast).

In this environment, the university exercises distributed place leadership. Conceptually, this represents the maturation and internationalisation of UCC's existing *Territorios Solidarios* (Solidarity Territories) model (Pérez Muñoz, Fajardo, & Granja, 2022). It functions as a national actor that links fragmented regional innovation systems into a cohesive national network. This involves specific capabilities that distinguish it from other actors:

Boundary spanning: UCC works across geographical, professional, and organisational divides. Its multicampus structure allows it to bridge the gap between the Global North (international academic networks) and the Global South (local communities). It acts as a knowledge broker that adapts global innovation (e.g., sustainable agriculture techniques from Europe) into local contexts (e.g., smallholder farms in Tolima).

Mobilising resources: The university uses formal and informal mechanisms to marshal resources for local development. This includes attracting international funding, national royalty funds (*Sistema General de Regalías*, SGR), or private sector investment to regions that otherwise lack institutional capacity to manage such resources.

Building legitimacy: Unlike elite universities whose legitimacy derives from selectivity and rankings, UCC builds legitimacy through local and national impact. It earns trust and support by creating a shared path forward that is seen as legitimate

and beneficial to the community, particularly in regions where the state presence is weak or contested.

These capabilities enable UCC to exercise effective, distributed place leadership, transforming distinct regional challenges into opportunities for national cohesion and development in Colombia.

2.2. Inclusive internationalisation: structural equity

From the perspective of place leadership, internationalisation is not an end, but a strategic mechanism to acquire resources (knowledge, talent, capital) that empower the local territory.

Internationalisation at Home (IaH): Addressing the barrier of low second-language proficiency among incoming students, IaH is a strategy for equity. Rather than prioritising physical mobility for a few, IaH integrates international and intercultural dimensions into the formal curriculum for the entire student body. This ensures that the benefits of global connection—such as intercultural competency and global awareness—are distributed equitably, rather than reserved for a mobile elite.

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL): This methodology leverages the university's boundary-spanning capacity. By connecting a student in Apartadó with peers in Mexico or Peru via digital platforms, the university facilitates "digital mobility." This overcomes the physical isolation of remote campuses and democratises access to global networks, preparing students for a digitised global labour market (Rubin, 2017).

Quality Assurance (QA) is the mechanism of trust that makes reciprocal internationalisation possible. To partner globally, UCC must prove its standards match those of international peers. Therefore, the Internal Quality Assurance System (SIAC) is not just a compliance exercise—it is a strategic enabler of internationalisation.

2.3. Sustainability and the social solidarity economy

Sustainability at UCC transcends environmental compliance; it is anchored in the solidarity economy. While UCC's historical identity is rooted in the Solidarity Economy, aligning with the broader UN definition of Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) allows the university to bridge its local cooperative DNA with global developmental agendas. Cooperatives are, by definition, sustainable socio-economic structures designed to endure market failures and prioritise collective well-being. Following Bozeman and Crow (2021), public value is not the exclusive domain of the state, rather, it is an

outcome that can be achieved by any organisation committed to the fundamental rights and benefits of citizens. For UCC, this means that its private status is secondary to its public function of democratisation and regional development.

Territorial resilience: Practically, this translates to resilience. If a region like Arauca is economically unstable or environmentally degraded, the campus there cannot be sustainable. This highlights how the university's fate is tied to the territory. Thus, sustainability strategies must focus on regenerative development—restoring the social and environmental fabric of specific localities.

EDI as Sustainability: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) are not just social goals but sustainability metrics. A campus that excludes local indigenous populations or fails to support gender equity in engineering programmes is socially unsustainable. The post-SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) era will likely prioritise these deep structural indicators over more superficial metrics.

2.4. Strategic governance: Civic vs. Entrepreneurial University

UCC occupies a strategic position between two dominant global models. The Entrepreneurial University (Clark, 1998), focuses on organisational pathways of transformation that enable income diversification, a strengthened steering core, and rapid market responsiveness. This model emphasises the university's capacity to act autonomously and innovate in its funding and systemic relationships, focusing on income diversification, patenting, and adaptability. The Civic University, as conceptualised by Goddard, Hazelkorn, Kempton & Vallance (2016), is an institution that embeds engagement within its core teaching and research missions, managing a soft boundary between academia and society. This model prioritises a social contract with the specific city or region, focusing on public health, local employment, and cultural vitality.

UCC aims to adopt a hybrid path, utilising the governance effectiveness of the entrepreneurial model to manage its complex multicampus structure while retaining the mission of the Civic University. Through Place Leadership, UCC becomes a Civic University of the social solidarity sector. Its primary stakeholders, along with multinational corporations, are cooperatives, employee funds, and small and medium enterprises that form the backbone of the Colombian popular (grassroots) economy.

3. A strategic analytical framework for integrated engagement

This framework serves as a diagnostic and planning tool for the university to audit and monitor its transition to the 2030 vision. It moves beyond standard accreditation indicators to measure the quality of integration between local and global across four critical dimensions.

Dimension 1: Foundational commitment and strategic alignment

This dimension focuses on the extent to which the university's mission and governance facilitate or hinder integration. The central audit question is whether the new National School structure directly incentivises cross-campus and international collaboration, or if it inadvertently creates new silos.

Strategic Action: The institution must transition from bureaucratic alignment (standardising syllabi for administrative ease) to strategic alignment (organising around shared challenges).

Key Indicator: The percentage of the institutional budget allocated to joint multicampus and international initiatives relative to standalone local initiatives.

Dimension 2: Integrated curriculum and student experience

This dimension focuses on the democratisation of the global experience and the relevance of training. The audit question asks whether the Global Competency route is accessible to Colombian students who may have limited connectivity or English skills.

Strategic Action: Embed COIL modules into the Institutional Courses (*Competencias Institucionales*) required for all degrees to ensure universal coverage. Crucially, the university must formalise the link between the Education for Work subsystem and professional degrees.

Key Indicator: The ratio of students participating in virtual exchange versus physical mobility, and the number of students certified in Propaedeutic Cycles (technical certifications obtained during professional degree study).

Dimension 3: Research and knowledge exchange for public value

This dimension addresses the shift from academic output (scientific and scholarly papers) to territorial impact (solutions). The audit question examines whether the

current consolidated research groups demonstrate active participation from peripheral campuses, or if they are dominated by central hubs like Bogotá, Medellín, and Bucaramanga.

Strategic Action: Prioritise Challenge-Based Research (*Investigación por Retos*) where local campuses identify a specific problem (e.g., water quality) and the national/international network provides the scientific capacity to solve it. This aligns with the place leadership function of mobilising resources to solve complex local issues.

Key Indicator: The number of research projects co-created with external community actors within the social solidarity sector.

Dimension 4: Developing a strategic ecosystem

This dimension focuses on partnerships as levers for development. The audit question assesses whether international agreements remain dormant (e.g. sleeping MOUs) or if they drive specific local outcomes.

Strategic Action: Focus on South-South cooperation. Prioritise partnerships with institutions in Latin America and the Global South that face similar challenges. These partnerships often yield more relevant technology transfer for the social and economic contexts of UCC's territories than partnerships with elite Global North universities.

Key Indicator: The number of active projects involving university, industry and Co-ops, government, and civil society.

Together, these four dimensions establish a coherent framework for integrated engagement, ensuring that UCC's strategic evolution relies on sustained impact rather than isolated (albeit successful) initiatives.

4. Regional and international good practices

To inform UCC's strategic trajectory, this section analyses institutions that have successfully navigated the tension between local engagement and global ambition, providing specific insights for the UCC context.

4.1. Latin American models (contextual relevance)

Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios (UNIMINUTO) - Colombia: Serving as a direct peer in terms of demographics and coverage, UNIMINUTO's model of Praxeology successfully integrates social service into the curriculum. Their Social Innovation Parks act as physical hubs for local development.

UCC should replicate this physical anchoring of innovation, transforming its campuses into open "Territorial Labs" for the solidarity economy. This evolution extends UCC's existing 16 *Territorios Solidarios* approach (Pérez Muñoz, Fajardo, & Granja, 2022), scaling it from a pedagogical strategy to structural institutional capability.

Tecnológico de Monterrey - Mexico: An aspirational model for private multi-campus systems. Its *Tec21 Educational Model* is based entirely on challenge-based learning and utilises telepresence to distribute academic quality.

UCC's shift to National Schools offers an opportunity to implement high-quality telepresence teaching. This ensures that a student in a remote campus has access to the same expert professors as a student in the capital, reducing internal inequality.

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (PUC): A benchmark for policy influence. PUC uses Centres for Public Policy to translate research into national legislative proposals.

UCC has the potential to position itself as the national think-tank for the Social Solidarity Economy. Building on its successful track record of influencing public policy with the UAEOS (Pérez Muñoz, Fajardo, & Granja, 2022), the university can expand its role and influence broader legislation (such as the Cooperative Law) based on its research outputs.

4.2. US and UK Models (strategic aspirations and governance)

Arizona State University (ASU) - USA: Relevance: The "New American University" model of scale and inclusion. As detailed by Crow and Bozeman (2021), the Starbucks-ASU Alliance demonstrates how a university can partner with a large corporation not just for funding, but to achieve a public value goal: providing debt-free education to thousands of workers. This partnership model turns corporate employees into university students at scale.

UCC should pursue similar high-volume "education-for-work" alliances with major Colombian cooperatives (e.g., Colanta, Coomeva), turning their workforce development needs into a public value engine.

University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) - Scotland: UHI offers insights on managing dispersed geography in a tertiary education institution (HE and FE). It utilises a federated model where local colleges retain community identity while pooling resources for university-status degrees. Research in marine energy and rural health is globally recognised *because* it is place-based.

UCC's peripheral campuses should be viewed not as branches but as specialised laboratories (e.g., Villavicencio as a global lab for Orinoquía sustainability).

The Open University (OU) - UK: As the world's first open university and the UK's largest by student numbers, the OU model has been adopted globally. Demonstrating the power of social mission and scale, it employs a "Supported Open Learning" approach that combines centralised high-quality materials with local tutor support.

As UCC expands its virtual offer, investment in high-touch support systems (human tutors, not just software) is critical to replicate this success in retaining non-traditional learners.

Civic University Network (UK): This network champions the Civic University Agreement, a rigorous framework where universities sign public contracts with their host cities to solve specific local challenges.

UCC can adopt this gold standard by establishing formal Territorial Pacts in each of its 19 locations. Unlike traditional outreach, these pacts would be negotiated strategies with local mayors and cooperatives—transforming UCC from a more passive neighbour into an accountable place leader.

5. Policy Recommendations for UCC

Based on the institutional diagnosis and the strategic goal of becoming a Civic University of Social Innovation by 2030, the following recommendations are proposed.

5.1. Governance: Networked National School

UCC must transition from administrative centralisation to an Academic Federation. The new National Schools should avoid concentrating all leadership in Medellín and Bogotá.

Action: Establish thematic nodes based on territorial strengths. For example, the School of Veterinary Medicine could situate its strategic research leadership in Bucaramanga or Pasto, closer to the agricultural frontier.

Policy: Mandate that the leadership committees of all National Schools have representation from at least three diverse regions to ensure the "periphery" has a voice in central strategy.

Additionally, Quality Assurance must be decentralised but standardised; the SIAC should be updated to monitor not just academic metrics but territorial impact and international interoperability to ensure that the flexibility of the multicampus model does not compromise the validity of the degrees. Governance must evolve from administrative control to Public Values Leadership (Bozeman & Crow, 2021). This implies empowering campus directors not just as managers, but as civic leaders responsible for identifying and solving specific public problems in their territories.

5.2. Faculty Development: the translational scholar

Addressing the challenge of limited international exposure and English proficiency among academic staff requires a pragmatic, high-impact approach.

Action: Instead of demanding immediate C1 proficiency for all staff, UCC will launch a Visiting Scholar at Home programme. This initiative invites international researchers to co-teach virtual modules alongside UCC professors, providing faculty with on-the-job international mentoring and exposure without leaving the campus.

Incentives: Crucially, this strategy requires reforming the *Sistema Integrado de Desempeño Profesoral* (SIDP). Currently, incentives heavily favour high impact bibliometrics (e.g., Scopus citations). To balance this, a new category for Social Appropriation of Knowledge (aligned with the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation) should be introduced. This would reward lecturers who co-create solutions with local communities or lead COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) courses, placing territorial impact on par with academic publication.

5.3. Research: mission-oriented innovation

Research should focus on social projection and global connection.

Action: Structure research around national missions that align with the SDGs and the current Colombian National Development Plan, such as Energy Transition, Total Peace, and Food Security. To ensure institutional resilience, these research missions must be framed broadly enough to transcend specific governmental cycles while remaining relevant to evolving national priorities.

Integration: Research projects funded by UCC should require a multicampus component (i.e. involving at least two campuses) and a social appropriation

component. The existing international multicampus projects should be utilised as pilot projects to apply for larger international grants (Horizon Europe, USAID) that specifically target regional impact.

5.4. Strategic partnerships: solidarity ecosystem

UCC's deep integration with the cooperative sector is a distinctive strategic advantage that sets it apart from traditional competitors.

Action: Launch a Global Cooperative Learning Hub, positioning UCC as the premier international gateway for researching and engaging with the Latin American solidarity economy.

Partnering: Prioritise alliances with global leaders like the Mondragon Corporation (Spain). These partnerships will drive "sandwich programmes" (integrated mobility tracks) where students alternate between academic study and practical problem-solving within these cooperatives, ensuring degrees deliver direct territorial impact.

5.5. Reciprocal deal with Industry (Employability)

To avoid mission drift towards a purely vocational training role (the polytechnic trap), UCC must demand reciprocity from the productive sector. Employers should not merely consume graduates; they must invest in their creation.

Endowed chairs. Establish Cooperative Chairs funded by major solidarity sector actors (e.g., Coomeva, Colanta) to drive sector-specific research and curriculum development within the university.

Co-funded dual training. Implement a model where the university provides the foundational civic and theoretical education, while partner companies provide (and fund) specific technical training and internships. This prevents the university from chasing ephemeral technical trends while ensuring graduates are work ready.

Propaedeutic cycles. While the articulation between Education for Work (*Educación para el Trabajo y el Desarrollo Humano*, ETDH) and professional degrees is legally established in Colombia, UCC should move beyond administrative compliance. The focus should shift to strengthening mechanisms for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and micro-credentials. This will create flexible, efficient progression pathways that allow students to earn technical titles on the route to professional degrees, ensuring early employability without trapping them in vocational tracks.

5.6. Sustainability as a Living Lab

The shift from theory to demonstration is critical.

Action: Transform specific campuses into Living Labs for sustainable practices. For example, the Santa Marta campus (coastal) could operationalise a circular economy model for water and waste that serves as a pilot for the city.

Future Proofing: Integrate EDI indicators into the sustainability dashboard. A campus cannot be deemed sustainable if it has a carbon-neutral footprint but a high dropout rate for female students or fails to include indigenous communities in its governance.

6. Conclusion

The Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia stands at a critical strategic juncture. The transition to the 2030 Plan presents a significant opportunity to operationalise its distributed, multicampus structure not as a logistical challenge, but as its primary comparative advantage.

By reconceptualising its 16 campuses as an integrated polycentric network, UCC creates an institutional architecture that elite universities cannot replicate: the capacity to drive territorial cohesion across diverse regional contexts while maintaining the scale of a unified national system. This dynamic interplay between local immersion and global knowledge flows serves as the central mechanism for public value creation. Whether mobilising global engineering standards to mitigate flood risks in Montería or connecting researchers in Pasto with Chilean peers to address rural education, UCC effectively operationalises the concept of place Leadership.

Ultimately, the institution's trajectory should not seek to emulate the research-intensive models of the Global North, but rather to consolidate its position as the paradigmatic Civic, Socially Innovative, Multicampus University of the Global South.

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