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Cooperative learning in higher education: a literature review on its influence on university students

Aprendizaje cooperativo en la educación superior: una revisión de literatura sobre la influencia en estudiantes universitarios

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Ana María Cherres Castro
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8317-3617
anache@ucvvirtual.edu.pe
Universidad César Vallejo. Piura, Peru

José Manuel Sandoval Peña
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8203-0339
jsandovalpe@ucvvirtual.edu.pe
Universidad César Vallejo. Piura, Peru

Abstract

This systematic review examines the impact of cooperative learning on university students during the period 2019-2025. Using the PRISMA methodology, 20 studies indexed in Scopus, SciELO, and Latindex 2.0 were selected, focusing on three main dimensions: social skills, positive interdependence, and stimulating interaction. The findings, supported by theories such as self-determination, symbolic interactionism, and the zone of proximal development, show significant improvements in active participation, group cohesion, and socio-emotional development. Likewise, cooperative learning enhances 21st-century cross-cutting skills, such as teamwork, effective communication, and leadership, showing adaptability to virtual and hybrid environments, even during the pandemic. The studies reviewed highlight its effectiveness in promoting shared responsibility, critical thinking, and collaborative knowledge construction. However, challenges in its implementation were identified, including teacher resistance to methodological changes and the need for training in cooperative strategies. In this regard, the evidence suggests that its institutional adoption requires curricular innovation, ongoing teacher training, and technological support. In conclusion, this review provides a basis for the design of educational policies that prioritize inclusive pedagogical models, aligned with current labor demands and university social responsibility.

Keywords: cooperative learning, positive interdependence, stimulating interaction.

Resumen

Esta revisión sistemática examina el impacto del aprendizaje cooperativo en estudiantes universitarios durante el periodo 2019-2025. Bajo la metodología PRISMA, se seleccionaron 20 estudios indexados en Scopus, SciELO y Latindex 2.0, centrados en tres dimensiones principales: habilidades sociales, interdependencia positiva e interacción estimuladora. Los hallazgos, sustentados en teorías como la autodeterminación, el interaccionismo simbólico y la zona de desarrollo próximo, evidencian mejoras significativas en la participación activa, la cohesión grupal y el desarrollo socioemocional. Asimismo, el aprendizaje cooperativo potencia competencias transversales del siglo XXI, tales como trabajo en equipo, comunicación efectiva y liderazgo, mostrando adaptabilidad a entornos virtuales e híbridos, incluso durante la pandemia. Los estudios revisados destacan su eficacia para promover la corresponsabilidad, el pensamiento crítico y la construcción colaborativa del conocimiento. No obstante, se identificaron desafíos en su implementación, entre ellos la resistencia docente a cambios metodológicos y la necesidad de capacitación en estrategias cooperativas. En este sentido, la evidencia sugiere que su adopción institucional requiere innovación curricular, formación docente continua y apoyo tecnológico. En conclusión, esta revisión aporta bases para el diseño de políticas educativas que prioricen modelos pedagógicos inclusivos, alineados con las demandas laborales actuales y la responsabilidad social universitaria.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje cooperativo, interdependencia positiva, interacción estimuladora.

Introduction

Cooperative learning, regarded as a key pedagogical method in higher education, is based on social interaction, teamwork, and shared responsibility to achieve collective learning outcomes (Cerdá et al., 2024).

According to Clemente (2023), referencing León (2017), this methodology develops essential social skills—such as problem-solving, effective communication, and leadership—while also stimulating cognitive development. These competencies are fundamental for training well-rounded professionals capable of addressing contemporary challenges.

This model transcends traditional classes by creating dynamic and inclusive environments, transforming passivity into active participation to construct knowledge collaboratively. International studies confirm that cooperative learning significantly enhances university students' academic performance, increases their intrinsic motivation, and fosters the collective construction of knowledge (García et al., 2022). However, the challenge of identifying critical factors that determine its effectiveness persists. Almeida and Núñez (2020) highlight student participation as an essential element, while Loza (2024) emphasizes the need to overcome individualistic approaches. Both agree that only genuine collaborative environments—prioritizing research and critical thinking—consolidate the benefits of this methodology.

Carrillo et al. (2021) note that cooperative learning promotes the development of transversal skills such as teamwork, group decision-making, and critical reflection on social and educational processes. These skills are particularly relevant in today's academic context, where professional development must be intertwined with social awareness and openness to constructive change.

In Peru, cooperative learning still faces obstacles in its implementation. Clemente (2023) indicates that many university students have not experienced this approach, revealing a gap in its adoption. Thus, there is an urgent need to promote more inclusive and equitable teaching practices that strengthen essential collaborative and social skills for the modern labor market.

Loza (2024) adds that the COVID-19 pandemic, while solidifying virtual learning, reduced direct interaction between students and instructors, adversely affecting motivation and active participation—crucial elements for the success of cooperative learning. This raises the need to investigate how to adapt and reinforce the methodology in virtual and hybrid environments.

The value of cooperative learning is also explained through solid theoretical frameworks. The self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) posits that intrinsic motivation depends on satisfying three basic needs: autonomy, competence, and meaningful social interaction. These principles materialize in cooperative practice by allowing students to decide how to learn, receive feedback, and build connections with their peers.

Furthermore, Mead's symbolic interactionism (1934) suggests that social interaction shapes identity and knowledge, aligning with the nature of cooperative learning as a generator of shared meanings. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (1978) underscores how cooperation enables individuals to overcome limitations through guidance from others, providing additional theoretical support.

These foundations help understand how cooperative learning influences motivation, social interaction, and group knowledge construction. Practically, it meets the demand for professionals with strong social skills, valued both in society and the labor market, where effective communication, decision-making, and collaborative problem-solving are priorities (García et al., 2022).

In this regard, cooperative learning not only enhances academic success but also prepares students to face complex work environments, fostering a critical, creative, and continuously progressive mindset (Loza, 2024).

Based on this, the main objective of this article is to analyze the influence of cooperative learning on university students. To achieve this, the following specific objectives are proposed: a) to explain its influence on the development of social skills in university students in 2025; b) to explore its impact on positive interdependence among peers; and c) to identify its role in stimulating interaction within the same temporal context.

The main hypothesis posits that cooperative learning significantly influences the development of social skills, positive interdependence, and stimulating interaction among university students in 2025. To validate it, a systematic review of recent scientific literature will be conducted.

The study adopts a qualitative and foundational approach, based on a thorough review of articles indexed in Scopus, SciELO, and Latindex 2.0. This procedure ensures the validity and relevance of the findings, providing a solid overview of the state of cooperative learning in higher education.

Finally, the article is structured as follows: first, the relevant literature is reviewed; then, the methodology employed and the results obtained are described; subsequently, limitations are discussed, and future lines of research are proposed; and finally, the practical implications of the findings are highlighted.

Methodology

The study adopts a quantitative approach and a descriptive design, based on a systemic literature review aimed at analyzing the influence of cooperative learning on university students. The analysis focuses on its main benefits and limitations in a contemporary context, emphasizing advancements made between 2019 and 2025.

The systematic review was developed following the PRISMA method, employing checklists and flow diagrams. Articles published between 2019 and 2025 in indexed journals were considered, applying inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure scientific rigor. The databases utilized were Scopus, SciELO, and Latindex 2.0.

In the first stage, 164 scientific articles related to cooperative learning in higher education were identified. Subsequently, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied: only indexed studies analyzing key variables were included, while duplicates, articles outside the designated period, or those not directly related to the topic were discarded. After this process, 110 articles were selected for preliminary analysis; however, 90 were excluded for not meeting methodological requirements, leaving 20 pertinent studies characterized by their timeliness, relevance, and methodological robustness.

The analysis was organized around an independent variable: cooperative learning, divided into three central dimensions:

1. Social skills, understood as the development of interpersonal competencies necessary for teamwork (Aguilera, 2020; Castañeda, 2019).
2. Positive interdependence, aimed at strengthening mutual support relationships among students to achieve common goals (Ortuño, 2024).
3. Stimulating interaction, related to the constructive exchange of ideas and knowledge among group members (Espinoza et al., 2021).

The methodological process unfolded in four phases:

1. Search phase

- A bibliographic search was conducted in Google Scholar and the Myloft UCV Virtual Library.
- Keywords such as "cooperative learning," "cooperative work," "higher education," and "university students" were employed.
- Language filters (Spanish and English) and time filters (2019-2025) were applied.
- Original scientific articles and reviews were considered, excluding theses.
- The search prioritized recognized journals indexed in Scopus, SciELO, and Latindex 2.0.

2. Evaluation phase

- Titles and abstracts were reviewed to determine the relevance of the articles.
- Inclusion criteria, such as length of 8 to 49 pages and exclusion of theses or non-peer-reviewed documents, were applied.
- The preliminary analysis showed that the target population consisted of higher education students (both university and non-university).
- The studies included pedagogical interventions based on cooperative learning, without the presence of comparison or control groups.
- Results were classified into two levels: a) digital and social networks, and b) scientific and labor.

3. Analysis phase

- An exhaustive reading of the selected articles was conducted.
- Key data were recorded: design, population, methods and instruments, as well as main findings.
- The studies included quantitative and qualitative approaches, experimental and non-experimental designs, descriptive and correlational types.
- The participants were higher education students.
- Instruments employed included observation and surveys, validated through expert judgment and with reliability reported via Cronbach's Alpha.
- Results highlighted increases in the positive perception of cooperative learning, significant correlations between variables, and improvements in social and academic competencies.
- Statistical analysis was performed using tests such as factorial ANOVA, Cronbach's Alpha, Pearson's correlation coefficient, and Spearman's Rho.

4. Synthesis phase

- Findings from the 20 selected articles were integrated.
- Patterns, common themes, and discrepancies in the application of cooperative learning were identified.

- Studies revealed greater confidence in digital skills, better integration of technologies with cooperative strategies, and a positive influence of social networks on this learning.
- A significant correlation was found between cooperative work and competencies such as leadership, effective communication, decision-making, and teamwork.
- It concludes that cooperative learning enhances active participation in inclusive and collaborative classrooms, bolstering the academic, social, and emotional development of students.

Figure 1

Study identification

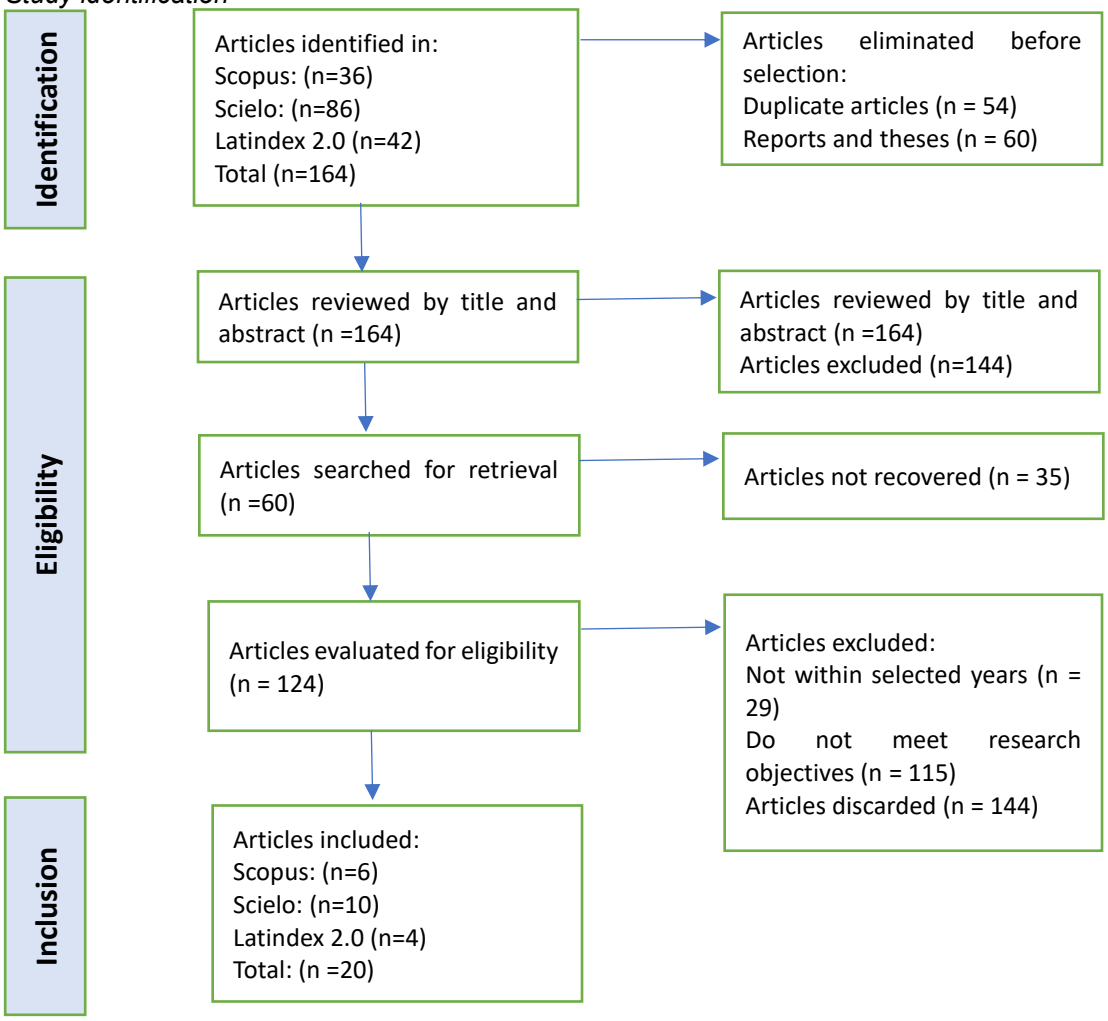


Table 1.

Selected articles

No	Title	Year	Author(s)	Database	Link, URL/DOI
1	Cooperative Learning on Promoting Creative Thinking and Mathematical Creativity in Higher Education	2019	Catarino, P.; Vasco, P.; Lopes, J.; Silva, H. & Morais, E.	Scopus	https://www.scopus.com/pages/publications/85068927346
2	Cooperative learning and approach goals in physical education: The discriminant role of individual accountability	2021	Rivera, S.; León del Barco, B.; González, J. & Iglesias, D.	Scopus	https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psicod.2020.11.001

3	Digital pedagogy and cooperative learning: Effect on the technological pedagogical content knowledge and academic performance of pre-service teachers	2021	Meroño, L.; Calderón, A. & Arias-Estero, J.	Scopus	https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psicod.2020.10.002
4	Interventions of Cooperative Learning and Associated Outcomes in Future Educators: A Systematic Review	2022	Fernández-Río, J.; Rivera-Pérez, S. & Iglesias, D.	Scopus	https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psicod.2022.04.002
5	Action-Research in Higher Education: Inquiring about Cooperative Learning	2022	Castro-Martín, B. & Sanchez-Suricalday, A.	Scopus	https://www.scopus.com/pages/publications/85146032101
6	Innovative Knowledge Management for Cooperative Learning in Higher Basic Education	2023	Basantes-Arias, E.; Chamorro Ortega, Cr. Y Yánez Valle, V.	Scopus	https://www.scopus.com/pages/publications/85160559422
7	Design and Experience of Cooperative Learning in the Field of Sciences	2019	Marina Carrasco Acosta Josefa Rodrígue z Pulido Mónica Guerra Santana Pilar Garcia Jimenez	Scielo	https://www.scielo.cl/scielo.php?pid=S0718-51622019000300211&script=sci_arttext&tlng=pt
8	Theoretical Approaches to Cooperative Learning for Health Education in the University Context	2020	Betancourt Aldana, G.; Santiesteban Labañino, M.; Vicente Mendo, J. Miranda Vázquez, M.	Scielo	http://scielo.sld.cu/scielo.php?pid=S1029-30192020000500925&script=sci_arttext&tlng=pt
9	Cooperative Learning in a National University of Peru, 2021	2021	Castagnola Rossini, G.; Cárdenas Saavedra, A.; Sánchez Farias, M. & Leiva Bazan. Z.	Scielo	http://scielo.sld.cu/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2218-36202021000600022
10	Use of Telegram and Cooperative Learning in the Teaching of Scientific Research in Medical Students	2021	Matzumura-Kasano, J. & Gutiérrez-Crespo, H.	Scielo	http://www.scielo.org.pe/scielo.php?pid=S1025-55832021000400314&script=sci_arttext&tlng=pt
11	The IPEEC Method in Cooperative Learning Among Students of an Intercultural Peruvian University	2022	Quintana Huaccho, J.; Huamani Pumacahua, S. & Espinoza Silva, E.	Scielo	http://scielo.sld.cu/scielo.php?pid=S1729-80912022000400181&script=sci_arttext&tlng=en
12	Emotional Competencies and Cooperative Learning of University	2023	Erazo-Moreno, M.; Colichón-	Scielo	https://www.scielo.cl/scielo.php?pid=S0718-

	Students in the Context of Online Education		Chiscul, M.; Nina-Cuchillo, J. & Cubas-Irigoin, N.		50062023000300011&script=sci_arttext
13	Cooperative Learning Technique: The Puzzle Applied in the University Context	2024	De León Nicaretta , F.; Santiviago Ansuberro , C.; Rubio Montaño , V. & Sosa Castillo, A.	Scielo	http://scielo.sld.cu/scielo.php?pid=S0257-43142024000200001&script=sci_arttext
14	Cooperative Learning, Social Skills, and Digital Competencies in Students of a Pedagogical Higher Education School	2024	Peralta Ortega, S.; Núñez-Lira, L. & Ocaña-Fernández, Y.	Scielo	https://ve.scielo.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2739-00632025000102079
15	Artificial Intelligence and Cooperative Learning in University Students	2025	Acosta Pastor, N. & Carcausto Calla, W.	Scielo	https://ve.scielo.org/scielo.php?pid=S2739-00632025000202021&script=sci_arttext
16	Cooperative Learning in Higher Education Students: A Systematic Review	2025	López Vargas, F.	Scielo	http://www.scielo.org.bo/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2959-65132025000100479
17	TPACK Model in Cooperative Learning Contexts: Perception of University Physical Education Students During Initial Teacher Training	2019	Meroño García, L., Calderón, A. & Arias-Estero, J.-L	Latindex	https://doi.org/10.22370/ieya.2019.5.2.1709
18	Design and Experience of Cooperative Learning in the Field of Sciences	2019	Marina Carrasco Acostaa, Josefa Rodríguez Pulidob, Mónica Guerra Santanac & Pilar Garcia Jimenez	Latindex	https://www.rexe.cl/index.php/rexe/article/view/789/565
19	Cooperative Learning and Its Relationship with Labor Competencies in a Private University in Trujillo, 2020	2020	Castagnola Rossini, G. M., Castagnola Sánchez, V. R., Castagnola Rossini, A. del C., & Castagnola Sanchez, C. G.	Latindex	https://doi.org/10.37955/cs.v4i3.74
20	Cooperative Learning and Social Networks in Students of a Private Technological Institute in Trujillo	2021	Arce Gutiérrez, K. M., Medina Gonzales, R. H., & Ulloa Parravicini, C. E.	Latindex	https://revistas.unitru.edu.pe/index.php/SCIENDO/article/view/3989/4522

Note: Authors' own elaboration

Results and discussion

From the initial 164 articles identified, only 20 studies (2019–2025) met the inclusion criteria, focusing on cooperative learning in universities and its relationship with three main dimensions: social skills, positive interdependence, and stimulating interaction. This selection was conducted in recognized academic databases (Scopus, SciELO, and Latindex 2.0), ensuring the reliability, timeliness, and methodological rigor of the research included in this systematic review.

The thematic analysis revealed a clear consensus: cooperative learning consistently enhances social and cognitive skills. All studies confirmed a positive and statistically significant impact on university students. These benefits were evidenced by increased active participation in classes, improved group cohesion, and stronger academic development, as reported by Castañeda (2019) and Moreno et al. (2023).

Eighteen of the twenty studies examined how cooperative learning fosters social skills. Carrillo et al. (2021) and García et al. (2022) identified advancements in conflict resolution, effective communication, and group decision-making. These findings align with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which emphasizes meaningful interaction and continuous feedback as foundations for intrinsic motivation and social skills development.

Aguilera (2020) and Espinoza et al. (2021) highlighted the utility of small groups as safe spaces for practicing verbal and non-verbal communication. This dynamic strengthened empathy and positive recognition of diversity. Such findings are supported by Mead's symbolic interactionism (1934), which posits that knowledge is constructed through social interactions that imbue formative experiences with meaning.

Cooperative learning transcended its pedagogical function to become a space for socio-emotional growth. Moreno et al. (2023) reported significant advancements in emotional competencies, suggesting that structured social interaction fosters psychological well-being and emotional self-regulation in academic contexts.

In sixteen studies, positive interdependence emerged as the core of cooperative learning. Defined by Ortuño (2024) as the perception that individual success depends on group achievement, it manifested in collaborative attitudes, mutual assistance, and shared goals. López (2025), Erazo-Moreno et al. (2023), and Rivera et al. (2021) observed that students strengthened their sense of belonging and commitment, developing tolerance, trust, and openness to dialogue. This approach is supported by Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (1978), where the most relevant learning emerges from interaction with more advanced peers. Betancourt et al. (2020) added that students learned to adjust expectations, adapt to group needs, and value diverse perspectives—key competencies in multicultural or multidisciplinary environments.

Stimulating interaction was also central in seventeen studies, emphasizing its role in promoting constructive dialogues, reflective argumentation, and co-construction of knowledge (Espinoza et al., 2021; Fernández-Río et al., 2022). These practices strengthened critical thinking and metacognition. Additionally, Matzumura-Kasano and Gutiérrez-Crespo (2021) demonstrated that applications like Telegram facilitated smooth and collaborative academic discussions among medical students. These findings support Mead's (1934) assertion that shared meanings arise from symbolic interaction and align with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which links meaningful interaction with intrinsic motivation. Research by Castro-Martín and Sanchez-Suricalday (2022) and Quintana et al. (2022) confirmed that cooperative environments promote interest and creativity.

Cooperative learning also extends beyond the classroom. Peralta et al. (2024) linked its practice with the development of digital competencies, leadership, and decision-making, aligned with current labor demands. Acosta and Carcausto (2025) pointed out the relationship between artificial intelligence and cooperative learning, showing that these methodologies adapt to virtual and hybrid environments—a key aspect in post-pandemic scenarios (Loza, 2024).

This review confirms that cooperative learning is an effective strategy in higher education, surpassing traditional methods centered on unidirectional teaching. The results support Clemente's (2023) warning that its application in Peru remains limited. Therefore, there is an urgent need to rethink teaching methodologies to train professionals with strong interpersonal skills. Collaborative teamwork not only contributes to academic performance but also fosters inclusive and enriched environments.

However, methodological limitations were identified: the absence of comparative groups, variability in implementation, and limited longitudinal follow-up. Future research should prioritize controlled experimental designs and longitudinal studies. Additionally, it is essential to train educators in cooperative strategies and the use of technologies to overcome methodological resistance. This review provides a solid foundation for designing educational policies that formally incorporate cooperative learning into Peruvian universities, promoting equity, inclusion, and educational quality in line with university social responsibility.

Conclusions

This systematic review demonstrates that cooperative learning is a highly effective pedagogical strategy for the holistic development of university students, particularly in contexts that demand professionals with strong social, emotional, and cognitive competencies. The analysis of the 20 reviewed studies allowed for the identification of key findings organized into three central dimensions.

Firstly, the methodology was shown to strengthen social skills such as assertive communication, conflict resolution, shared leadership, and empathy. These competencies emerge from constant interaction and align with the tenets of Mead's symbolic interactionism (1934). Additionally, a direct relationship was identified between cooperative strategies and the development of positive interdependence, manifested in shared responsibility, mutual trust, and commitment to group goals, supporting Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development.

Secondly, cooperative environments demonstrated the facilitation of meaningful interactions through reflective exchanges, constructive questioning, and collaborative knowledge construction processes, enhancing both critical thinking and metacognition. These practices promote intrinsic motivation, in line with Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory.

Finally, it was confirmed that this methodology not only strengthens academic learning but also key professional competencies such as teamwork, effective communication, and decision-making. Even in the face of challenges arising from the pandemic, cooperative learning exhibited a remarkable capacity for adaptation in virtual and hybrid environments, facilitated by the use of technological tools that ensured the continuity of collaborative learning.

For effective implementation, institutional measures are required, including teacher training, curriculum updates, and strengthening technological infrastructure. This review lays the groundwork for future longitudinal research and the design of adaptive pedagogical strategies aimed at consolidating an inclusive, innovative education aligned with university social responsibility.

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