

The Ethical Training of Lawyers in Contemporary Legal Education: Challenges to the Legitimacy of the Professional Practice of Law in Latin American Legal Systems

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Summary:

The ethical training of the lawyer has acquired special relevance in Latin America in the face of the persistent crisis of legitimacy of the professional practice of law, marked by citizen distrust and repeated questioning of the integrity of legal operators. This article critically analyzes ethical training in contemporary Latin American legal education and its impact on the social legitimacy of the lawyer's professional practice. The research adopts a qualitative approach of a doctrinal, normative and comparative nature, based on the documentary analysis of recent scientific literature, regulatory frameworks of higher education and codes of professional ethics, as well as on the curricular review of Law programs in public universities in Peru, Colombia, Chile and Mexico. The results show a persistent gap between the formal recognition of ethics in educational and professional regulations and its effective implementation in curricula and legal practice. It is found that ethics tends to occupy a marginal or fragmented place in university education, with punitive approaches predominating in the regulation of professional practice, which limits the internalization of substantive ethical values. The study concludes that the legitimacy of the professional practice of law alone cannot be sustained by disciplinary mechanisms, but requires a comprehensive, transversal and sustained ethical training from legal education, aimed at strengthening the commitment to justice, human rights and the rule of law in Latin America.

Keywords: ethical training of lawyers, contemporary legal education, legitimacy of the professional practice of law, Latin America.

1. INTRODUCTION

The growing concern about the professional ethics of lawyers in Latin America has become relevant in a scenario of institutional crisis and citizen distrust of the justice system. Misconduct and judicial corruption scandals of legal operators have undermined the public perception of the integrity of the professional practice of law, leading confidence in the regional Judiciary to 25% considered historically low levels. International institutions have indeed warned that strengthening integrity and ethics in the justice system is decisive to reaffirm social legitimacy and, in addition, to recover citizen trust. From the perspective of the United Nations (UN) Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, lawyers are fundamental agents of the administration of justice, and must at all times maintain the honour and dignity of their profession, acting independently and in accordance with strict ethical standards. Achieving these ideals requires not only focusing on ex post facto sanctions but also considering ethical training from the educational process, as a condition for the legitimate exercise of the profession and that it be socially reliable. The central question that underlies is whether contemporary legal education in the region is adequately preparing lawyers to face the ethical dilemmas of modern practice and uphold the legitimacy of the rule of law in the eyes of the citizenry. (Observatory of Judicial Systems in Ibero-America, 2022) (Atlantic Council, 2024) (UN, 1990)

In this framework, university legal education is the seedbed from which future legal system operators graduate, but traditionally in Latin America a technical and formalistic teaching model has prevailed, with emphasis on legal dogma and normative memorization, to the detriment of training in social responsibility and values. A marked dichotomy between theory and practice has been evidenced, where the legal curriculum privileges technical-procedural contents, neglecting an ethical-humanistic training that guides the professional towards service to the community. This reductionist approach has led to professional ethics being conceived in law schools as a marginal or accessory issue. In countries such as Colombia, in fact, the Deontology course is usually relegated to novice professors and generates apathy in students, which reflects the scarce integration of ethics in traditional legal teaching. In contrast to this is the mandate of contemporary educational regulatory frameworks, for example, recent Mexican legislation requires that higher education provide a comprehensive education of the student, oriented not only to technical knowledge but also to the harmonious development of all his faculties and social commitment. (Montoya, 2021) (Anzola, 2016) (General Law of Higher Education, 2021)

Similarly, among the purposes of university education, Peruvian University Law No. 30220 enshrines the humanistic and ethical training of professionals, in line with international standards of educational quality. Such provisions show a structural tension in Latin American legal education: on the one hand, the pressure to train lawyers who are highly competent in the technical-legal aspect; on the other, the imperative axiological need to inculcate ethical principles, commitment to human rights and social sensitivity in these future jurists. Thus, the region's universities find themselves at a crossroads between maintaining traditional models of teaching law and reforming their curricula to meet the increasingly strong call for socially responsible legal education. (Law No. 30220, 2014)

This legal-educational framework is also influenced by international and comparative guidelines. The UN and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) have promoted initiatives to integrate ethics into higher education as part of building a culture of legality. For example, the series of modules on integrity and ethics is based on the premise that building a culture of legality begins by strengthening ethical values and the ability to act accordingly, seeking to improve the ethical awareness of law students and their commitment to act with integrity in professional and public life. In the same vein, the UN Basic Principles on Lawyers call on educational institutions to inculcate in future lawyers an awareness of their ideals and ethical obligations, as well as respect for human rights. In short, there is a broad normative consensus, from national laws on higher education to professional codes of ethics and international instruments, on the importance of ethical training in Law. However, there is still a gap between what should be normative and the daily reality of law classrooms in the region, where the effective implementation of these ethical-educational postulates still faces institutional and cultural

obstacles. (UNODC, 2019) (UN, 1990)

Regarding the critical problematization, it can be mentioned that Latin American legal systems face structural challenges regarding the ethical training of their lawyers, the overcoming of which is key to legitimizing professional practice. One of the most pointed out problems is the curricular marginalization of ethics in the law career. Numerous curricula give professional ethics a secondary status, often as an elective course or with a low workload, this transmits to students the implicit message that it is a matter of minor importance. In Ecuador, a recent research revealed deficiencies in ethical training in the career of Law, due to the little importance given to this discipline in the curricular content, concluding on the urgency of more effective pedagogical methods in this area. (Alvarado, 2025)

This situation results in many graduates lacking the deontological sensitivity and the ability to resolve ethical dilemmas, which is necessary for responsible professional practice. It is evident in the transition from academia to forum, often a disconnect between theoretical training and applied deontology, young lawyers face real dilemmas such as procedural loyalty, conflicts of interest, confidentiality, pressure for results, without having acquired solid ethical tools during their formative stage. This is compounded by poor coordination between universities and bar associations on ethics. In Colombia, for example, the body in charge of professional discipline (Superior Council of the Judiciary) has historically been not very prestigious, and the legal profession has tended to evade discussion and research on professional ethics, reflecting a low level of internalization of deontology in legal culture. (Rogers, 2023) (Anzola, 2016)

The consequences of these training shortcomings transcend the academic field and directly affect the legitimacy of the practice of law in society. The absence of a solid ethical basis during training can result in questionable professional practices, ranging from the use of delaying tactics or collusion with corrupt practices, to dishonesty and respect due to parties and courts. It has been noted that many lawyers prioritize technical training over ethical training, which can lead to a degradation in professional integrity, and leave them unprepared to face complex ethical dilemmas. In fact, the non-negligible incidence of ethical infractions in the forum (acts contrary to procedural good faith, undisclosed conflicts of interest, misleading advertising of services, among others) feeds the public perception of a legal profession more concerned with profit than with justice. (Atlantic Council, 2024) (Cevallos & Alvarado, 2025)

Various indicators indicate that corruption and lack of ethics in the judicial system, where lawyers play an essential role, undermine citizen confidence in justice. These behaviors erode legitimacy, to the point that it is considered imperative to strengthen ethics in a holistic way to combat corruption and improve public confidence in justice. Meanwhile, the lack of comprehensive ethical training is not only an academic problem, but also a factor that affects the crisis of legitimacy that the legal professions in Latin America are going through, where broad sectors of citizens perceive lawyers and judges as part of a system that is not very transparent and far from the values of justice and public service. (Pedersen & Johannsen, 2023)

Contrary to what might be expected given the seriousness of the problem, there is a lack of comprehensive studies that jointly address the relationship between ethical legal education and the professional legitimacy of the lawyer in Latin America. Traditional legal literature in the region has tended to compartmentalize these issues, on the one hand, there is an abundance of analyses on reforms to the teaching of law focused on content or methods, but without emphasis on ethics and, on the other, works on professional deontology or disciplinary responsibility, generally disconnected from the educational field. There is little research that articulates both levels, that is, university education and professional practice, examining how the first influences the ethical quality and legitimacy of the second. It has been stated that the field of professional ethics of the lawyer is perhaps one of the least explored by the legal academy, with few and very basic works.

Although in recent years case studies and surveys have begun to emerge (for example, on the students' perception of the need for more ethics in the curriculum), the lack of a comparative and panoramic vision that links the training shortcomings with the way in which it is developed in practice, because without sufficient evidence and also academic reflection tends to be little more than cosmetic or reactive. The Latin American legal-pedagogical doctrine does not have a strong theoretical body on ethical legal education in comparison to that in the Anglo-Saxon world, likewise with relative scarcity the regulations in the field of professional ethics are systematized between the different countries through the prism of education, for example with studies that confront, how codes of ethics, bar association laws, or accreditation standards address or ignore continuing ethics education. This academic gap justifies the relevance of this study, requiring filling the gap by integrating dispersed doctrinal, normative and empirical perspectives, in order to better understand the problem and guide possible solutions. In other words, it is necessary to connect the blind spots between legal education and the legitimacy of the lawyer, providing comparative evidence that illuminates where current approaches have failed and how ethics training could be reoriented to achieve a positive impact on the legal profession and its social reputation.

Against this background, the main objective of this article is to critically and comprehensively analyze the ethical training of lawyers in contemporary Latin American legal education, and its impact on the legitimacy of the professional practice of law. It is a study of a doctrinal, normative and comparative nature, which examines the relevant legal and deontological provisions (in countries such as Peru, Mexico, Argentina and Colombia), in the light of legal theory and current educational trends. Ultimately, the article seeks to critically reflect on the reforms necessary to strengthen the teaching of legal ethics, both in substantive content and in pedagogical methodologies, and on how these changes can contribute to improving the legitimacy of the lawyer in society. Far from proposing simplistic solutions, a contextual and multidimensional view will be adopted, aware that professional ethics is not exhausted in the theory taught in the classroom, but it does find its most fertile base or, on the contrary, its origin of fragility.

In terms of academic contribution, in more general terms, this research contributes to the strengthening of the rule of law in Latin American contexts. A well-functioning rule of law is not only based on the existence of good laws and good institutions, but also on the existence of legal professionals (lawyers, judges, prosecutors) with high professional ethics and who are committed to the public interest. By working on the ethical training of the lawyer and the legitimacy of the lawyer's conduct, the article offers inputs for public policies that seek to recover the trust of citizens in justice itself. Giving reason to the postulate that ethics and integrity in the justice system, including the legal profession, will help combat corruption and strengthen public confidence in justice. In this sense, the findings and reflections that have been presented in this work are important not only for academics and educators, but also for bar associations, university authorities, accreditation bodies and policymakers who seek an intermediate, more transparent and more legitimate justice.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research was based on a qualitative approach, being doctrinal, normative and comparative, oriented to the critical study of the ethical training of the lawyer with respect to current legal education and its formalization in the legitimacy of the professional practice of law in Latin American legal systems. The methodological strategy was based on documentary analysis as the main technique. The study was developed from three interrelated levels of sources. First, a doctrinal analysis of recent scientific literature, corresponding to the period 2019–2026, published in English and Spanish in indexed academic journals, was carried out. This review focused on three thematic axes: the ethical training of lawyers, professional ethics in the practice of law and the crisis of legitimacy of the legal profession. The choice of articles responded to criteria of thematic relevance, topicality, academic impact and analytical depth, prioritizing those inquiries that critically addressed the ethical challenges of contemporary legal practice.

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Secondly, a normative analysis of the legal frameworks that regulate both higher education and the professional practice of law in Peru, Colombia, Chile and Mexico was carried out. This analysis included a review of existing national higher education laws and of the lawyers' codes of professional ethics or equivalent disciplinary regimes in each country. The selection of these legal systems responded to the need to contrast diverse regulatory models within Latin America, allowing the identification of declarative, disciplinary and preventive approaches in the regulation of legal ethics. The analysis was oriented to examine how ethics is conceptualized normatively, what mechanisms are foreseen for its implementation and evaluation, and how its relationship with the legitimacy of professional practice is linked or omitted.

Thirdly, a curricular analysis was carried out based on the official curricula of the Law degree in public universities of high institutional relevance in each country: the National University of San Marcos (Peru), the National University of Colombia, the University of Chile and the National Autonomous University of Mexico. These cases were chosen for their historical, academic and formative weight within their respective legal education systems. The analysis focused on identifying the presence, location and treatment of ethical content in the curricula, considering whether ethics is addressed as an autonomous subject, as a transversal competence or implicitly through other training spaces.

The processing and systematization of the information was carried out using documentary analysis matrices designed specifically for this study. Thus, it was the matrices that made it possible to record in an orderly manner the analytical categories, the documents investigated, the aspects analyzed, the findings and analytical observations. Of course, these matrices do not appear in the article, but they constitute the methodological instrument that guaranteed the analysis is coherent.

The analytical procedure was developed sequentially, starting with an exploratory reading of the documents, followed by a process of thematic coding based on previously defined categories. Next, an interpretative analysis was carried out aimed at evidencing the patterns, convergences, divergences and omissions that could be relevant between the documents, which concluded in a comparative synthesis that considers the doctrinal, normative and curricular results. Likewise, the comparative approach was carried out transversally to the entire research and not as a single moment.

All the materials analyzed in this research are public and open access sources. This is true of legislation, ethical-professional codes, institutional curricula and scientific literature. In this sense, quantitative databases were not developed, nor were computer codes used. Desk analysis matrices are available upon reasonable request by the authors.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Ethical training of lawyers in contemporary legal literature

Recent doctrinal studies coincide in pointing out deficiencies in the ethical training taught in law schools. A pattern of teaching reduced to normative and isolated content is identified, with little connection between academic theory and professional practice, which makes it difficult for future lawyers to internalize values. He criticizes the fact that legal ethics does not have a clear mission in the curriculum and proposes incorporating it into a larger community of institutional practice, instead of limiting the discussion of ethics to the non-applied theoretical course. Thus, it highlights the need to insert applied ethics in the teaching of law that integrates the socio-political issues of professional practice with classroom training. This makes visible that they give prominence to compliance with rules on substantive ethical deliberation. In both cases, there is agreement that current legal education favors a formalistic conception of ethics centered on norms/sanctions over a substantive conception guided by principles and internal values of the lawyer. (Loacker, 2023) Rogers (2023) Traczykowski (2024)

On the other hand, some divergences or omissions are observed in the literature. While emphasizing the creation of a shared ethical culture between academia and the profession to overcome the current weak articulation, other authors propose specific solutions such as the incorporation of ethics specialists in the teaching staff to ensure that ethics has a preponderant place in training. There is consensus, however, that ethics should no longer be treated as a mere curricular add-on. The absence of comprehensive strategies in the traditional literature reveals an important omission. Meanwhile, contemporary literature coincides in diagnosing structural deficiencies in the ethical training of lawyers and, although it suggests various ways of improvement, they all point to the need to profoundly reformulate the teaching of ethics in order to align the professional identity of the lawyer with his or her social responsibility. Rogers (2023) (Traczykowski, 2024) (Wald, 2023)

These shortcomings reflect the need to rethink how ethics is incorporated into legal education. They maintain that ethics must be substantively integrated into the training of jurists, and not limited to an instrumental or peripheral content. In their study of law schools in Mexico, they argue that ethics guides correct decision-making and should permeate the institutional culture, proposing concrete actions to make it a palpable part of the curriculum and training practice of future lawyers. This recent academic perspective reinforces the findings of our matrix, requires ethics training to move from being an isolated course to a community of practice integrated into legal education. Torres & Gallardo (2023)

3.2. Normative regulation of ethical training in legal education

Higher education legislation in Latin America at the normative level, formally, although with disparate scopes, recognizes the importance of ethical training. Professional ethics enshrine several norms as part of the purposes of legal education; the Peruvian University Law requires university social responsibility and ethical principles in training, and the Colombian Law of Higher Education declared since 1992 comprehensive and ethical training as an essential purpose of universities, including making the teaching of professional ethics mandatory in all programs. The recent General Law of Higher Education of Mexico, in the same way, explicitly incorporates values such as honesty, justice and integrity among the guiding criteria of the educational system, aimed at preventing corruption and training professionals with an ethical and supportive conscience. These provisions show a rhetorical convergence around ethics, the legal frameworks emphasize, at least on paper, that legal training to fulfill its social function must include ethical components. (Law No. 30220, 2014) (Law 30, 1992) (General Law of Higher Education, 2021)

However, important divergences and gaps emerge in the effectiveness of such regulations. Some legislations are purely declarative, Law 30 of 1992 in Colombia, despite instituting ethics as mandatory, does not develop criteria on content, methodology or evaluation of this training, delegating these details to university autonomy. This regulatory vacuum has led to heterogeneous and unequal implementations among faculties, diluting the real impact of ethics on the graduate's profile. In other cases, the omission is more evident, Chile's Law 21.091 (2018) reformed higher education without explicitly mentioning ethical training in the curricula, prioritizing aspects of quality and inclusion, but leaving the ethical dimension entirely subordinate to the institutions. The Mexican regulations, which are even richer in value, maintain a general and programmatic tone whose effectiveness depends on complementary educational policies. In short, although there is a normative consensus on the relevance of ethics in legal education, the differences in specificity and enforceability of these provisions and the lack of mechanisms for their uniform application constitute omissions that limit their practical impact on the ethical training of lawyers and, therefore, on the strengthening of the legitimacy of the profession. (Law No. 21,091 on Higher Education, 2018) (General Law of Higher Education, 2021)

In this scenario, the literature on higher education confirms that normative mandates alone do not ensure effective ethical training. A comparative study carried out in universities in Spain points out

that, although regulation imposes ethical values in university education, both teachers and students perceive a lack of real ethical training in the study programs. Teachers agree on the need to provide ethical training, but warn that it is not sufficiently materialized in the curriculum; In the same way, students recognize that they are unaware of the ethical competencies expected in their training. In view of this gap, it is recommended to explicitly incorporate ethical competencies into the curricula of all careers and make them visible and understandable to the academic community. These conclusions reinforce the findings of this study, without clear and enforceable guidelines, the inclusion of ethics in legal education is left to institutional chance, underlining the urgency of more forceful educational policies to ensure that ethics training is a transversal and evaluated component in law schools. (Jerónimo et al., 2023)

3.3. Professional ethics and regulatory models of the practice of law

The regulatory models of the lawyer's professional ethics in Latin America show contrasting patterns between traditional sanctioning approaches and more recent preventive-substantive approaches. On the one hand, regulations such as the Peruvian Lawyer's Code of Ethics (2023) and the Colombian disciplinary regime (Law 1123, 2007) mainly conceive ethics as a system of duties and prohibitions whose non-compliance triggers institutional sanctions. In these classic schemes, professional ethics is structured as a set of external rules of conduct that the lawyer must abide by, relating to the treatment of the client, the other party, the courts and society; under threat of punishment for infraction. The training function is thus reduced to ex post compliance with rules, evidencing a formalistic conception of ethics focused on the control and correction of behaviors. This model is reinforced by state or union discipline and control over the lawyer, but it tends to associate ethics more with fear of punishment than with personal conviction, moral deliberation or professional identity. (Law 1123, 2007; Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2023)

On the other hand, there is a shift towards normative models with a substantive and preventive horizon, exemplified by the most recent codes of ethics in Chile and Mexico. The Code of Ethics of the Chilean Bar Association extends the scope of professional ethics, beyond the lawyer-client relationship, emphasizing duties towards society, justice and the rule of law; incorporating principles of dignity, public trust and professional honor, as well as preventive obligations (such as avoiding conflicts of interest and rejecting matters contrary to ethical duties). Similarly, the Mexican Code of Professional Ethics configures the lawyer as a servant of justice, subordinating economic profit to social duty, and proactively imposes obligations such as abstaining from cases that compromise their moral integrity, renouncing the defense if the client incurs in illegalities and providing free legal assistance to the vulnerable. These norms, unlike the sanctioning model, conceive ethics as a guiding framework for professional practice, promoting a lawyer self-regulated by his conscience and with the common good committed. The divergence between the two approaches is clear, while the first seeks to control conduct through punitive rules, the second aspires to form internal ethical criteria in the lawyer that guide his actions before the fault occurs. (Code of Professional Ethics., 2011) (Code of Professional Ethics, 2017)

Despite these differences, common omissions persist in the different regulatory models. Neither the traditional sanctioning codes nor the most progressive codes guarantee by themselves the internalization of ethical values in the daily practice of the lawyer. It points out that an overreliance on formal norms may be insufficient in the face of contemporary ethical challenges; for example, the mere observance of rules of conduct does not ensure the lawyer's active commitment to social justice or equitable access to justice. The most advanced codes, likewise, although they declare laudable principles, lack mechanisms to link these principles with the continuous training of the professional. None of the models analyzed explicitly integrates professional ethics with undergraduate or graduate legal education; that is, regulation and pedagogy operate unrelated. This disconnect implies that the responsibility for developing a strong professional ethos rests almost entirely on the individual will of

the lawyer or on the informal culture of the profession, which is a major limitation. In this sense, the current regulatory models converge in setting ethical standards for the practice of law, but they diverge in their philosophy (external coercion vs. internal conviction), and they all share the pending challenge of articulating with educational training to achieve a professional ethics that is authentically incorporated and legitimizes legal work. Wald (2023)

The need to evolve towards more substantive ethical models is highlighted by recent doctrine. , analyze disciplinary cases in Argentina and argue that deontological rules should be updated with a perspective of human rights, technological transformation and the right of access to justice, reorienting the lawyer's activity towards his or her social function. They seek to rethink the lawyer as a guarantor of constitutional democracy, social peace or the vulnerable, which leads them to maintain that codes of ethics must go beyond the mere enumeration of faults to promote them. They also emphasize the teaching of Law as responsible for training professionals who can take charge of their public responsibility, thus closing the gap between the ethics that are declared and the ethics that are practiced. This perspective also converges with the results of this research, the most legitimate regulatory models will be those that, in addition to sanctioning misconduct, help to promote an internal ethics of the legal profession, in accordance with social expectations of integrity and service to justice. Bruzzone & Ochoa (2025)

3.4. Ethical training in law curricula

The analysis of various curricula of law schools in the region shows that, although it is present, ethical training tends to appear in a fragmentary and early way, rather than as a continuous transversal axis. Ethics is in many cases limited to one or two initial courses of a general or philosophical nature, without continuity in the advanced cycles of the career. At the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos (Peru) the plan includes "Citizen Ethics" as a compulsory first-year subject and another elective subject on public ethics, but lacks a specific course on legal deontology in the following years. Similarly, the University of Chile offers Moral Philosophy or other humanistic courses in the first semesters, but does not incorporate any compulsory subjects dedicated exclusively to the professional ethics of the lawyer along the grid. (Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, 2018) (Universidad de Chile, 2021)

Nor is there a subject of legal ethics in the National University of Colombia in the compulsory nucleus; the teaching of values in courses such as Human Rights, Legal Sociology or in the practice of the Clinic is implicit, without a formal explication in the profile of graduates of ethical competencies. On the other hand, a model predominates where the ethical sphere is embroidered as a complementary content at the beginning of the training or in a diffuse way in practical spaces, leaving an illusion that deliberately integrates ethical reflection throughout the formative process. This dissociated curricular structure suggests that ethical internalization depends more on personal initiatives and isolated experiences than on systematic educational planning, which limits the solidity of the ethical training of the future lawyer. (National University of Colombia, 2008)

However, there are curricular experiences that demonstrate a greater degree of institutionalization of ethics in the teaching of Law, pointing to a difference with respect to the general pattern. The case of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) stands out, whose curriculum contains the subject "Professional Ethics of the Jurist" as mandatory in the second semester, this means that it recognizes ethics as a concrete training component from the initial stages of the undergraduate degree. In addition, through related compulsory courses, UNAM reinforces the ethical dimension (Culture of Legality, Human Rights) and electives on topics such as anti-corruption or bioethics, which shows a broader integration of ethical values at different stages of the career. He contrasts this approach with that of universities where ethics is merely optional or incidental, highlighting a gap in curricular commitment to professional ethics. (National Autonomous University of Mexico, 2019)

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However, it is observed even in advanced models such as the Mexican one, that most of the ethical contents are concentrated in the first years, without guaranteeing a systematic obligatory progression during legal specialization. The lack of an explicit transversal axis, which connects ethics with all the areas of Law studied, implies that, beyond the dedicated courses, the responsibility of integrating ethical considerations in the training in the interpretation of each educator or in the student himself continues to fall. Thus, the curricular comparison shows the convergences, in relation to the minimal presence of ethics in the mesh, since no one completely leaves it aside, but also the divergences, with regard to the depth and continuity of such teaching. The majority regional tendency still subordinates ethics to the background, a fact that implies losing a good opportunity to consistently cement professional ethical awareness before the lawyer faces real-world situations in the exercise of his profession and the consequent repercussions on its legitimacy.

The above curricular findings coincide with pedagogical studies that show deficiencies in the teaching of ethics in Law and advocate innovative methodologies to correct them. Analyzing the Ecuadorian context, it reports that traditional methodologies have weaknesses and that in most of the country's law schools little importance is given to ethics within the content at the curricular level. Their results showed that this area of training is insufficient, and recommends the implementation of more dynamic strategies connected to practical reality for the teaching of professional values. He insists on the need to incorporate ethics in a transversal way and with active methodologies (analysis of real cases, ethics clinics or simulations) that involve students in the resolution of specific ethical dilemmas. This proposal fully coincides with the panorama described here, in order to overcome the existing fragmentation, the faculties must make ethics an integrative axis, ensuring its implementation throughout the curriculum through diverse subjects and training experiences. Only in this way will ethical training cease to be a marginal component and become a constituent part of the graduate profile of the contemporary lawyer. Alvarado (2025)

3.4. Ethical training and the crisis of legitimacy of professional practice

The findings suggest that the crisis of legitimacy of the legal profession is closely linked to deficiencies in ethical training at both the educational and regulatory levels. Various sources agree that public trust in lawyers has been eroded due to the gap between the ethical values proclaimed by the profession and the observed conduct in practice. This deterioration of public trust is not only due to individual cases of malpractice, but to structural factors, according to , have stressed the ethos of the lawyer, the commodification of the legal practice and the pressure for profitability, displacing ideals of public service by instrumental logics. Similarly, it documents a professional malaise originating in the dissonance between the personal ethics of many lawyers and the demands of a professional ethic reduced to meeting market goals or unilateral loyalties to the client. Such dynamics undermine the moral authority of the profession and weaken the social justification of the lawyer's role, manifesting itself in perceptions of corruption, lack of integrity, and divorce from justice. Faced with this diagnosis, institutional responses are emerging that seek to tackle the crisis, promoting, for example, continuous training in values of diversity, inclusion and service for lawyers already qualified, with a view to restoring citizen confidence. Likewise, some sectors of the profession advocate reorienting the rules of conduct towards a clearer commitment to the public interest, recognizing that traditional ethical norms focused on the attorney-client relationship are insufficient in the face of current social demands. Both the doctrine and the practical reforms as a whole, coincide in the imperative of reinforcing the ethical dimension to recover the lost legitimacy, considering that a solid lawyer trained in values and focused on the service of justice is seen as a necessary condition for society to regain confidence in the Law. (Anzola, 2019; Heery & Hughes, 2025) Loacker (2023) Anzola (2019) (Heery & Hughes, 2025) (Wald, 2023)

However, approaches to confronting this crisis of legitimacy vary and present tensions with each other. One school of opinion emphasizes normative and disciplinary solutions, toughening and

enforcing codes of ethics, making visible sanctions for those who violate duties (for example, implementing public registries of sanctioned lawyers) and strengthening external control over the profession, all to demonstrate to the public that responsibility is demanded and professional practice is purified. This reactive approach seeks to legitimize the lawyer through guarantees of punishment for unethical behavior. On the other hand, another perspective privileges a preventive and formative strategy, proposing that legitimacy be rebuilt from the ground up, instilling in future lawyers a solid public ethic during their university training and promoting a professional culture oriented to the common good. Under this vision, initiatives such as including mandatory ethics subjects, clinical methodologies with an emphasis on values, ethical mentoring, and professional identity development are especially important to align the motivations and behaviors of lawyers with social expectations of justice and probity. The divergence between the sanctioning and educational approaches has not been fully resolved in Latin American practice, and constitutes in itself part of the problem, the lack of articulation between professional ethical control mechanisms and ethical training in the classroom weakens the overall effectiveness of both approaches. In the current situation, codes of conduct and ethics courses operate in parallel, when greater interaction (for example, feeding back into the curriculum with the experiences of the disciplinary regime, or vice versa) could generate synergies to address the crisis of confidence. Thus, the legitimacy of the professional practice of law is revealed as a multifactorial phenomenon that requires both a strengthening of ethics *ex ante*, through education and professional culture, and a coherent system of *ex post* responsibility. The absence of any of these elements undermines the credibility of the profession, while their integration could substantially strengthen the relationship between the legal profession and society. (Law 1123, 2007; Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2023) (Loacker, 2023; Rogers, 2023)

The connection between ethical training and professional legitimacy is supported by recent empirical studies. , researching law students in Ecuador, found that 89% of them consider it important to include professional ethics as a mandatory subject in the curriculum, and 79% consider it necessary to have more ethical training during their career. These reflections are closely related to the concern about public trust, the authors warn that the lack of ethical knowledge can lead to making decisions that are not correct and weaken society's trust in the legal system. They suggest strengthening ethics education by formalizing it in the curriculum in order to strengthen the moral integrity of the lawyers of the future. They argue that this remedy would not only reverse the quality of professional practice, but would also raise public confidence in the legal profession, as it would guarantee that lawyers who obtain their qualifications do so with a strong ethical conscience and a commitment to social responsibility. In short, facing the crisis of legitimacy of the legal profession inexorably implies reforming ethical training, a legal education that is based on the teaching of values of service, honesty and social justice is essential for the legal profession to recover its prestige and credibility in the eyes of the public. Alvarado & Cevallos (2025)

4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis allows us to conclude that the ethical training of the lawyer constitutes an essential pillar for the legitimacy of the professional practice of law in Latin American legal systems. Although there is a broad doctrinal and normative consensus on the importance of professional ethics, the results show a persistent gap between its formal recognition and its effective implementation in legal education and in the regulation of professional practice. This disconnection contributes to weakening public confidence in the legal profession and reinforcing the perception of a profession that is oriented more towards instrumental compliance with rules than in itself at the service of the public interest and justice.

The comparative study shows that both the regulatory frameworks of higher education and the codes of professional ethics have the tendency to address ethics in a fragmentary way and, in many cases, with a predominance of sanctions. Added to this is a curricular structure that relegates ethical training to isolated or early courses, without continuity or transversality throughout the law career. This limits

the internalization of ethical values and the ability of future lawyers to face complex dilemmas in professional practice, evidencing the need to overcome merely declarative approaches and ex post control.

Consequently, the legitimacy of the professional practice of law cannot be strengthened only through disciplinary mechanisms, but requires a comprehensive strategy focused on deontological training. It is essential to reorient curricula towards models that integrate ethics as a transversal training axis, articulating substantive contents, active methodologies and a greater link between universities, professional associations and regulatory bodies. Only through solid, sustained and coherent ethical training will it be possible to contribute to the construction of a legal profession committed to democratic values, human rights and the strengthening of the rule of law in Latin America.

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