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DISCOURSES ON QUALITY ASSURANCE: A CRITIQUE OF THEIR ROLE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

Discursos sobre garantía de calidad: una crítica de su papel en la construcción del Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to critically examine the influence of the discourse on quality assurance in shaping the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). By acknowledging that the Bologna Process has utilized quality as a driving force behind several reforms, this article delves into the analysis of the narratives that have emerged during

this process and the policies it has engendered. Through this exploration, the paper highlights the challenges encountered in defining the concept of educational quality within the framework of converging European higher education systems. On one hand, our investigation identifies a series of issues that derive from granting excessive autonomy to quality assurance agencies. This predicament arises from a transformation in the state model, propelled by the rationale of neoliberal governance and the adoption of New Public Management principles, which redefines the landscape of public administration. On the other hand, our analysis delves into the intricacies of trying to define the true essence of educational quality—an elusive notion that lacks clarity and resists straightforward conceptualization. Given its polysemic nature, the concept of educational quality becomes inherently contestable and is perpetually entangled in debates and revisions. The paper concludes by examining how this emerging ‘culture of quality’, prevalent in the European Higher Education context, has significantly influenced the perception of universities and the research practices of academic faculty. Within this context, our analysis highlights that any evaluation of teaching and research quality is informed by a framework that guides scientific and theoretical endeavours. In particular, and from the perspective of current knowledge society and economy, such a framework has increasingly taken on an inherently *economic* nature.

Keywords: quality of education; educational policy; continuous assessment; evaluation criteria; crisis of education; educational reform.

RESUMEN

El propósito de este texto es analizar el papel que el discurso sobre la garantía de calidad ha tenido en la edificación del Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior (EEES). Partiendo de la constatación de que el Proceso de Bolonia ha utilizado a la calidad para imponer un cierto número de reformas, el artículo explora, mediante el análisis de los discursos emergidos a lo largo de este proceso y del contenido de las políticas impulsadas por este, las dificultades que, en el marco de convergencia de los sistemas de educación superior europeos, es posible hallar en la noción de calidad educativa. Por un lado, nuestra investigación nos conduce a una serie de problemas ligados al peligro de la excesiva autonomía de las agencias de garantía de la calidad. Dicho problema es resultado de un cambio de modelo de Estado, impulsado por la racionalidad de gobierno neoliberal, y una nueva manera de entender la gestión pública (la Nueva Gestión Pública). Por otro lado, nuestro análisis explora la dificultad de saber en qué consiste efectivamente la noción de calidad educativa, algo que, como se verá con detenimiento, no está nada claro. En efecto, al ser un término polisémico y de difícil conceptualización, esta noción no puede ser más que una categoría intrínsecamente contestable, un término en permanente disputa y reconsideración.

El artículo concluye analizando cómo esta nueva “cultura de la calidad”, tan extendida en el área de Educación Superior Europea, ha ayudado a transformar tanto la concepción de la Universidad como las prácticas investigadoras del profesorado

universitario. En tal sentido, nuestro análisis advierte que no existe criterio de calidad docente e investigadora posible sin una pauta que guíe el quehacer científico y teórico. Y que esa pauta es, en el actual escenario de la sociedad y las economías del conocimiento, una pauta básicamente *económica*.

Palabras clave: calidad de la educación; política de la educación; evaluación continua; criterio de evaluación; crisis de la educación; reforma educativa.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the outset of the current century, which has been significantly shaped by economic, political, and social restructuring following the Lisbon Agenda (European Council, 2000), Europe has witnessed two crucial processes of 'harmonization' (Valle, 2014) in the realm of education: the Bologna Process, targeting Higher Education, and the Copenhagen Process, focused on Vocational Training. Both initiatives aimed to foster European cooperation and convergence in higher education systems (Matarranz, 2021).

The creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) as an outcome of the Bologna Process represents a milestone as the first direct action taken by the European Union in the sphere of higher education policy, transcending multi-year programs such as the renowned Erasmus initiative (Carrasco, 2021). The roots of this development can be traced back to the Sorbonne Declaration (1998), a pivotal gathering in Paris where ministers signed a 'Joint declaration on harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system'. This declaration, as evident from its opening paragraphs, sought to elevate the role of European universities in fostering knowledge, intellectual advancement, and cultural enrichment across the continent.

The Sorbonne Declaration, therefore, marked the inception of one of the most ambitious undertakings in European education. This visionary project aimed, in principle, to create 'a unique space for higher education students in Europe, characterized by excellence in teaching and research' (Matarranz, 2021, p. 155).

One year after the Paris meeting, in June 1999, the Bologna Declaration (1999) was signed. Initially subscribed to by 29 countries, this declaration laid the foundation for the construction of the EHEA based on the following key objectives or elements:

- The adoption of an easily readable and comparable system of qualifications, including the introduction of a Diploma Supplement to enhance the employability of European citizens and the competitiveness of their higher education system.
- The implementation of a common two-level university education system: Bachelor's (first cycle) and Master's (second cycle) studies.

- The establishment of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).
- The removal of obstacles to ensure free mobility for students, academic staff, and administrative personnel.
- The promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance, aiming to design comparable criteria and methodologies.
- The encouragement of the European dimension in higher education.

These elements or objectives, pursued through the Bologna Process, reflect the recognition that the 21st century presents a new and dynamic scenario: that of the global society, characterized by increased labor-market mobility and the rapid dissemination of knowledge, and that of the knowledge society, where research and education are recognized as key drivers of economic growth and competitiveness.

Consequently, the Bologna Process addressed the pressing need for greater compatibility, comparability, and internationalization of European higher education systems in our competitive and globalized society (Carrasco, 2021). To achieve these goals, participating countries agreed to hold biennial follow-up meetings to analyse challenges, assess progress, and chart future directions. As we will soon observe, the discourse on quality assurance played a pivotal role in legitimizing the comprehensive process of reforms.

2. QUALITY AS A LEGITIMATION ELEMENT OF THE EHEA

Since the inception of the Bologna Process, the concept of quality (or, more precisely, the discourse on its assurance) has emerged as a pivotal tool in shaping the EHEA. As early as the Berlin meeting in 2003, the second gathering after the Bologna Declaration (1999), it was highlighted that developing 'shared criteria and methodologies on quality assurance' was of utmost importance, given that 'the quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area' (Berlin Communiqué, 2003, p. 3).

During this meeting, it was established that by 2005 the quality assurance systems of member states should encompass the following elements: defining the responsibilities of bodies and institutions involved, conducting program or institutional assessments, implementing accreditation, certification, or similar processes, encouraging international participation, and fostering cooperation and networking (ibid., p. 3).

Furthermore, the ministers responsible for higher education invited the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) to develop a comprehensive set of guidelines, procedures, and evaluation systems for quality assurance, including the accreditation of agencies or bodies.

The European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education was established in 2000 with the primary aim of promoting cooperation at the European level in the field of quality assurance in higher education. Four years later, it morphed into what is now known as ENQA, with the overarching objective of contributing to the maintenance and enhancement of the quality of European higher education while serving as a driving force for the advancement of quality assurance across all signatory countries of the Bologna Process (as stated on its website: <https://www.enqa.eu/about-enqa/>).

ENQA's most substantial contribution to the EHEA is the formulation of the document titled 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area'. This seminal document, drafted in 2005 following the Bergen ministerial conference, was formally approved on May 14, 2015, during the Yerevan meeting. The final text emerged from a 'thoughtful process of reflection and public consultation throughout the European Higher Education Area' which began in late 2010 through the MAP-ESG Project. This project entailed an in-depth analysis of the interpretation and implementation of the ESG by agencies and higher education institutions within member countries (ESG, 2015, p. 3).

According to the ENQA document, the ESG are 'a comprehensive set of criteria and guidelines for ensuring quality in higher education' (Ibid, p. 8). Their primary function is to provide 'European-level criteria against which quality assurance agencies and their activities are evaluated' (Ibid, p. 10)¹. This is of paramount importance as it ensures that the national quality assurance agencies within the EHEA adhere to a common set of principles, while allowing flexibility in adapting their processes and procedures to align with their specific objectives and contextual considerations.

Within its scope of competencies, ANECA is responsible for the evaluation of the following²:

- University programs leading to the award of official and nationally recognized degrees.
- The qualifications and merits of candidates applying for teaching positions and contracted faculty roles at universities.
- Activities encompassing teaching, research, knowledge transfer, and management of academic and research staff at universities, as well as tenure-track researchers in Public Research Institutions.

1. National agencies that seek to become part of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) are required to undergo an external review process following the criteria outlined in the ESG. Similarly, when applying for membership to ENQA, agencies must also go through a rigorous evaluation based on the ESG criteria.

2. <https://www.aneca.es/aneca>

- University institutions and centres.
- Foreign university degrees through processes of recognition or equivalence.
- The alignment of national university degrees issued prior to RD 1393/2007 with the Spanish Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (MECES).

Additionally, ANECA acts as an evaluation body for periodic competitive calls by the General Secretary of Universities and for processes requiring peer assessment of academic achievements. The Agency's activities and procedures undergo external evaluation and audit every five years by ENQA, ensuring its inclusion in the EQAR. These procedures adhere to the guidelines set forth in the aforementioned ENQA document.

3. QUALITY: A KEY POLICY IN THE EHEA

At the outset, it is crucial to acknowledge that, at least in principle, no reasonable person would oppose the pursuit of quality, especially in the domain of education. Moreover, it is worth highlighting that the concept of quality has always been, in one form or another, an integral part of academic endeavours. The 'good work' within academic disciplines (and can we not consider this as quality?) has consistently been intertwined with a 'rigorous adherence to the internal theoretical demands imposed by the scientific discipline under consideration in each specific case' (Fernández & Alegre, 2004, p. 237). This ethos has undoubtedly been prevalent within the university context.

Let us consider an illustrative example. What does it truly mean to be a proficient pedagogue? It primarily involves subjecting oneself to the inherent theoretical demands of pedagogy and conducting a rigorous and in-depth analysis of the subject matter at hand. However, assessing the quality of pedagogical research becomes arduous for someone lacking knowledge in the field of pedagogy. Unless, of course, the evaluation criterion is, as is often the case, the 'impact' of the publication venue. Alternatively, in the context of assessing and accrediting personal merits, the number of scientific articles published by the pedagogue in renowned databases like Web of Science or Scopus becomes pivotal. We shall delve further into these considerations later.

Thus, the pertinent question emerges: what has prompted the current interest in incessantly evaluating the quality of academic endeavours? What underlies the genesis of this policy?

For now, let us set aside these inquiries and focus on the discourse on quality assurance. In the Spanish context, a quantitative study (Matarranz, 2021) has identified the most frequently employed words over the past twenty years of ministerial meetings within the EHEA. Utilizing the Atlas.ti analysis program, this study excludes certain linguistic elements, such as prepositions or articles, that lack substantive

significance. The outcomes of this analysis carry significant implications for our reflections.

Beyond the understandable repetition of certain terms without substantial interest - education, Europe, Bologna, area, institutions, EHEA, etc. - the words most recurrently utilized throughout the entire process are as follows (in order of frequency): student/s (154), learning (150), quality (138), development (126), recognition (119), qualification (106) (Ibid, p. 163).

As discernible from the analysis, the term 'quality' is among the most frequently employed and central terms throughout the Bologna Process. This, of course, is not a mere coincidence.

In every ministerial gathering, the question of quality emerges, both explicitly and implicitly, as 'the aspiration to enhance the quality of tertiary education across the European Higher Education Area is a fundamental element within the Bologna Process' (European Commission, 2015, p. 85) (Matarranz, 2021, p. 165).

While this aspiration is undoubtedly legitimate, it is not without its challenges. In the subsequent discussion, we shall concentrate on two of them.

4. ON THE DANGER OF EXCESSIVE AUTONOMY OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES (FIRST PROBLEM)

Over the past few decades, a considerable share of the state's responsibility for implementing, controlling, and regulating public policies has been delegated to 'autonomous' bodies, independent entities operating outside the central administration (Dardot & Laval, 2013; Jones, 1993). This transformation in public governance, known as the New Public Management, gained traction in the 1980s as a result of a shift in the state's model driven by neoliberal rationality (Brown, 2015). In this context of state-driven economic restructuring under the influence of neoliberalism, the emergence of independent quality assurance agencies for higher education becomes profoundly significant. Furthermore, the ongoing international convergence of higher education systems, influenced by the process of commercialization, adds another layer of complexity³.

One defining characteristic of the neoliberal state is its detachment, at least to some extent, from direct provision of public services. In the framework of New Public Management, this task is devolved to private entities or autonomous public

3. While agencies such as ANECA operate as autonomous bodies, this does not mean that they are entirely disconnected from the state and its regulatory functions. The concept of agency autonomy aims to prevent them from becoming mere advocates for the universities they oversee, a phenomenon known as regulatory capture.

bodies, such as quality assurance agencies. Within the context of accountability policies, these agencies are instrumentalized by the neoliberal state to evaluate, supervise, and accredit - essentially, to regulate - the quality of Higher Education Institutions (Cannizzo, 2015; Verger, 2013). However, as we will show, this approach is not without its dangers.

As highlighted by Pedró (2021), two primary justifications underlie the creation of agencies, i.e., autonomous regulatory bodies within the public sector. Both justifications are linked to the paradigm shift in the state driven by neoliberal rationality. Firstly, agencies are believed to facilitate the separation of politics from administration, theoretically enhancing credibility. Secondly, agencies are seen as mechanisms to attain greater specialization, which, within the realm of New Public Management, translates into increased efficiency and effectiveness. Nevertheless, both assertions rest on assumptions and require closer examination.

The era of global proliferation of the independent agency model coincides, not by chance, with the rise of neoliberalism in the mid-1980s. The prominence of this model is intricately linked to the state's withdrawal from direct provision and regulation of public services. As globalization took hold in the 1990s, this type of agency extended its reach dramatically, encompassing nearly all sectors and public services. This era witnessed an unprecedented 'agencification fever' (Pedró, 2021, p. 134).

In the contemporary landscape, agencies for ensuring the quality of higher education have become widespread across the world, taking on crucial roles in evaluating, supervising, and accrediting Higher Education Institutions. In the European context, the Bologna Process led to a governance model for quality assurance agencies characterized by their independence from political influence and the institutions they oversee: the universities (ESG, 2015).

While various governance approaches exist within the diverse realm of quality assurance agencies, it is important to note that there is currently a strong convergence process in 'organizational structure' that states and regions utilize to ensure higher education quality. However, this convergence is not solely organizational; it also extends to 'methodological' aspects. As Pedró (2021) emphasizes, the majority of agencies in the higher education sector predominantly employ four methods for quality review: self-assessment, peer review, external review, and audits. The choice of these methods depends on factors such as the perceived quality issues, implicit quality definitions, and the primary objectives of the quality assurance process.

In addition to organizational and methodological convergence, there is another distinct aspect of convergence involving critical issues: political independence, accountability, and the increasing focus on learning outcomes.

Considering these three aspects, we conclude this section by highlighting a series of problems that hold significant relevance for our analysis (Pedró, 2021, pp. 147-149):

a) *Fragmentation and Discoordination*

The dominant model of co-governance agencies, established in the mid-1980s, can lead to fragmented and poorly coordinated policy instruments, although exceptions may exist. In the context of higher education, especially in countries with multiple agencies operating at the national level, agencification has resulted in significant fragmentation, leading to the coexistence of various evaluation mechanisms. This is evident in the case of the United Kingdom, where universities 'have been burdened with accommodating multiple site visits, providing data for diverse evaluation schemes and organizations, and supplying information to different entities' (p. 148).

b) *Weakening of the Political Core*

This second generic problem, tied to accountability (Cannizzo, 2015), is related to the challenge policymakers - who are ultimately responsible for formulating public policies - face in exerting the same level of control over 'autonomous' agencies as they do over their own ministerial departments. As Pedró (2021) points out, 'policy-makers may feel a loss of control, as the public holds them accountable for issues, while they are not supposed to interfere in agency activities' (Ibid).

Moreover, the increasing internationalization of higher education poses another aspect of the weakening of the political core. This internationalization is intertwined with the emergence of a global market and the growing influence of global private regulators, which are essentially profit-driven corporations, as observed in ranking producers. These private actors significantly impact universities' international reputation, gradually overshadowing the relevance of national quality assurance agencies, further contributing to the aforementioned weakening.

c) *Capacity of Agencies to Promote Real Quality Improvement in Higher Education*

Another challenge related to the agencification model pertains to the agencies' capacity to effect tangible, meaningful improvement in the quality of Higher Education Institutions (Pedró, 2021; Woodhouse, 2010). Additionally, a controversial issue is the sources of legitimacy for these agencies when proposing new quality standards, which may involve their participation in international networks (Paradise et al., 2009; Pedró, 2021). Furthermore, the present governance of universities

involves numerous stakeholders, complicating self-regulation in many respects. This is an outcome of the concept of governance, emphasizing ‘network governance’ (Brown, 2015).

d) *Institutional Fatigue*

Finally, another common problem of the agencification model, not exclusive to the educational domain, is institutional fatigue. This stems from what is commonly known as the ‘audit culture’ (Power, 2000), a practice influenced by business-oriented approaches. Institutional fatigue, in essence, denotes exhaustion resulting from the perpetual stress of continuous evaluation and the excessive increase in workload—an undesirable consequence of various efficiency, quality, and performance control mechanisms. Moreover, it is essential to acknowledge that in many instances, such practices may involve the private exercise of political power.

5. WHAT IS QUALITY IN EDUCATION? (SECOND PROBLEM)

If the first set of issues was concerned with the potential danger of granting excessive autonomy to quality assurance agencies, the second problem delves into the realm of theory: the challenge of truly understanding what constitutes educational quality. As we shall explore, this remains far from a straightforward matter.

The central question is: what does educational quality entail? When we refer to educational quality, what are we really discussing? Moreover, when it comes to higher education institutions, can we contemplate quality without considering the guiding principles of theoretical and scientific endeavours?⁴

The term ‘educational quality’ has gained immense significance in supranational educational policies over the last few decades, and this has not happened by mere coincidence. Interestingly, it was during the early 1990s, within the UNESCO-led *Education for All* movement, that this concept began to garner attention on the international stage (UNESCO, 1990). Since then, the matter of educational quality has occupied an undeniable position in the political agendas of Supranational Organizations, such as the OECD and the World Bank (OECD, 1992, 2012, 2019; Prieto & Manso, 2018; UNESCO, 2005; World Bank, 2007).

4. The definition of ‘quality’ provided by the RAE (Royal Spanish Academy) in its primary entry is purely formal: ‘Property or set of inherent characteristics of something that allows for the judgment of its value. *This fabric is of good quality*’. (<https://dle.rae.es/calidad>)

While the notion of educational quality has been widely embraced and globally adopted, its application has not been without criticism, chiefly due to its inherent ambiguity and lack of precise definition. Scholars, including Monarca, have aptly noted the fluid and elusive nature of this term, as it encompasses various interpretations and is often entangled in political disputes.⁵

In a similar vein, other scholarly works depict the notion of educational quality as a polysemic and contested term, one that defies clear delineation due to its varied interpretations from different perspectives on individuals and society (Gorostiaga et al., 2018; Gutiérrez & Jiménez, 2019; Sayed & Ahmed, 2015; Vailant & Rodríguez, 2018). Consequently, defining what educational quality exactly constitutes involves elucidating several interconnected aspects of education, such as the desired type of schools, the underlying values shaping its foundation, the prioritized pedagogical processes, and the links between educational quality and societal objectives (Ávila-Gómez, 2016). In essence, the meaning ascribed to educational quality depends heavily on the broader understanding of education, the intentions, goals, and functions assigned to it, and how they are tailored to specific subjects and contexts (Monarca, 2012). To assert that educational quality is self-evident would, therefore, be 'a peculiar and arbitrary way of attributing significance to a phenomenon of great complexity' (Monarca, 2018, p. 5). Furthermore, this approach may obscure its ethical and political dimensions, reducing the complex phenomenon to a mere technical and procedural exercise (Amigot & Martínez, 2013; Monarca, 2018).

Hence, despite its seemingly objective, neutral, and timeless appearance, the concept of quality inevitably involves a symbolic system where struggles and interests over the meaning of the 'social cosmos' and education intersect. Consequently, it is essential to inquire about the origin of the discourse on educational quality within the educational sphere and its dissemination through Supranational Organizations. As previously observed, this origin is intrinsically tied to a paradigm shift in the state's role and the ascendancy of a form of governance rooted in economic principles

5. Drawing on the insights of Laclau (1996), Monarca (2018) claims that educational quality evokes an elusive plenitude, a desirable yet elusive goal that binds the entire political community together, as they identify with this aspiration. Monarca suggests that quality occupies a place of fulfillment that, being absent, influences other educational discourses (Clarke, 2014; Colella & Díaz-Salazar, 2015), as it fuels the subjects' desire to attain it and justifies diverse forms of political intervention aimed at alleviating this sense of lack (Colella & Díaz-Salazar, 2015). According to Ávila-Gómez (2016), the notion of educational quality possesses significant discursive potency, resonating with the fundamental desires and aspirations of the citizenry concerning education. However, despite the fact that decisions are often made based on discourses related to quality in practice, it is acknowledged that a clear and unequivocal reference point for assessing quality is lacking (Gutiérrez & Jiménez, 2019).

(neoliberalism). Put differently, understanding the current notion of educational quality requires, at the very least, acknowledging its connection to the state's reform program (New Public Management) initiated by the logic of neoliberal governance in the 1980s (Monarca, 2018).

In the realm of higher education, where ongoing evaluation assumes a growing significance, *governing by numbers* (Saura & Caballero, 2021) prevalent in academic capitalism has driven a set of policies aimed at reshaping knowledge production modes and universities' functioning logics.⁶ These policies find expression primarily through university rankings and accountability-driven evaluations.

However, these new orientations of academic knowledge are not recent developments. In a well-known report by the World Bank (Johnstone et al., 1998), there was a call for countries to adopt market-driven models in their universities, where academics' salaries and economic incentives would be tied to their performance and productivity. This fact serves as a reminder that defining criteria for teaching and research quality is not possible without a guiding theoretical framework. And for several decades now, that framework has predominantly been economic in nature. It is perplexing that a philosopher, for example, might be prompted to fill out a report listing their patents (Morey, 2013). What kind of patents should be attributed to someone dedicated to philosophical research? More importantly, how does the 'public' dimension of knowledge fit into this entire scheme?

In the case of Spain, the establishment of ANECA, coinciding with the creation of the EHEA, aimed to implement accountability policies (Saura & Caballero, 2021). Alongside the well-known accreditation systems and incentives for scientific production, such as the research evaluation periods (*sexenios*), ANECA's primary task has been to evaluate the quality of university faculty based on quantitative parameters linked to knowledge production dynamics inherent in academic capitalism (Amigot & Martínez, 2013, 2015; Fernández & Alegre, 2004; Manzano, 2015; Saura & Bolívar, 2019; Saura & Caballero, 2021).⁷

6. The concept of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 2001) emerges from the interplay of knowledge generation and economic competition within the framework of a post-Fordist production logic. This dynamic fundamentally reshapes the role of the University. As highlighted by various scholars (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Saura & Caballero, 2021), knowledge generated within academia, especially knowledge that can be easily commercialized, has become a form of production aimed at advancing competitive logics on a global scale. This phenomenon is what is commonly known as 'knowledge economies' (Moos et al., 2019), a term that gained traction, particularly in Europe, from the late 1990s onwards.

7. Certainly, this is the exact purpose of ANECA, as outlined in Article 31.a. of the LOU: 'to assess the performance of the public service in higher university education and be accountable to society' (LOU, 2001, p. 25).

Thus, in the new landscape of knowledge economies and under the criteria and guidelines set forth by the EHEA, quality is defined as the way in which society ‘supervises’ (or ostensibly demands accountability from) the university, urging it to adapt to the ever-changing demands of the learning and knowledge society. This is how the universe of ‘quality’ is shaped.

While ongoing adaptation may seem feasible, the crucial question is not merely about feasibility, but rather about desirability: Is it prudent to continuously adapt the university to meet social demands? What does the term ‘social’ signify within the context of this analysis?⁸

As emphasized throughout this theoretical exploration, quality has become a pivotal aspect of the new role assigned to the university in knowledge society and economy. In the European context, the convergence of higher education systems has made enhancing quality a central concern, serving as a legitimizing element within the so-called ‘Bologna Process’. Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that contemplating the issue of educational quality necessitates grappling with a specific conception of human development, the aims, and the purpose of education. Moreover, in the particular case of the university, this exploration must also interrogate the guiding theoretical and scientific framework.

6. CONCLUSION

Throughout these pages, it has become evident that quality has played a pivotal role in the Bologna Process and the establishment of the EHEA. By becoming the cornerstone of the EHEA (Berlin Communiqué, 2003), this concept has facilitated the development of common criteria and the implementation of external evaluations. Indeed, thanks to quality, the majority of EHEA countries have introduced mandatory accreditation processes for both universities and official educational programs. This, coupled with the increasing presence of independent agencies and their accreditation reports, has given rise to a new ‘culture of quality’ (Matarranz, 2021). This cultural shift has had profound effects not only on how the university is perceived but also on the research practices of university faculty.⁹

8. In this sense, it is crucial to underscore that a central characteristic of neoliberalism is the ‘economization’ of spheres, activities, and subjects that were previously non-economic (Brown, 2015; Çalışkan & Callon, 2009).

9. Within the local context, there exists the Spanish Network of University Quality Agencies (REACU). This network, comprising ANECA and the quality agencies of different Autonomous Communities, aims to promote collaboration and establish common standards. Although beyond the scope of this paper, it would be intriguing to explore whether the coexistence of various regional quality agencies in Spanish universities has given rise to distinct ‘cultures of quality’ within each institution in their respective communities.

It is essential to consider the conditions in which this transformation occurred. These conditions are closely intertwined with the emergence of a new ideology surrounding education (Fernández & Alegre, 2004). In the era of neoliberal globalization, this ideology sought to redefine the role of knowledge and research (and consequently, the university) in the wake of the decline of the Fordist production model and the emergence of a new global logic of competition (Dardot & Laval, 2013). Embracing the imperative of not falling behind the 'progress train', the new neoliberal state -efficient and competitive- sought to position the university 'at the service of society'. In other words, it aimed to align the university's objectives with economic growth and competitiveness.¹⁰ The burgeoning educational revolution, euphemistically referred to as the 'knowledge society', recognized that the creation and accumulation of wealth were increasingly dependent on the production and transfer of specific knowledge, as well as on a flexible, creative workforce continuously adapting to the ever-changing 'demands' of today's deregulated labour markets.

Consequently, the criterion for evaluating the university's mission could no longer rest solely on traditional theoretical pursuits; instead, it required an entirely novel framework primarily aligned with the business world. It is within this context that the discourse on quality assurance has emerged as a fundamental instrument, legitimizing, certifying, and accrediting the new logics of academic capitalism's (over)production.

In this new landscape of neoliberal reforms in higher education, the evaluation of academic faculty, among the array of governance technologies, has assumed a normalizing and productive role of great importance (Amigot & Martínez, 2013). In other words, the method of evaluating, measuring, and accrediting academic work fundamentally shapes the very nature of that work. Understanding what and how something is measured proves crucial in determining what is expected of individuals. As a governance technique, evaluation (which, in this context, is also continuous) demands specific types of work and fosters particular subjectivities. The independent agencies for quality assurance are instrumental in this process, as they work towards standardizing university practices.

In evaluation, quality is determined based on formal aspects that, however, indirectly influence content issues and the type of epistemic practices involved. The term 'quality', whose meaning has evolved through institutional practices, becomes a matter of quantity and impact. Along the way, normative characteristics are established, shaping trends and directions in knowledge production. (Amigot & Martínez, 2013, p. 117).

10. It is noteworthy, in this regard, to remember that the strategic goal of the European Council in Lisbon (2000) was to make the European Union the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world.

One of the many effects of the bureaucratic management of regulated knowledge is the preference for a specific type of knowledge – empirical, current, innovative, and fundamentally *applicable*. Deviating from this regulated management of scientific knowledge risks exclusion, creating the impression that there is only one acceptable way of engaging in academic pursuits, as demanded by quality evaluation bodies. Thus, in addition to its impact on subjectivation and self-control, the *governing by numbers* (Saura & Caballero, 2021) a priori shapes research, writing styles, and the relevance of addressed issues. Continuous evaluation not only normalizes but also moralizes the characteristics of academic production (Amigot & Martínez, 2013).

In conclusion, within the university context, a criterion for teaching and research quality cannot be established without a guiding theoretical framework. In the current era of knowledge societies and economies, this framework is fundamentally *economic*.

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