KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER IN HIGHER EDUCATION. EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHALLENGES IN THE ERA OF NEOLIBERALISM

TRANSFERÊNCIA DE CONHECIMENTO NO ENSINO SUPERIOR. DESAFIOS ESPISTEMOLÓGICOS NA ERA DO NEOLIBERALISMO

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Abstract. Educational research currently operates within a context dominated by efficiency and accountability criteria. In many countries, both educational systems and academic output are evaluated through a statistical and neoliberal lens. This model, detached from the principles of evidence-based policy, places educational research under epistemological pressure by instrumentalizing its outcomes to support new political strategies. As a result, it constructs an education system based on neoliberal logics of production and efficiency, legitimized by a statistical language that reshapes the relationship between research and educational policy. This paper critically examines the institutionalization of knowledge transfer as a quality indicator in Spanish universities. It sets out two main objectives: (1) to interrogate the impact of this indicator on qualitative educational research within a context dominated by statistical discourse; and (2) to infer its long-term implications for the relationship between research and policy in the field of education. The study employs Critical Discourse Analysis, specifically Norman Fairclough´s Three-Dimensional Model, applied to a representative legislative corpus underpinning this institutionalization. The analysis reveals discursive structures and lexical choices that promote the instrumentalization of knowledge transfer, framing it as a competitive indicator aligned with a quasi-market logic in higher education. The findings highlight a strong association with Human Capital Theory and the advancement of meritocratic individualism in teaching practices. Therefore, the adoption of this indicator legitimizes educational neoliberalism by reinforcing technocratic approaches as political strategies. Consequently, qualitative research becomes less visible due to the nature of its outcomes. Moreover, ethical concerns emerge when educational issues are interpreted solely through a positivist lens in both research and policy, limiting the representation and agency of marginalized social groups, whose problems remains obscured within the statistical averages that dominate the numerical discourse.

Keywords: Knowledge Transfer; Discourse; Higher Education; Quality; Neoliberalism

Resumo. Atualmente, a pesquisa educacional opera em um contexto dominado por critérios de eficiência e responsabilidade. Em muitos países, tanto os sistemas educacionais quanto a produção acadêmica são avaliados por meio de uma lente estatística e neoliberal. Esse modelo, distante dos princípios da política baseada em evidências, coloca a pesquisa educacional sub tensão epistemológica ao instrumentalizar seus resultados para apoiar novas estratégias políticas. Como resultado, constrói um sistema educacional baseado em lógicas neoliberais de produção e eficiência, legitimado por uma linguagem estatística que remodela a relação entre pesquisa e política educacional. Este artigo examina criticamente a institucionalização da transferência de conhecimento como um indicador de qualidade nas universidades espanholas. Ele estabelece dois objetivos principais: (1) questionar o impacto desse indicador na pesquisa educacional qualitativa em um contexto dominado pelo discurso estatístico; e (2) inferir suas implicações de longo prazo para a relação entre pesquisa e política no campo da educação. O estudo emprega a Análise Crítica do Discurso, especificamente o Modelo Tridimensional de Norman Fairclough, aplicado a um corpus legislativo representativo que sustenta essa institucionalização. A análise revela estruturas discursivas e escolhas lexicais que promovem a instrumentalização da transferência de conhecimento, enquadrando-a como um indicador competitivo alinhado com uma lógica quase mercadológica no ensino superior. Os resultados destacam uma forte associação com a

Teoria do Capital Humano e o avanço do individualismo meritocrático nas práticas de ensino. A adoção desse indicador legitima o neoliberalismo educacional, reforçando abordagens tecnocráticas como estratégias políticas. Consequentemente, a pesquisa qualitativa se torna menos visível devido à natureza educacionais são interpretadas exclusivamente através de uma lente positivista, tanto na pesquisa quanto na política, limitando a representação e a agência de grupos sociais marginalizados, cujos problemas permanecem obscurecidos dentro das medias estatísticas que dominam o discurso numérico.

Palavras-chave: Transferência de conhecimento; Discurso; Ensino Superior; Qualidade; Neoliberalismo

1. CONTEXTUALISING EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: RETHINKINF FROM AND WITHIN THE FIELD

Contemporary educational research operates within a context where the notion of Quality "provides coherence and ascribes new meanings to a wide array of elements within education" (Monarca et al., 2024, p.133). Among these, quality is used to determine when scientific output from higher education institutions is considered valuable, particularly based on the impact of its results (Santos et al., 2020).

The emergence and consolidation of the concept of quality in education is a phenomenon whose impact must be understood as two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, there is the influence that international discursive strategies, used to signify educational quality, have had on the political rationality underpinning how most countries currently organize the governance of their education systems within a globalised political and economic framework (Ozga & Jones, 2006; Monarca, 2020; Gorur, 2024). On the Other hand, implications arise for the epistemological perspective from which research interprets and problematizes educational reality.

From the first perspective, a key consequence of this new internationalised context is the paradigmatic shift in the modes of governance adopted by nation states. A clear trend is observable towards a model grounded in competitive neoliberalism: a logic that is progressively permeating all possible spheres of governance (Tello, 2016). In education, this trend has resulted in a process of endogenous privatisation (Ball & Youdell, 2008; Saura & Muñoz, 2016), characterised by the gradual implementation of quasi-market strategies aimed at managing and optimising the quality of education systems (Chiang et al., 2024).

Within this framework, discourses emanating from supranational organisations concerning various dimensions of the educational landscape (Monarca, 2017) have become foundational to contemporary education policy. Chief among these organisations is the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) which has played a pivotal role in promoting a liberal logic of education quality, grounded in two essential principles: competitiveness and system performance. The OECD´s publishing *Education at a Glance* served as an initial attempt to systematise educational realities through measurable parameters and internationally comparable indicators. However, it is through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) that the OECD has firmly established its authority in defining what constitutes quality in education at the global level.

With successive Editions and the proliferation of new international assessment surveys, a transnational framework for interpreting educational reality has been constructed (Valle & Sánchez-Urán, 2023). This framework is legitimised by the increasing number of participating countries and by the use of its results as a basis for shaping national education policy. These assessments and their outcomes have thus become widely accepted as valid and reliable instruments for measuring and enhancing education system quality (Carvalho, 2009)

The substantial influence of PISA and its reports on global perceptions of quality management in education is indisputable (Özer, 2020). It is, therefore, crucial to scrutinise the discursive strategies employed by the OECD in constructing its narrative on educational reality

that participating countries ultimately internalize. If they did not, these nations would not rely on the results to inform or redefine their education policy objectives. In this way, a highly specific, statistically grounded interpretation of educational quality has been established at the international level (Fernández-González & Monarca, 2018).

Thus, supranational organisations such as the OECD have built their own symbolic capital, enabling them to impose a new lexicon for deliberating upon contemporary educational phenomena. The consolidation of positivism as the hegemonic discourse has been facilitated by the inherent complexity of the quality concept, particularly in education, where it is shaped by confluence of contextual, historical and social factors (Doherty, 2022). The subjective nature of quality, when coupled with an international landscape governed by neoliberal positivist logics, has fostered a "regulatory culture" (Ball, 2013, p.104) that interprets and narrates educational reality through the prisms of accountability, standardisation, comparability and quantification (Gorur et al., 2019). This creates favourable conditions for the global commodification of education systems.

Given the discursive complexity of this context, it is necessary to examine how it shapes the epistemological and methodological ways in which educational research conceptualizes its subject matter. This constitutes the other side of the coin in the quality incursion into education: the entwinement of neoliberal governance logics with the production of educational research in the contemporary moment.

The literature highlights how standardisation has blurred the lines between politics and science in education. Prustch (2020) in particular, identifies two significant phenomena: (1) the scientification of politics, or evidence-based policy, which employs state governance models underpinned by the quality and effectiveness criteria of the prevailing performative system; and (2) the politicisation of science, whereby the interests of political actors increasingly shape research agendas and outcomes.

The use of positivist language in signifying educational quality is fundamental, as it allows the subjective nature of the concept to be bypassed. Through the rhetoric of facticity attributed to numerical data (Van Dijk, 1992; Wolfe, 2010), the narrative constructed in standardised surveys reports acquires objectivity, validity and reliability. This measurable discourse also permits the strategic use of statistical data to produce representations of educational reality that align with specific ideological imperatives.

Such conditions facilitate the alignment of political interests with educational research, contributing to the dominance of a particular epistemology (De Sousa, 2010). As Prustch (2020) cautions, contemporary interactions between science and politic foster the production of politicised knowledge that perpetuates a performative culture. This is the focal concern of the present paper, aligning with Rivas-Flores et al. (2020), identification of a "hegemonic utilitarian perspective of research" (p.48).

It is worthwhile to pause here and consider a process that has unfolded over the past decade in knowledge production contexts. The emergence of the idea of the "third mission of the university" (Santos et al., 2020, p.16; Alonso et al., 2021, p.94) reflects a critical stance towards the distance between modern universities and everyday social issues, which has led to a reassessment of the functionality and societal contribution of academic research.

In Spain, the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities (CRUE in Spanish), in collaboration with Banco Santander, published in 2018 the report *Knowledge Transfer: A New Model for Prestige and Momentum* (Mato, 2018), which asserts that "evaluating and rewarding knowledge transfer remains an unresolved issue" (p.6). In this context, knowledge transfer refers to the institutionalized process through which academic research is expected to generate mensurable social, economic, or policy-oriented outputs beyond scholarly publication.

This report introduces knowledge transfer as a new indicator for assessing higher education quality, a trend that is also gaining traction across Europe and Latin America (González-Cadena & Vázquez-Rojas, 2021).

In accordance with the provisions of Organic Law 2/2023 of 22 March on the University System, knowledge transfer has been incorporated into the statutory definition and responsibilities of Spanish universities. This development entails two primary implications: firstly, the institutionalisation of the objective that contemporary research must promote economic, political, and social improvements; and secondly, the introduction of a new indicator for assessing the quality of scientific output among academic and research staff (Bernal, 2020). In the field of education, this transfer thus implies the production of knowledge aimed at fostering social and economic well-being (Mato, 2018; Santos et al., 2020; González-Cadena & Vázquez-Rojas, 2021). In line with Giroux´s perspective (2018), this initiative signifies the infiltration of commercial principles derived from neoliberal governance into higher education institutions, particular through the discourses that articulate mechanisms aimed at monitoring and controlling the performance of academic staff.

In conclusion, the dominance of statistical discourse and performative technologies, wich underpin the current understanding of educational quality, in tandem with the interactions between science and politics the engender, carry significant epistemological consequences for educational research field. These dynamics shape our conceptualisation and construction of educational problems and needs so, consequently, influence the methodological frameworks employed to examine educational reality through a positivist lens.

1.1 Problematizing Education through a Decolonial and Critical Discourse Lens

In the preceding section we addressed the issue of knowledge transfer in higher education. This was done because, arguably, given the educational context described, it must be regarded as an initiative with significant potential to feed back into the problem raised by Prustch (2020). Indeed, research has already been published in this regard.

Of relevance is the study conducted by Fernández-Navas et al. (2021), which demonstrates that the vast majority of publications in high-impact educational journals are quantitative in nature. This results in a clear devaluation of knowledge produced through qualitative methods, as evidenced by the decline in publications grounded in this methodological tradition. Moreover, it hampers the visibility of issues specific to social minority groups, given that such samples often lack high statistical representativeness (Castillo, 2017).

Consequently, a neo-positivist trend in educational research has emerged, leading to the gradual marginalisation of qualitative methodologies (Fernández-Navas et al., 2021). In this way, quality and quantity currently dominate and constrain the scientific discourse in education as they do within national and international education policy and politics.

Amidst the hegemony of the positivist paradigm, qualitative methodological practices are frequently relegating to a “merely auxiliary” role (Fernández-Navas et al., 2021, p.7). They are often employed as complementary tools to describe the causalities established by quantitative practices and their findings, or they are considered solely as data collection techniques in preparation for a subsequent quantification phase, rather than as an epistemological framework from which to formulate research questions and analyse data. This situation inevitably shapes the way educational reality is narrated and interpreted within the field of educational research itself (Hernández-Hernández & Revelles, 2019). It is therefore essential to “recover and analyse narratives in a broad sense and through diverse formats: school stories, educational biographies, micro-narratives, biographical interviews, focused accounts” (Leite et al., 2024, p.41).

Within this scenario, adopting a decolonial perspective as a strategy to dissect the logic underpinning the definition of what currently constitutes an educational problem emerges as a

necessary stance in our field of inquiry. Such an approach enables us to position ourselves and exercise agency within what Rivas et al. (2020) refer to as the "coloniality of knowledge or of the epistemic" (p.107), which currently structures the production of knowledge in educational research. Here this term refers to the process by which certain epistemological frameworks become dominant and marginalize alternative ways of knowing. This structure aligns closely with the hegemonic positivist paradigm that characterizes neoliberal conceptions of educational quality.

We are witnessing the commodification of the knowledge generated by universities, a phenomenon made possible through the instrumentalization of research. Methodology becomes a disciplinary mechanism (Castillo, 2017) through which, by means of "micro-penalisation" (Foucault, 2020, p.165), the sanctioning effects of limited financial resources and the prevailing tendency among scientific journals to reject qualitative research in education are gradually normalised, as previously noted by Fernández-Navas et al. (2021). We identify this as a process of constructing what Foucault (2008) terms a "corpus of knowledge" (p.49), which not Only shapes how we speak about education, but also how we interpret educational phenomena from within the research field itself.

The terminology employed in this study already reveals its underlying epistemological position. In *The Archeology of Knowledge,* Foucault (2008) reflects on how knowledge, discourse, and power are constructed through social practices and statements that shape and produce the objects to which they refer. One of his key arguments is that discursive formations are characterized by a framework that shapes how researchers analyse educational reality, operating within a "shared system of transcribing what is perceived into what is said (the same vocabular, the same play of metaphors)" (Foucault, 2008, p.49).

Thus, it is both coherent and necessary to understand the use of quantitative methodologies in education as a disciplinary instrument for the exercise of power based on two fundamental reasons:

a) Due to their alignment with the hegemonic statistical language derived from OECD standardised assessment. These assessments have shaped the style in which discourse on educational quality is constructed both nationally and internationally. They serve as a model from which current educational policy is generated in various countries, and Prustch (2020) has highlighted the challenges present in the Science-policy nexus within education, stemming from this language and its modes of production. Quantitative methodologies provide the ideal conduit for articulating and interpreting this vision of educational reality.
b) Within these diffuse Science-policy linkages in education, the concept of knowledge transfer – as both as guiding idea and a quality indicator for higher education institutions- represents a key space in which such connections begin to take concrete shape and definition.

The core principle of this indicator lies in the practical applicability of knowledge to promote social improvement. However, such improvements are unfeasible in the absence of political actions to support them. As we have argued, the political logics at play are subordinate to the neoliberal and positivist tendences that dominate the current discourse on educational quality. Therefore, it is undeniable that the influence or this logic will determine what type of knowledge is applicable (or valid) and what is not. Considering the hegemony of statistical language and politics of evidence, quantitative research will most likely be the main source of the knowledge demanded of universities by the discourse of knowledge transfer as an indicator of the quality of these institutions.

1.2 Discourse and power-knowledge structures. Reinforcement and tensions in educational research and policy

> The marketization of the discursive practices of universities is one dimension of marketization of higher education in a more general sense. Institutions of higher education come increasingly to operate (under government pressure) as if they were ordinary businesses competing to sell their products to consumers. (Fairclough, 1993, p.143)

We refer to discourse and language as central factors in all the issues discussed in this text, as we contend that the discursive strategies fostered by standardised assessments, the modes of production and dissemination of their results, and the ways in which these results are interpreted, have led to significant reinterpretations. These reinterpretations have enabled the articulation of specific political and ideological positions concerning what should be understood as educational quality at the international context. In this sense, we approach and situate discourses as social practices capable of constructing reality and shared common meanings.

This position is grounded in the work of Fairclough (1993), with whom we concur that language use constitutes a key resource in the construction of "social identities, social relations, and systems of knowledge and belief" (p.172). In other words, the language and stylistic choices employed in the production of enunciations possess a capacity to shape our subjectivities, construct us as subjects and as a social group, as well as to (re)construct our knowledge. In this sense, language not only reflects reality but actively shapes it and all that composes it. Fourez (2008) adopts a similar perspective, placing it and identifying language as a determining factor in the social construction of knowledge and the epistemologies through which it is described. He goes so far as to characterize it as a "element of pressure that forces us to remain within the framework in which language structures knowledge and the world" (p.31).

Thus, we are now faced with a problem that Deleuze (1999) has already anticipated in the 1990s, and in which we are now fully immersed: "the corresponding abandonment of all research within the University, the introduction of business at all levels of education" (p.280). It is for this reason that we propose in this paper a review of the concept of knowledge transfer as an indicator due to the effects (in terms of discursive practices) that can be caused by the dominant neo-positivism and neoliberalism in education. Similarly, we contend that the evolution of this indicator within such a context will affect the current relationships among universities, society and politics within a strongly standardised educational framework in which these governmental logics of symbolic and cultural homogenisation continue to be promoted.

This work is undertaken with the conviction that research must once again refocus on education and universities breaking away form commercial quality standards that prioritize efficiency and the production of mensurable outcomes. Universities are institutions where complex knowledge production processes take place that could serve as spaces for transformation; for the construction of counter-narratives that foster new emancipatory epistemological paths. However, we clearly identify issues that have already been raised by Foucault (2002), Deleuze (1999), and Bourdieu (2003), and further elaborated in the educational field by authors such Giroux (2018), Allman et al. (2005) or Ball (2013): the order of the current global discourse and the hegemonic epistemologies underpinning it continue sustain and reinforce the reproduction of the capitalist, neoliberal and mercantile model of production in every educational institutions. This is the foundation of our interest in investigating what kind of representation is constructed around what is understood by knowledge transfer, particularly as it is defined and operationalized as a quality indicator in university research production. We aim to glimpse what kind of expectations and regimes of truth that the indicator may construct within the field of educational research.

Reflection on educational problems is intrinsically linked to the configuration that society and researchers produce to refer to them. Given the dominance of the standardised paradigm of statistical and efficiency-oriented on contemporary educational quality discourse, we understand that this is the framework within which the direction and establishment of what is understood as valid and invalid knowledge -transferable or non-transferable- will be determined. In light of this, we consider that probably the logic underlying this paradigm, in line with the criteria established by the new quality indicator, is sufficiently powerful to have a negative impact on the diffusion of qualitative research outcomes because of his own nature. This, in turn, leads to the marginalization of such research and the erasure of the non-hegemonic social groups with whom it is often engaged.

We would like to conclude by making it clear that our intention is not to demonise quantitative methodologies, because if they are applied appropriately, they are undeniably valuable and capable of generating crucial data for understanding social realities. However, we want to highlight the colonial heritage in the use of this mode of knowledge construction, as well as to the ease with which it allows mercantilist logic to turn universities and educational research into a site for the production and legitimisation of ideological positions underlying this particular view from which reality, society and education are conceived.

2. METHODOLOGY

From our epistemological standpoint, we want to work with an interdisciplinary methodological strategy that allows, from a qualitative framework, a systemic approach to our research objectives. In line with the formulation of the problem under investigation, we have chosen to analyse it from the methodological perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (hereinafter CDA).

Framed within Critical Discourse Studies (Van Dijk, 2016), this approach offers an interesting potential for deconstructing the structures of knowledge-discourse-power that underlying any issues in which it is essential to unravel relationships between language, knowledge and power and its effects on social dynamics. In turn, CDA offers us to establish a theoretical-dialogical relationship between discourses (text) and discursive strategies trough they materialise they, alongside the constant changes or resignifications that occur in the processes of educational transformation.

Approaching our research from this perspective gives us a better understanding of the capacity of language to shape educational phenomena, as it delves into the discursive spirit of the practices that have the most significant social impact at a given historical moment (Fairclough, 1993)

Placing ourselves in this position allows us to establish a dynamic dialogue between theory, discourse and semiosis. This enriches our understanding of a specific social process by placing it in the context in which they are embedded, context in which language plays a central role in their definition and signification

2.1. Definition of research objectives

Our main objective is to understand the power-knowledge structures that are perpetuated in educational research based on semiotic-discursive formations derived from the definition of knowledge transfer as an indicator of quality in universities.

In this way, we can set two specific objectives to open up new avenues for critical reflection and dialogue:

1) To problematise the impact of this indicator on qualitative research in education in a context dominated by statistical language.

2) To infer the possible long-term implications of trends that may take hold in the direction of the relationship between research and policy in the field of education

2.2. Linguistic Corpus

In accordance with our approach, we focus our attention on the definition of knowledge transfer provided in the CRUE document. This choice is based on our view that constitutes the foundation of its inclusion as an indicator in legislation and, consequently, for the implementation of technologies and mechanisms that translate discourse into new practices for assessing the quality of higher education.

For this study, we created our linguistic corpus, consisting of a series of fragments selected and extracted from the text in question. These were based on the criteria defined by Hernández (2023), which are presented and detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Criteria used to construct the linguistic corpus

PARAMETER	CRITERIA	ASSOCIATED FEATURE
Time frame	Diachronic corpus	Year of publication 2018
Distribution medium and format	Textual/digital/electronic	Material in written form, in electronic format with digital distribution
Coprus topics	Multidisciplinary	Covers a specific area of study, only one perspective about Knowledge Transfer
Material specificity	Generical/homogeneous	Material from a single genre: Report
Amount of material	Extracts	Representative sections extracted from the document are included
Distribution of material	Pyramidal corpus	Organisation of material by levels of complexity and discursive representativeness
Number of languages	Monolingual	Includes material in Spanish only

Fonte: Own elaboration based on Hernández, 2023

The decision to work with selected extracts, rather than the full text, responds to the methodological need to isolate and examine key discursive segments that encapsulate core ideas. This approach enhances the identification of salient patterns in the representation of social actor. Moreover, by concentrating on strategically chosen paragraphs, the study lays the groundwork for future research to establish interdiscursive connections with other forms of representation within the educational field, thus contributing to a broader and more comparative understanding of discourse practices.

2.3. Strategies applied for data collection and processing within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis

One of the benefits of CDA is its flexibility in accommodating multidisciplinary. This allows us for greater adaptability and relevance in designing analytical strategies through which to process the discourse corpus. However, for this breadth to work in our favour and allow us to achieve the objectives of our work, we need to manage it by establishing a framework from which to operationalise the theory underpinning our research questions in their dialogical engagement with the data extracted from the corpus. In our case, we have defined two analytical strategies in the line with the epistemological understanding that informs our use of

the term discourse, understood as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 2002, p.81).

2.3.1. Taxonomy for the analysis of Social Representations in Discourse by Van Leewuen

One of the issues that is most strongly conditioned in CDA research is the process of corpus data collection. This depends on the research objectives defined based on our questions regarding their epistemological perspective and the various possibilities for approaching the study of language in a text. In our case, we seek to determine the potential long-term impact of the way in which Knowledge Transfer is defined (based on the language used in constructed corpus) as an indicator of quality in higher education in Spain, and how this may impact on qualitative research education. In short, we aim to identify which logics and rationalities will be (de)legitimised in the production of knowledge in the field of educational research and the repercussions that these may have.

Accordingly, the detection and analysis of the representation of social actors becomes particularly relevant focus, as it allows us to determine the ideological features underlying the processes of conceptualisation, inclusions or exclusion that occur in a text and its relationship or concordance with the context in which it was produced (Van Leewuen, 2008).

To this end, we apply the taxonomy developed by Van Leewuen (2008), presented in Figure 1, as it offers a “socio-semantic” (Van Leewuen, 2008, p.23) register from the different ways in which social actors (people, institutions, or personifications of objects ans social facts) can be represented or made invisible semantically in a text, their sociological implications, and the underlying ideological legitimations.

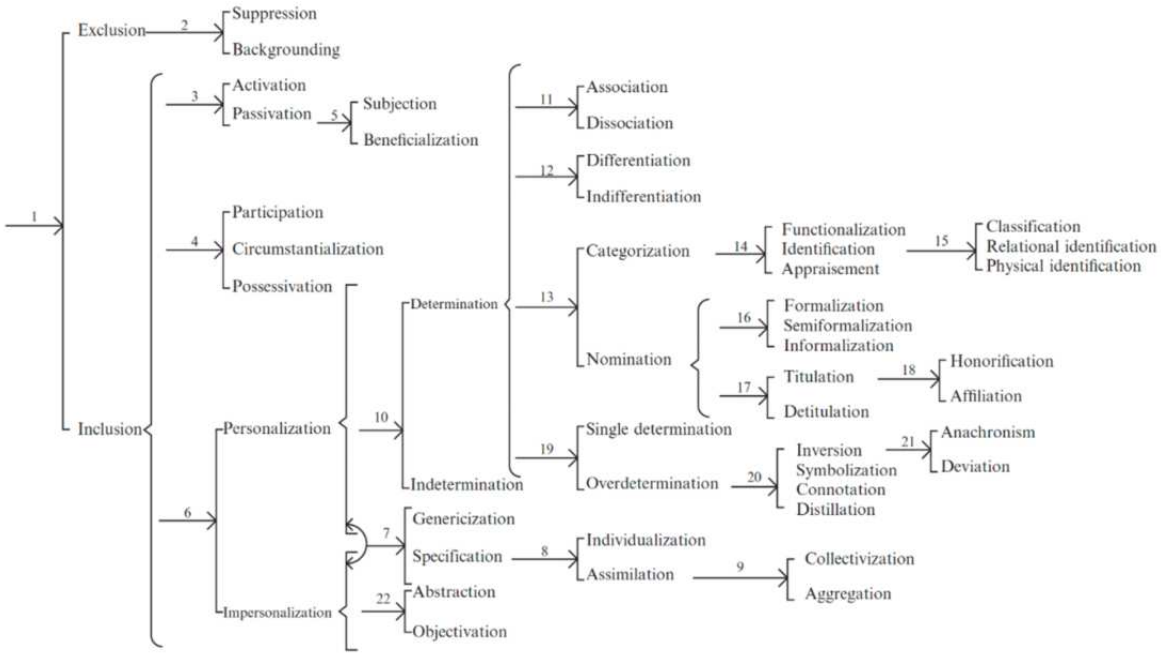

Figure 1. Taxonomy for the analysis of social representations
Source: Van Leeuwen, 2008, p.52

2.3.2. Van Dijk´s Sociocognitive Discourse Perspective (2016)

Van Dijk´s stance on how to approach the analysis of a text or discourse provides us with a framework that relates discourse as a social practice to its capacity to construct realities and meanings -as Foucault pointed out- that is, to legitimise rationalities and their hegemonicisaton.

Social representations and their implications are our focus of study because they are a form of knowledge that directly influences the common sense constructed in the everyday life of social groups. They are shared symbols that "based on people´s experience, serve as a framework for interpreting reality and as a guide for action in practical everyday life" (Jodelet, 2011, p. 134).

We turn to Van Dijk because his proposal brings us closer to the cognitive dimension of discourse as a social practice. In this way, we theoretically and methodologically situate language as an instrument for the crystallisation of new social dynamics or power relations between science and politics, which establish new discursive logics and common meanings about the quality of higher education, and by extension about what is or not considered to be Knowledge Transfer in scientific production in educational research.

Van Dijk (2016) gives us the possibility of going beyond discourse as text and practice in itself, including the structures from which that practice is inscribed in social dynamics. Therefore, the sociocognitive dimension involves addressing the social repercussions of a specific discourse (and not another) being hegemonic in terms of what is and is not quality according to the definition of Knowledge Transfer in higher education from the understanding of what specific meanings construct it.

Given the complexity of data processing involved in this perspective, the extracted data are organised prior to processing into two structural levels, defined by Van Dijk (2016) to organise how discourse operates sociocognitively. These are de microstructural and macrostructural levels. Table 2 represents the frameworks and contextual factors that we have defined to cross-reference with data obtained from this perspective.

Table 2. Sociocognitive triangulation of discourse defined for this research

LEVEL OF DISCOURSE STRUCTURE	COGNITION	SOCIETY (Social actors who produce and/or interpret the text)
MACRO	Socially shared knowledge about high education quality • Attitudes, ideologies, norms and values that determine what is desirable in scientific production at universities • The history of all editions of all standardised evaluations of the quality of the education system carried out and the knowledge that has been generated around them • Considerations regarding practical research and whether or not it is necessary for society	Social actors who produce and/or interpret the text • Government of Spain • Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities of Spain • Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport of Spain • Ministry of Economy, Trade and Business of Spain • Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities (CRUE in Spanish) • Santander Bank • National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain (ANECA in spanish) • Universities of Spain • Teaching and Research Staff
MICRO	Mental models of the knowledge frameworks (experiences of social members • Previous experience with the meanings of statistical and comparative language	Interaction between social members • Communicative interactions between Crue and Santander Bank with the Ministries, universities and Teaching and research staff.

	• Previous experience with what quality is and is nor in everyday life • Previous experiences of transferring positions in comparative rankings • Previous experience with systems for evaluating the scientific output of teaching and research staff at universities for the purposes of career advancement

Fonte: Own elaboration based on Van Dijk, 2016, p.177

3. RESULTS

The presentation of the results is structured around four analytical axes, each of which corresponds to a thematic dimension identified through CDA applied to the selected report that sets out the framework for constructing and defining Knowledge Transfer assessment model as an indicator of quality for Spanish universities. Together, these four analytical axes address the two research objectives of the study.

The first and second axes (sections 3.1 and 3.2) primarily contribute to Objective 1 by examining how the definition and operationalization of knowledge transfer reshape the conditions, visibility and value of qualitative educational research. The third and fourth axes (sections 3.3 and 3.4) address Objective 2 by analysing the longer-term implications of these discursive constructions for the relationship between educational research, university governance, and public policy.

These axes – the accountability of academic staff, the representation of Knowledge Transfer, the tension between the social mission of the university and market demands, and the ideological effects of framing Knowledge Transfer as an indicator of quality- have been defined according to the main discursive and ideological patterns on which Knowledge Transfer is bases in the report and its legitimacy for incorporation into the Spanish university system following its pilot experience of the Six-Year Transfer Periods in 2018 (OECD, 2021).

For each axis, a pyramidal presentation of the most representative fragments of the linguistic corpus is followed. However, all of them are complementary and help to sketch out an overall understanding of the logic underlying Knowledge Transfer as a concept and as an articulated system. Thus, each subsection shows the results of the analysis carried out, beginning with a Main Extract (ME), which is a fragment of the key text that summarises the central discursive proposal or the specific ideological position. This is followed by one or more Complementary Extracts (CE), which provide additional information that helps to take into account contextual nuances or discursive variations that reinforce the analysis of the main fragment. This structure allows us to establish a dialogical relationship not only between theory and discourse, but also between general and global propositions with more specific discursive issues and operational details. In this way, we ensure that our macro-level of discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 2016) and micro-level examination of linguistic strategies and the representation of actors (Van Leeuween, 2008) are connected rather than isolated.

Finally, we would like to point out that all extracts from the corpus were originally selected and analysed in Spanish, the language of the source document from which samples were taken. The English translations are our own, and the discourse analysis was carried out in the original language to preserve the linguistic and cultural nuances of the original text.

3.1. Discursive construction of the responsibilisation of academic staff for university excellence and quality

> (ME) Only if we were to enable a system of `six-year transfer periods´ that are compatible and complementary to those of research, it means that also allow for professional promotion, recognition and prestige for researchers, we would see a change in attitude and, ultimately, in culture, which would lead our researchers to go out into the real world in search of ways and means in which their knowledge can help solve the problems and needs of the society. (Mato, 2018, p.10).

Firstly, we focus on the social actors that are explicitly included in this extract. In this regard, it is particularly interesting to note how the report presents and constructs the identity and place of teaching and research staff with regard to knowledge transfer. This social actor, continuously represented in the text through its activation with the nominalisation and collectivization through the use of the noun *researchers*, is positioned as the main -and, implicitly, sole- responsible party for the level of excellence and quality standards upheld by university. This issue is important because, although the teaching and research staff is included, other social actors directly related to key factors in the levels of quality and excellence of the university (political, ideological, regional, financial) are excluded, and therefore invisible within the ME´s discursive proposal. However, other social actor is included, in this case those who sign the document, in a more subtle way: in the conjugations of verbs (*we were able to, we would see, our researchers*), positioning themselves as active participants in the process of modelling Knowledge Transfer as an indicator. But they only assume the role of facilitators of the measurement system, not of its validity or reliability. This reflects a clear dichotomy or differentiation established by a us/them delineation in the distribution of responsibilities regarding universities quality levels, in which two key actors are differentiated: those who speak (authors of the document) and configure the measurement system, and those about whom they speak and on whom they place the responsibility of adapting and producing in accordance with their system to meet the expectations it sets for them.

These discursive strategies mark the first clear power relations in the text through the exercise of symbolic forces in the use of language, especially when researchers are possessivated by the speaker (*our researchers*), establishing a hierarchy and distance between the speakers and the group being spoken about implicitly. In other words, trough these discursive structures, the authors reflect their consideration of ownership over the collective of teaching and research staff at universities in Spani, over whom they have decision -making power. In addition, they place themselves outside of any process that produces quality data and results for universities.

The Main Extract discursively constructs the teaching and research staff as agents responsible of change. Under this premise, they are instrumentalised as an effective tool for implementing and legitimising this system of accountability for universities. This is reinforced by the beginning of the extract “only if”. This grammatically establishes an exclusive condition, as it presents a single possible path: only if we do X, Y will happen. In this case, the implementation of the six-year transfer system aimed at teaching and research staff is presented as the only (non-negotiable) and viable condition for improving transfer. This is further justified by once again holding them responsible, in this case by presupposing, in addition to attributing to them an attitude towards their role that is not desirable (we would see a change in attitude).

This justifies and establishes the need for a system of incentives to improve the productivity of researchers in Spain, which responds to what is expected of them in terms of transfer. in transfer depends on individual motivation, stimulated by an incentive system like the existing

six-year research periods for promotion in the teaching career in Spain. Therefore, it is thus assumed that researchers share the same conditions (resources, time, stability) to produce according to the desired standards in knowledge transfer, making invisible the inequalities and internal problems within the group, as well as issues that are beyond their control, such as structural factors arising from (serious) funding problems, teaching loads, technical support, the type of language used in scientific deliberation in different areas of knowledge, and the possibilities for tangible transferability according to those areas.

It is also interesting, to consider the use of the discursive structure or expression "going out into the real word". This is a "conceptual metaphor" (Villa, 2018, p.306) that reveals a mental framework or mental representation, in Van Dijk's terms, held by those who write about the teaching and research staff in universities. Through it, they express their conviction, in addition to assuming it as legitimately true, and thus establishing it for potential consumers of the text, that there is a symbolic distance between researchers and society or real problems.

There are two issues here: first, that they are considered outsiders. This reinforce the *change in attitude* that is demanded of them, assuming their responsibilities, which, with the addition of the change *in culture* or the stage at which the role of researchers in universities has been up to now. They are thus interpreted as solving problems that are not their own. They are not recognised as a group that is part of the social fabric and that has its own needs and limitations, which are intertwined with political and ideological issues, as are those of the real world they talk about. Secondly, the issues that researchers have focused on so far are downplayed and invalidated. They are not real problems, they are not valid knowledge in terms of transfer, and therefore a negative assessment of the knowledge produced by universities so far is added.

> (CE) A broader reflection is needed on the need to combine the individual motivation of university teachers and researchers with the institutional interests of the universities themselves and apply this to the processes of knowledge transmission and transfer. (Mato, 2018, p.20).

This CE has been selected because it provides a strong reflection of hierarchy and power structures that we were already able to glimpse in the ME. In this case, in addition to continuing to position teachers and research staff as the central axis of the Knowledge Transfer, it also activates *the universities themselves* as a collectivized social actor, though this is presented as a passive beneficiary of the alignment between the researchers' interests and those of the institution.

The subordinate clause *on the need to combine the individual motivation of university teachers and researchers with the institutional interest of the universities themselves,* clearly reflects the underlying tension between the individual interest of researchers and the institutional interest or universities. This places the action of combining and intertwining interests within a hierarchical context, in which technologies or actions aimed at aligning these interests are prioritised. Then this is identified as a necessity, it is implicitly assumed that, until now, these interests conflicted with each other.

This conjunction could suggest the idea that there must be a balance between the individual and institutional interests. This could be interpreted as an attempt to reconcile these two dimensions. However, from an intertextual perspective, and considering the internal coherence of the text´s discourse, this is a discursive strategy that subordinates the personal interests of researchers to those of the institution. Thus, the aim is to shift the focus of researchers towards the end result (the Knowledge Transfer) rather than the current complexity of the relationship between teachers, researchers and universities.

3.2. Discursive legitimation of hegemonic representation of Knowledge Transfer as a social actor

> (ME) This report provides recommendations to encourage university Knowledge Transfer activities form a dual perspective. On the one hand, an institutional scenario in which a new system of indicators for Knowledge Transfer in the Spanish university system is defined, leading to a policy of promotion and prestige for Spanish universities. On the other hand, a scenario of individual merit and reward, through the introduction of a Knowledge Transfer section. (Mato, 2018, p.6).

The ME, CE 1 and CE 2 in this case have been selected to show how knowledge transfer is represented discursively.

First, we would like to highlight an important agent in the ME (and crucial to the text as a whole whenever it is activated), namely the report itself (*this report provides*).

In this case, the *report* itself is activated as a social actor through the impersonalization and objectification of the document on behalf of those who are impersonalised: the authors of the text. In this form of representation, social actors are constructed through or in reference to their statements, which constructs an authority that, being impersonalized, depoliticises the discourse and endowing it with objectivity. Thus, the report itself has agency, being assigned the task of making recommendations on the issue of knowledge transfer (the report provides recommendations to). Similarly, using the report as the initial subject also plays with mental representations of this literary genre at the social level.

Reports are a type of text that enjoy great scientific and informative validity, as their purpose is to be a reliable and truthful source of information (Porro, 2013). Therefore, the information that is going to be given below is legitimised as a recommendation, as its legitimacy is tacitly given by the type of document it is.

Focusing now on the other the actors included, we find again a passive representation of the university collectivised, which is the beneficiary of the policy measures (*for Spanish universities*) derived from the new system of indicators that constitutes the Knowledge Transfer. This passivity establishes a clear hierarchy in the process. The system of indicators sets the desired goals, the institutions generate policies containing actinons that promote the achievement of the standards that indicators establish as desirable, and the university is assumed to benefit from these policies that they are described as actions that promote *prestige*.

This is a decision-making process in which there is no deliberation. It is assumed that it will be beneficial, and thus and *institutional scenario* is configured in which actions and decisions are carried out in vertical and unidirectional manner, with movement only from the top down. Once again, as in the previous section, the hierarchy embedded in the power and decision-making structures governing the systematisation of Knowledge Transfer is evident here, depriving the university of its capacity for onto-epistemological debate on the definition of an evaluation framework to which it will be subjected.

Thus, in the ME, the framework for action for Knowledge Transfer is established and defined around two main axes or pillars: the modification of policy based on data obtained from university accountability, (*institutional scenario*) and the introduction of a meritocratic and competitive logic that uses rewards as motivation (*scenario of individual merit and reward*), thus ensuring the self-regulation of teaching and research staff so that their output is aligned with the underlying logic of the six-year Transfer period.

Here we find a feature of internal coherence in the text and in the mental representations that the authors allow us to glimpse. As we saw in the CE in subsection 3.1, the idea of defining institutional interests as those that should be the interests of researchers is not only a need that has been identified, as stated in that section, but is one of the two key elements that underpins the logic of Knowledge Transfer as a measurement system.

> (CE 1) The absence of a single conceptual framework makes it hard to promote and generalise an impact analysis that meets the real needs for quality and excellence in universities when it comes to passing on knowledge to society. (Mato, 2018, p.20)

We include CE 1 because we find interesting the reinforcement of the idea of Knowledge Transfer as a framework composed of actions that homogenise and define what is meant by quality in Spanish university production.

In this case, there is no representation of social actors as such; they are omitted. However, we do find the phrase 'the absence of a univocal conceptual framework'. This indicates a need, while also pointing out the factor that hinders the task accompanying this phrase, emphasised by the verb "makes it hard to". In Spanish, the verb originally used in the extract is a transitive verb, i.e. it requires a complement that allows it to activate the meaning of its action and makes the meaning of the statement complete and understandable. A cause-and-effect relationship is established with this verb: since there is no common or general conceptual framework for measuring the excellence and quality of knowledge transfer in universities, this task cannot be carried out.

Added to this, the same verb naturalises the problem, without considering whether it is really feasible or possible to have a framework that allows the scientific output of all areas of knowledge at all Spanish universities to be measured in a generalised, reliable and fair manner. This rules out the possibility of considering that the results obtained may be affected by external variables such as the financial situation of the university, the branch of knowledge, the state of its infrastructure, among others.

In this way, a grammatical and discursive fence is erected around a concrete course of action, rather than exploring other causes in order to ascertain the real level of transferability of the knowledge generated by universities.

The difficulty diagnosed is attributed exclusively to the absence of a univocal conceptual framework. This provides access to the logic already established in the international educational context based on standardised assessments such as PISA or Education at a Glance. Therefore, this assertion is sustained and reinforced as a legitimate truth in the mental representations that already exist in the social imagination built around its effectiveness and validity as instruments of educational quality control. To clarify the latter, we accompany ME and CE1 with CE 2.

> (CE 2) This value proposition aims to develop a university performance measurement system that also has both regional and national application. (Mato, 2018, p.22)

As can be seen, here the existence of this mental representation referred to in the previous extract is made explicit. It is proposed that the actions designed to measure the quality and excellence of universities based on the transferability of their scientific output should aim for regional application. This would lead to comparisons between universities within the country, as this is a socially established practice resulting from the style and discourse strategies used in evaluation reports such as PISA.

Therefore, we find the definition of knowledge transfer as an accountability system that revolves around two key actions: the definition of policies tailored to specific interests, and the constant evaluation of the performance of the raw material of universities and researchers, in order to ascertain the level of performance of the Spanish education system and to be able to make comparisons (for now) within the country.

3.3. Discursive negotiation between the university´s social mission and the contextual demands of the market

At this point, we pause to consider the evidence emerging from the ME and CE regarding the tensions between the social mission historically attributed to the university and the market-oriented contextual imperative that are also implicit in the discourse of Knowledge Transfer.

> (ME)The University must exploit its intellectual, scientific and technological potential and promote Knowledge Transfer. The latter is a fundamental element in the processes of applying the knowledge generated by the University so that, as a social good, it contributes to general well-being. (Mato, 2018, p.9).

In ME, we find the University activated once again through collectivization, but this time it is not a passive subject. In fact, it is an active, functionalised subject. Actions are attributed to it and marked as mandatory through the use of the verb *must*. The university is thus represented as a productive agent. This functionalisation allows us to understand -thanks to the lexicon used- the representation or mental model of the writer of how they perceive (and is perceived in the text) the universities as institutions and the place they occupy within the conceptual model proposed on the Transfer of Knowledge.

Exploit. This verb is significant because its meaning changes depending on the elements that accompany it in the statement, and it can be transitive or intransitive. In this discursive structure, the university is required to exploit its intellectual, scientific and technological potential. Therefore, when the direct complement (*its potential...)* is incorporated, the verb exploit must be interpreted as a transitive verb. In this way, we can affirm that its meaning in the sentence is `to take advantage of´ or `benefit from something´. In other words, we are dealing with a grammatical construction that uses vocabulary typical of the language of the market and productivity logic, portraying the university as an agent possessing *intellectual, scientific and technological* raw materials that it could *exploit* to produce and obtain more benefit from them.

Likewise, in addition to its productive function, the university is identified as responsible for promoting the transfer of knowledge, and this function is directly attributed to it as another duty (through the additive conjunction *and*) alongside the exploitation of its potential. Here we detect how, as with teaching staff and researchers, the self-regulation of the university is once again articulated as a strategy of alignment and control with specific interests underlying the measurement system that constitutes Knowledge Transfer as an indicator. This is reinforced by legitimising the latter as an indispensable factor in ensuring that the university produces social welfare. To construct this meaning, it equates the knowledge produced by the university with a social good.

Knowledge Transfer is the nominalisation of the transitive verb *to transfer*, so requires a complement (that which is transferred) to make sense. In this case, what is transferred is a product represented as a social good -*knowledge generated by the universi*ty-, so that Knowledge Transfer is understood as a legitimately altruistic action that is beneficial to society.

While the university is functionalised from a commercial and productive logic, what Knowledge Transfer does with what it produces or exploits is signified as a social action. Here we find an ideological hybridisation underlying the discourse of the extract, in which the social mission of the university is maintained as a statement, but is subordinated to its potential to produce measurable and useful results. Thus, even though Knowledge Transfer is presented as such, it is not an altruistic act or one oriented exclusively towards the common good, but rather a process whose legitimacy depends on its insertion into market dynamics and its contribution to competitiveness, as we have seen in the previous excerpts. This double discursive

inscription—moral and commercial—is what shapes the structural tension that runs through the entire discourse of the document.

> (CE) Social impact indicators are not as robust as structural and economic indicators. In this regard, efforts should be made to identify them correctly and reach a consensus on them. (Mato, 2018, p.23).

The CE qualifies this tension between altruism and the competitive and commercial context in which Knowledge Transfer seeks to inscribe itself as a system of social welfare. It sets out a clear hierarchy of indicators (are not robust as) by comparing the families of indicators that are constituted for the pilot test.

This hierarchy is marked by robustness, an adjective attributed to indicators as social actors activated by abstraction according to their qualities. Here robustness refers to their perceived methodological reliability and their suitability for quantification, comparision, and performace-based evaluation -'structural and economic impact', 'social impact' or 'excellence'- (Mato, 2018, p.23). By attributing a qualifying adjective, it is possible to compare them, making it possible to categorise them according to their greater or lesser agreement with the adjective. In this labelling or categorisation process, although the importance of social impact indicators is recognised, they are rated as 'not as robust' as structural and economic indicators. They receive this label because those that are potentially quantifiable or that already generate quantitative data are considered robust (Mato, 2018). Therefore, we can say that this comparison is not neutral; it has a clear ideological bias that is identical to the performative context and the framework of truth regimes on quality in education built from standardised assessments. By establishing this meaning of 'robustness' as a criterion of legitimacy for considering an indicator valid, the value of the social in Knowledge Transfer is implicitly shifted towards the need to conform to the standards and methodologies of statistical measurement. Thus, the discourse adopts a technocratic logic of validation that invites us to leave the social for a future review and definition that allows its translation into quantifiable and comparable data. This would imply adjusting to market norms by adapting to the single conceptual framework that was deemed necessary in CE 1 of sub-section 3.2.

Therefore, the objective of being able to measure the social impact of the university's scientific output makes social value a dispensable item, or a product that must be studied in terms of how it can be calculated, managed and, ultimately, instrumentalised for strategic purposes.

When placed in an intertextual relationship with the main fragment, this extract reinforces the tension between the social mission and the commercial logic that accompanies Knowledge Transfer, since, although the rhetoric of social commitment is maintained, the way in which it is validated and integrated into university policy subordinates it to the paradigm of productivity and competitiveness, reproducing neoliberal hegemony in university governance.

Consequently, we can argue that this tension is not merely methodological, nor is it unique to the operationalisation of the social in measurable indicators, as the authors maintain, but rather that it is a structural tension.

3.4. Ideological effects of framing Knowledge Transfer as an indicator of university quality

Finally, in this last section, ME, CE 1, CE 2 have been selected and analysed to examine the ideological implications of defining Knowledge Transfer as an indicator for evaluation university quality.

> (ME) An important point in the report is the dual work carried out. On the one hand, the specification of a series of institutional indicators to be used by universities and, on the other, the provision of other indicators to be used individually to implement the Transfer stages. (Mato, 2018, p.57**).**

Specifically, the extracts reflect the system or control technologies through which knowledge transfer is materialised and constructed as a mechanism for controlling university output. The strategy for this is the use of eminently technocratic language with an administrative lexicon (*institutional, indicators, stages, to implement*) accompanied by several nominalisations in the Spanish version of the document of key verbs (*specification, to provision, dual work carried*) and the passive voice in which they are conjugated in the original language. In this way, the representation of the social actors who have the agency to carry out each of these actions is linguistically omitted, which neutralises the processes, removes them from the political and ideological field of decision-making and signifies them as natural objective and technical actions. However, there are marked agencies in the text, which construct responsibilities: *indicators to be used by universities*. In this case, the indicators are represented as social actors again, accompanied by a complement agent *universitie*s through the passive verb to be used by. In this way, attention is focused on the action itself and on the indicators, since it is the element that is of interest to associate with the action of being used, while the agent complement is optional, a section of the utterance that can change without altering the meaning of the sentence, that is, without eliminating the truth regime that the indicators are defined to be used.

It is interesting to note in this excerpt how the presentation of the two key axes of Knowledge Transfer is repeated, but this is seen as the highlight of the entire document. The actors themselves provide us with the two key macro-proposals at the end of the text (this extract is part of the document's conclusions) regarding the functionality attributed to indicators as social actors: *to be used by universities*; and *to be used individually in the transfer stages*.

This same idea is introduced in the first pages. As can be seen in the analysis made in section 3.2 of the ME, the purpose of the report is to encourage knowledge in two specific scenarios: the institutional scenario and the meritocracy scenario (individual merit and reward). Therefore, both at the beginning and at the enfo of the discourse, the two key pillars of the author´s emphasis on knowledge transfer are strategies that aim to establish a regulatory framework of uniform standards for monitoring university performance, with a particular focus on teaching and research staff

> (CE 1) In this regard, the current report sets out and indicates the method for working in collaboration with the relevant ministries, trough the signing of the agreement between CRUE, MECD and MINECO[1]. (Mato, 2018, p.57).

The use of the expression *In this regard* helps to establish and strengthen the internal discursive cohesion of the text, as it links or intertwines the meanings constructed in previous utterances and establishes an order of argumentation with which to continue after the expression. These types of structures are very helpful in organising the extracts and the analysis into a pyramid way and establishing the underlying logic of specific discursive strategies and structures.

Thus, in relation to the analysis in the ME, we find that, in relation to what is expressed in that fragment, CE 1 is constructed as a clarification. It once again positions *the report* as a social actor with agency, attributing to it the actions of *set out* and *indicates*. These two verbs,

[1] For calification, the acronym MECD corresponds to the Spanish name of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport of Spain. The acronym MINECO corresponds to the Spanish name of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Business of Spain

being transitive, require a complement that allows them to complete the meaning of the statement when read and thus construct the mental representation of the interpretation it gives us about the attribution to, in this case, *the report*. Consequently, the use of these two verbs assigns *the report* an agency that is actually characteristic of individuals or working groups, which gives the text (*the report*) greater technicality and implies less political and ideological weight in the reading of the instructions for its application. In addition to this, it should be noted that the use of the verb *to indicate*, which has a normative or prescriptive function in this case, functionalises *the report* itself as a framework for action to be followed, given that it *sets out* not just any method, but *the* specific and valid working *method* to be followed if Knowledge Transfer is to be measured correctly from the point of view from which it has been established as an indicator.

Through the possibility of collaboration, i.e. association, undetermined social actors are included, such as *relevant ministries*, but specific actors are specifically identified and activated through their acronyms (*CRUE, MECD and MINECO*). This list of specific entities, separated by commas and joined by the conjunction *and,* indicates the association between the three actors, assuming that they share a very similar perspective to that *set out* in the report, as well as placing them at the top of the hierarchy outlined in the previous extracts. This is assumed by making it explicit that in order to work, it must be done through the signature of the three actors. In this way, *CRUE, MEC and MINECO* are represented as the authorities that allow or do not allow (power relationship), that authorise or do not authorise (*through*), that is, they are the social actors represented and identified in the text as specific regulators due to their ultimate power to allow -or not allow- any, any action in relation to the Transfer of Knowledge.

A closed (and inflexible) framework of action is configured in CE 1, naturalising a series of political and implicitly ideological decisions, signifying them as a technical process, which deactivates the possibility of public deliberation or questioning of the guidelines that underpin and shape the method.

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the excerpts selected for the corpus of this study shows that, although Knowledge Transfer is presented by the author of the text as an indicator with two main cores (the institutional and the Six-Year Transfer), the way in which this system for measuring university quality in Spain is configured rests on an epistemological and discursive basis in which structures of knowledge–power are articulated in alignment with neoliberal logic and accountability frameworks.

The production of scientific knowledge is capitalized and therefore construed as a raw material to be exploited by universities. It thus becomes necessary to systematize the control of such production in order to optimize the economic, social, and cultural benefits generated by its development. However, as we have seen, given the current symbolic and cultural capital regarding what educational quality is and how it should be measured, the text reveals a clear power struggle between the more altruistic and humanistic face of the university, and the market-driven, productivist, and competitive culture surrounding the notion of educational quality through standardized evaluations. Consequently, even though it has not been addressed directly here, we can infer that what is being reorganized is not merely a measurement system, but also the very meaning of what should and should not be understood as “quality” within the Spanish university system today.

As we have observed, this construction aligns with the identity-based belief system of neoliberalism and competitive capitalism. The most effective instrument for this is the identification of ways to obtain quantifiable, measurable, generalizable data, imbued with a rhetoric of factuality that positions them as legitimate truths. In this way, teaching and research staff are positioned within a discourse in which their identity is built around individual

responsibility for the levels of excellence and quality achieved by their institution. By capitalizing knowledge, it becomes possible to measure the amount transferred—i.e., to quantify how many of the outputs of teaching and research staff have generated transferable knowledge. This results in the invisibilization of structural factors and external agents—ministries, rectorates, companies—that determine the conditions for the production, circulation, and application of knowledge.

Thus, in this accountability framework, the focus is not only on the quality of teaching production as a form of reward for merit, fostering individualism and redirecting research activity toward that end, but also on ensuring that institutional policies for quality and improvement are aimed especially at this sector of the workforce. This involves the expansion of control and evaluation mechanisms, such as the "Transfer sexennia," which are presented as a technical and neutral necessity when, in fact, they reinforce processes of both control and self-regulation characteristic of an academic panopticism that activates "technologies of the self" in teaching and research staff. This dynamic imposes limits and expectations that must be met to obtain recognition, directly affecting academic career paths and the scope of action of teaching and research staff, while legitimizing a model of university governance that shifts critical focus onto the individual and exempts political and economic decision-making levels from responsibility.

This generates an epistemological and structural tension in the discourse, as the social mission of the university is constantly invoked to justify Knowledge Transfer, yet the system considers only those indicators that facilitate or adapt to quantitative language in its evaluation. This results in social indicators being placed in a secondary position to economic and structural ones, revealing an inconsistency between the ethical commitment to collective well-being and subordination to objectives of competitiveness and profitability. Knowledge is thus conceived as a competitive asset whose value depends on its capacity to circulate within market dynamics. This process homogenizes disciplinary and contextual differences and erases the specificities of qualitative knowledge, particularly fields such as the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education.

From this perspective, the effects of funding and evaluation decisions —and their impact on quality and excellence —are depoliticized and, consequently, naturalized. Indicators are represented as neutral and objective tools. However, they materialize ideological criteria that determine the conditions under which knowledge is considered valid and transferable. Compliance with these indicators becomes a prerequisite for accessing individual rewards. As a result, faculty and researchers are encouraged to align their interests with those of institutions and the market, reinforcing a supply-and-demand logic in which only universities and researchers with higher output achieve better performance results in the Knowledge Transfer measurement system. This process institutionalizes inequalities, as pre-existing disparities between universities and academic staff—and the unequal distribution of resources shaped by political and ideological decisions—are neither acknowledged nor made visible, but instead normalized.

The results obtained have allowed us to address the objectives set out at the beginning of this study. Regarding the problematization of the impact of this indicator on qualitative educational research, we can confirm that, as we proposed at the outset, the dominant statistical language in current deliberations on education—together with the logic of standardization—is highly capable of subordinating and even absorbing qualitative methodologies, thus favoring the legitimization of a single model of knowledge validity, one more permeable to market-oriented interests. This affects educational research, on the one hand, by promoting its epistemological colonization and, on the other, by reducing the visibility of its ability to address and give voice to complex, minority, and/or marginalized realities.

Concerning our objective of inferring the possible implications for the relationship between politics and research, the results show that, if the observed trends consolidate, the educational research agenda will become increasingly subordinated to criteria of immediate utility defined by external actors on demand. This could intensify institutional dependence on data derived from future evaluations of the Knowledge Transfer indicator, resulting in a feedback loop that reinforces the accountability system and, by extension, dominant policies. The greatest risk we identify here is the limitation of research's capacity to question and transform the power structures that perpetuate social and educational inequalities.

The findings of this study have direct implications for higher education policy, research evaluation, and institutional governance. In particular, they highlight the risk of adopting knowledge transfer as a quality indicator without considering the epistemological exclusions it produces and its disciplinary effects. Policymakers and national and international evaluation agencies should consider that indicator-based accountability systems tend to privilege quantifiable outputs, systematically disadvantaging qualitative and critical research oriented towards social and educational issues. Universities, in turn, may use these insights to reflect on how performance-based mechanisms -such as transfer-oriented evaluation schemes- reconfigure academic priorities, research agendas, and academic careers.

A more plural and reflexive approach to knowledge transfer could help preserve the social mission of universities while preventing research quality from being reduced to narrow performative metrics.

Although this study is grounded in the Spanish higher education system, the analytical patterns identified are not limited to this national context. The institutionalization of knowledge transfer as a quality indicator, the dominance of performative and accountability logics, and the privileging of quantifiable outputs are characteristic of higher education systems operating under OECD-driven and neoliberal governance frameworks across Europe and Latin America.

Spain is therefore examined here as a theoretically illustrative case rather than as an isolated exception. The discursive dynamics described -particularly the tension between social mission, market-oriented evaluation, and the marginalization of qualitative research- are analytically transferable to other national and institutional contexts in which similar regimes of academic performativity prevail.

As with any critical and qualitative study, this research is subject to certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is based on a specific legislative corpus, namely the CRUE report that underpins the institutionalization of knowledge transfer as a quality indicator in Spain. This means that the findings are analytically grounded in this discursive configuration. However, this focus is consistent with the epistemological and methodological orientation on Critical Discourse Analysis, which seeks depth of interpretation rather than statistical generalization. Second, the interpretative nature of CDA implies that meanings are analysed through theoretically informed reading of discourse rather than through purely procedural or replicable coding schemes.

Rather than representing a weakness, this is a necessary condition for discursive examining power-knowledge relations, ideological effects and discursive constructions that cannot be captured through purely positivist approaches. These limitations therefore do not undermine the validity of the study but rather define the analytical scope within which its critical insights should be understood.

In conclusion, this study underscores the need to reclaim from universities and educational research the space for democratic and pedagogical deliberation on the meaning and purposes of the university itself and of research itself. Doing so could prevent Knowledge Transfer from becoming an ideologically and productively driven control mechanism devoid of critical reflection. We therefore contend that, at present, committing to a plurality of approaches and to evaluation criteria that integrate epistemological diversity is essential to preserve the social

commitment of research, safeguard its independence, and resist the commodification of knowledge.

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