QUALITY AS A TECHNOLOGY OF GOVERNANCE: PERFORMATIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN ACADEMIC WORK

A QUALIDADE COMO TECNOLOGIA DE GOVERNAMENTALIDADE: PERFORMATIVIDADE E SUBJETIVAÇÃO NO TRABALHO ACADÊMICO

LA CALIDAD COMO TECNOLOGÍA DE GOBERNANZA: PERFORMATIVIDAD Y SUBJETIVIDAD EN EL TRABAJO ACADÉMICO

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ABSTRACT: Quality in higher education represents a central element in educational policies, associated with faculty qualifications and the enhancement of teaching and learning processes. This study analyzes quality as a technology of governmentality, investigating its effects on academic work in terms of performativity and subjectivation. It adopts a qualitative poststructuralist approach grounded in a Foucauldian analytics of power. The research, conducted at a higher education institution, drew on semi-structured interviews with 36 faculty members and an analysis of institutional documents. The results reveal that quality materializes through mechanisms of evaluation, standardization, accountability, and outcome measurement, making faculty work visible, comparable, and subject to continuous regulation. These devices intensify performativity and encourage self-regulation. The study concludes that quality functions as a technology of government, significantly influencing the formation and ways of being of academics.

KEYWORDS: Quality. Governmentality. Teacher training. Performativity. Subjectivation.

***RESUMO**: A qualidade no ensino superior representa elemento central nas políticas educacionais, associada à qualificação docente e à potencialização dos processos de ensino-aprendizagem. Este estudo analisa a qualidade como tecnologia de governamentalidade, investigando seus efeitos de performatividade e subjetivação sobre o trabalho acadêmico. Adota abordagem qualitativa pós-estruturalista fundamentada na analítica foucaultiana do poder. A pesquisa, realizada em instituição de ensino superior, utilizou entrevistas semiestruturadas com 36 docentes e a análise de documentos institucionais. Os resultados revelam que a qualidade se materializa por mecanismos de avaliação, padronização, responsabilização e mensuração de resultados, tornando o trabalho docente visível, comparável e continuamente regulado. Esses dispositivos intensificam a performatividade e estimulam a autorregulação. Conclui-se que a qualidade funciona como tecnologia de governo, influenciando significativamente a formação e os modos de ser dos acadêmicos.*

***PALAVRAS-CHAVE**: Qualidade. Governamentalidade. Formação docente. Performatividade. Subjetivação.*

***RESUMEN**: La calidad en la educación superior representa un elemento central en las políticas educativas, asociada con la cualificación docente y la potenciación de los procesos de enseñanza-aprendizaje. Este estudio analiza la calidad como tecnología de gubernamentalidad, investigando sus efectos de performatividad y subjetivación sobre el trabajo académico. Adopta un enfoque cualitativo posestructuralista fundamentado en la analítica foucaultiana del poder. La investigación, realizada en una institución de educación superior, utilizó entrevistas semiestructuradas con 36 docentes y el análisis de documentos institucionales. Los resultados revelan que la calidad se materializa mediante mecanismos de evaluación, estandarización, responsabilización y medición de resultados, haciendo que el trabajo docente sea visible, comparable y esté continuamente regulado. Estos dispositivos intensifican la performatividad y estimulan la autorregulación. Se concluye que la calidad funciona como tecnología de gobierno e influye significativamente en la formación y en los modos de ser de los académicos.*

***PALABRAS CLAVE**: Calidad. Gubernamentalidad. Formación docente. Performatividad. Subjetivación.*

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Introduction

In recent decades, educational systems have undergone profound transformations resulting from the incorporation of managerial and evaluative logics into the educational field, especially in higher education. These changes are associated with the diffusion of *New Public Management* and managerialism, which introduce principles such as efficiency, productivity, performance evaluation, and accountability (Olssen; Peters, 2005). This movement directly impacts teacher training, as it redefines not only pedagogical content and practices, but also the ways teachers act, assess, and develop professionally at different educational levels.

In the contemporary context, marked by demands related to the quality of education, inclusion, and the incorporation of educational technologies, the growing centrality of assessment devices, performance indicators, and *accountability* mechanisms is observed. These elements come to guide both institutional organization and teaching practices, configuring a scenario in which academic performance is permanently monitored and regulated (Romanowski, 2022). In this sense, quality emerges as a structuring axis of educational policies, frequently associated with the improvement of teacher training and the enhancement of teaching-learning processes.

However, beyond its normative character, quality can be understood as a device that regulates practices, guides conduct, and produces specific ways of being a teacher. Ball (2003) argues that performativity transforms education into a field oriented by measurable results, in which teachers are evaluated by their ability to respond to indicators and targets. Similarly, Shore and Roberts (1995) point out that quality systems operate as disciplinary technologies, intensifying processes of control and surveillance in the university context.

From the Foucauldian perspective, this movement can be analyzed as an expression of a rationality of governmentality, in which power is exercised through the conduct of conduct (Foucault, 2008; Rose, 1999; Dean, 2010). Thus, quality ceases to be merely a technical parameter and begins to act as a governance technology, articulating mechanisms of standardization, surveillance, and individualization that directly impact academic work and teacher training.

In this context, the intensification of evaluative practices and the centrality of measurement contribute to the production of academic subjects oriented by the logic of performativity, characterized by self-regulation, accountability, and the constant pursuit of performance (Skea, 2021). This scenario highlights contemporary educational challenges,

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especially regarding teacher training in environments marked by pressure for results, the incorporation of educational technologies, and the expansion of institutional demands.

Recent studies have shown that the transformations associated with contemporary university governance have produced significant impacts on academic identities, intensifying processes of adaptation, negotiation, and reconstruction of teaching roles (Marques; Lopes; Magalhães, 2024). These dynamics reinforce the centrality of performativity as a rationality that guides practices, evaluations, and modes of action in higher education (Visser *et al*., 2024). Given this scenario, the research problem is: in what way does quality, as a technology of governmentality, produce effects of performativity and subjectivation in academic work, especially in the context of teacher training in higher education?

The objective of this study was to understand how quality operates as a technology of governmentality, analyzing its effects on academic work and its implications for teacher training. Specifically, the aim is to identify how practices associated with evaluation, standardization, and the use of indicators influence teaching conduct, promoting processes of self-regulation, performativity, and reconfiguration of professional identities.

The relevance of the study lies in the need to problematize contemporary educational transformations, especially regarding the challenges of teacher training in contexts marked by the intensification of assessment policies, the incorporation of educational technologies, and the expansion of demands for inclusion and quality. When analyzing quality as a technology of governmentality, the research contributes to a critical understanding of the processes that permeate teaching work. More specifically, this study contributes to debates on governmentality in higher education by demonstrating how quality devices operate simultaneously as mechanisms of institutional management and technologies for producing faculty subjectivities, broadening the understanding of the relationships between assessment, performativity, and modes of being academic in the contemporary university context.

Methodology

The present investigation is characterized as qualitative, of an applied nature, with exploratory-descriptive objectives, guided by a post-structuralist perspective anchored in the Foucauldian analysis of power. In line with the study's objective—to understand quality as a technology of governmentality and its performativity and subjectivation effects in academic

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work—the research adopts discourse as the central unit of analysis, understood as a practice that produces knowledge, truths, and modes of regulating conduct.

From the perspective of technical procedures, a single case study was conducted at a community higher education institution located in the Northwest region of the State of Rio Grande do Sul. The choice of the institution was justified by its trajectory in institutional evaluation, which began in the 1990s, and by the centrality assumed by the quality agenda in its academic management and regulation processes. The choice of a case study allowed for an in-depth understanding of a contemporary phenomenon within its specific organizational context.

The data production involved triangulation between primary and secondary sources. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 36 faculty members from different departments of the institution. The sample was defined non-probabilistically and intentionally, favoring subjects considered relevant for understanding the phenomenon investigated. Of the participants, 25 had more than ten years of institutional affiliation (69%) and 11 had less than three years of experience at the institution (31%). Regarding their qualifications, 19 held doctorates (52.77%), 16 held master's degrees (44.43%), and one was a specialist (2.8%), allowing for the inclusion of diverse academic backgrounds and experiences.

The interviews were conducted between 2015 and 2016, supplemented by interviews with institutional managers conducted in 2014. The average duration of the interviews was approximately one hour, with some cases exceeding two hours. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, transcribed, and submitted to interpretative analysis. The collection was concluded when recurrence of discourses and saturation of empirical data were observed.

The semi-structured script included questions related to the characteristics of institutional management, the transformations resulting from the quality agenda, institutional evaluation, accountability practices, and the effects of these dynamics on teaching work. Among the central questions highlighted were: "What are the main characteristics of the current management in the institution?", "What have been the main changes since you joined the university?", "How do you understand the evaluation system?" and "How do you perceive the discourse on quality in higher education?". The instrument was previously tested with teachers, aiming to ensure clarity, relevance, and adherence to the research objectives.

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Complementarily, institutional documents related to evaluation, planning, academic management, and quality policies were analyzed, allowing for the triangulation of the evidence produced.

The data analysis was based on the Foucauldian approach to discourse, seeking to identify discursive regularities, power-knowledge practices, and mechanisms for conducting behaviors. The analytical process articulated empirical data and theoretical framework, taking governmentality, normalization, surveillance, and individualization as initial categories. From these categories, the analytical axes that structure the study's results were constructed: bureaucratization, accountability, performativity, standardization, and teacher subjectification.

The data treatment followed an interpretive logic, allowing for the understanding of quality as a device that articulates knowledge and power, produces regimes of truth, and impacts teachers' practices, conduct, and subjectivities.

Results and discussion

In the context investigated, quality directly impacts teacher training by redefining the competencies, practices, and modes of action expected of teachers. The analyzed excerpts show that it operates less as a formative principle and more as a technology of governmentality. In this sense, quality becomes associated with procedures, controls, records, evaluations, goals, standardization, and accountability, configuring itself as a rationality of governance of teaching work and producing specific forms of academic subjectification.

A first finding refers to the bureaucratization of academic life. The testimonials indicate that the faculty recognize the expansion of institutional procedures, but also perceive it as a burden that shifts the focus of academic work. A2's statement is exemplary in stating that "filling out forms and papers does not mean quality" (A2), while A3 synthesizes this process by saying that "bureaucracy swallows us whole" [...]. These things discourage me" (A3). A4, in turn, associates the bureaucratization of time with the loss of continuity in teaching work, especially due to the overload of meetings and administrative demands, highlighting that "we feel pressured in this regard" (A4). Still in this direction, A5 mentions "a bureaucratized routine in hours, a very exhausting routine" and states that "we work many more hours than contracted" (A5).

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These excerpts allow us to interpret that quality is materialized through devices that make teaching work visible, measurable, and comparable. This reading converges with Romanowski (2022), indicating that accreditation mechanisms operate through standardization and *accountability*. This interpretation is reinforced by Ball (2003), who argues that performativity transforms educational practices into measurable outcomes. Shore and Roberts (1995) complement this discussion by stating that quality systems function as disciplinary technologies that expand surveillance and control mechanisms in universities. Under a Foucauldian reading, this process can be understood as the constitution of a regime of truth about quality, in which discourses such as efficiency and productivity define what is valid (Foucault, 2008). In this regime, registering and measuring become conditions for the existence of academic work, leading to the individualization and normalization of teaching practices.

A second result refers to individual accountability. Decentralization appears linked to accountability, also expanded by external demands. The interviewees state that "by bureaucratizing, you hold people more accountable" (A3), that "decentralization presupposes accountability" (A2), and that "accountability expanded in the research through the demand of external bodies" (A6). This dynamic confirms the centrality of accountability (Romanowski, 2022) and can be deepened by Foucauldian governmentality, in which the teacher begins to govern themselves according to performance principles (Rose, 1999; Dean, 2010). Quality thus acts as a technology of itself, leading to self-regulation. This interpretation also dialogues with Skea (2021), by demonstrating the academic's production as a performance-oriented subject, and with Olssen and Peters (2005), by highlighting accountability as a central mechanism of neoliberalism in higher education. For Olssen and Peters (2005), managerial reforms in higher education reinforce practices of monitoring, efficiency, and competition, aligning universities with market rationalities.

A third finding refers to performativity. University management will operate based on results and goals, creating an environment of constant evaluation. Teachers report an intensification of institutional demands and pressure for productivity. According to A9, "we are pressured to produce, to show results" (A9). A4 problematizes academic productivism by stating that "what matters is to publish, publish, and publish" (A4), while A24 highlights that "we are hostages of meritocracy" and that "all policies are about measuring results" (A24). Furthermore, A13 points out that "to achieve these quality parameters, it is necessary to produce" (A13).

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This scenario can be interpreted as an update of panopticism (Foucault, 2014), in which surveillance is internalized by the subjects. Ball (2003) points out that this process generates constant comparison, while Shore and Roberts (1995) highlight the disciplinary nature of quality systems. Huber (2018) also identifies that performance indicators and the Lattes curriculum function as mechanisms for stratification, classification, and control of academics. In this context, performativity transforms teaching activity into a permanent object of measurement, classification, and ranking.

A fourth result refers to pedagogical standardization. Changes in teaching plans and methodologies demonstrate normalization processes. The interviewees report changes in programmatic content and greater control over pedagogical processes. B2 highlights that "the issue of active methodologies [...] is changing" and that teachers are being encouraged to explicitly state methodologies in their teaching plans (B2). B3 already mentions "the change in teaching plans" and the creation of "a core of the syllabi" (B3). Romanowski (2022) associates this movement with accreditation systems, while Foucault (2014) allows us to understand it as the definition of what is institutionally acceptable and desirable. Olssen and Peters (2005) highlight that this logic restricts practices and knowledge by aligning education with efficiency and economic rationality. A fifth finding refers to subjective effects. The testimonies reveal weariness, pressure, surveillance, and loss of freedom, indicating that quality produces ways of being a teacher. A4 describes "a feeling of oppression" and states feeling "that she is always indebted" (A4). Another interviewee states that they feel "in a semi-liberty regime" (A8). Já A12 reports that "there is an oversight, there is a follow-up of everything" (A12). A11 mentions "the feeling of being monitored" (A11), while A10 states that "the teacher feels coerced" (A10).

Skea (2021) points to the reconfiguration of academic identity, while Foucault (2014) allows us to understand this process as individualization based on metrics and disciplinary devices. Ball (2003) also argues that performativity produces ontological insecurity and pressures individuals into constant performance demonstration. The findings reinforce Huber's (2018) analysis, according to which the quality agenda produces subjects oriented by self-regulation, internalization of institutional demands, and continuous surveillance.

The findings corroborate Skea (2021), by demonstrating that the incorporation of performance and quality requirements does not occur solely at the organizational level, but participates in the constitution of academic identities aligned with contemporary neoliberal rationalities. In this perspective, quality ceases to act exclusively as a mechanism for evaluation and management to actively participate in the production of specific ways of being a teacher,

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marked by self-discipline, accountability, and the permanent pursuit of performance.

Furthermore, these processes are articulated with biopolitics, by regulating academic populations through indicators, goals, and performance metrics (Foucault, 2008), aligning with the *New Public Management*. Quality thus begins to act not only as a technical-administrative mechanism, but as a device for guiding conduct, articulating power, knowledge, and subjectivity.

The results synthesized in Table 1 show that quality operates through articulated mechanisms of normalization, individualization, visibility, performativity, and subjectification. These mechanisms do not act in isolation, but rather compose a network of practices and discourses that guide behaviors, regulate academic work, and produce specific forms of teacher subjectivation in the contemporary university context.

Table 1 – Mechanisms of governmentality and their effects on academic work

Analytical category	Identified quality devices	Effects on academic work
Normalization	Institutional protocols, teaching plans, evaluation criteria, quality indicators, and standardized procedures	Homogenization of teaching practices, conformity to institutional standards, and reduction of professional autonomy
Individualization	Individual evaluations, performance metrics, productivity goals, rankings, and accountability for results	Competition among teachers, self-responsibility, fragmentation of collective action, and differentiation of subjects
Visibility/Surveillance	Institutional evaluation systems, continuous monitoring, records, reports, and results disclosure	Expansion of supervision, feeling of permanent observation, and intensification of control mechanisms
Performativity	Performance indicators, institutional goals, scientific productivity, and results measurement	Orientation towards results, academic productivism, and valuation of measurable performance
Subjectification	Internalization of quality discourses, incorporation of evaluative requirements, and adaptation to institutional criteria	Production of self-regulated, self-disciplined subjects aligned with contemporary managerial rationalities

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on research data.

On the other hand, tensions and resistances emerge, with teachers defending a quality linked to critical and humanistic training. A15 states that “the concern with knowledge [...] seems to have been somewhat lost” (A15), indicating resistance to the excessive technification and instrumentalization of higher education. This movement confirms Foucault’s (2008) reading about the coexistence between power relations and possibilities of resistance. It also dialogues with Shore and Roberts (1995), by highlighting that academics do not always fully

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adhere to the rationalities imposed by quality systems.

In summary, quality functions as a technology of governmentality by articulating disciplinary, normalizing, panoptic, individualizing, and biopolitical dimensions, configuring itself as a device that governs conduct, regulates practices, and redefines contemporary university work.

Final considerations

The present research aimed to understand how quality operates as a technology of governmentality in higher education and its effects on academic work and teacher training. The results show that quality surpasses its normative and technical-administrative function, constituting itself as a device that regulates practices, guides conduct, and actively participates in the production of subjectivities in the university context.

The analysis revealed that mechanisms associated with evaluation, standardization, accountability, monitoring, and measurement of results make teaching work permanently visible, comparable, and auditable. These devices intensify performativity processes by inducing behaviors oriented towards goal achievement, productivity, and compliance with previously established institutional standards. As a consequence, effects related to the bureaucratization of academic activities, increased performance pressures, intensified surveillance, reduced professional autonomy, and growing self-regulation of teaching conduct are observed.

The findings demonstrate that faculty members internalize institutional demands related to performance, scientific production, and compliance with quality indicators, configuring processes of subjectification marked by adaptation to contemporary managerial rationalities. In this perspective, quality begins to operate as a technology of governance by articulating mechanisms of normalization, individualization, visibility, performativity, and subjectivation, producing specific ways of being a teacher in higher education.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes to debates on governmentality by demonstrating that quality operates simultaneously as a mechanism for institutional management and a technology for producing academic subjectivities. By highlighting the articulation between normalization, individualization, visibility, performativity, and subjectivation, the understanding of the ways in which quality policies participate in the conduct

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of teaching practices and the constitution of academic identities aligned with contemporary neoliberal rationalities is broadened. The study's main contribution consists of demonstrating that quality, far from merely representing a technical evaluation tool, acts as a technology of governance that produces effects on the practices, behaviors, and modes of subjectivation of academic subjects.

The research also showed that governance processes are not established in a homogeneous or totalizing way. The participants' speeches revealed tensions, ambiguities, and forms of resistance, especially when teachers advocate for conceptions of quality associated with critical, reflective, and humanistic training. These movements indicate that, although quality devices exert a strong influence on academic practices, spaces for contestation, negotiation, and redefinition remain within higher education institutions.

As a limitation, the study's execution in a single community higher education institution stands out, which restricts the generalization of the results to other organizational contexts. Furthermore, the analyzed data reflect a specific context of evaluation and quality policies, and may assume distinct configurations in different institutional, national, or cultural systems.

Future research may expand this discussion through comparative studies between public, private, and community institutions, as well as investigate how emerging processes of digitalization, platformization, and the use of artificial intelligence are reconfiguring the mechanisms of evaluation, monitoring, control, and subjectification in academic work.

It is concluded, therefore, that quality constitutes a central element of contemporary forms of higher education governance, operating not only on institutional structures but also on the subjects who act within them. Critically understanding these processes becomes fundamental for reflecting on the directions of teacher training, evaluation policies, and the ongoing transformations in contemporary academic work.

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