

Neoliberalism and its impact on academics: A qualitative review.

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The changes produced in higher education as a consequence of neoliberal influences have had a considerable impact on the university world. As a consequence, there has been a growing research interest in how such changes have affected academics. However, recent review studies related to this issue are scarce in the literature. Therefore, this systematic review aims to provide a general overview of the way in which these new changes in higher education have had an impact on teachers. To this end, a bibliographic search was conducted on the Web of Science, SCOPUS, and Education Resources Information Centre, which yielded a total of 38 articles published in international journals. Thematic analysis was applied using the Nvivo 12 software package, from which three emerging themes were identified: *action strategies in view of new neoliberal demands*; *construction of the professional identities*; and *work, health and social consequences*. Further, this review highlighted the need for more research on the influence of the closest social context (research team/department) on academic staff; as well as the development of systematic reviews of the literature that go deeper into the processes of construction and development of new professional identities.

Keywords: academics; higher education; academic work; neoliberalism; systematic review.

Introduction

The introduction of neoliberalism as an ideology began around the 1980s with the policies carried out by the governments of Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK. This ideology began to permeate different sectors such as the economy, health and education (Rodgers, 2018); and rapidly began to influence the ways of being and acting of society in general (Tight, 2019).

In the case of education and knowledge, the impact of neoliberalism has been particularly relevant for two reasons. First, because these are areas that have not traditionally been associated with market ideology (Tight, 2019). And second, because of the enormous potential of education to influence the formation of

future citizens. Such is the importance of the latter that the last 20 years have seen significant changes in education-related policy practices (Rinne, 2008). According to Luengo and Saura (2012), the influence of neoliberalism on education takes the form of two parallel processes: (1) the opening up of public educational resources to the private sector, i.e., processes of privatisation in the field of education; and (2) the absorption of typical private practices by the public education sector. Ball and Youdell (2007) call these processes as exogenous and endogenous dynamics respectively.

With respect to the Higher Education (HE) sector, the last two decades have seen the development of a wide range of policy measures of a significantly neoliberal nature. As a result, the university world has undergone a profound transformation in recent decades of its aims and functions (Harland, 2009; Henkel, 1997, 2005; Javadi & Azizzadeh, 2020; McCowan, 2017). This is mainly due to the development of a set of policies aimed at favouring the development of the economy through the search for excellence in Higher Education (Harland, 2009; Tomicic, 2019). The most evident changes in the HE sector can be seen in the development of reforms, whose objective is to gain economic profit from the public sector, the privatisation of public entities, or the introduction of private agents for university management (Brøgger, 2019b; Díez-Gutiérrez, 2018; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Saura and Bolívar, 2019). However, there are other, less evident, processes which go far beyond simple structural changes.

In this sense, we are referring to new forms of governance based on principles of *governmentality* (Foucault, 1991) and *performativity* (Ball, 2003). The clearest example can be found in the standardisation of academics' performance evaluations, the results of which determine the possibility of

accessing, promoting and establishing incentives within the profession. Moreover, the fact that research has become the main priority in these evaluations has contributed to this activity becoming indispensable for the survival and progress of the university world (Bermúdez-Aponte and Laspalas, 2017; Caballero & Bolívar, 2015; McCune, 2019).

All of these changes are having a significant impact on the professional activity of university academics. In this regard, there are several studies which have focused on analysing the effects that these new forms of governance have on academics (Arvaja, 2018; Anikina, Goncharova & Evseeva, 2019; Cannizzo, 2017; Collins, Glover & Myers, 2020; Dashper & Fletcher, 2019; Knights & Clarke, 2014; Leisyte, 2015; Saura & Bolívar, 2019; Smith, 2017; Ylijoki, 2014). However, despite the growing scientific production, no recent systematic reviews have been carried out to provide an overview of the main published findings within in this field of study. Therefore, the present work aims to answer the following research question: *what are the most relevant contributions regarding the impact of these new neoliberal changes in HE had on academics?*

To answer this question, we have analysed the most recent studies (2010-2020) carried out on the influence of new forms of political control on academics. This review had three main objectives. First, we aimed to collect, group and consolidate the existing knowledge. Second, we set out to identify biases and to suggest future lines of research. Third, we aimed to establish a critical and reflective starting point that will identify the main themes that could stimulate a debate that will allow us to analyse the future of the university and science.

Methodology

The present research consists of a literature review. The aim of this type of review is to gain insight into the current state of a given research topic and, at the same time, to draw conclusions based on scientific evidence that will further the development of the field in question (Gough et al., 2012; Harari et al., 2020). However, in order to provide the highest degree of scientific rigour to this study, a *systematic review* was carried out. This is a type of literature review which, compared to traditional narrative reviews, is characterised by the quality, exhaustiveness and systematisation of the search and study selection processes (Alexander, 2020). In this case, this systematic review has used the Prisma Statement so as to minimise both the bias in the selection of studies and the subjectivity of the review process (Moher et al., 2010).

However, within the wide variety of existing types of systematic reviews (Grant and Booth, 2009), the present study developed a *qualitative systematic review*. This is a method that integrates the results and contributions of those studies included in the review after the search and selection processes. In contrast to other types of reviews such as meta-analysis, "its aim is not aggregative in the sense of "adding studies together", [...] but interpretative by broadening the understanding of a specific phenomenon" (Booth, 2006, 422). Along these lines, qualitative systematic reviews contribute to obtaining a more complete view of the existing evidence, since they are not limited to studies that only include statistical information, as is the case with meta-analysis (Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, 2009).

Selection of databases and specification of search equations

Three databases were selected on the search for relevant research that met our study purpose. Two of them were selected for their relevance at the international level

(SCOPUS and Web of Science -WOS-) and a third one for its importance within the field of education, the Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC). In addition, these databases were chosen on the basis of quality criteria, as all three have efficient analysis tools which enable the detection of high-impact studies. The keywords selected for the search (*academic, earlycareer researcher, teaching staff, researcher, higher education, university, neoliberalism, metric, measure, research evaluation, managerialisma*) were combined to construct the following search equation:

- (“academic*” OR “earlycareer researcher*” OR “teaching staff “ OR “researcher*”) AND (“higher education” OR “universit*”) AND (neoliberalism) AND (effect* OR impact* OR consequence*)
- (“academic*” OR “earlycareer researcher*” OR “teaching staff “ OR “researcher*”) AND (“higher education” OR “universit*”) AND (managerialism) AND (effect* OR impact* OR consequence*)

Formulation of the inclusion/exclusion criteria

The proposals of Dixon-Woods et al. (2006) and Booth et al. (2016) were considered for the specification of inclusion/exclusion criteria. For this reason, the filters used were as follows: *language* (English and Spanish), *date of publications* (between 2010 and 2020) and *studies published in review or article formats*. Although neoliberalism manifests itself in universities before 2010, it was decided to filter the search on the last 10 years (2010-2020) in order to analyse the most recent studies on the subject.

Evaluation of the results

Figure 2 shows the PRISMA method scheme, illustrating all the steps carried out until the final reach the final articles. According to the databases, search equations and

inclusion/exclusion criteria applied, we obtained a total of 317 documents. After eliminating the duplicates (12), we went on to evaluate the documents using a two-stage process. In the first phase, we proceeded to a reading of titles and abstracts after which we excluded those documents not considered to be directly related to our study topic (258). And, in the second phase, we proceeded to a complete reading of the remaining documents (47) in search of false positives (Codina, 2018). Finally, 38 documents were selected for the systematic review. This whole process of evaluation and selection of documents was carried out and agreed upon by three researchers, in order to provide the maximum degree of coherence to the research.

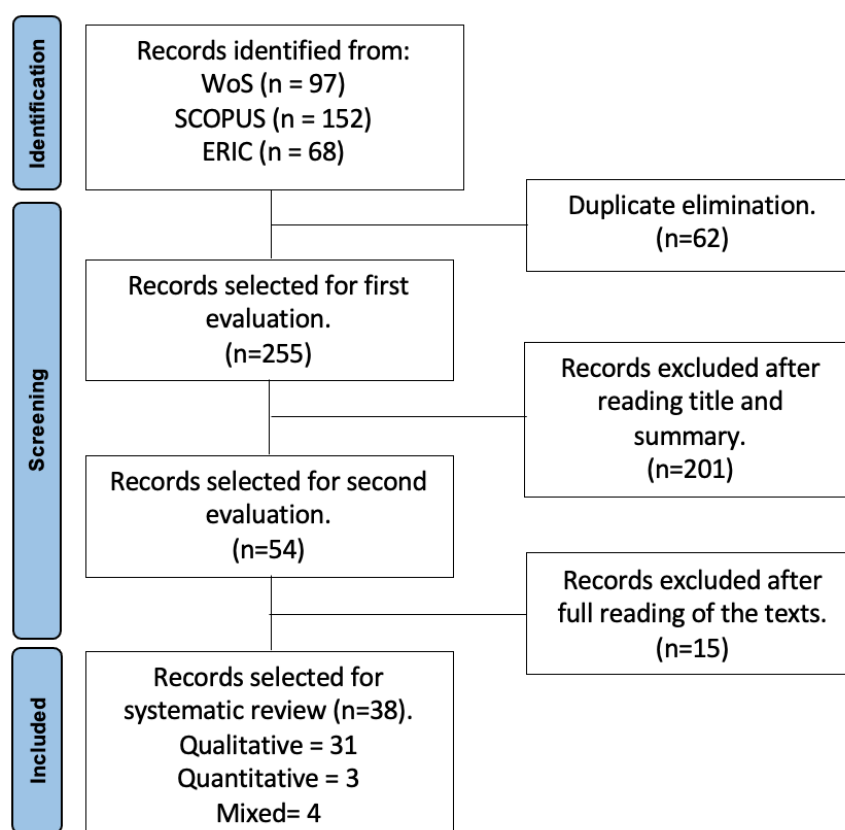


Figure 1. PRISMA's flow chart of the stages followed in the bibliographic search.

Analysis and synthesis of the results

Finally, in the fourth and last phase, the results were analysed and synthesised. For that purpose, two different phases were performed. First of all, an analysis of the main

characteristics of the studies was carried out. For that aim, an Excel database was created in which the following data was compiled: authors name and year, countries where studies were carried out, main topics, study purposes and research questions, methods used, characteristics of the sample. Second of all, a thematic analysis was used to analyse the results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this purpose, we used the *Nvivo* 12 qualitative analysis software. The emerging thematic categories were agreed upon by three researchers in order to provide the highest degree of consistency to the research.

Results

In this section, the 38 articles included in our systematic review will be analysed. First, we will start by providing a general description of the characteristics of the studies (temporal aspects, research designs, and contexts). And finally, we will move to an in-depth analysis of each of the emerging themes resulting from our research.

General characteristics of the studies

Most of the studies in our review were published between 2012 and 2020, even though our literature search covered the last decade (2010-2021). An increase in the number of publications can also be observed in the last two years. Thus, while 50% of the production corresponds to the earlier years, the remaining 50% belongs to the last three years (2018-2020), where 2019 is the year with the highest number of publications (10). The distribution of the papers can be observed in Figure 2.

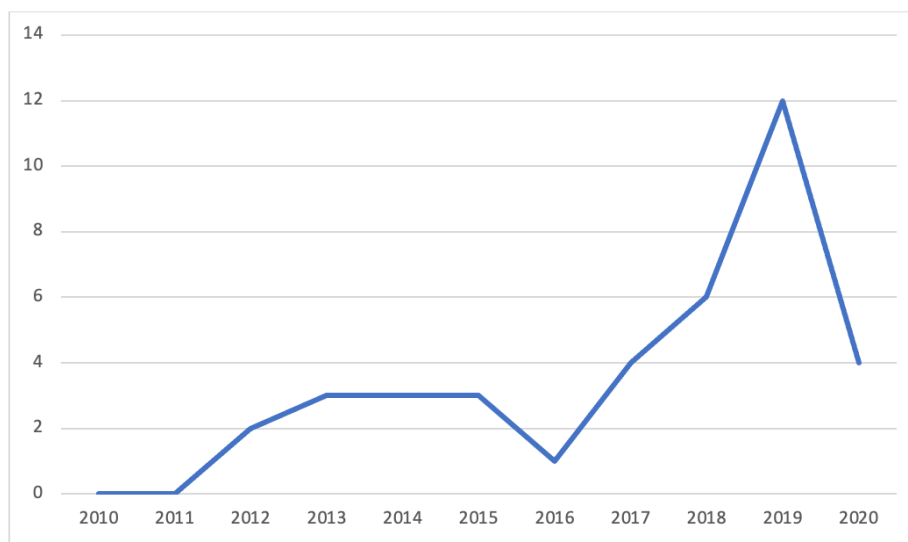


Figure 2. Temporal Evolution of Scientific Production.

With regard to the methodological design of the selected articles, 31 were qualitative studies (81.6%), four used a mixed design (10.5%) and three followed a quantitative approach (7.9%), mainly by means of a survey. The qualitative methods included, among others, discussion groups, reflective journals, observations and interviews (semi-structured, open, group, and with a biographical-narrative approach).

Most of the study samples were composed of academics from different professional categories (Lecturer, Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, Professor, Dean, Chancellor). However, there are some specific studies focusing on a single professional category, usually young academics or Early Career Researches (Chipindi & Vavrus, 2018; Jones, 2017; Smith, 2017; Ursin, et. al., 2020; Ylijoki & Henriksson, 2017). With regard to the academic disciplines addressed, a high degree of homogeneity can be observed if we look at Biglan's classification (1973).

Finally, with respect to the geographical distribution of the studies, there is a clear predominance of research conducted on areas of Northern Europe (18), with countries such as the United Kingdom (9) and Finland (5) being of particular note.

Research was found from other geographical areas such as the USA (2), Canada (1), China (2), Australia (3), Zambia (1), Chile (3), Turkey (1), Spain (1) and Switzerland (1).

Thematic analysis

Following the thematic analysis of the 38 documents, it was possible to identify a total of three emerging themes: *action strategies in view of new neoliberal demands*; *construction of the professional identities*; and *work, health and social consequences*. We will now proceed to analyse each of these in the following sections.

Action strategies in view of new neoliberal demands

There are numerous studies in our review that focus on studying the different ways in which an academic staff can proceed and act in the face of new managerial demands. After a thorough analysis of these documents, we have identified three main trends in academic behaviours: (1) *conscious acceptance or submission* (Clarke & Knights, 2015; Dugas et al., 2018; Ylijoki, 2014), (2) *unconscious submission* (Clarke & Knights, 2015) and (3) *resistance/rejection* (Feldman and Sandoval, 2018). However, among these positions, Shams (2019) describes a fourth trend that we will call *flexible or elastic*.

The first trend, that is, conscious acceptance or submission, also known as *professional pragmatism* (Teelken; 2012) or *careering* (Clarke & Knights; 2015), refers to all those behaviours that imply the acceptance of the new demands. These behaviours are driven by several factors: the need to obtain benefits, to survive in the academic world or to avoid the social rejection that could result from resisting such changes (Clarke & Knights, 2015; Cannizzo, 2017; Djerasimovic & Villani, 2019).

With respect to the second trend, that is, *unconscious submission*, also termed *formal instrumentality* (Teelken, 2012), this refers to behaviours that lead to the acceptance of new performative changes as a consequence of their normalisation (Cannizzo, 2017). In this sense, Ylijoki (2014) describes a strategy called *dramaturgical*. This consists of people who accept the new demands without criticism but display a false image of rejection to the outside world.

With regard to the third trend, that is, *rejection/resistance*, this refers to those behaviours that lead to non-acceptance of the wider social context. If this simply implies the non-acceptance of new demands, we would speak of *rejection*; whereas if it is associated with fighting behaviours, we would speak of *resistance*. In this sense, Feldman and Sandoval (2018) describe three different *resistance/rejection* strategies. First, *abstention* or *abandonment*, which implies retirement, the search for professional careers outside the university, or the abandonment of their academic or professional aspirations. Second, these authors also describe the notion of *attack* (both individual and collective), with examples such as confronting leaders, rebelling against the student administration or choosing to meet minimum requirements. According to Tight (2019), attack at the individual level (individuals or small academic groups) is the most effective strategy of resistance. However, this author is aware of the considerable level of involvement and burnout which this can entail. Finally, Feldman and Sandoval (2018) also mention the *development of alternatives* to the neoliberal university. With respect to this strategy, we found multiple studies that propose to either change the models of evaluating the quality of academics' performance (Albatch & Wit, 2019; López, 2018; San Fabián, 2020); or promote integration between teaching and research tasks (Caballero & Bolívar, 2015; McCune, 2019).

However, it appears that most of these options are no more than simple

proposals that could not be implemented. According to Manzano-Arrondo (2017), this is due to “the remarkable degree of settlement of the current system, which concerns not only international dynamics [...], but very specially the shaping of individual trajectories. In such a homogenised and deep-rooted situation, any change has a difficult prognosis” (p. 28).

Finally, the fourth trend, known as *flexible* or *elastic*, and also called *symbolic compliance* (Teelken, 2012) or *blind professional* (Dashper & Fletcher, 2019), consists of remaining immutable in the face of the new context, adapting only to what is convenient in each moment.

To conclude, several trends have been observed in relation to the strategies adopted by academics. First, *resistance/rejection* strategies are practiced more by older professionals, i.e., those about to retire or who have already achieved all of their professional goals. (Cannizzo, 2017). Second, a gradual decrease in this type of strategy can be observed with the passage of time. And third, unconscious submission strategies are more frequently practised by the younger academics. This latter trend is due to the fact that new academic staff have not experienced anything other than a performative-based system, which, for them, becomes normalised and regarded as the only plausible reality in university life (Smith, 2017).

Construction of the professional identity

The second emerging topic of our study is related to the underlying causes of the development of new professional identities (hereinafter PPII). These studies all point to the dichotomy between tradition and the new demands of the university as the main cause of the transformation of academic identities (Huang & Guo, 2019; McCune, 2019; Shams, 2019). The clash between the current reality of Higher Education —

driven by market interests, competitiveness and performativity — and the traditional forms of university that are based on principles of autonomy, reflection or freedom, are pushing academics towards a radical change in their ways of acting and proceeding (Shams, 2019; Winter & O'Donohue, 2012).

Although most authors agree that this identity tension is a consequence of the cultural shock between the performative university and one based on more traditional values, some authors go further. Ylijoki (2013), Cannizzo (2017), Jiménez (2019) and Tülübas and Göktürk (2020) focus on the opposing values between the traditional and the performative university. Shams (2019) distinguishes between the traditional deontology of being academic (service to society, honesty, and utility) and the new performative-based demands (increased productivity).

Moreover, several authors emphasize that this controversy is the result of new ways of working. Guzmán-Valenzuela and Martínez (2016) argue that the *polyfunctionalism* of the traditional university is struggling with a new university that is primarily aimed at research production. Leisyte (2015) and Dugas et al. (2018, 2020) see the cause of the conflict as being the supremacy of research over teaching; and McCune (2019) points out the imbalance between the new ways of measuring and valuing research and the marginal place assigned to teaching.

Finally, other authors argue that this debate stems from the continuous search for *the true academic* (Knights & Clarke, 2014), identifying the controversy between what academics want to be and what they are able to be (Guzmán-Valenzuela & Barnett; 2013); what they want to be and what they must be (Saura & Bolivar, 2019); or what they believe they are and what they really are (Angervall & Ustafsson, 2014)

Therefore, the PPII of academics are now defined as *multiple, dynamic and with a high pace of change* (Arvaja, 2018; Collins et al.; 2020; Huang and Guo, 2019; Saura

& Bolívar, 2019). Moreover — and as a result of the tension between the traditional and performative universities — PPII are also characterized by their *fragility* and *fragmentation* (Guzmán-Valenzuela & Barnett, 2013). Consequently, the studies analysed describe new types of PPII arising from the new demands of Higher Education. These new PPII can be classified into three categories: *resistance/rejection*, *acceptance/submission* and *flexible/neutral PPII*.

The PI defined by *resistance/rejection* patterns, includes all PPII created as a result of strategies based on opposition to or rejection of the new demands of the broader social context of Higher Education. Thus, within this category, two distinct PPII groups are identified: ignorance or rejection. The PPII of the *ignorance group* are notable for showing indifference to the changes and new demands of Higher Education (Tülübas & Göktürk, 2020; Ylijoki, 2014), whilst the PPII of the so-called *rejection group* have a clear tendency towards rejection of this new scenario (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013).

The category of *acceptance/submission* includes all PPII formed as a result of strategies based on the acceptance of or submission to the changes in Higher Education. However, the types of acceptance found in the literature can be classified into three groups: PPII related to a positive view of the changes; PPII linked to a negative view; and PPII associated with a neutral vision or unconscious subjugation.

The *PPII group with positive vision* includes all identities characterized by the acceptance of new demands without criticism (Theisyte, 2015). These PPIIs are often related to academics who see these new demands as being beneficial for their careers (Huang Pang y Yu, 2016). The *PPII group with negative vision* encompasses identities who accept the new context with criticism (Jiménez, 2019). Generally, these PPIIs are usually developed by academics who feel obliged to assume the new requirements in order to survive in the academic world (Leysite, 2015). The *PPII group with neutral*

vision involves unconscious subjugation, that is, the inertial adaptation to changes due to the unawareness of alternative realities (Saura & Bolivar, 2019).

To finish, the *flexible Professional Identity* cover all academics prone to the development of accommodating or neutral strategies. Within this group, we can identify three different types of PPIIs: *balanced PIs*, *PI subject to interests*, and *PI in process*. The *balanced PIS* is linked to the continuous search for a stable balance between the new demands and the traditional values of the university (Huang & Guo, 2019). The *PI in process* is characterised with the loss of traditional values without being supplanted by any other (Leisyte, 2015). And the *PI subject to interests* seeks to find a balance between traditional university values and the new demands, motivated by personal/professional interests (Whitchurch, 2019).

Work, health and social consequences

The latest emerging topic of our study is related to the consequences that the new demands of Higher Education have on academics' work, health and social life. To this end, Table 1 shows the main work and health consequences organized around the new types of PPII described in the previous section.

Table 1. Work and health implications for academics

Types	Groups	Labour Consequences	Health Consequences
	Ignorance	- Balance of teaching and research. - High levels of satisfaction.	
Rejection/ resistance identities	Rejection	-Search for professional options outside of the academic world. - Low levels of job satisfaction.	- High levels of anxiety and distress. - Development of negative emotions (guilt, anxiety, fear, insecurity, exhaustion).

Acceptance /submission identities	<i>Positive Vision</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Positive attitude towards change. - High levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation; trust and satisfaction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Loss of autonomy. - Increased individualization processes. - Subject to competition and productivity logics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Positive emotions (enthusiasm, satisfaction, enjoyment).
	<i>Negative Vision</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low levels of job satisfaction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Predominance of research IP versus teaching. - Loss of the sense of being a traditional academic or the values of the traditional university. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High levels of stress and anxiety (symptoms of physical and mental tiredness, sleeplessness and depression) - Presence of varying degrees of insecurity. - Negative emotions (insecurity, fear, frustration).
	<i>Neutral Vision</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Varied levels of job satisfaction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development of unethical research practices (pay-to-publish, misrepresentation of data, poor authorship practices, etc.). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High levels of stress, anxiety and insecurity (symptoms of physical and mental tiredness and sleeplessness)
Flexible/ neutral identities	<i>Balance</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cognitive and emotional wear and tear. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presence of ambivalent emotions.
	<i>Process</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Balance of teaching and research. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High stress values and levels of insecurity (symptoms of physical and mental tiredness and anxiety).
	<i>Interest</i>			

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Finally, some studies also mention the consequences that this context has on academics' social and family relationships. In this sense, it is underlined how academics' enormous work overload leads to the development of social and family problems due to the inability to balance social/family and work tasks (Guzmán-Valenzuela y Barnett, 2013; Ylojiki y Ursin, 2013)

Discussion and Conclusions

The objective of this work was to conduct a systematic review that aimed to provide a general overview of the impact that the new neoliberal changes in HE had on academics. To do this, 38 documents were analyzed, allowing us to identify the main emerging themes, delve into the main characteristics of the selected research, and extract a number of key ideas.

First, this review has allowed us to observe the considerable impact of the broader social context of Higher Education (new forms of governance, performativity and production) on academics (Archer, 2008a, 2008b; Ball, 2012, 2015; Dowling, 2008; Harland, 2009; Harland, Tidswell, Everett, Hale & Pickering, 2010; Harris, 2005; Henkel, 1997, 2005; Manathunga, 2007; McCowan, 2017; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Saura & Bolívar, 2019; Tight, 2019). This influence has provoked an identity shock that has generated new fragmented and fragile PPII (Archer, 2008b; Guzmán-Valenzuela and Barnett, 2013; McCune, 2019; Shams, 2019; Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). However, the context has affected not only the identities of academics, but also their roles, their ways of acting and proceeding, their health or their relationships both within and outside the working context (Fitzmaurice, 2013; Dugas, et al., 2018; Harris, Myers and Ravenswood, 2019; McCune, 2019; Ursin, et al., 2019). These findings are in accordance with the works of Clarke et al. (2013) and Alonso, Lobato and Arandia (2015), who point to the broader social context of Higher Education today as being one of the key influences on academics. Such is the relevance of this broader social context and the concerns regarding its impact on academics, in recent years there has been a considerable increase in scientific production on this issue, as evidenced in our review.

In a similar vein, the wide geographical variety of samples in the analyzed studies also demonstrates how these new forms of government, performativity and

production are not limited to specific areas or countries but are widespread on a global scale. According to Bermúdez-Aponte and Laspalas (2017), this expansion reflects the efforts made by various countries to improve the quality of Higher Education in order to contribute to the growth of employment, and thus the economy. However, other authors (Balaban & Wright, 2017; Brøgger, 2019a; Tomicic, 2020) believe that the intention is to ensure a global Higher Education that is capable of competing at an international level.

Finally, as a future line of research, we can highlight the potential role that is played by the nearest social context (institution, department, research team, etc.) in the changes that are being experienced by academics. Whilst several authors mention the important role played by this variable (Anikina et al., 2019; Ylijoki & Henriksson; 2017), this issue has barely been addressed. Our work also suggests the need to conduct systematic literature reviews that delve further into the construction and development processes of the new PPII. It is vitally important to continue investigating this issue in order to generate a debate that allows us to analyze the future of universities and other alternatives for Higher Education.

Limitations

Some of the decisions made during the review process could be regarded as limitations. For example, restricting the searches to only Spanish and English may have caused some bias by omitting studies published in other languages. On the other hand, the selected databases may also have led to the non-consideration of possible studies relevant to this research. However, the choice of these databases was made on the basis of their scientific rigour, as the aim was to ensure that the studies included in the review met certain quality standards. Finally, examples of grey literature were also not

considered, which may also be a cause of some bias. Therefore, these limitations should be considered in future reviews.

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