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BETWEEN INDICATORS AND MEANING: SELF-ASSESSMENT, INTERNATIONALIZATION, AND EPISTEMIC COHERENCE IN POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION

Entre indicadores e sentido: autoavaliação, internacionalização e coerência epistêmica na pós-graduação em educação

Entre indicadores y significado: autoevaluación, internacionalización y coherencia epistémica en la educación de posgrado

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Abstract: Self-assessment and internationalization have become structuring axes of Brazilian postgraduate education. However, they have frequently been conducted under a predominantly instrumental rationality, centered on maximizing quantitative results and adapting to external evaluative standards. In this sense, this article analyzes the articulation between self-assessment and internationalization in postgraduate education, problematizing the centrality of quantitative indicators and discussing their effects on knowledge production, academic training, and the institutional identity of the programs. As an analytical key, the Relational Theory of Epistemic Coherence of Learning (RTECL) is used, which understands knowledge systems as relational fields structured by links, tensions, and levels of coherence. From this perspective, postgraduate education is analyzed as an institutional epistemic field in which indicators, policies, and practices of internationalization operate as relational updating mechanisms capable of strengthening or destabilizing formative coherence. It is argued that only self-evaluation conceived as a reflective and epistemically responsible practice can support ethical, pluralistic, and intellectually consistent internationalization processes. The article thus proposes a reconceptualization of evaluation and internationalization policies that places training, meaning, and epistemic coherence at the center of postgraduate education. The analysis highlights the need for a reconceptualization of evaluation and internationalization policies, since the analyzed mechanisms tend to reconfigure the epistemic coherence of postgraduate programs in a fragmented manner when dissociated from the formative project.

Keywords: institutional self-assessment; internationalization; RTECL.

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Resumo: A autoavaliação e a internacionalização consolidaram-se como eixos estruturantes da pós-graduação brasileira. No entanto, têm sido frequentemente conduzidas sob uma racionalidade predominantemente instrumental, centrada na maximização de resultados quantitativos e na adequação a padrões avaliativos externos. Nesse sentido, este artigo analisa a articulação entre autoavaliação e internacionalização na pós-graduação em Educação, problematizando a centralidade dos indicadores quantitativos e discutindo seus efeitos sobre a produção do conhecimento, a formação acadêmica e a identidade institucional dos programas. Como chave analítica, mobiliza-se a Relational Theory of Epistemic Coherence of Learning (RTECL), a qual compreende sistemas de conhecimento como campos relacionais estruturados por vínculos, tensões e níveis de coerência. A partir dessa perspectiva, a pós-graduação é analisada como campo epistêmico institucional no qual indicadores, políticas e práticas de internacionalização operam como mecanismos de atualização relacional capazes de fortalecer ou desestabilizar a coerência formativa. Defende-se que somente uma autoavaliação concebida como prática reflexiva e epistemicamente responsável pode sustentar processos de internacionalização éticos, plurais e intelectualmente consistentes. O artigo propõe, assim, uma reconceptualização das políticas de avaliação e internacionalização que recoloca a formação, o sentido e a coerência epistêmica no centro da pós-graduação em Educação. A análise evidencia a necessidade de uma reconceptualização das políticas de avaliação e internacionalização, uma vez que os dispositivos analisados tendem a reconfigurar a coerência epistêmica dos programas de forma fragmentária quando dissociados do projeto formativo.
Palavras-chave: autoavaliação institucional; internacionalização; RTECL.
Resumen: La autoevaluación y la internacionalización se han convertido en ejes estructurantes de la educación de posgrado brasileña. Sin embargo, con frecuencia se han llevado a cabo bajo una racionalidad predominantemente instrumental, centrada en la maximización de resultados cuantitativos y la adaptación a estándares evaluativos externos. En este sentido, este artículo analiza la articulación entre la autoevaluación y la internacionalización en la educación de posgrado, problematizando la centralidad de los indicadores cuantitativos y discutiendo sus efectos en la producción de conocimiento, la formación académica y la identidad institucional de los programas. Como clave analítica, se utiliza la Teoría Relacional de la Coherencia Epistémica del Aprendizaje (RTECL), que entiende los sistemas de conocimiento como campos relacionales estructurados por vínculos, tensiones y niveles de coherencia. Desde esta perspectiva, la educación de posgrado se analiza como un campo epistémico institucional en el que los indicadores, las políticas y las prácticas de internacionalización operan como mecanismos de actualización relacional capaces de fortalecer o desestabilizar la coherencia formativa. Se argumenta que solo la autoevaluación, concebida como una práctica reflexiva y epistémicamente responsable, puede sustentar procesos de internacionalización éticos, pluralistas e intelectualmente consistentes. Por lo tanto, el artículo propone una reconceptualización de las políticas de evaluación e internacionalización que sitúa la formación, el significado y la coherencia epistémica en el centro de la formación de posgrado. El análisis evidencia la necesidad de una reconceptualización de las políticas de evaluación e internacionalización, ya que los dispositivos analizados tienden a reconfigurar la coherencia epistémica de los programas de manera fragmentaria cuando se disocian del proyecto formativo.
Palabras clave: autoevaluación institucional; internacionalización; RTECL.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, Brazilian graduate education has undergone structural transformations resulting from the expansion of the system, the intensification of international scientific cooperation, and the consolidation of increasingly complex evaluative mechanisms. Since the institutionalization of the national evaluation model conducted by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES), evaluation has come to play a central role in the organization of the Brazilian scientific field, redefining parameters of quality, funding, and academic recognition (CAPES, 2019; Balbachevsky, 2005). In this context, self-evaluation and internationalization have ceased to occupy peripheral positions and have become strategic axes of regulation, planning, and institutional legitimation within graduate programs.

This centrality, however, has not developed in a neutral manner. The consolidation of an evaluative culture oriented toward quantitative indicators, publication indexes, impact factors, citation metrics, number of international agreements, academic mobility, and external funding acquisition has introduced a rationality grounded in measurement, comparability, and performance (Weber, 2010; Sguissardi, 2010). This movement aligns with global trends in academic governance (Zapp, 2021; Intraprasert, 2026), often associated with the logic of performativity and the expansion of international rankings (Marginson, 2011; Dale, 2005). Although such instruments are indispensable for transparency and public management, their absolutization may reduce complex processes of education and knowledge production to statistical performances.

Within this scenario, self-evaluation runs the risk of being transformed into a technical procedure of data organization and accountability, distancing itself from its formative and reflective dimensions (Dias Sobrinho, 2003). Simultaneously, internationalization tends to be treated as a strategic imperative associated with global visibility and interinstitutional competitiveness, often detached from epistemological problematization (Knight, 2004; De Wit, 2011, 2024). When this occurs, the articulation between these two processes ceases to constitute a space for reflection on academic purposes and instead operates as a mechanism of adaptation to external standards of scientific validation.

The problem, therefore, does not lie in the existence of indicators or in the pursuit of international insertion, but rather in the ways these elements reconfigure priorities, distribute incentives, and shape understandings of what counts as quality, relevance, and impact. As argued by Pierre Bourdieu (2004), scientific fields are permeated by symbolic disputes that define criteria of legitimacy; when such criteria are naturalized in the form of metrics, their structuring effects become less visible, although they remain profoundly active.

In the field of Education, this tension assumes particularly sensitive contours. Graduate education in Education articulates scientific production, teacher education, public policy analysis, and social commitment, constituting a space in which technical and normative dimensions intertwine (Gatti, 2001; Saviani, 2007). Reducing its evaluative

processes to productivity metrics implies shifting the center of gravity of education toward performance, thereby weakening the critical dimension that has historically characterized the field. The risk, in this case, is not merely administrative, but epistemological: it concerns the possible erosion of coherence between educational projects, scientific production, and social responsibility.

In light of this scenario, the problem guiding this study consists of understanding how the centrality assumed by internationalization indicators, articulated with self-evaluation processes, reconfigures the epistemic coherence of graduate programs in Education, influencing the relationships between education, knowledge production, and institutional projects.

It is at this point that the article introduces the Relational Theory of Epistemic Coherence of Learning (RTECL) (Lima; Almeida, 2026) as its analytical framework. This approach understands educational institutions as relational epistemic fields in which different elements—pedagogical projects, research lines, educational practices, evaluative indicators, and internationalization strategies—interact to configure structures of coherence. Institutional quality, from this perspective, cannot be reduced to the sum of measurable results, but rather depends on the degree of relational integration and stability among these components. Indicators and policies function as updating mechanisms capable of strengthening or tensioning such coherence.

Under this lens, the articulation between self-evaluation and internationalization ceases to be a mere technical adjustment between goals and outcomes and instead becomes understood as a structuring mediation in the production of institutional meaning. Self-evaluation, when conceived solely as a control mechanism, tends to operate in a fragmented manner, prioritizing isolated variables to the detriment of the integration of the educational project. Internationalization, when guided exclusively by metrics of global visibility, may introduce epistemological asymmetries and normative dependencies that affect the intellectual autonomy of graduate programs (Marginson, 2011).

Problematizing this dynamic implies recognizing that internationalization does not simply mean expanding circulation or publishing in other languages, but deciding which forms of knowledge are prioritized, from which theoretical frameworks, and in accordance with which social commitments. Likewise, evaluation does not merely consist of measuring performance, but also of interrogating the very criteria that define excellence. Without such reflection, indicators may produce interpretative opacities: numbers become ends in themselves, obscuring the historical, political, and epistemological mediations that confer meaning upon them.

By placing indicators and meaning in tension, this work argues that epistemic coherence should occupy a central place in the formulation of self-evaluation and internationalization policies within graduate education in Education. It is argued that the production of meaning does not constitute an accessory element, but rather a structural condition for evaluative processes to be intellectually consistent and ethically oriented. From the perspective of RTECL, self-evaluation is proposed as a reflective practice of institutional integration, while internationalization is understood as a process of epistemological mediation requiring continuous contextualization.

The Relational Theory of Epistemic Coherence of Learning (RTECL), recently proposed within the field of education, constitutes the theoretical framework adopted in this study.

Thus, this article contributes to the contemporary debate by shifting the discussion from an exclusively technical plane to an epistemological and educational one. It therefore affirms a conception of graduate education in Education committed not only to measurable performance, but also to the intelligibility of its practices, the coherence of its institutional projects, and intellectual responsibility in the face of contemporary social and educational challenges.

In view of this scenario, the guiding problem of this study consists of understanding how the centrality of internationalization indicators, articulated with self-evaluation processes, reconfigures the epistemic coherence of graduate programs in Education. In other words, the study investigates how such evaluative and normative mechanisms impact the integration between education, knowledge production, and institutional projects.

2 EVALUATION OF GRADUATE EDUCATION IN BRAZIL: REGULATION, HISTORICITY, AND THE CULTURE OF INDICATORS

The consolidation of evaluation as a structuring axis of Brazilian graduate education cannot be understood outside its institutional historicity. Since the institutionalization of the National Graduate Education System in the 1970s, the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) has assumed a central role in the induction, monitoring, and regulation of graduate programs, articulating funding, accreditation, and academic recognition with progressively formalized quality criteria (CAPES, 2019; Balbachevsky, 2005). Over the last decades, this system has undergone successive reformulations, incorporating increasingly refined mechanisms of measurement and interinstitutional comparison, especially following the consolidation of triennial and, later, quadrennial evaluations.

Initially guided by predominantly qualitative assessments based on peer reviews and collegial analyses, evaluation policy evolved into a hybrid model in which quantitative metrics came to play a decisive role (Dias Sobrinho, 2003; Sguissardi, 2010). Indicators of bibliographic production, journal impact, international insertion, fundraising, and the training of master's and doctoral students became central elements in defining the scores assigned to graduate programs. This transition represented not merely a technical improvement, but a profound transformation in academic culture: a logic of institutional performativity became consolidated, in which measurable outcomes began to organize strategic priorities (Ball, 2005; Marginson, 2011).

The intensification of this culture of indicators occurred alongside the expansion of the graduate education system and Brazil's growing integration into global scientific networks. Internationalization, gradually incorporated as a criterion of excellence, ceased to be a peripheral dimension and became a structuring component of evaluation processes (Knight, 2004; De Wit, 2011). Publications in foreign journals, international cooperation, academic mobility, and participation in global networks came to compose

the repertoire of evidence mobilized to attest quality, reinforcing the articulation between national evaluation and global dynamics of scientific production (Marginson; Van Der Wende, 2007).

This movement produces ambivalent effects. On the one hand, it strengthens the international visibility of Brazilian scientific production, stimulates academic cooperation, and raises standards of excellence. On the other hand, it may induce homogenization and normative pressures that shift the focus of institutional projects toward adaptation to external metrics (Dale, 2005; Sguissardi, 2010). In this context, evaluation ceases to operate merely as an instrument of quality assurance and becomes a mechanism for the structural orientation of academic practices, influencing research agendas, editorial strategies, and forms of curricular organization.

Such transformation implies recognizing that indicators are not neutral instruments of measurement. They operate as regulatory devices that reconfigure incentives, reorganize priorities, and influence academic decision-making (Weber, 2010). By establishing comparative national and international parameters, the evaluation system produces hierarchies that permeate institutional everyday life, affecting everything from the definition of research lines to the selection of journals and the constitution of collaboration networks.

In the field of Education, this dynamic assumes specific contours. It is an area whose critical tradition and social commitment continuously challenge excessively technicist evaluation models (Saviani, 2007; Gatti, 2001). The growing incorporation of international metrics associated with bibliometric impact standards and global visibility introduces particular challenges: how can international insertion be articulated with situated knowledge production? How can comparative standards be reconciled with epistemological diversity? How can coherent educational projects be preserved under performative pressures?

These questions demonstrate that the debate on self-evaluation and internationalization cannot be reduced to an operational adjustment of criteria. It involves the very definition of what is understood as academic quality and the social role of graduate education. When indicators occupy a central normative position, there is a risk that institutional decisions become guided more by the logic of regulatory conformity than by critical reflection on educational purposes (Ball, 2005).

It is precisely in this scenario that it becomes necessary to shift the debate from an exclusively technical level to an epistemological one. Evaluation does not merely measure; it interprets. Internationalization does not merely expand circulation; it redefines the criteria of legitimacy of knowledge (Knight, 2004; Marginson, 2011). Understanding these practices as structuring mediations of the academic field requires an approach capable of analyzing not only results, but also relations; not only performance, but coherence.

3 SELF-ASSESSMENT, INTERNATIONALIZATION, AND EPISTEMIC COHERENCE: A RELATIONAL READING

The consolidation of self-assessment as a structuring practice in Brazilian graduate education in Education takes place within a scenario marked by the intensification of internationalization policies and the growing sophistication of evaluative systems coordinated, in the Brazilian context, by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) (CAPES, 2019; Weber, 2010). This convergence does not represent a mere superposition of administrative agendas; rather, it constitutes a process of reconfiguration of the very epistemic field of graduate education, in which indicators, criteria of excellence, and strategies of global insertion begin to exercise an organizing function over institutional priorities, influencing curricular decisions, research lines, editorial policies, and formative practices (Ball, 2005; Marginson, 2011).

Interpreting these movements requires an analytical shift. Understanding self-assessment merely as a technical instrument of monitoring and internationalization as a strategy of visibility implies reducing complex processes of knowledge production to administrative operations. Such reduction obscures the mediating dimension of these devices: evaluating and internationalizing are practices that redistribute recognition, redefine criteria of legitimacy, and reorganize internal and external hierarchies of knowledge (Bourdieu, 2004; Knight, 2004). They are not neutral procedures, but epistemological operations that directly affect the relational structure of formative projects.

To make this dynamic explicit, the Relational Theory of Epistemic Coherence of Learning (RTECL) is mobilized as the theoretical framework of analysis. This approach is grounded in a relational ontology according to which systems of knowledge are not static aggregates of elements, but dynamic configurations composed of relations among subjects, norms, practices, evaluative devices, and institutional purposes. Such a perspective dialogues with relational conceptions of knowledge and rationality that emphasize the interdependence between structures, practices, and meanings (Bourdieu, 2004; Morin, 2005). The focus shifts from isolated elements to the patterns of articulation that connect them.

Within this framework, epistemic coherence must not be confused with logical consistency or quantitative performance. Consistency refers to the absence of formal contradictions; performance refers to the attainment of measurable results according to specific criteria; epistemic coherence, in turn, concerns the degree of meaningful integration among the components of a system of knowledge. This distinction resonates with epistemological debates concerning coherence theories and systemic integration of knowledge (Thagard, 2007). A graduate program may present high performance in terms of indicators and still operate with low epistemic coherence if its results are not articulated with an explicitly formulated and reflexively sustained formative project.

RTECL allows the identification of at least three interdependent levels of coherence within graduate education. The first level is micro-epistemic, related to formative practices and the relations among faculty members, students, and research

projects. The second is meso-epistemic, referring to the institutional organization of the program, its research lines, editorial policies, internal evaluation criteria, and internationalization strategies. The third is macro-epistemic, connected to the program's insertion into the national and international graduate education system, including its position within evaluation processes and global knowledge circulation networks (Marginson; Van Der Wende, 2007). Institutional quality depends on the consistent articulation among these levels.

Applied to graduate education in Education, this perspective makes it possible to conceive graduate programs as institutional epistemic fields in which self-assessment and internationalization operate as mechanisms of relational updating. Indicators are not merely descriptive measures; they are operators that reorganize the field by introducing incentives, expectations, and comparative standards (Weber, 2010). Likewise, internationalization policies are not mere circulation devices; they redefine which forms of knowledge gain centrality, which languages become strategic, which partnerships are prioritized, and which agendas begin to orient scientific production (De Wit, 2011; Knight, 2004).

These mechanisms produce effects that are not always linear or predictable. The intensification of demands for international publication may increase visibility and academic dialogue, but it may also induce thematic or methodological displacements guided more by indexing criteria than by local formative demands (Marginson, 2011). The expansion of productivity metrics may stimulate internal organization and strategic planning, but it may likewise generate fragmentation between activities that "count" for evaluation and those that sustain long-term critical formation (Ball, 2005).

When such processes are incorporated without critical problematization, a silent displacement of interpretative responsibility emerges. Data begin to be treated as self-explanatory evidence; metrics become naturalized criteria of excellence; rankings acquire normative authority. The naturalization of these devices may produce fragilities of coherence insofar as quantitative elements begin to guide decisions without explicit integration into the formative project (Bourdieu, 2004).

In the field of Education, this tension assumes particular relevance. Historically, the field articulates theoretical production, public policy analysis, reflection on pedagogical practices, and commitment to social transformation (Saviani, 2007; Gatti, 2001). When internationalization is conducted exclusively as expansion of circulation and self-assessment as consolidation of statistical results, there is a risk of destabilizing the coherence between formation, research, and social responsibility. Institutional projects become reactive, guided more by external expectations than by internalized epistemological principles.

From the relational perspective adopted here, the central problem does not lie in the existence of indicators nor in the search for international insertion. The core issue resides in the absence of reflexive integration between these elements and the institutional project. Epistemic coherence requires that metrics be interpreted in light of explicitly formulated formative purposes; that internationalization strategies be articulated with consciously assumed theoretical, linguistic, and social commitments;

and that institutional decisions recognize their interpretative and normative dimensions (Dias Sobrinho, 2003).

This implies understanding self-assessment as a structuring practice of self-reflection, capable of examining not only results but also the very criteria that render such results meaningful. It also implies recognizing internationalization as a process of epistemological mediation in which choices regarding partnerships, circulation, and publication configure positions within the global field of knowledge (Knight, 2004; De Wit, 2011). In both cases, the challenge is not to maximize indicators, but to sustain high levels of coherence among performance, formation, and academic project.

Thus, self-assessment and internationalization cease to be understood as independent technical spheres and come to be viewed as mediating processes that continuously configure and reconfigure the epistemic field of graduate education. Repositioning coherence at the center of this articulation means recognizing that institutional quality is not exhausted by quantitative performance, but depends on the capacity to sustain consistent, reflexive, and responsibly assumed relations among indicators, formative practices, and academic project.

4 METHODOLOGICAL-CONCEPTUAL PROCEDURES: RELATIONAL ANALYSIS AND COHERENCE

This study adopts a qualitative theoretical-analytical approach guided by a critical conceptual analysis of the practices, discourses, and normative devices associated with self-assessment and internationalization in graduate education in Education. It is an epistemological investigation whose focus lies on the conditions of possibility that structure such practices within the academic field and on the relational effects they produce in the configuration of institutional projects. Qualitative research is understood here not merely as a methodological option, but as an epistemological framework that privileges interpretation, contextualization, and the analysis of meanings (Denzin; Lincoln, 2018; Geertz, 1989).

This is not an empirical investigation aimed at measuring variables or constructing statistical generalizations. The central objective is to examine the assumptions, mediations, and patterns of articulation that sustain particular ways of understanding quality, excellence, and international insertion. The emphasis shifts from data collection to the analysis of the conceptual structures that guide their production, interpretation, and use, in accordance with traditions of conceptual analysis in philosophy and the human sciences (Beaney, 2009; Hacking, 2002).

Methodologically, the procedure is organized into three articulated and progressively integrated axes.

4.1 Self-Assessment as Interpretative Practice

The first axis consists of the conceptual analysis of self-assessment, taking as reference institutional documents from graduate programs, national evaluation guidelines established by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel, and specialized literature on academic regulation. The objective is not to

describe regulations or classify evaluative models, but to examine the assumptions that sustain particular forms of measuring and interpreting academic quality.

Self-assessment is understood as an interpretative practice structured by criteriological choices. Every selection of indicators implies the hierarchization of dimensions considered relevant; every organization of reports involves narrative framings; every strategic decision presupposes implicit conceptions of excellence and impact. In this sense, evaluation is understood as a social practice endowed with normative and performative effects (Power, 1997; Strathern, 2000). The analytical procedure therefore consists of identifying these choices, making their conceptual bases explicit, and examining their effects on the organization of the formative project.

4.2 Internationalization as an Epistemological Operation

The second axis is devoted to internationalization (Hazelkorn, 2024; Chaignon, 2026), analyzed simultaneously as academic policy and as an epistemological operation. Institutional discourses, strategic guidelines, and recurrent practices associating internationalization with mobility, scientific cooperation, bibliographic production in foreign languages, and global visibility are examined. Internationalization is understood as a structuring dimension of contemporary higher education (Marginson, 2016).

The analysis interrogates the implicit criteria of knowledge legitimation underlying such associations. What conception of quality sustains the valorization of certain indexing databases? What linguistic and cultural assumptions inform the prioritization of particular international circuits? In what ways does the search for global visibility reconfigure research agendas and formative priorities? These questions dialogue with analyses of the scientific field as a space of symbolic disputes (Bourdieu, 2004) and with critical perspectives concerning epistemological hegemonies and unequal circulation of knowledge (Santos, 2007).

By shifting the focus from the operational dimension to the epistemological dimension, the procedure seeks to make explicit how specific conceptions of excellence come to structure institutional strategies.

4.3 Integration through RTECL: Analysis of Relational Patterns

The third axis, integrative in nature, mobilizes the Relational Theory of Epistemic Coherence of Learning (RTECL) as a transversal analytical matrix. RTECL provides conceptual tools to examine how different elements, indicators, administrative decisions, formative practices, international strategies, and theoretical commitments, articulate with one another in configuring distinct levels of epistemic coherence.

Methodologically, this implies shifting the analysis from linear causal relations to the identification of relational patterns, in accordance with approaches that understand social systems as dynamic configurations of interdependence (Elias, 1994) and fields structured by relations of force and recognition (Bourdieu, 2004).

Rather than asking whether a given indicator "causes" a certain effect, the analysis investigates how it integrates (or fails to integrate) into the institutional project, what

tensions it produces, and how it reorganizes priorities. The analysis seeks to identify: (i) levels of integration between metrics and formative purposes; (ii) unexplicitated zones of tension between performance and academic project; (iii) fragmentation processes that weaken institutional consistency; and (iv) mechanisms of relational updating that strengthen epistemic coherence.

Coherence is not treated as a static attribute, but as the result of interpretative and institutional processes that require permanent reflection.

4.4 Criteria of Rigor and Epistemological Positioning

The rigor of the analysis is grounded not in statistical replicability, but in argumentative consistency, explicitness of theoretical assumptions, and the internal coherence of the conceptual framework. This perspective dialogues with criteria of validity and reliability proper to interpretative qualitative research (Lincoln; Guba, 1985).

The use of RTECL as an analytical matrix requires that interpretations be systematically referred to the proposed relational structure, thereby avoiding impressionistic generalizations or unfounded normative judgments. It is assumed that every analysis is situated and that the production of knowledge involves epistemic responsibility.

By making explicit its foundations and procedures, the article argues that theoretical analysis, when systematically conducted, constitutes a legitimate and necessary mode of investigation within the field of Education, especially when the object under examination involves practices that are themselves interpretative and normatively oriented.

5 IMPLICATIONS FOR GRADUATE EDUCATION POLICIES: COHERENCE, RESPONSIBILITY, AND INSTITUTIONAL PROJECT

The analysis developed throughout this article points to substantial implications for the formulation and implementation of graduate education policies in Education, especially regarding the articulation between self-evaluation and internationalization within the Brazilian regulatory context. By mobilizing the Relational Theory of Epistemic Coherence of Learning (RTECL), the focus shifts from the maximization of isolated results toward the reflective integration between indicators, formative practices, and institutional projects, understanding evaluation as a social practice that produces normative effects (Power, 1997; Strathern, 2000). These implications may be organized into four interdependent axes.

5.1 The Epistemological Status of Indicators

The first implication concerns the status of indicators within evaluative processes. From the perspective of the RTECL, indicators are understood as relational operators that influence the configuration of the institutional epistemic field. They do not merely

measure results; they reorganize incentives, distribute recognition, and shape priorities, configuring dynamics typical of the "audit society" (Power, 1997).

Their institutional effectiveness depends less on the quantity of metrics adopted and more on the ability to integrate them into an explicitly articulated formative project. When indicators are treated as ends in themselves, they produce fragmentation: faculty members begin to orient research agendas according to scoring criteria; programs reorganize strategies based on rankings; formative decisions become reactive to evaluation cycles. This process may intensify effects of institutional performativity (Strathern, 2000).

Institutional policies that promote collective spaces for the critical interpretation of data, involving faculty, students, and management, tend to foster greater epistemic coherence. Within such spaces, indicators cease to function as naturalized normative devices and become objects of reflection in light of the academic purposes of the program. The challenge is to move evaluation from the logic of mere compliance to the logic of reflective integration, recognizing its structuring role within the scientific field (Bourdieu, 2004).

5.2 Internationalization as an Epistemological Decision

The second implication concerns internationalization. Conceiving it as a formative process implies recognizing that choices related to publication languages, partnership types, circulation circuits, and cooperation modalities are epistemological decisions, not merely strategic ones. Internationalization constitutes a structuring dimension of contemporary higher education, redefining standards of recognition and circulation of knowledge (Marginson, 2016).

The prioritization of certain indexing systems, the valorization of publications in specific languages, or the search for partnerships with hegemonic centers configure positions within the global field of knowledge, understood as a space of symbolic disputes (Bourdieu, 2004). Such choices influence research agendas, mobilized theoretical frameworks, and standards of scientific validation, potentially reinforcing dynamics of epistemological centrality and peripheralization (Santos, 2007).

Coherent institutional policies must therefore make explicit the criteria guiding these decisions. This does not mean rejecting international standards, but avoiding their uncritical naturalization. From the perspective of the RTECL, internationalizing means expanding interlocutions while preserving the intelligibility and intellectual identity of the program. It involves sustaining global insertion without dissolving local coherence.

5.3 Integration Between Management, Formation, and Regulation

The third implication concerns academic management and its relationship with the national regulatory system, particularly within the framework established by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES). Fragmentation between administrative sectors and pedagogical projects tends to

weaken institutional coherence, especially when strategic decisions are made exclusively according to evaluation cycles.

The articulation between self-evaluation and internationalization requires integrated policies in which administrative decisions are discussed in light of their formative and epistemological impacts. Selecting indicators, defining goals, and prioritizing actions are activities that involve value judgments and conceptual choices inserted within fields structured by relations of force and recognition (Bourdieu, 2004).

Programs operating with greater epistemic coherence are those in which external regulation is critically incorporated, integrating systemic demands into explicitly formulated academic projects. This is not a matter of opposition between autonomy and regulation, but of their reflective mediation, recognizing that regulatory processes also configure forms of institutional rationality (Power, 1997).

5.4 Critical Formation as a Structuring Principle

The fourth implication reaffirms the centrality of critical formation in the face of regulatory and performative pressures. Epistemic coherence is not an automatic attribute of highly evaluated programs; rather, it results from institutional practices that explicitly assume responsibility for the interpretations guiding strategic decisions.

When self-evaluation and internationalization are integrated into academic projects conscious of their historical, social, and epistemological purposes, they strengthen intellectual autonomy and expand the public relevance of graduate education in Education. Conversely, when they operate merely as mechanisms of instrumental adaptation, they may produce silent displacements that weaken formative meaning, reproducing dynamics of excessively technicist rationalization (Santos, 2007).

From the perspective of the RTECL, graduate education policies should be guided by a structuring principle: the search for high levels of coherence between performance, formation, and institutional project. Indicators are necessary; international insertion is strategic; regulation is a constitutive part of the system. However, their legitimacy depends on their capacity to be integrated into an explicitly sustained relational architecture.

Ultimately, the contribution of this analysis lies in affirming that academic quality cannot be reduced to the sum of metrics, but emerges from the reflective consistency between practices, criteria, and purposes. Repositioning epistemic coherence at the center of graduate education policies means recognizing that institutional excellence is inseparable from the interpretative responsibility that sustains it.

6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article began from the observation that self-evaluation and internationalization have become structuring axes of graduate education in Education, particularly within regulatory systems oriented by performance indicators, rankings, and productivity metrics. Although such devices are constitutive of the contemporary

organization of academic life, their increasing centrality has produced subtle shifts in the way quality, excellence, and relevance are understood.

By mobilizing the Relational Theory of Epistemic Coherence of Learning (RTECL) as an analytical framework, the study proposed an interpretative displacement: rather than treating indicators and international strategies as neutral instruments of measurement and expansion, it understands them as relational operators that reorganize the institutional epistemic field. The decisive issue is no longer the quantity of metrics or the volume of international insertion, but the level of coherence established between these elements and the program's formative project.

The analysis demonstrated that institutional fragmentation emerges when self-evaluation and internationalization operate dissociated from the formative horizon. Indicators become autonomous ends; international strategies are converted into reactive responses to hegemonic standards; administrative decisions become primarily guided by external expectations. In this scenario, the risk is not merely administrative, but epistemological: the erosion of the formative meaning of graduate education.

Conversely, when conceived as interpretative and strategically integrated practices, self-evaluation and internationalization may strengthen institutional consistency. Self-evaluation, understood as a reflective exercise of explicating criteria and purposes, contributes to the intelligibility of the academic project. Internationalization, understood as epistemological mediation rather than merely the expansion of circulation, broadens interlocutions without dissolving intellectual identities. In both cases, the decisive element is the relational coherence that articulates metrics, decisions, and purposes.

The principal contribution of this article therefore lies in repositioning epistemic coherence as the normative horizon of graduate education policies. In contexts marked by regulatory and performative pressures, defending the centrality of coherence does not imply rejecting indicators nor disregarding the importance of international insertion. Rather, it implies affirming that academic quality is an emergent attribute of interpretatively integrated systems, not the automatic result of maximizing metrics.

Repositioning formation, meaning, and institutional project at the center of self-evaluation and internationalization means assuming that academic excellence is inseparable from epistemic responsibility. Graduate programs are not merely productive units of knowledge; they are interpretative communities that continuously define the criteria by which they recognize themselves and are recognized by others.

Between indicators and meaning, the choice is not exclusionary. The contemporary challenge consists in producing articulations in which metrics serve the formative project rather than replacing it. It is precisely at this point that the RTECL offers its most relevant contribution: by demonstrating that institutional consistency depends on the quality of the relations established among its constitutive elements, the article reaffirms that coherence, rather than mere performance, should constitute the horizon of graduate education policies in Education.

As a limitation, it should be noted that this investigation is theoretical-analytical in nature and does not incorporate systematic empirical data from specific graduate programs. In this sense, the inferences presented here operate at a conceptual and

interpretative level, indicating the need for future studies capable of articulating the RTECL with empirical evidence drawn from different institutional contexts.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

1) Beatriz Oliveira de Almeida Lima

2) Antonio Luiz de Almeida

Contribuição	Autor 1	Autor 2
1. Conceituação	X	
2. Curadoria de dados		X
3. Análise formal	X	
4. Obtenção de financiamento		
5. Investigação	X	X
6. Metodologia		X
7. Administração do projeto	X	
8. Recursos		
9. Software		
10. Supervisão		
11. Validação		
12. Visualização		
13. Redação (rascunho/original)	X	X
14. Escrita (revisão e edição)	X	X

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the article "Between Indicators and Meaning: Self-Assessment, Internationalization, and Epistemic Coherence in Graduate Education".

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The entire dataset supporting the results of this study has been published in the article itself.

STATEMENT ON THE USE OF AI

The artificial intelligence tool ChatGPT was used exclusively for support and language review purposes. All original content, data analysis, and intellectual authorship are the responsibility of the authors, who manually reviewed and validated all the material.

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