Trading quality across borders: colonial discourse and international quality assurance policies in higher education

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Accountability and quality assurance have become central discourses in higher education policy throughout the world. However, accountability and quality assurance involve power and control. Practices and ideas about quality developed in the Global North are spreading rapidly across the Global South, leading to increased uniformity in the approaches to quality assurance. Given the significant asymmetries that divide the Global North and Global South, this article maps interdiscursive relations among key texts that influence policy development on international quality in higher education, and explores the applicability of colonial discourse as a perspective for understanding this increasing international convergence.

**Keywords:** accountability; quality assurance; postcolonial theory; imperialism; discourse

**Introduction**

Quality assurance and accountability are salient discourses in contemporary higher education policy (Huisman & Currie, 2004; Singh, 2010), and these two ideas are acquiring new influence in all regions of the globe. The rapid expansion of internationalized approaches to quality assurance in higher education invites the question of who benefits from this diffusion. This article explores the expansion of global quality practices in higher education, which frequently originate in the Global North. The enquiry focuses on the discourses embedded in contemporary global policies regarding quality in higher education, and utilizes colonial discourse analysis as an entry point.

Before further discussion, it seems necessary to introduce a note about the use of the terms Global North and Global South. First, it is important to mention that the North/South division does not correspond to geographical location. The Global South encompasses formerly colonized nations and territories (Grovogu, 2011). The Global South is often referred to as the Third World, and also as the Developing World. Conversely, the Global North comprises former colonial powers. Because the Global North is equated to the First World in contemporary discussions, the US and Australia are also part of the Global North.

It has been observed that quality assurance in higher education has become a global enterprise (Harvey, 2004; Huisman & Currie, 2004), situated in a field characterized by substantial asymmetries (Martin & Stella, 2007; Morley, 2003). Higher education institutions in the Global South are particularly prone to adopt uncritically (Law, 2010)
approaches to quality assurance developed in the Global North. In this article, it is argued that such propensity is not random, but connected to existing global relations, which become perpetuated by colonial discourse. The flow of ideas and practices about education reform at all levels is frequently unidirectional, moving from North to South. For this reason, analysing the flow of ideas about quality in higher education is not only an academic endeavour but also a moral imperative. It is necessary to question who establishes international norms and standards for quality, and who benefits as a result of such processes.

To the extent that norms and expectations for quality in higher education become internationally standardized, it is possible to identify a widening gap between winners and losers. For example, US institutional accreditation has been described as the world’s gold standard of quality assurance (Altbach, 2003; Jackson, Davis, & Jackson, 2010). In addition, the US has been characterized as the main ‘exporter’ of accreditation (Ewell, 2008, p. 152). Moreover, different international networks of quality assurance have emerged, and they coordinate their efforts with each other (Kinser, 2011). As an illustration, the European Higher Education Area influences policy beyond Europe (Robertson, 2008, 2010; Williams, 2010), and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education has affiliated organizations in distant regions, including South America and the Middle East (http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/enqa-agencies/affiliates/). Notably, the organizations setting the standards and making recommendations are located in the Global North. Organizations and institutions in the Global South are frequently construed as underdeveloped, and always in the process of catching up to international standards. As an example, the concept of ‘world class universities’ invokes the idea that a single model for university sets the template for quality in higher education. While the merits of such a universal model are debatable, the desire to become ‘world class’ is powerful and pervasive.

**Problem and scope of enquiry**

The contemporary process of internationalization of quality assurance in higher education is frequently framed in the context of globalization. Globalization can be understood from different perspectives and, in this article, it is argued that a critical interpretation of globalization – grounded in postcolonial and dependency theories (Hickling-Hudson, 1998; Kapoor, 2002) – may provide insights about the potential risks of mobilizing ideas and practices about higher education quality from Global North to Global South contexts. If globalization is a process of increased connection, then internationalization of quality assurance involves collaboration and joint problem-solving. However, if globalization is connected to colonization and to past and present forms of imperialism, then the internationalization of quality assurance in higher education may exacerbate power struggles. As a result, this article explores the applicability of colonial discourse critique for analysing the internationalization of quality assurance in higher education. In particular, the article addresses the following questions:

- Does colonial discourse critique provide a relevant framework for analysing the internationalization of quality assurance in higher education?
- Are there examples of international quality assurance practices that, explicitly or implicitly, involve colonial discourse?
Prospectus

This paper is divided into two parts. First, the internationalization of quality assurance in higher education is analysed in the context of contemporary globalization. This analysis incorporates elements from postcolonial theory (Loomba, 2005; Said, 1993, 1994) in order to frame globalization as a continuation of colonization. In the second part of the paper, the framework developed is applied, with the purpose of mapping interdiscursive relations stemming from key policy documents that influence the international expansion of quality assurance in higher education today. The paper concludes with a few implications and directions for further research.

Internationalization of quality assurance

Different approaches for recognizing quality in higher education across borders can be identified: (a) mutual recognition, (b) international quality assurance agencies accrediting institutions directly and (c) the establishment of supranational organizations with the purpose of recognizing quality assurance agencies (Harvey, 2004). Each of those approaches has different implications regarding how authority is distributed among local and global stakeholders. For instance, mutual recognition keeps control and decision-making at the local level, whereas the presence of supranational organizations may undermine local decision-making. Harvey (2004) emphasized that the establishment of a particular model is unlikely to be determined by its practicality or technical merit, but rather as a result of a political struggle. One important development in this respect is the growing role that multinational organizations, such as the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), play in establishing international quality policies for higher education.

The role of multinational organizations

Multinational organizations influence agendas for international quality assurance. OECD and UNESCO have played significant roles in the development of policies (e.g. UNESCO, 2005, 2008) related to the expansion and internationalization of quality assurance and are, to some extent, responsible for the resulting similarities that exist across regions (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007). A paper prepared for OECD (Van Damme, 2002) explored different models for developing international quality assurance mechanisms that would advance quality assurance and credential recognition. A sobering aspect of the paper was its stated purpose: ‘provide an analytical overview of trends and models in quality assurance arrangements that can contribute to transnational regulation of trade in higher education services’ (p. 6). In that paper, education is construed as a service to be traded across national borders, under the umbrella of general agreements on trade and services.

Van Damme discussed different ways to develop a common frame to appraise quality in higher education. These approaches included promoting collaboration among national systems, the development of cross-national quality assurance projects, the development of an international accrediting process for existing accrediting agencies and, finally, the development of an international accreditation system. The mechanisms that propose retaining control at the local level are presented less favourably than those promoting the establishment of global policies.
Global patterns in quality assurance

Models about quality developed in the Global North dominate the process of internationalization of quality assurance in higher education (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2010). Despite the vast differences in resources and national cultures, one can observe clear similarities in the quality assurance policies and practices in higher education globally (Kells, 1999). With the expansion of quality assurance across the globe, it is possible to identify a significant amount of ‘borrowing’ of policies and procedures (Morley, 2003, p. 19).

Since the mid-1990s when many nations around the world began developing their own quality assurance schemes, US models for quality assurance, accreditation in particular, became widespread (Kells, 1999). In addition, some observers point to Europe and its growing influence in the development of higher education policies (Hartmann, 2008; Robertson, 2010). However, even European institutions and organizations seem to be influenced by US ideas about quality (Stensaker, 2011). Rather than having a single country setting the international agenda for quality in higher education, it is possible to identify a pattern in which Global North ideas dominate the international landscape.

The motivations behind the worldwide expansion of quality assurance and its potential effects have been described as follows:

Major investments are being made in marketing and branding campaigns in order to get name recognition and to increase enrolments. The possession of some nature of accreditation is part of the campaign and assures prospective students that the programmes/awards are of high standing. The desire for accreditation status is leading to a commercialization of the field of quality assurance/accreditation. (Knight, 2007, p. 139)

It can be observed that increased interest in quality assurance is frequently connected to reductions in government funding for higher education, privatization, massification, greater sense of market-like competition among institutions and mistrust of the self-regulation system (Harman, 1998).

Quality assurance: Global North expansion

While concerns exist about the effectiveness of current forms of international quality assurance (e.g. Hazelkorn, 2011; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007), it continues to expand rapidly. Besides the US, the European Network of Quality Assurance (ENQA) has undertaken international activities beyond Europe for over a decade, primarily in Asia, the Middle East and Latin America (Robertson, 2008, 2010; Robertson & Keeling, 2008). Other actors from the Global North have also expanded their areas of influence:

The United States does face growing competition for higher education offerings abroad in certain areas. For example, the distance education market for postsecondary education in Asia is increasingly being served by institutions in Australia and New Zealand. As a result, US accreditation of programs and institutions operating in these areas needs to enable them to credibly claim high quality in relation to competitors whose quality has been recognised by a different agency and standard. (Ewell, 2008, p. 153)

Globalization has been used to euphemize, negate or justify geo-political relations that are imperialistic in nature (Bush, 2006; Cole, 2005). Many of the contemporary concerns about quality in higher education are related to massification (Lemaitre, 2002; Singh, 2010). Given that many of the changes under the umbrella of globalization in
higher education involve new forms of expansion and diversification of postsecondary education, globalization seems to exacerbate an already contested environment of quality in higher education. In the current environment, in which populations previously excluded from higher education have gained access to postsecondary learning and in which nations of the Global South are creating new institutions, the emergence of a single universal model to evaluate the quality of higher education institutions is not only puzzling but may also jeopardize the advances made.

The existing Global North hegemony in higher education quality assurance poses the question of what assumptions are embedded in such approaches. It has been argued that technical rationality, with its emphasis on economic liberalism and free markets, is the main engine of contemporary quality assurance practices in higher education (Blanco Ramírez, 2013; Standaert, 1993).

Colonial discourse and higher education: toward a conceptual framework

In the Global South, colonization and higher education cannot be separated (Altbach, 2011), given that universities in the colonized world were instruments of empires intended to educate elites (Lemaître, 2011; Thelin, 2004). In this context, individuals from the Global South were seen as raw materials for knowledge creation, not as crafters of knowledge. Colonial rule and knowledge creation reinforce each other because, ‘those who have power have control of what is known and the way it is known, and those who have such knowledge have power over those who do not’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007, p. 63).

The terms ‘colonised’ and ‘empire’ have been used to describe the expansion of quality assurance around the world (Lemaître, 2002, 2005; Singh, 2010, p. 192). Altbach (2003), for example, described the process of accreditation of US regional agencies beyond their national boundaries as ‘academic colonialism’ (p. 5). Analysing the globally convergent patterns of accreditation and quality assurance against the background of colonization and imperialism may lead to valuable insights.

Discussions of empires, past and present, are generally grounded on materialist analyses of capitalism and its expansion (Bush, 2006; Gandhi, 1998; Kapoor, 2002). On the other hand, the study of colonial discourse and postcolonial theory often focuses on discourse critique (Hickling-Hudson, 1998). Rather than pitting these perspectives against each other, I recognize that, in the context of higher education, both approaches provide valuable insights, given that the internationalization of higher education often involves the development of new markets as well as the establishment of systems of representation. Some have characterized postcolonial theory, which constitutes the main analytical framework in this paper, as a tense balance between Marxist and post-structural voices (Gandhi, 1998; Hickling-Hudson, 1998).

Understanding imperialism–colonialism

For several reasons, the imperialism–colonialism dyad constitutes a valuable heuristic for analysing quality assurance in higher education, in the context of contemporary globalization. Imperialism does not require political or territorial takeover (Bush, 2006; Loomba, 2005; Smith, 1999). Imperialism emphasizes the economic aspects of domination, which are particularly important for understanding contemporary globalization (Loomba, 2005). The concept of colonialism extends to include the influence that the Global North exercises on cultural production.
While the imaginary of globalization often suggests that empires are archaic systems (Bush, 2006; Said, 1993) no longer in existence, imperialism and colonialism exist today. Empires operate in new ways and under a different set of assumptions: ‘Imperialism simply switches tactics’ (Nkrumah, 1966, p. 239). Neo-imperialism emphasizes market control (Cole, 2005; Rizvi, 2006). It also seems clear that the United States is not the single imperial power. The European Union and, increasingly, large emerging economies play a significant role as centres of economic and political power – often through their shared influence on multinational organizations (Chimni, 2004; Hartmann, 2008). These nations share many interests, namely promoting ‘free trade and open capital markets’ (Harvey, 2003, p. 159). While they may compete, they share an agenda of ‘expanding the global service economy’ (Hartmann, 2008, p. 211), and one might place quality assurance in higher education within this.

Imperialism becomes enabled, legitimized and perpetuated by a process of representation and knowledge creation, which some have labelled Orientalism (Said, 1993; Ngũgĩ, 2012). Colonial discourse, or Orientalism, depicts people of the Global South as ‘inferior … incapable of looking after themselves’ (Young, 2003, p. 2), and ‘include[s] notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination’ (Said, 1994, p. 9, emphasis in original). Consequently, postcolonial theory has much to offer for the analysis of how representation and knowledge production accompany and support imperial supremacy, historically and through contemporary globalization (Loomba, 2005).

The connection between knowledge creation and imperial domination requires exploring the role that education has in legitimizing and perpetuating North/South imperial relations. Such an exploration has gained valuable insights from postcolonial perspectives (Tikly, 2001; Tikly & Bond, 2013). Many international initiatives for quality assurance perpetuate relations of dependency among Global South actors and institutions while opening new markets for Northern consultants, evaluators and experts. Many such initiatives are justified under the premise of international development, a concept that has come under scrutiny for reinforcing hierarchical and teleological assumptions (Corbridge, 2007; Sylvester, 1999).

Northern accreditation and imperialism

Now that the main elements of colonization and imperialism have been laid out, it is possible to utilize this framework to analyse key texts that influence the development of international quality policies in higher education. The expansion of Global North practices and ideas about education can be interpreted in the light of what has been described as ‘cultural imperialism’ (Bush, 2006, p. 195). The interests of global powers and multinational organizations converge in the expansion of global markets for quality assurance in higher education. To the extent that education is seen as a tradable commodity (Van Damme, 2002), and quality assurance presents an instrument for governmentality (Harman, 1998), the growing market of international quality not only profits experts and evaluators from the Global North but also strengthens global hierarchies.

Even though definitions of accreditation and quality assurance emphasize the voluntary nature of the process and the centrality of peer review (Kells, 1995; Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, & Pârlea, 2004), Morley (2003) suggested that ‘in time, no university in any national location will be able to escape the gravitational pull of the quality assurance discourse’ (p. 21). In a similar fashion as neo-liberal economic principles have been pushed on the Global South, Global North quality assurance has gained overbearing presence everywhere (Kells, 1999). Higher education systems in the Global South face
the choice of either accepting Global North quality ideas and standards or becoming isolated.

**Document analysis**

In order to address the questions presented in the introduction and apply the framework outlined in the previous section, strategies for critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002) were utilized. Methods of qualitative coding and data analysis, such as open and axial coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), were employed to analyse documents line by line. The purpose of the analysis was to identify recurrent ideas, patterns and intertextual references connecting the documents.

**Sources of evidence**

The corpus of texts analysed in this project consisted of more than 350 pages stemming from 21 documents. These documents varied in authorship. Some of them were commissioned or published by multinational organizations, such as UNESCO and OECD. Other documents stemmed from the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), an international organization for quality assurance agencies from around the world. Given the relative importance of US institutional accreditation, several American sources were included. The US documents analysed here were authored by the American Council on Education, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation and different US regional accrediting agencies such as the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. Moreover, documents from the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) from Australia, were included in the analysis. The selection of documents was intended to represent the perspectives of stakeholders for quality assurance policy across the Global North. In addition, some of these documents have been analysed elsewhere (e.g. Blackmur, 2007; Stella, 2006), which supports their potential significance.

**Limitations**

It is necessary to demarcate some limits for the present analysis. First and foremost, it seems appropriate to underscore that the present study is informed by assumptions that are grounded in a critical-interpretive paradigm (Denzin, 2009). In addition, post-structural and postmodern perspectives are deeply sceptical toward grand theories (Lyotard, 1984) and I subscribe to this scepticism. The insights offered in this article are not intended to amount to theory, but they are presented as tentative arguments that may lead to insights and reflection.

I am aware that the position taken in the present article constitutes a departure from traditional scholarship characterized by an emphasis on scientific rigour and researcher objectivity. Some may go as far as characterizing the present analysis as unscientific and appropriate for activism, not scholarship. Mindful of these potential criticisms, I offer alternative standards for evaluating the soundness of the arguments presented in this article: ‘a critical text is judged by its ability to reflexively reveal … structures of oppression’ (Denzin, 2009, p. 105).
International quality assurance: language and discourse

As foreshadowed in the first part of this article, language and translation have great potential to serve as heuristics in order to analyse the internationalization of quality assurance in higher education. In particular, language serves as an ideal entry point to analyse the power struggles inserted in quality practices. The study of language ideology suggests that linguistic hierarchies are not random but respond to specific social conditions (Milani & Johnson, 2010). Consequently, discourse analysis serves well the purpose of unveiling assumptions embedded in policy documents.

Based on the discussion of postcolonial and dependency theories presented earlier in the paper, along with the analysis of contemporary developments in international quality assurance in higher education, one might anticipate the presence of the following issues in the documents analysed: (a) strong presence of Global North organizations in policy development forums and lower participation of Global South organizations and institutions; (b) representation of higher education systems from the Global South as underdeveloped and needing assistance; and (c) legitimation of the prevailing status quo. The presence of these elements may indicate that colonial discourse is at play in existing policy documents. The rest of this section provides examples that illustrate the presence of each of these issues.

Unequal participation

This article has focused on the expansion of Global North ideas about quality assurance in higher education throughout the world. Examples of this expansion abound, and despite conducting a deliberate search, examples of Global South ideas being adopted in the Global North could not be found. Moreover, the participation of Global North countries in policy agenda setting is evident: for instance, ‘Australia contributed to the development of … the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines on Quality Provision in Cross Border Higher Education’ (TEQSA, 2013, p. 5). A different policy document, entitled ‘Sharing Quality Higher Education across Borders: A statement on behalf of higher education institutions worldwide’, deserves attention. Even though the document’s title might suggest a broad representation of institutions and agencies from around the world, the signatories are mainly North American organizations: the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, the American Council on Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA, 2005). Even though it may be argued that another signatory, the International Association of Universities, has a broader membership, it is important to note that 39% of this organization’s membership is European (http://www.iau-aiu.net/content/institutions).

The Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity (GIQAC), sponsored by UNESCO, presents yet another example of the overwhelming representation of institutions and organizations from the Global North. The inaugural steering committee of this initiative comprised the World Bank, UNESCO and organizations from Germany, Netherlands, Norway and the US. The Commonwealth of Knowledge, an inter-governmental organization of nations ‘originally linked together in the British Empire’ (http://www.col.org/about/Pages/default.aspx), represents some organizations from the Global South, and yet a direct reference to their colonial past is evident. This global initiative recognizes English as its only ‘working language’ (UNESCO, 2008, p. 5).

These examples cannot be interpreted as intentional efforts to marginalize institutions and organizations from the Global South. However, they call attention to the existing
disparities in representation between Global North and Global South in international forums for quality assurance. This issue is paradoxical because, as subsequent sections will discuss, assisting the Global South is often the rationale offered for establishing these international working groups. Additionally, it may be necessary to explore the consequences of establishing English as the recognized working language. This choice may, even if unintentionally, alienate some potential members. It is important to highlight here that English has been privileged and that language can constitute a form of oppression (Lippi-Green, 1997).

Representation of the Global South as underdeveloped

Even though individuals and organizations from the Global South are usually under-represented in establishing international quality assurance strategies, they are kept in mind during these discussions. Higher education systems from the Global South are discussed frequently, often as a source of concern: ‘While cross-border education can flow in many different directions and takes place in a variety of contexts, it should strengthen developing countries’ higher education capacity’ (CHEA, 2005, p. 1). The concept of ‘developing countries’ appeared frequently in the documents analysed for this project: ‘the gap in resources and access to knowledge between the industrialized and developing world is growing’ (CHEA, 2005, p. 1). In this regard, when analysing documents, it becomes evident that the term ‘developing’ is used as a euphemism to signify underdeveloped. The very notion of development is rooted in the assumption that a single model of progress is to be applied to all societies. Consequently, from such a perspective, ‘it is the job of development studies to make “them” more like “us”’ (Corbridge, 2007, p. 179). That is, to make the Global South more like the Global North.

Assistance and capacity development were additional discourses related to the idea of ‘developing countries’. Global North organizations construe themselves as ‘a source of advice and expertise for international government and quality assurance bodies’ (TEQSA, 2013, p. 2) to ‘promote good practice’ (INQAAHE, 2007, p. 4) and ‘to assist countries’ (CHEA, 2001, p. 1). Some of this assistance is more targeted regionally: for example, the Australian quality assurance agency indicates that, ‘TEQSA will engage in capacity building activities by providing advice and targeted assistance to countries in the Asia-Pacific region’ (TEQSA, 2013, p. 3). The GIQAC, sponsored by UNESCO, seems to echo these assumptions: ‘there is need to strengthen capacity for quality assurance in many developing countries’ (UNESCO, 2008, p. 2). The stated goal of this initiative focuses on ‘quality assurance practices and systems in developing countries and territories’ (p. 2) and ‘assist[ing] emerging quality assurance systems’ (p. 3).

Having established that the notion of assisting developing countries can be identified as a central goal in the documents analysed, it seems necessary to critically analyse the implications of such a goal. Despite affirmations about the multidirectional nature of collaboration, these documents reveal the assumption that higher education systems in the Global South require assistance and guidance. While providing support for quality assurance may very well be a noble cause, it is the similarity between these statements and what has been characterized as colonial discourse that presents some questions and concerns.

There are references to mutual learning in the documents analysed, for example: ‘US accrediting organisations seek to benefit from what they can learn from quality review practices in other countries’ (CHEA, 2002, p. 3), and ‘the Association will gain the experiences, insights, and innovations of … the most effective learning organizations
in the world’ (WASC, 2012, p. 2). Nevertheless, even when there is a discourse of collaboration and mutual learning, it is implied that so-called developing countries are the primary beneficiaries: ‘promote and support academic and research partnerships and other forms of cooperation for higher education capacity-building in developing countries’ (WASC, 2012, p. 14). In over 300 pages of documents, the word ‘partner’ appears only twice, and the words power and justice are not mentioned at all. How then can collaboration between the Global North and Global South take place if power asymmetries are not acknowledged?

**Legitimation**

If colonial discourse can be found in existing policy documents regarding international quality assurance in higher education, a third element to be anticipated is the presence of legitimising discourses. Emphasis on underdevelopment of Global South higher education systems and a discourse of assistance serve as powerful rationales to justify the over-representation of Global North actors in establishing quality policies and practices. This is because higher education systems and organizations from the Global South are represented as needing assistance, not as equal partners. An additional component that provides support for the status quo is the assumption that free trade and open markets are not only desirable but also necessary. Moreover, the involvement of multinational organizations serves as an additional legitimizing element.

Quality organizations from the Global North present the participation of UNESCO, OECD and the World Bank as rationales for their own involvement in quality policies. In the United States, the CHEA (2002) document suggests the following: ‘some supranational organizations are giving increasing attention to quality assurance’ (p. 4). In addition, ‘Australia has played a strong role in quality assurance in higher education, particularly through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation’ (TEQSA, 2013, p. 3). These multinational organizations, in turn, legitimize their involvement through discourses of partnership and collaboration: ‘Experience shows that development of effective QA capacity benefits from global exchanges … and the seamless sharing of … best practices’ (UNESCO, 2008, p. 2). Nevertheless, as shown earlier, participation privileges partners from the Global North.

In a document sponsored by UNESCO and OECD (UNESCO, 2005), along with many other policy texts, discussions of internationalization of quality practices are linked to trade and market expansion. INQAAHE (2007) also incorporates trade language in its recommendations, as the document makes reference to ‘importing’ and ‘exporting’ (p. 12) countries.

Utilizing colonial discourse as a heuristic to explore the development of international quality assurance policies leads to hypothesizing about the presence of discourses representing higher education actors from the Global South as underdeveloped and requiring assistance. This representation would lead to limited participation in international forums. Examples of these discourses and representations can be found in the documents analysed here. These two discourses reinforce each other in a self-perpetuating cycle of legitimation. Table 1 illustrates the presence of the theorized elements of colonial discourse in one of the documents analysed.
An analysis of the prevailing situation of quality assurance and its internationalization reveals ties between quality-related processes with colonial discourse and market values. Explorations of how individuals at universities in the Global South develop strategies to approach international quality assurance will be increasingly necessary as well as the critical analysis of quality assurance discourses. This paper shows that trade language is central to the expansion of quality assurance in higher education. The realities illustrated here invite reflection about whether it is possible to coordinate efforts intended to promote quality in higher education without imposing universal assumptions and practices.

If international collaboration to promote quality improvement in higher education is possible, it would require at least the following: (a) rejection of universal models of quality, (b) recognition that quality is context driven, (c) emphasis on substance over form, i.e. a commitment to quality for improvement beyond quality for accountability, (d) acknowledgement of global power differences and (e) addressing, and correcting when possible, existing inequities. Paradoxically, perhaps the best way to promote quality in higher education across borders is to rein in the totalizing expansion of quality assurance discourses and practices.

Given that the internationalization of quality assurance in higher education is often inserted in discourses of assistance and framed as an exercise of capacity building, attempts to de-colonize ideas about development and progress would be potentially fruitful avenues for future research and practice. Ideas of progress, development and a better future are most frequently Eurocentric (Langdon, 2013), or focused on turning the Global South into a replica of the Global North. Deconstructing these ideas may lead to notions of internationalization based on collaboration, not assistance.

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