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UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: TENSIONS AMONG THE COLONIALITY OF KNOWLEDGE, INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE, AND EPISTEMIC JUSTICE IN LATIN AMERICA, THE CARIBBEAN, AND AFRICA

AUTONOMÍA UNIVERSITARIA Y LIBERTAD ACADÉMICA EN EL SUR GLOBAL: TENSIONES ENTRE COLONIALIDAD DEL CONOCIMIENTO, GOBERNANZA INSTITUCIONAL Y JUSTICIA EPISTÉMICA EN AMÉRICA LATINA, EL CARIBE Y ÁFRICA

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University autonomy and academic freedom in the Global South: tensions among the coloniality of knowledge, institutional governance, and epistemic justice in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa

Autonomía universitaria y libertad académica en el Sur Global: tensiones entre colonialidad del conocimiento, gobernanza institucional y justicia epistémica en América Latina, el Caribe y África

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ABSTRACT

This research examines contemporary challenges affecting university autonomy and academic freedom in the Global South through a comparative transregional analysis involving Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa. Grounded in the theoretical perspectives of Epistemologies of the South and critical intercultural education, the study analyzes how neoliberal governance models, epistemic dependency, political polarization, bureaucratic control, and symbolic exclusion influence knowledge production, research agendas, and academic freedom in public universities.

The project adopts a mixed-methods comparative design combining quantitative surveys administered to university professors and researchers with qualitative interviews, discourse analysis, and institutional policy review. The research seeks to identify shared structural patterns and contextual differences regarding institutional autonomy, freedom of teaching and

research, academic participation, and resistance to political, ideological, and economic pressures.

Special attention is given to epistemic justice and to the ways universities in peripheral contexts negotiate tensions between global academic standards and locally situated forms of knowledge production. The study also incorporates critical analyses derived from previous investigations on governance crises and exclusionary political discourses within Colombian higher education institutions, particularly in the Caribbean region.

The project aims to contribute to international debates on democracy, higher education, and knowledge production by proposing a decolonial and intercultural framework for understanding academic freedom beyond Eurocentric perspectives. Ultimately, the study seeks to strengthen South–South academic dialogue and generate policy recommendations for more democratic, autonomous, inclusive, and socially committed universities throughout the Global South.

It further emphasizes collaborative research networks capable of promoting institutional resilience, equity, and regional epistemological sovereignty globally.

Keywords: University Autonomy; Academic Freedom; Epistemologies of the South; Higher Education Governance; Epistemic Justice

RESUMEN

Esta investigación examina los desafíos contemporáneos que afectan la autonomía universitaria y la libertad académica en el Sur Global mediante un análisis comparativo transregional que involucra a América Latina, el Caribe y África. Fundamentada en las perspectivas teóricas de las Epistemologías del Sur y la educación intercultural crítica, el estudio analiza cómo los modelos de gobernanza neoliberal, la dependencia epistémica, la polarización política, el control burocrático y la exclusión simbólica influyen en la producción de conocimiento, las agendas de investigación y la libertad académica en las universidades públicas.

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El proyecto adopta un diseño comparativo de métodos mixtos que combina encuestas cuantitativas aplicadas a profesores e investigadores universitarios con entrevistas cualitativas, análisis del discurso y revisión de políticas institucionales. La investigación busca identificar patrones estructurales compartidos y diferencias contextuales en relación con la autonomía institucional, la libertad de enseñanza e investigación, la participación académica y la resistencia frente a presiones políticas, ideológicas y económicas.

Se presta especial atención a la justicia epistémica y a las formas en que las universidades en contextos periféricos negocian las tensiones entre los estándares académicos globales y las formas localmente situadas de producción de conocimiento. El estudio también incorpora análisis críticos derivados de investigaciones previas sobre crisis de gobernanza y discursos políticos excluyentes dentro de instituciones de educación superior colombianas, particularmente en la región Caribe.

El proyecto tiene como objetivo contribuir a los debates internacionales sobre democracia, educación superior y producción de conocimiento mediante la propuesta de un marco de referencia decolonial e intercultural para comprender la libertad académica más allá de las perspectivas eurocéntricas. En última instancia, el estudio busca fortalecer el diálogo académico Sur–Sur y generar recomendaciones de política pública para promover universidades más democráticas, autónomas, inclusivas y socialmente comprometidas en todo el Sur Global.

Asimismo, enfatiza la importancia de las redes de investigación colaborativa capaces de fomentar la resiliencia institucional, la equidad y la soberanía epistemológica regional a escala global.

Palabras clave: Autonomía Universitaria; Libertad Académica; Epistemologías del Sur; Gobernanza de la Educación Superior; Justicia Epistémica

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INTRODUCTION

In the first decades of the 21st century, universities in the Global South are facing a profound reconfiguration of their governance structures, their forms of knowledge production, and their margins of institutional autonomy. This scenario is marked by multiple tensions stemming from the expansion of neoliberal models of higher education, the increasing bureaucratization of university systems, the commodification of knowledge, epistemological dependence on the Global North, and the strengthening of symbolic, political, and digital surveillance mechanisms over academic communities. Far from representing merely administrative transformations, these dynamics constitute a complex field of ideological, epistemological, and cultural disputes that directly affect academic freedom, research agendas, and the possibility of constructing situated knowledge from peripheral contexts (Santos, 2018; Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2000).

In Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa, the public university has historically been conceived as a space for social mobility, critical thought production, and cultural democratization. However, in recent decades, numerous studies have shown how structural adjustment policies, standardized evaluation systems, pressure for international indexing, and the subordination of research to productivity logics have progressively reduced the margins of university autonomy (Ordorika, 2003; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). This situation has generated new forms of academic subordination that no longer operate exclusively through direct censorship or explicit political repression, but also through more sophisticated mechanisms associated with the coloniality of knowledge, the technocratic regulation of research, and the imposition of hegemonic scientific paradigms originating from global centers of academic power (Lander, 2000; Castro-Gómez, 2007).

From the perspective of Southern epistemologies, these contemporary forms of academic control constitute expressions of a global structure of cognitive inequality that privileges certain knowledge, languages, methodologies, and university models while rendering invisible alternative forms of knowledge production developed in historically marginalized contexts

(Santos, 2014). In this sense, epistemological coloniality not only affects what knowledge is considered valid within universities, but also who has the legitimacy to produce it and under what institutional conditions it can circulate (Quijano, 2007; Walsh, 2009). Academic freedom in the Global South, therefore, cannot be analyzed solely from traditional liberal legal frameworks, but also from the perspective of the power relations that structure the global knowledge system.

Authors such as Pierre Bourdieu have shown that the university field constitutes a space of disputes over legitimacy, symbolic capital, and institutional control, while Michel Foucault demonstrated how modern institutions operate through technologies of surveillance and discipline that produce subtle forms of subjective regulation. In the contemporary university context, these dynamics manifest themselves through mechanisms of continuous evaluation, metrics of scientific productivity, digital surveillance, dependence on external funding, and the precarious employment of faculty. Such processes generate conditions that favor academic self-censorship, epistemological homogenization, and the subordination of research agendas to external economic, political, or geostrategic interests (Giroux, 2014; Brown, 2015).

In the Colombian case, these tensions take on particular characteristics due to the historical disputes surrounding university autonomy, the funding of public universities, and the relationships between the state, knowledge, and democracy. Several recent studies have indicated that Colombian public universities are undergoing complex processes of governance crisis, institutional fragmentation, and weakening of their critical capacities, especially in peripheral regional contexts where the material and symbolic conditions for scientific production are more limited (Soto Molina, 2025). These problems not only impact university administration but also the dynamics of democratic participation, research conditions, and the development of intercultural academic citizenship.

Within this framework, the Colombian Caribbean constitutes a particularly relevant setting for analyzing the tensions between university autonomy, state bureaucracy, and situated knowledge production. Public universities in this region simultaneously face challenges

associated with social inequality, academic centralism, epistemological dependence, and structural limitations in consolidating contextualized research agendas. From this perspective, the Colombian node of this research proposes a critical examination of the relationships between university governance, academic coloniality, and intellectual freedom, articulating contributions from critical intercultural education, the bilingual intercultural curriculum, and epistemologies of the Global South. Of particular relevance in this context are previous studies such as "University Autonomy and Governance Crisis in Colombia: A Critical Analysis from the University of the Atlantic" (Soto Molina, 2025), which demonstrates how institutional conflicts, internal political disputes, and administrative bureaucratization affect research processes and democratic dynamics within universities. Likewise, the study "The Culture of Exclusion in the Political Discourse of Colombian University Students" provides theoretical and methodological tools for understanding how certain institutional discourses produce symbolic mechanisms of exclusion, silencing, and marginalization within the Colombian academic field.

This research is based on the hypothesis that contemporary restrictions on academic freedom in the Global South operate not only through explicit forms of censorship, but also through mechanisms of epistemological coloniality, scientific dependency, institutional bureaucratization, and neoliberal regulation of knowledge. Consequently, the project seeks to comparatively analyze the transformations, tensions, and resistance strategies linked to university autonomy and academic freedom in universities in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa, from a critical, decolonial, and intercultural perspective. (Soto-Molina, 2022)

To this end, the research aims to identify the main forms of political, economic, institutional, and epistemological pressure that affect academic freedom; examine how contemporary university policies condition research agendas and scientific production; and compare the perceptions of faculty and researchers using common instruments applied in different regions. This study analyzes strategies of academic resistance and the construction of

epistemic justice, and proposes guidelines aimed at strengthening autonomous, democratic, and intercultural university models.

The relevance of this study lies in its capacity to contribute to international debates on democracy, universities, and cognitive justice from a perspective situated in the Global South. Furthermore, the project seeks to strengthen South-South academic dialogues and generate alternative analytical frameworks that allow for an understanding of academic freedom beyond traditional Eurocentric conceptions, incorporating categories such as the coloniality of knowledge, critical interculturality, and transformative academic citizenship.

The Colombian research node has a strong track record in the critical study of university autonomy, governance dynamics, and the discursive tensions present in higher education institutions in Colombia. In particular, research by the Language Circle research group, based at the University of the Atlantic, stands out for its ability to understand the relationships between power, exclusion, university democracy, and academic freedom in peripheral Latin American contexts.

One of the key precedents is the study entitled "University Autonomy and the Crisis of Governance in Colombia: A Critical Analysis from the University of the Atlantic," developed by Jairo Eduardo Soto Molina and collaborators. This work analyzes how tensions between institutional autonomy, administrative bureaucratization, internal political disputes, and contemporary models of university management affect knowledge production and the exercise of academic freedom in Colombian public universities.

The research demonstrates that the crisis of university governance cannot be understood solely as an administrative problem, but rather as an expression of epistemological, political, and symbolic disputes that permeate the higher education system in Latin America. The study also reveals the existence of institutional pressure mechanisms, fragmentation of academic communities, and structural limitations for the development of autonomous and contextualized research agendas.

Complementarily, the work "The Culture of Exclusion in the Political Discourse of Colombian University Students" constitutes a fundamental reference for understanding the symbolic forms through which dynamics of exclusion, polarization, and delegitimization are produced within university settings. This research provides tools from critical discourse analysis and the sociology of power to examine how certain institutional and political discourses generate processes of silencing, academic marginalization, and indirect restriction of freedom of thought.

Both precedents are especially relevant to the present proposal because they allow us to establish connections between:

- academic freedom,
- university autonomy,
- institutional democracy,
- symbolic violence,
- coloniality of knowledge,
- university governance,
- epistemic justice,
- situated knowledge production.

Furthermore, these studies provide a solid methodological and conceptual basis for the development of the regional comparative component of the project, particularly in relation to the analysis of teacher perceptions, institutional dynamics, and contemporary mechanisms of academic control in universities of the Global South..

Contemporary Analysis of University Autonomy and Academic Freedom in the Global South

A contemporary analysis of university autonomy and academic freedom in the Global South requires a theoretical framework capable of moving beyond traditional interpretations focused exclusively on legal or administrative dimensions of higher education. Recent transformations of public universities, particularly in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa,

reveal that current tensions cannot be understood solely as isolated institutional conflicts, but rather as expressions of historical power structures associated with the coloniality of knowledge, neoliberal rationality, and disputes over epistemological legitimacy in the contemporary world system. From this perspective, the present research is based on a critical dialogue between epistemologies of the South, decolonial theory, critical sociology of education, and studies on power, discourse, and university governance.

One of the central references for this proposal is the thought of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, particularly his contributions on cognitive justice and epistemologies of the South. According to Santos (2014), the modern world has produced an “abyssal divide” separating knowledge considered legitimate from that historically rendered invisible by Eurocentric rationality. This logic has shaped a global system of knowledge production where universities in the Global South often occupy peripheral positions, subordinated to scientific, linguistic, and methodological paradigms defined by the Global North. Consequently, academic freedom cannot be reduced to the formal right to research or teach, but must also be understood as the effective possibility of producing situated, pluralistic, and epistemologically diverse knowledge. From this perspective, cognitive justice is an indispensable condition for democratizing the contemporary university and challenging the forms of epistemicide stemming from modern Western hegemony (Santos, 2018).

Aníbal Quijano's reflections complement this analysis by pointing out that capitalist modernity produced a global structure of domination based on the coloniality of power, understood as a historical pattern that articulates race, knowledge, economics, and political authority (Quijano, 2000). In the university sphere, this coloniality is expressed through epistemological hierarchies that privilege certain scientific models, academic languages, and forms of knowledge validation. The coloniality of knowledge thus operates as a mechanism of intellectual subordination that limits the autonomy of peripheral universities and conditions research agendas toward external interests. In this sense, scientific dependence and

subordination to international rankings, indexing systems, and academic productivity policies constitute contemporary manifestations of this persistent colonial structure.

In dialogue with Quijano, Walter Mignolo develops the concept of epistemic disobedience as a strategy of resistance against hegemonic forms of knowledge production. According to Mignolo (2011), universities in the Global South face a constant tension between reproducing Eurocentric models of scientific validation and constructing situated epistemological alternatives that recognize historically marginalized forms of knowledge. The notion of “decolonial options” is particularly relevant to this research, as it allows us to analyze how certain university actors generate practices of intellectual resistance against contemporary neoliberal mechanisms of knowledge regulation. From this perspective, academic freedom also implies the capacity to question dominant epistemologies and open spaces for pluriversal forms of scientific production.

For his part, Enrique Dussel offers a philosophical critique of Western modernity that is fundamental to understanding the relationships between university, coloniality, and democracy. Dussel (1994) argues that European modernity was historically constituted through processes of exclusion and subordination of other peoples and rationalities. In response, he proposes the concept of transmodernity as an ethical and political horizon oriented toward the recognition of otherness and the construction of horizontal intercultural dialogues. Applied to the university field, this approach allows us to problematize the ways in which higher education institutions reproduce structures of epistemological and cultural exclusion, as well as to explore alternatives based on critical interculturality and the democratization of knowledge.

The critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu offers fundamental tools for analyzing the power relations that permeate the university field. Bourdieu (1988) understands the university as a space of struggle for symbolic capital, legitimacy, and intellectual authority. In this field, academic actors compete for scientific recognition within deeply hierarchical structures that reproduce social and cultural inequalities. The notion of symbolic violence is particularly useful for understanding how certain institutional discourses, evaluation criteria, and accreditation mechanisms produce subtle

forms of academic exclusion. In the contemporary context, scientific productivity policies, international metrics, and the pressure to be indexed operate as mechanisms of symbolic regulation that condition the intellectual autonomy of researchers and peripheral universities.

The contributions of Michel Foucault allow for a deeper analysis of the contemporary mechanisms of surveillance and control present in universities. Foucault (1975) showed how modern institutions produce forms of discipline through mechanisms of constant surveillance and the normalization of behavior. In the contemporary university setting, these technologies of power manifest themselves through systems of continuous evaluation, academic audits, digital surveillance, administrative bureaucratization, and mechanisms of institutional control over research and teaching. The notion of epistemic surveillance is particularly relevant to this research, as it allows us to understand how certain regimes of scientific validation delimit what knowledge is acceptable, what methodologies are recognized, and what discourses can legitimately circulate within academia.

From the perspective of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire offers an emancipatory understanding of education as a practice of freedom and social transformation. Freire (1970) criticized the banking model of education, which reproduces vertical relations of domination, and proposed a dialogical pedagogy based on critical consciousness and democratic participation. (Pertuz, & Soto-Molina, 2026) His contributions allow us to analyze the university not only as a space for ideological reproduction, but also as a potential arena for resistance, intercultural dialogue, and the collective construction of knowledge. Freire's notion of conscientization acquires particular relevance in the face of contemporary dynamics of educational commodification and the technocratic subordination of research.

Based on this theoretical dialogue, the present research articulates fundamental analytical categories such as academic freedom, university autonomy, the coloniality of knowledge, cognitive justice, neoliberal governance, epistemic surveillance, and intercultural academic citizenship. Academic freedom is understood here not only as an individual legal

guarantee, but also as a collective condition for the autonomous and critical production of knowledge in democratic contexts. University autonomy, for its part, is conceived as a political, epistemological, and cultural dimension that implies the institutional capacity to define research agendas, pedagogical practices, and academic projects without undue subordination to external interests.

Neoliberal governance constitutes another central axis of the analysis, insofar as contemporary transformations in higher education have introduced business logics, competitive systems, and managerial models that reconfigure the relationships between university, state, and market (Brown, 2015). These dynamics profoundly affect faculty working conditions, research priorities, and mechanisms for democratic participation within universities. Epistemic surveillance then appears as a mechanism associated with the regulation of scientific production through global standards of productivity and academic legitimation.

Finally, the concept of intercultural academic citizenship allows us to project alternatives oriented toward more democratic, pluralistic, and socially engaged universities. This category proposes understanding university actors not only as producers of technical knowledge, but also as political subjects capable of building intercultural dialogues, cognitive justice, and forms of resistance against the contemporary coloniality of knowledge. From this perspective, the university of the Global South can become a strategic space for epistemological democratization and the construction of decolonial educational horizons.

METHODOLOGY

This research will be conducted using an international comparative design with a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach, aimed at understanding the contemporary transformations of university autonomy and academic freedom in contexts of the Global South. This methodological approach allows for the integration of quantitative and qualitative strategies in an articulated manner to analyze both structural trends and situated experiences, discourses,

and practices related to university governance, the coloniality of knowledge, and the dynamics of academic resistance in universities in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa. The mixed-methods approach is particularly relevant for research on complex and multidimensional phenomena, as it allows for complementing the analytical breadth of quantitative data with the interpretive depth of qualitative approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The choice of a sequential explanatory design responds to the need to identify, in a first phase, comparative patterns related to faculty perceptions of university autonomy, research freedom, and institutional regulation, and subsequently to delve qualitatively into the interpretations, experiences, and narratives produced by academic actors in their respective regional contexts. Thus, the study seeks to articulate comparative statistical analysis with critical perspectives from discourse analysis, decolonial theory, and epistemologies of the Global South.

From an epistemological perspective, the research is situated within a critical-interpretive paradigm that recognizes the historical, political, and cultural nature of knowledge production. Consequently, the study assumes that the relationships between university, power, and academic freedom cannot be analyzed from a supposed scientific neutrality, but rather as part of structural disputes associated with epistemic inequalities, mechanisms of institutional regulation, and dynamics of contemporary coloniality (Santos, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Likewise, the project incorporates methodological principles of critical intercultural research and situated knowledge production, recognizing the historical and sociopolitical particularities of each participating university context.

The quantitative phase will focus on administering a common survey to faculty, researchers, and academics affiliated with public universities in the participating countries. The purpose of this instrument is to identify perceptions, experiences, and trends related to contemporary conditions of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The use of a standardized questionnaire will allow for transregional comparisons between Latin America, the

Caribbean, and Africa, as well as the identification of convergences and divergences in the forms of institutional, political, and epistemological pressure present in different university contexts.

The variables considered in this phase include perceptions of university autonomy, institutional censorship, ideological pressure, research freedom, academic self-censorship, precarious employment of faculty, the impact of international rankings and scientific productivity metrics, democratic participation in university governance, and perceptions of epistemological dependence on the Global North. These categories were defined based on previous studies on neoliberal governance of higher education, academic coloniality, and contemporary university capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Brown, 2015). The questionnaire will incorporate Likert-type questions, items on institutional perception, and open-ended questions designed to capture specific experiences related to academic constraints and dynamics of university regulation..

The sample will be purposive and will consist of faculty and researchers from public universities in the participating regions. While the study does not aim for national statistical representativeness, it does seek to achieve institutional, disciplinary, and regional diversity to allow for meaningful comparative analyses. In the case of the Colombian node, the work will focus primarily on public universities in the Colombian Caribbean, especially institutions that reflect tensions between university autonomy, state bureaucracy, and peripheral conditions of academic production.

Quantitative data will be processed using descriptive and comparative statistical techniques. Frequency analyses, measures of central tendency, correlations between variables, and interregional comparative analyses will be used to identify common patterns and contextual differences. Depending on the final sample size, exploratory multivariate analyses may be incorporated to examine relationships between perceived autonomy, institutional pressure, and academic working conditions. Statistical results will be interpreted not only from traditional positivist perspectives but also from critical approaches that recognize the symbolic and political dimensions of the phenomena analyzed. The qualitative phase will be developed subsequently

to delve deeper into the interpretations produced by university actors regarding the dynamics identified in the quantitative phase. To this end, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and documentary analysis of university policies, institutional regulations, and official discourses related to academic freedom, research evaluation, and university governance will be used. The interviews will allow for the exploration of personal and collective experiences associated with symbolic censorship, academic self-censorship, institutional surveillance, job insecurity, and tensions arising from contemporary higher education policies.

The focus groups will seek to generate spaces for collective dialogue among faculty and researchers in order to analyze shared perceptions of university autonomy, academic coloniality, and strategies of intellectual resistance in peripheral contexts. This technique is particularly relevant for critical and intercultural research due to its capacity to make visible processes of collective meaning-making and shared experiences of subordination or exclusion (Morgan, 1997). Furthermore, the focus groups will facilitate the comparative analysis of academic narratives among different participating regions.

The documentary analysis will include a critical review of higher education laws, research policies, university accreditation systems, faculty evaluation regulations, and institutional documents related to university governance. This component will allow participants' perceptions to be contextualized within broader normative and political structures, as well as identify contemporary forms of neoliberal regulation of knowledge and institutional mechanisms of epistemic surveillance.

The processing of qualitative information will be carried out using critical discourse analysis, an approach that allows us to examine how power relations, epistemological hierarchies, and mechanisms of exclusion are reproduced through institutional and academic discursive practices (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 2016). This approach is particularly relevant for analyzing how certain university discourses legitimize hegemonic models of scientific production while marginalizing situated knowledge, decolonial perspectives, and alternative forms of research.

The research will also incorporate a transregional triangulation process aimed at integrating quantitative and qualitative findings from the various participating nodes. Triangulation will strengthen the study's interpretive validity by comparing diverse data, perspectives, and institutional contexts (Flick, 2018). It will also facilitate the identification of common structural patterns in universities of the Global South, as well as regional specificities related to political history, university models, and local forms of academic resistance.

Within this general framework, the Colombian Caribbean/Colombia node will assume a strategic role in analyzing the relationships between public universities, institutional governance, academic coloniality, and situated research. This regional component will examine how Colombian public universities confront tensions between university autonomy and state bureaucracy in contexts characterized by structural inequality, academic centralism, and epistemological dependence. The work developed from the Colombian Caribbean will allow for the incorporation of peripheral perspectives that are frequently overlooked in international debates on higher education.

The specific contribution of the Colombian node will be articulated with previously developed lines of research on intercultural bilingual curricula, epistemologies of the South, linguistic coloniality, and critical interculturality. In this sense, the research will not be limited solely to the administrative or legal analysis of university autonomy, but will also examine the cultural, epistemological, and discursive dimensions of academic freedom in peripheral contexts. Of particular relevance will be previous research such as "University Autonomy and Governance Crisis in Colombia: A Critical Analysis from the University of the Atlantic" and "The Culture of Exclusion in the Political Discourse of Colombian University Students," studies that offer fundamental analytical categories for understanding the relationships between symbolic power, discursive exclusion, and university governance in Colombia.

From this methodological perspective, the research seeks to produce a critical and intercultural analysis of contemporary dynamics affecting academic freedom in the Global South,

integrating quantitative, discursive, institutional, and epistemological dimensions within a transregional comparative framework oriented toward the construction of cognitive justice and university democratization.

RESULTS

This research aims to generate academic, institutional, and political results that significantly contribute to contemporary debates on university autonomy, academic freedom, and cognitive justice in the Global South. First, it seeks to produce an international comparative study that identifies convergences and divergences in contemporary forms of academic regulation, pressure, and resistance in universities in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa. This comparative study will offer a transregional perspective on current transformations in higher education from a critical, decolonial, and intercultural standpoint, moving beyond exclusively national or Eurocentric approaches to academic freedom.

One of the main outcomes will be the creation of a comparative regional database comprised of quantitative and qualitative information collected from the various participating institutions. This database will allow for the systematization of faculty and research perceptions related to university autonomy, institutional censorship, ideological pressure, job insecurity, epistemic surveillance, and scientific dependence. In addition to providing methodological input for future research, this comparative database will help to highlight common problems affecting public universities in the Global South and will facilitate subsequent longitudinal and comparative analyses.

The project also aims to generate high-impact scientific output through the development of academic articles for Q1 and Q2 indexed journals in areas such as higher education, decolonial studies, sociology of education, critical discourse studies, and university policies. These articles will address specific themes derived from the research findings, including academic coloniality, neoliberal governance, institutional surveillance, cognitive justice, peripheral knowledge

production, and intercultural academic citizenship. The intention is to position the experiences of universities in the Global South within international academic debates that have historically privileged Eurocentric perspectives on autonomy and academic freedom.

Furthermore, an academic and policy report is planned for CLACSO and CODESRIA, which will systematize the study's main comparative findings and formulate recommendations aimed at strengthening democratic and intercultural university policies. This report will not only be descriptive but also proactive, incorporating strategic guidelines for protecting academic freedom and consolidating more autonomous and socially engaged university models.

Another expected outcome of particular relevance will be the consolidation of a South-South academic network on academic freedom, university autonomy, and epistemic justice. This network will seek to strengthen ties of intellectual cooperation among researchers from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa, promoting horizontal academic exchanges and alternative forms of collaborative knowledge production. From the perspective of Southern epistemologies, this international articulation constitutes a fundamental strategy for challenging scientific dependence on hegemonic centers of academic production and advancing toward more pluralistic and intercultural forms of university research (Santos, 2014).

In the specific case of the Colombian Caribbean/Colombia node, it is expected to contribute a critical understanding of the existing tensions between university autonomy, state bureaucracy, and academic coloniality in peripheral contexts of scientific production. This component will bring to light experiences and issues frequently excluded from global debates on higher education, especially those related to regional public universities, university governance, and epistemological inequality in the Colombian context. Likewise, the study will contribute to strengthening lines of research linked to intercultural bilingual curriculum, linguistic coloniality, and critical interculturality previously developed in the Colombian Caribbean.

Finally, one of the project's most innovative contributions will be the formulation of a preliminary proposal for alternative indicators of intercultural university autonomy. Unlike traditional models

based exclusively on administrative or financial criteria, these indicators will seek to incorporate dimensions related to cognitive justice, epistemological plurality, democratic participation, situated knowledge production, linguistic diversity, and critical interculturality. This proposal aims to open new discussions on how to evaluate university autonomy in contexts of the Global South.

Table 1.

Comparative Framework for Academic Freedom, University Autonomy, and South–South Intellectual Cooperation in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa.

Comparative Dimension	Latin America	Caribbean	Africa	Potential for South–South Cooperation
Historical University Context	Strong tradition of public universities and reformist movements since the Córdoba Reform (1918).	Universities shaped by British, French, and Spanish colonial legacies.	Higher education systems deeply influenced by European colonialism and relatively recent independence processes.	Development of shared historical frameworks on higher education, decolonization, and university autonomy.
Main Contemporary Challenges	Insufficient funding, bureaucratization, political polarization, and international performance metrics.	External academic dependency, budget constraints, and brain drain.	Pressure from international organizations, financial dependency, and technological inequality.	Identification of common patterns of neoliberal governance and epistemic subordination.
University Autonomy	Relatively consolidated legal tradition but increasingly weakened by neoliberal reforms.	Varies according to territorial contexts and external geopolitical influences.	Frequently conditioned by state structures and international agencies.	Exchange of experiences on institutional protection and democratic governance.
Academic Freedom	Threatened by political polarization, institutional surveillance, and faculty precarity.	Limited by dependent economies and institutional fragility.	Risks associated with political censorship, social conflicts, and state control.	Development of shared protocols for academic protection and intellectual solidarity networks.
Coloniality of Knowledge	Dominance of Eurocentric	Dependence on metropolitan	Persistence of colonial	Promotion of Southern

Comparative Dimension	Latin America	Caribbean	Africa	Potential for South–South Cooperation
	epistemologies and pressure for international indexing.	academic models and limited regional visibility.	frameworks in research and higher education.	epistemologies and strengthening of situated knowledge systems.
Dominant Academic Languages	Spanish, Portuguese, and international academic English.	English, French, Spanish, and Creole languages.	English, French, Portuguese, and African local languages.	Promotion of multilingualism and linguistic justice in scientific production.
Impact of Neoliberal University Policies	Commodification of education and a culture of scientific productivity.	Dependence on external funding and business-oriented management models.	Partial privatization and subordination to international development agendas.	Joint critiques of global academic capitalism and alternative governance models.
Peripheral Scientific Production	Limited international visibility despite strong regional critical scholarship.	Underrepresentation in global rankings and databases.	Scientific production constrained by technological inequalities and insufficient funding.	Creation of collaborative South–South publishing and knowledge-sharing platforms.
Emerging Critical Methodologies	Critical pedagogy, decolonial theory, and participatory research.	Postcolonial studies, intercultural approaches, and community-based methodologies.	African epistemologies, oral traditions, and community-centered research methods.	Development of intercultural and transregional methodological integration.
Academic Resistance Movements	Critical university networks, student movements, and faculty unions.	Regional initiatives for cultural and educational integration.	Pan-African intellectual and decolonial movements.	Consolidation of a South–South academic network on academic freedom and epistemic justice.
Potential Contributions to the Project	Expertise in university autonomy and decolonial critique.	Intercultural perspectives and Afro-Caribbean diasporic experiences.	Experiences in educational decolonization and epistemic justice.	Collective development of alternative indicators for intercultural

Comparative Dimension	Latin America	Caribbean	Africa	Potential for South–South Cooperation
				university autonomy.
Expected Outcome of Cooperation	Strengthening of critical Latin American scholarship.	Greater visibility of Caribbean academic production.	Consolidation of African critical research networks.	Production of transregional knowledge not subordinated to Global North paradigms.

The comparative table reveals that, although universities in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa have distinct historical trajectories and sociopolitical contexts, they share structural problems stemming from the coloniality of knowledge, academic dependency, and the expansion of neoliberal models of university governance. In all three regions, there is increasing pressure on university autonomy through mechanisms associated with institutional bureaucratization, standardized evaluation systems, the precariousness of academic work, and the subordination of research agendas to international criteria of scientific productivity. These dynamics directly affect academic freedom and limit the possibilities of constructing situated knowledge rooted in the social and cultural realities of the Global South.

At the same time, the table shows that each region contributes unique experiences that enrich the development of South-South intellectual cooperation. Latin America brings a strong tradition of critical thought, emancipatory pedagogy, and decolonial studies; the Caribbean offers intercultural perspectives shaped by the Afro-descendant diaspora, multilingualism, and multiple colonial legacies; While Africa contributes with processes of educational decolonization, African epistemologies, and historical experiences of intellectual resistance to colonialism, these differences do not represent obstacles, but rather opportunities to build broader and more horizontal comparative frameworks on academic freedom, cognitive justice, and university autonomy.

In this sense, strengthening cooperative ties among researchers from the three regions seeks to overcome traditional dependence on academic centers in the Global North and promote alternative forms of collective knowledge production. The creation of South-South academic networks will allow for the sharing of critical methodologies, the development of comparative research, the creation of joint platforms for scientific publication, and the construction of alternative indicators of intercultural university autonomy. In this way, transregional cooperation will not only have academic value, but also political and epistemological value, contributing to the democratization of knowledge and the recognition of the plurality of knowledge present in universities of the Global South.

Prepare a robust discussion with a suggested conceptual framework

where you propose a unique analytical category within the project:

“Coloniality of University Governance” and “Institutional Epistemological Violence” and that connects with:

decoloniality,

academic freedom,

university policies,

knowledge bureaucracy,

discursive exclusion,

academic neoliberalism.

Using pilot comparative data from institutions such as Universidad del Atlántico, The University of the West Indies, and Mohammed V University would allow the project to demonstrate:

- feasibility of the comparative methodology,
- transregional coherence,
- applicability of the survey instrument,
- preliminary analytical categories,

- and the potential relevance of the expected findings.

This is particularly useful in international calls because evaluators often want evidence that:

1. the comparative framework is operationalizable,
2. the variables can be measured across different contexts,
3. and the proposed analytical categories are empirically grounded rather than purely theoretical.

Methodologically, however, it is important to present this not as "final empirical evidence," but as:

- a pilot comparative data,
- an exploratory analytical matrix,
- or a preliminary proof of concept.

That distinction is academically important.

To illustrate the feasibility of the proposed comparative design, the project includes a preliminary exploration involving three representative universities from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa.

Table 2.

Comparative Indicators of Academic Freedom, University Governance, and Epistemic Dependency in Selected Universities of the Global South

Variable	Universidad del Atlántico	University of the West Indies	Mohammed V University
Perception of institutional autonomy	Medium–Low	Medium	Medium–High
Bureaucratic pressure	High	Medium	High

Variable	Universidad del Atlántico	University of the West Indies	Mohammed V University
Academic freedom perception	Medium	Medium–High	Medium
Dependence on international rankings	High	Medium	High
Epistemic dependence on Global North	High	Medium–High	High
Inclusion of local knowledge systems	Medium	High	Medium
Perceived neoliberal governance	High	Medium	High
Academic self-censorship	Medium–High	Medium	Medium–High

You could then explain that these are:

- hypothetical exploratory values,
- based on documented regional tendencies,
- intended only to demonstrate the comparative analytical architecture of the study.

Conceptually, this would also help operate your two proposed categories:

Coloniality of University Governance

through:

- dependence on Northern academic validation,
- bureaucratic productivity systems,

- managerial governance,
- ranking pressure.

Institutional Epistemological Violence

through:

- exclusion of local epistemologies,
- symbolic marginalization,
- linguistic hierarchies,
- restricted research agendas,
- self-censorship dynamics.

Another advantage is geopolitical balance:

- Latin America → Colombia,
- Caribbean → anglophone postcolonial context,
- Africa → North African francophone/Arab academic context.

That triangulation gives the project much greater international legitimacy and comparative depth.

Academically, this would move the proposal from:

“interesting theoretical project”

to:

“operational comparative research framework already in analytical development.”

And that matters a lot in competitive international funding calls.

4.2 Absence of Decolonial Perspectives

One of the most significant findings emerging from this study is the notable absence of decolonial perspectives in the English language textbooks analyzed. Despite the growing academic debate surrounding decoloniality, epistemic justice, and intercultural education in Latin America and other regions of the Global South, most textbooks continue to reproduce Eurocentric frameworks of knowledge and representation. Cultural content remains predominantly oriented

toward Anglo-American realities, values, and communicative norms, while local histories, indigenous epistemologies, Afro-descendant perspectives, and community-based knowledge systems are either marginally represented or entirely excluded. This absence reinforces what Quijano (2000) conceptualizes as the coloniality of knowledge, where Western forms of knowing are normalized as universal and superior, while alternative epistemologies are rendered invisible or secondary.

Furthermore, the lack of decolonial approaches contributes to the reproduction of epistemological dependency within language education. English textbooks frequently position learners as consumers of globalized cultural content rather than as active subjects capable of constructing knowledge from their own sociocultural realities. As a result, language learning becomes associated with assimilation into dominant cultural models instead of fostering critical intercultural dialogue and epistemological plurality. From a decolonial perspective, this represents a significant limitation, since education should not merely facilitate linguistic competence but also empower learners to critically examine power relations embedded in language, culture, and knowledge production. Consequently, the absence of decoloniality in textbooks not only limits cultural representation but also restricts the transformative potential of English language education in the Global South.

Pilot Comparative Simulation: Academic Freedom and University Governance in the Global South

Preliminary Exploratory Comparative Matrix

To strengthen the methodological feasibility of the proposed transregional research framework, a pilot comparative simulation was developed using three representative universities from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa: Universidad del Atlántico (Colombia), The University of the West Indies (Caribbean region), and Mohammed V University (Morocco). The purpose of this exploratory matrix is not to present definitive empirical findings, but rather to

demonstrate the operational viability of the comparative analytical architecture proposed for the project.

The exploratory values presented below were constructed from documented regional tendencies identified in previous literature on university governance, academic freedom, neoliberal higher education reforms, epistemic dependency, and decolonial studies in the Global South. These values function as hypothetical indicators designed to illustrate how the categories of “Coloniality of University Governance” and “Institutional Epistemological Violence” can be operationalized comparatively across distinct geopolitical and academic contexts.

The following table also demonstrates the capacity of the project to integrate quantitative and qualitative dimensions into a coherent transregional framework capable of identifying convergences and divergences in the contemporary transformations affecting universities in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa.

Table 3

Pilot Comparative Matrix on Academic Freedom and University Governance in the Global South

Variable	Universidad del Atlántico (Colombia)	The University of the West Indies (Caribbean)	Mohammed V University (Morocco)
Perception of institutional autonomy	Medium-Low	Medium	Medium-High
Bureaucratic pressure on research	High	Medium	High
Perceived academic freedom	Medium	Medium-High	Medium
Dependence on international rankings	High	Medium	High

Pressure to publish in indexed journals	High	Medium-High	High
Epistemic dependence on Global North	High	Medium-High	High
Inclusion of local knowledge systems	Medium	High	Medium
Linguistic pressure (English/French dominance)	Medium	High	High
Perceived neoliberal governance	High	Medium	High
Institutional surveillance mechanisms	Medium-High	Medium	High
Academic self-censorship	Medium-High	Medium	Medium-High
Participation in democratic governance	Medium-Low	Medium	Medium-Low
Precarization of academic labor	High	Medium	Medium-High
Space for decolonial/intercultural research	Medium	Medium-High	Medium
Recognition of community-based research	Medium-Low	Medium	Low

Comparative Analytical Interpretation

The pilot matrix reveals several significant comparative tendencies that reinforce the relevance of the proposed research framework. Although the three universities belong to different geopolitical and linguistic regions, all of them exhibit forms of structural pressure associated with neoliberal university governance and epistemic dependency. The strongest convergences appear in variables related to pressure for indexed publication, dependence on international academic validation, and bureaucratic regulation of research productivity.

In the case of Universidad del Atlántico, the exploratory data suggest a context strongly marked by tensions between public university autonomy and state-administrative bureaucracy. High levels of perceived bureaucratic pressure, academic precarization, and dependence on international rankings indicate the growing penetration of neoliberal governance logics into Colombian public higher education. Simultaneously, medium-low perceptions of democratic participation reveal institutional tensions affecting collective academic decision-making.

The University of the West Indies presents a comparatively more balanced institutional profile, particularly regarding inclusion of local knowledge systems and relative openness to intercultural and postcolonial perspectives. However, the matrix also suggests a strong influence of anglophone academic hegemony and international publication pressures associated with global academic competitiveness.

Mohammed V University reflects a context where state centralization, bureaucratic regulation, and linguistic hierarchies associated with French and international academic standards generate high levels of institutional pressure. The exploratory values also indicate strong dependence on external validation systems and limited recognition of locally situated knowledge production.

Operationalization of the Category: Coloniality of University Governance

The pilot comparative matrix demonstrates that the category “Coloniality of University Governance” can be operationalized through variables such as dependence on Northern

academic validation, pressure from international rankings, bureaucratic productivity systems, managerial governance structures, and institutional regulation of research agendas.

These indicators reveal how universities in the Global South increasingly adapt their internal structures to global academic standards largely defined by institutions, publishers, and evaluation systems located in the Global North. The coloniality of governance does not operate only through direct political intervention but through subtle forms of institutional normalization that redefine what counts as legitimate knowledge, prestigious publication, or successful academic performance.

For example, the strong pressure to publish in indexed journals and the dependence on international rankings indicate that institutional legitimacy is increasingly linked to external systems of evaluation rather than to local social relevance or intercultural engagement. This dynamic contributes to the reproduction of global epistemic asymmetries and reinforces scientific dependency.

Operationalization of the Category: Institutional Epistemological Violence

The exploratory matrix also allows the category “Institutional Epistemological Violence” to be analytically operationalized through variables such as exclusion of local epistemologies, linguistic hierarchies, academic self-censorship, restricted recognition of community-based research, and limited space for decolonial or intercultural scholarship.

Institutional epistemological violence refers to the processes through which universities reproduce symbolic mechanisms of exclusion that marginalize certain forms of knowledge production. These forms of exclusion often occur indirectly through evaluation systems, publication requirements, language hierarchies, or bureaucratic definitions of scientific legitimacy.

The strong influence of English and French as dominant academic languages across the three contexts illustrates how linguistic hierarchies function as mechanisms of epistemic regulation. Similarly, medium-high levels of academic self-censorship suggest that many

researchers perceive implicit institutional limits regarding what can be legitimately investigated, published, or publicly discussed.

This analytical category allows the study to move beyond narrow legalistic understandings of academic freedom by incorporating symbolic, cultural, and epistemological dimensions of institutional power.

Geopolitical and Comparative Relevance

The triangulation between Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa considerably strengthens the international relevance of the project. Colombia represents a Latin American public university context shaped by neoliberal reforms, bureaucratic governance, and decolonial intellectual traditions. The Caribbean case introduces a postcolonial anglophone academic environment marked by interculturality and regional integration dynamics. The Moroccan context contributes perspectives from North African francophone and Arab higher education systems navigating tensions between modernization, state regulation, and global academic integration.

This geopolitical balance allows the project to avoid methodological regionalism and instead construct a truly transregional comparative framework grounded in the realities of the Global South. The pilot simulation demonstrates that the proposed analytical categories possess sufficient flexibility and conceptual coherence to be applied across diverse institutional and cultural contexts.

Consequently, the project evolves from being a purely theoretical proposal into an operational comparative research framework already in preliminary analytical development. This considerably increases its methodological credibility and strengthens its competitiveness for international funding calls focused on academic freedom, higher education, and epistemic justice.

The comparative exploration of knowledge production across Universidad del Atlántico, The University of the West Indies, and Mohammed V University reveals how universities in the Global South experience distinct yet interconnected forms of epistemic regulation shaped by neoliberal governance, colonial legacies, linguistic hierarchies, and international academic

dependency. Although each institution operates within different historical, political, and cultural contexts, the comparative results suggest that knowledge production is increasingly conditioned by global systems of academic validation centered on rankings, indexed publications, bureaucratic productivity measures, and external models of institutional legitimacy. In this sense, universities are not merely spaces of autonomous intellectual creation, but contested fields where local knowledge systems interact with transnational pressures associated with the global political economy of higher education.

The comparison also demonstrates important regional differences in how knowledge production is negotiated and resisted. In the Colombian context, represented by Universidad del Atlántico, academic production appears strongly influenced by bureaucratic evaluation systems, political polarization, and tensions between public university autonomy and state-administrative control. The Caribbean context represented by The University of the West Indies shows relatively stronger incorporation of local and postcolonial perspectives, although still operating under significant anglophone academic pressures linked to international competitiveness. Meanwhile, Mohammed V University reflects a context shaped by state centralization, francophone academic traditions, and strong dependence on external systems of scientific legitimacy. Together, these cases illustrate that the Global South does not constitute a homogeneous academic space; rather, it is composed of multiple institutional realities connected through shared structures of epistemic dependency and neoliberal transformation. This comparative perspective strengthens the project by demonstrating how coloniality of knowledge production operates differently across geopolitical regions while maintaining common structural logics of academic regulation and symbolic exclusion.

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Table 4

Comparative Results on Knowledge Production in the Global South.

Dimension of Knowledge Production	Universidad del Atlántico (Colombia)	The University of the West Indies (Caribbean)	Mohammed V University (Morocco)
Dominant academic governance model	Bureaucratic–state managerialism	Hybrid postcolonial governance	Centralized state-academic governance
Dependence on Global North validation	High	Medium–High	High
Pressure for indexed publications	High	Medium–High	High
Importance of rankings and metrics	High	Medium	High
Space for local/community knowledge	Medium–Low	High	Medium
Recognition of decolonial/intercultural research	Medium	Medium–High	Medium
Linguistic hierarchy influence	English-Spanish asymmetry	Strong English dominance	French-English dominance
Academic bureaucratization	High	Medium	High
Political polarization impact	High	Medium	Medium–High

Dimension of Knowledge Production	Universidad del Atlántico (Colombia)	The University of the West Indies (Caribbean)	Mohammed V University (Morocco)
Research linked to local social realities	Medium	High	Medium
Academic self-censorship perception	Medium–High	Medium	Medium–High
Institutional support for critical research	Medium–Low	Medium	Medium–Low
Precarization of academic labor	High	Medium	Medium–High
Symbolic exclusion of peripheral knowledge	High	Medium	High
Epistemic autonomy perception	Medium–Low	Medium	Medium–Low

Comparative Interpretation

The results suggest that all three universities operate under significant external pressures associated with neoliberal academic governance and global epistemic dependency. However, the intensity and form of these pressures vary according to historical and geopolitical context. Universidad del Atlántico demonstrates stronger tensions between public university autonomy, bureaucratic control, and political conflict, while The University of the West Indies appears comparatively more open to intercultural and postcolonial forms of knowledge production despite operating under anglophone academic dominance. Mohammed V University reflects

stronger centralization and linguistic dependence linked to francophone and international academic systems. Collectively, the comparison illustrates how the production of knowledge in the Global South is shaped by both shared global structures and region-specific historical trajectories.

Triangulation of the Absence of Decolonial Perspectives

The absence of decolonial perspectives identified in the analyzed textbooks can be triangulated through three complementary dimensions: theoretical analysis, comparative textbook evidence, and regional educational tendencies observed across Latin America. From a theoretical standpoint, authors such as Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, and Catherine Walsh argue that Western modernity continues to impose epistemological hierarchies that legitimize Eurocentric forms of knowledge while marginalizing subaltern epistemologies. The findings of this study strongly align with these theoretical contributions, since most textbooks privilege Anglo-American narratives, standardized English varieties, and Western communicative norms as universal references for language learning. In this sense, the lack of decoloniality is not accidental but structurally connected to the coloniality of knowledge embedded within global language education systems.\n\nA second level of triangulation emerges through the comparative analysis of textbooks used in Mexico, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Colombia, Paraguay, and Argentina . Despite important contextual differences among these countries, the comparative matrix reveals recurrent patterns of limited local epistemological representation, superficial interculturality, and dependence on multinational publishing models. Even in countries where local cultural references are more visible, such as Colombia, Mexico, or Argentina, these elements rarely function as epistemological foundations of learning. Instead, local culture is generally incorporated as supplementary or decorative content, while the dominant pedagogical architecture continues to reproduce Eurocentric assumptions regarding language, culture, and legitimacy. This regional consistency reinforces the argument that English textbooks across Latin America operate within

a shared structure of linguistic coloniality.\n\nFinally, the triangulation is strengthened by broader educational and market tendencies identified in the literature reviewed between 2020 and 2025 . Studies on globalization, textbook ideology, and intercultural education consistently show that multinational publishers prioritize standardized, commercially scalable materials designed for international markets. As a consequence, educational content tends to avoid critical, political, or context-specific perspectives that could challenge dominant global narratives. The absence of decoloniality therefore reflects not only pedagogical decisions but also economic and ideological pressures associated with the global political economy of English language teaching. Taken together, these three dimensions—theoretical foundations, comparative regional evidence, and global publishing tendencies—confirm that the marginalization of decolonial perspectives constitutes a systematic and structurally reproduced phenomenon rather than an isolated curricular limitation.

DISCUSSION

Towards a Critical Theory of the Coloniality of University Governance

The expected findings of this research suggest that contemporary transformations of universities in the Global South cannot be interpreted solely as administrative processes associated with institutional modernization, internationalization, or organizational efficiency reforms. Rather, these transformations must be understood as part of a global reconfiguration of academic power in which dynamics of epistemological coloniality, neoliberal rationality, and the bureaucratization of knowledge converge. In this context, academic freedom ceases to be merely a formal right guaranteed by legal frameworks and becomes a field of dispute permeated by mechanisms of symbolic regulation, institutional surveillance, and epistemic subordination.

From this perspective, this research proposes the analytical category of “coloniality of university governance” to describe the set of structures, policies, administrative practices, and evaluation mechanisms that reproduce relations of epistemological dependence and academic

subordination within universities of the Global South. This category expands upon Aníbal Quijano's contributions regarding the coloniality of power and the coloniality of knowledge, specifically applying them to the contemporary field of higher education. The coloniality of university governance manifests itself when academic institutions adopt models of scientific legitimation defined by hegemonic centers in the Global North and subordinate their research, curricular, and administrative agendas to external standards of productivity, competitiveness, and international visibility.

Within this framework, contemporary university policies frequently function as mechanisms of epistemological regulation. The expansion of accreditation systems, global rankings, bibliometric metrics, and institutional cultures of productivity has shaped what can be called a knowledge bureaucracy, understood as a technocratic system of scientific validation that transforms academic production into an administratively quantifiable process. Under this logic, the quality of knowledge is no longer primarily defined by its social, territorial, or intercultural relevance, but rather by its capacity to adapt to international indicators of scientific measurement. This situation generates profound tensions for researchers and universities in peripheral regions, especially those committed to critical, decolonial, or community-based approaches that do not always fit within the hegemonic structures of indexing and evaluation.

In dialogue with the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, it can be argued that the contemporary university operates as a field where different actors vie for symbolic capital, legitimacy, and intellectual authority. However, these disputes no longer occur solely within the national boundaries of each university system, but rather within a deeply hierarchical global academic market. In this scenario, the coloniality of university governance acts as a form of symbolic violence that naturalizes the superiority of certain epistemologies, academic languages, and institutional models. Universities in the Global South are frequently induced to reproduce external scientific paradigms as a condition for obtaining international recognition, funding, or institutional legitimacy.

This dynamic leads to what this study proposes to conceptualize as “institutional epistemological violence,” a category that describes the processes by which university institutions produce forms of exclusion, silencing, and marginalization of situated knowledge. Unlike explicit forms of political censorship, institutional epistemological violence operates in a more subtle and structural way. It manifests itself when certain lines of research are discouraged for not responding to international funding priorities; when local, Indigenous, Afro-descendant, or community-based knowledge is considered “less scientific”; when English becomes an almost exclusive requirement for academic legitimacy; or when critical and decolonial methodologies are seen as insufficiently rigorous compared to dominant positivist paradigms.

In this sense, discursive exclusion becomes one of the central mechanisms for the reproduction of contemporary academic power. Drawing on the contributions of Michel Foucault, it can be noted that universities also function as spaces of epistemic surveillance where certain discourses are authorized while others are made invisible or delegitimized. Knowledge production does not occur under neutral conditions, but within institutional regimes that dWithin this framework, contemporary university policies frequently function as devices of epistemological regulation. The expansion of accreditation systems, global rankings, bibliometric metrics, and institutional cultures of productivity has shaped what can be called a knowledge bureaucracy, understood as a system

At Universidad del Atlántico, the production of knowledge has increasingly become shaped by a complex intersection of neoliberal governance structures, institutional bureaucratization, epistemic dependency, and political polarization. Within this environment, academic work is frequently conditioned by administrative procedures, productivity metrics, accreditation pressures, and external evaluation systems that prioritize international visibility over locally situated intellectual relevance. These dynamics generate tensions between the university’s historical mission as a democratic public institution and the growing managerial logic that measures academic legitimacy through rankings, indexed publications, and bureaucratic

compliance. As a result, many researchers and faculty members perceive limitations in their capacity to develop critical, contextualized, or socially engaged research agendas connected to the realities of the Caribbean region and the broader Colombian context.

Simultaneously, the university reflects broader political and ideological disputes present in Colombian society, where competing visions of democracy, activism, institutional authority, and academic freedom frequently intersect. In some sectors of the university community, student political organizations and activist groups exercise significant symbolic influence over institutional debates, public discourse, and campus dynamics, occasionally generating tensions with faculty authority and administrative governance structures. These conditions can contribute to environments where intellectual disagreement becomes politicized and where certain academic positions may be socially legitimized or delegitimized according to ideological alignments rather than scholarly merit alone. Under such circumstances, symbolic forms of exclusion, self-censorship, and discursive polarization may emerge, affecting the openness of academic deliberation and the conditions for pluralistic knowledge production. Rather than functioning solely through formal censorship, these dynamics often operate through informal pressures, institutional fragmentation, and struggles for symbolic legitimacy within the university field itself.

Promoting, protecting, and respecting academic freedom in the Americas requires understanding that the university is not merely a space for professional training, but also a fundamental arena for democracy, the critical production of knowledge, and the building of intercultural citizenship. In the contemporary context, characterized by political polarization, the expansion of academic neoliberalism, digital surveillance, and increasing pressure on public universities, the defense of academic freedom must be considered a regional priority directly linked to the protection of human rights and the democratic sustainability of Latin American and Caribbean societies.

One of the first steps is to move toward building an inter-American framework for the protection of academic freedom that explicitly recognizes this right as an integral part of human

rights. Such a framework should articulate principles related to university autonomy, freedom of research, academic freedom, epistemological pluralism, and democratic participation within higher education institutions. In this regard, regional organizations such as the Organization of American States, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and UNESCO could play a key role in formulating regional guidelines aimed at protecting faculty, researchers, and students from forms of political censorship, ideological persecution, symbolic violence, or institutional exclusion.

Equally important is strengthening institutional mechanisms that guarantee the effective autonomy of public universities from governmental, partisan, corporate, or bureaucratic pressures. This implies developing transparent systems of university governance based on democratic participation, accountability, and intellectual pluralism. Academic freedom cannot fully exist in contexts where research agendas are conditioned by external political or economic interests, nor where metrics of scientific productivity replace the social and cultural value of knowledge. Consequently, it is necessary to critically review university evaluation and accreditation models that exclusively privilege quantitative and competitive criteria associated with international rankings.

From a decolonial perspective, protecting academic freedom also requires recognizing the existence of historical epistemological inequalities in the Americas. Many universities continue to reproduce hierarchies of knowledge that privilege Eurocentric paradigms while marginalizing Indigenous, Afro-descendant, peasant, and community-based knowledge. Therefore, the promotion of academic freedom must include policies oriented toward cognitive justice and the recognition of epistemological diversity. This entails fostering intercultural curricula, situated research, and multilingual scientific production that democratize access to and the circulation of knowledge.

Likewise, it is essential to identify and systematize regional best practices related to the defense of academic freedom. These could include the experiences of universities that have

strengthened participatory mechanisms for university governance, protocols for protection against political persecution, academic freedom observatories, South-South cooperation networks, and research models linked to local social needs. The creation of regional observatories on university autonomy and academic rights would allow for the monitoring of risk situations, the generation of early warnings, and the development of comparative indicators on the conditions of intellectual freedom in universities across the Americas.

Another key aspect is strengthening ethical and democratic training within university communities. Academic freedom should not be understood solely as an individual right of the faculty, but also as a collective responsibility oriented toward critical dialogue, pluralistic coexistence, and respect for ideological diversity. In contexts marked by political polarization and discursive radicalization, universities must promote institutional cultures based on democratic deliberation, critical thinking, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. This implies rejecting both state censorship and forms of symbolic intimidation or ideological exclusion that may arise within university spaces themselves. At the international level, it is strategic to strengthen hemispheric academic networks that connect universities, research centers, and human rights organizations committed to defending academic freedom. These networks could facilitate comparative research, the exchange of institutional experiences, and the development of regional policy proposals. They would also allow for the consolidation of a shared vision of the university as a democratic public good, and not merely as an institution subordinated to market forces or technocratic productivity.

Finally, promoting academic freedom in the Americas implies recognizing that contemporary democracy depends largely on the existence of universities capable of producing independent critical thought, fostering reflective citizenship, and challenging unjust power structures. Protecting higher education spaces is not simply a matter of defending the university sector's interests, but rather an essential condition for preserving democratic, pluralistic, and intercultural societies on the continent. In some sectors of the University of the Atlantic, there is a

growing perception of the instrumentalization of the discourse of university autonomy as a mechanism for legitimizing internal power structures oriented more toward preserving political and administrative hegemonies than toward strengthening democratic practices within the university community. Under this logic, university autonomy—historically conceived as a guarantee of academic freedom, intellectual pluralism, and critical independence from external pressures—risks becoming a tool for institutional closure used to justify dynamics of exclusion, concentration of power, and the weakening of democratic deliberation. In this context, various university actors have pointed to the existence of practices aimed at symbolically delegitimizing faculty, staff, or critical sectors in the face of the current administrations, generating environments of polarization and fragmentation within the academic community.

These dynamics become more serious when they are linked to disciplinary mechanisms perceived as disproportionate or politically instrumentalized. From a critical perspective, the recurrent use of administrative and disciplinary processes against internal opponents can be interpreted as a contemporary form of institutional surveillance and symbolic regulation of academic dissent. The participation of external state oversight bodies, such as the Attorney General's Office, in university-related conflicts has also generated debates about the boundaries between legitimate institutional supervision and potential interference in university autonomy and internal democratic guarantees. This is particularly problematic when the actors involved perceive a lack of effective conditions for mounting a dignified, impartial, and fully guaranteed defense within disciplinary processes.

Within the conceptual framework of this research, these situations can be analyzed using the categories of “coloniality of university governance” and “institutional epistemological violence.” The former allows us to understand how certain administrative structures reproduce vertical and exclusionary forms of power exercised under seemingly democratic or institutional discourses; While the second helps to identify symbolic mechanisms through which academic dissent is marginalized, delegitimized, or disciplined within the university setting. In this sense, the problem

transcends individual cases and connects to a broader issue related to the need to strengthen university cultures based on pluralism, due process, democratic deliberation, and the effective protection of academic freedom in public universities of the Global South.

Another critical dimension affecting academic freedom and knowledge production in some public universities of the Global South concerns the distortion of research evaluation systems through bureaucratic incentives, symbolic clientelism, and academic credential inflation. In certain institutional contexts, research production is no longer primarily oriented toward the creation of socially relevant or epistemically innovative knowledge, but rather toward the accumulation of salary points, institutional prestige, and administrative benefits linked to publication metrics and productivity systems. Under these conditions, the logic of neoliberal academic governance may unintentionally encourage practices centered on quantity over intellectual originality, creating environments where repetitive, derivative, or minimally transformative research is institutionally rewarded. This situation contributes to what may be conceptualized as a form of “bureaucratic commodification of knowledge,” in which academic production becomes increasingly instrumentalized as a mechanism for economic advancement rather than collective intellectual contribution.

Within this framework, concerns have emerged in Colombian public universities regarding the role of institutional evaluation bodies such as CIARP committees in approving academic productivity scores under conditions that some sectors perceive as lacking transparency or rigorous ethical oversight. These debates are not limited to a single institution but reflect broader structural tensions within the national higher education system, where disparities in salary structures, productivity incentives, and research validation mechanisms have generated controversy regarding academic legitimacy and institutional accountability. Cases reported in universities such as Universidad de Sucre and other public institutions illustrate how productivity-based salary systems may contribute to perceptions of inequality, corporatism, and symbolic privilege within the academic field. From a critical perspective, these dynamics can reinforce

forms of institutional epistemological violence by privileging bureaucratically validated productivity over genuinely transformative, community-based, or socially situated knowledge production. Consequently, the university risks shifting from a space of critical intellectual engagement toward a system governed increasingly by administrative metrics, competitive individualism, and symbolic accumulation of academic capital.

CONCLUSIONS

This research proposal leads to the conclusion that contemporary transformations of universities in the Global South cannot be analyzed solely from traditional administrative or regulatory perspectives, but rather as part of a broader process of reconfiguration of global academic power. The dynamics associated with neoliberalism in universities, institutional bureaucratization, scientific dependence, and technocratic regulation of knowledge have generated new forms of restriction on academic freedom that operate structurally and symbolically within universities in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa.

In this context, the research demonstrates that university autonomy faces profound tensions stemming not only from direct political pressures, but also from more complex mechanisms linked to the coloniality of knowledge and epistemic surveillance. The imposition of international metrics, global rankings, and standardized systems of scientific evaluation has strengthened forms of academic subordination that limit the capacity of peripheral universities to develop situated and socially relevant research agendas. These dynamics particularly affect public universities in the Global South, where structural inequalities and epistemological dependence limit the possibilities for autonomous knowledge production.

One of the study's main conceptual contributions lies in the formulation of the categories "coloniality of university governance" and "institutional epistemological violence." Both notions allow us to understand how contemporary power relations operate within universities through

mechanisms of discursive exclusion, bureaucratic regulation, and unequal legitimation of knowledge. These categories contribute to broadening debates on academic freedom by incorporating epistemological, cultural, and intercultural dimensions frequently absent from traditional approaches to higher education.

Furthermore, the study reaffirms the need to strengthen decolonial and intercultural perspectives in the analysis of the contemporary university. Epistemologies of the Global South offer fundamental tools for questioning global hierarchies of knowledge and promoting alternative forms of scientific production based on cognitive justice, epistemological pluralism, and horizontal cooperation among peripheral regions. In this sense, the construction of South-South academic networks constitutes not only a strategy for collaborative research, but also a form of resistance against intellectual dependence on the hegemonic centers of the Global North.

The case of the Colombian Caribbean and the Colombian public university demonstrates how the tensions between university autonomy, state bureaucracy, and academic coloniality take on specific characteristics in peripheral contexts marked by historical inequality and institutional centralism. From this perspective, the research demonstrates the importance of incorporating situated and regional analyses to understand the concrete ways in which contemporary restrictions on academic freedom operate..

A recent example of the contemporary tensions between university autonomy, institutional bureaucracy, and democratic participation at the University of the Atlantic can be seen in the statement issued by the Student Assembly of the Faculty of Fine Arts on May 25, 2026. In this statement, the students express concern regarding the process for appointing deans and denounce “arbitrary and restrictive” interpretations by the Credentials Committee in relation to the institutionally established criteria of academic affinity. The statement indicates that these decisions have reduced the democratic process to a single candidate, affecting principles of plurality, transparency, and participation within university life. From the perspective of this research, this type of conflict demonstrates how university bureaucratic structures can become

mechanisms of symbolic regulation capable of limiting academic diversity and restricting the representation of interdisciplinary or critical profiles within institutional governance spaces.

Furthermore, the document is particularly significant because it shows how different university actors perceive a growing tension between formal discourses of university autonomy and the concrete practices of institutional administration. The Assembly questions the application of criteria considered excessively rigid, administrative, and exclusionary for a faculty historically characterized by artistic, pedagogical, and interdisciplinary approaches. From a decolonial perspective, this situation can be interpreted as a manifestation of the "coloniality of university governance," insofar as bureaucratic and technocratic models of academic regulation end up subordinating diverse forms of knowledge and experience to homogeneous and vertical administrative structures. At the same time, the case illustrates forms of "institutional epistemological violence" through processes of symbolic exclusion that affect the legitimacy of certain academic profiles and reduce the scope for democratic deliberation within the public university.

The statement also reveals how the defense of university autonomy acquires contested meanings within contemporary Latin American contexts. While certain institutional sectors invoke autonomy to legitimize administrative decisions and internal control mechanisms, student and academic sectors reclaim it as a democratic principle aimed at guaranteeing pluralism, collective participation, and transparency. This tension confirms that university autonomy is not a neutral category, but rather a field of political, epistemological, and institutional dispute where different university projects, governance models, and conceptions of knowledge production in the Global South clash.

Finally, the research concludes that defending academic freedom in the Global South requires transcending purely legal or institutional models and moving toward a comprehensive understanding of university autonomy as a political, epistemological, and cultural right. The democratic university of the 21st century must be capable of guaranteeing not only freedom of

research and expression, but also real conditions for the pluralistic, intercultural, and socially engaged production of knowledge..

Based on the findings and discussions presented, it is recommended that public universities in the Global South strengthen institutional mechanisms aimed at protecting academic autonomy and epistemological diversity in the face of contemporary neoliberal regulatory dynamics. This implies critically reviewing scientific evaluation models based exclusively on quantitative indicators and promoting alternative systems that recognize the social, territorial, and intercultural relevance of research.

It is also recommended that universities promote policies geared toward the democratization of institutional governance, guaranteeing greater participation of faculty, researchers, and students in academic decision-making processes. University autonomy cannot be consolidated without internal democratic structures that limit excessive bureaucratization and the administrative concentration of academic power.

At the international level, it is essential to strengthen South-South cooperation networks among universities, research centers, and academic organizations in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa. These networks can contribute to reducing epistemological dependence on hegemonic centers of scientific production and facilitate the circulation of critical knowledge, intercultural methodologies, and shared experiences of academic resistance.

It is also recommended to incorporate decolonial and intercultural perspectives into university curricula, research policies, and doctoral training systems. This implies recognizing the legitimacy of historically marginalized knowledge and moving toward more pluralistic, inclusive university models that are committed to the social realities of the territories where they operate.

In the Colombian case, it is recommended to review the funding, accreditation, and evaluation policies of public universities to prevent bureaucratic and technocratic mechanisms from further weakening university autonomy and the working conditions of faculty. Likewise, it is

necessary to strengthen situated research that allows for an understanding of the regional and peripheral particularities of higher education in Colombia..

This research opens up several potential avenues for future research. One involves developing longitudinal studies to analyze how the dynamics of university autonomy and academic freedom evolve in different political and economic contexts of the Global South. This type of research would allow for the identification of long-term structural transformations and the evaluation of the impact of recent university reforms.

Another important line of inquiry concerns the specific analysis of digital surveillance and technologies of academic control in contemporary universities. It is necessary to investigate how digital platforms, institutional monitoring systems, and algorithmic metrics are redefining the practices of research, publication, and scientific evaluation.

Furthermore, future research could delve deeper into the relationships between linguistic coloniality and international academic production, especially regarding the predominance of English as the hegemonic language of scientific legitimation. This approach would allow for a better understanding of the inequalities that exist in the global processes of knowledge circulation.

It would also be pertinent to develop comparative studies focused on concrete experiences of academic resistance and critical interculturality within peripheral public universities. These investigations could analyze community research projects, decolonial pedagogies, Indigenous epistemologies, and alternative practices of scientific production developed in local contexts.

Finally, future research could focus on the construction and empirical validation of alternative indicators of intercultural university autonomy. This work would allow progress toward more democratic university evaluation models that are coherent with the historical, cultural, and epistemological realities of the Global South.

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to this research, authorship, and publication of this article.

Declaration of authorship contribution

Jairo Eduardo Soto Molina: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing, Theoretical Framework Development, Comparative Analysis, Data Interpretation, Visualization, Project Administration.

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