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## Overcoming feudal constraints on educational research in Spain: the impact of the CIMIE conference

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### ABSTRACT

Feudal structures and power relationships that Spanish universities inherited from Franco's dictatorship have damaged the quality of educational research. However, the emergence of initiatives aimed to address these limitations have been identified. In this article, we analyze the impact of the Multidisciplinary International Conference on Educational Research (CIMIE). Specifically, we analyze how CIMIE is contributing to overcome some of the feudal constraints affecting educational research in Spain, such as fragmentation of areas of knowledge, limited international research efforts, and precarious and unstable employment situations of many researchers. Grounded in the communicative methodology of research and using mixed methods, we have conducted a longitudinal study of this research initiative (2012–2016), comprising interviews and communicative observations, analysis of documentation and quantitative data. The results show that participants understand that their involvement in CIMIE is contributing to make them feel released from the constraints of university feudalism by building solidarity networks and egalitarian relationships, and by rethinking research.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Democracy; educational research; higher education; university; Spain

## Introduction

In the context of the recent European crisis, the debate on the benefits higher education can provide for facilitating social and economic development has revived (Castelló, McAlpine, & Pyhältö, 2017; Zapp, 2018). However, some obstacles have been identified to be hindering universities to achieve their mission. In this article, we delve into some of these constraints in Spain, focusing on democratic limitations that compromise the research careers of early career researchers and teaching staff, damaging the quality of educational research. Specifically, we analyze the implications of the so-called university feudal model (Flecha, 2011), which refers to the process of incomplete democratization suffered by universities, as a consequence of the system inherited from Franco's

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dictatorship (1939–1944) and from the *Spanish transition* (Share, 1987). Although some previous research has analyzed the characteristics of Spanish universities under the Franco regime (Claret, 2006; Otero, 2001), this article focuses on aspects less discussed, such as the relationship between the feudal model and the maintenance of relationships based on harassment and abuse of power (Flecha, 2011). Furthermore, we explore the impact generated by participants in the annual Multidisciplinary International Conference on Educational Research (hereafter CIMIE) on constructing new types of academic relationships and new ways of understanding educational research.

We first provide a theoretical framework in relation to international studies addressing the limitations of universities in terms of democracy, equity and ethics from the perspective of staff, and we analyze how these elements operate in the Spanish academia, identifying four evolutionary phases. Second, we present the study, focused on the analysis of the perceptions of participants involved in CIMIE from 2012 to 2016. Our findings suggest that participants perceive that taking part in CIMIE has made them feel released from some of the constraints of university feudalism, by building more equal and supportive relationships within the university community, which has allowed them to rethink educational research. Finally, our discussion raises critical questions about how CIMIE is creating *bottom-up* responses that are contributing to rewrite the history of Spanish educational research.

## Theoretical framework

### *Democratic and ethics limitations in higher education*

Over the last decades, investigations analyzing democratic and ethical limitations that affect university staff have explored workplace bullying (Adams & Crawford, 1992; Unda, 2016). However, attention paid to aggressions suffered by faculty within their own institutions is relatively little (Lester, 2013). Specially, there is a particular lack of such research outside of Anglo-American contexts and Scandinavian countries (Zabrodska & Kveton, 2013). This research gap is remarkable when we consider the frequency and intensity with which bullying situations emerge in universities. For example, Keashly and Neuman (2010) show that in the United States the rates of bullying seem relatively high in academic contexts (32%) compared with those noted in the general population (10–14%).

Furthermore, different studies (Euben & Lee, 2006; Twale & De Luca, 2008) have identified connections between organizational and work features of higher education institutions – including academic culture, climate, values, and work practices – and the quality of interpersonal behaviors. For instance, hierarchical relationships and power imbalances in universities have been strongly linked with the climates particularly prone to the onset of bullying and harassment, which significantly affect the most vulnerable members of the academia such as non-tenured faculty, students and women (Clancy, Nelson, Rutherford, & Hinde, 2014).

To address these situations, several higher education institutions are taking specific actions, such as establishing standards for promotion and merit review and promoting transparent decision-making processes (Allen, 2003). However, very few studies in higher education have focused on transformational change and even fewer have addressed bottom-up initiatives contributing to transform undemocratic functioning (Kezar, 2012). This study aims to contribute to narrow this gap.

## The Spanish university feudal model

The study of the Spanish university system offers an example of how democratic and ethical shortcomings in universities can adversely affect the quality of research. Understanding the legacy of feudalism in Spanish universities requires considering the profound changes that have affected social and economic systems beginning after the Spanish civil war (1936–1939). This section presents four evolutionary phases of the Spanish university system (see Table 1) in relation to the country's socio-historical and political context, focusing mainly on their implications for faculty and early career researchers: (1) emergence of Spanish science (1900–1936); (2) university under Franco's dictatorial regime (1939–1975); (3) *Spanish transition* and university feudal model (1975–1990); and (4) current trends of change in Spanish universities (from 1990s).

### The emergence of Spanish science in the twentieth century (1900–1936)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Spanish scientific research was greatly weakened by the limited public resources, the scarce economic development and the stagnation of university structures (Otero, 2001). A key element that inaugurated a stage of development until then not reached was the creation in 1907 of The Board for Advanced Studies and Scientific Research (*Junta para la Ampliación de Estudios e Investigaciones Científicas*, JAE) within the framework of the Free Educational Institution (Institution Libre de Enseñanza, ILE) (Barona, 2007). The JAE prioritized two strategic lines: firstly, it funded more than 2000 stays abroad for Spanish professors and early career researchers, which allowed a contact with the leading international research lines. Also, it created scientific institutions to give continuity to the training acquired abroad, enabling the development of a solid national scientific system. However, the JAE's incipient advances were interrupted by the outbreak of the civil war in 1936 and, afterwards, by the ideological guidelines adopted under Franco's dictatorship.

### The university under Franco's dictatorial regime (1939–1975)

In 1939, after the civil war, Spain was ruled by a dictatorship led by General Francisco Franco that extended for the next 36 years (Richards, 1998). The consequences of this

**Table 1.** Four evolutionary phases of the Spanish university system.

Phase	Time periods	Main facts
Emergence of Spanish science	1900–1936	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of the Board for Advanced Studies and Scientific Research (JAE) within the Free Educational Institution (ILE)</li> </ul>
Franco's dictatorial regime	1939–1975	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Depuración</i> affecting state officials, including university staff</li> <li>• 'Cultural restoration' based on anti-intellectualism, nationalism and catholic values</li> </ul>
Spanish <i>transition</i>	1975–1990	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elimination of prior bodies of educational and scientific promotion (JAE, ILE)</li> <li>• University Reform Act (URA) increased the autonomy of universities and supported the fragmentation of higher education into isolated areas of knowledge</li> </ul>
Current trends of change	1990s to present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incomplete process of democratization</li> <li>• Organic Universities Act (<i>Ley Orgánica de Universidades</i>, 2001)</li> <li>• Creation of external evaluation agencies: National Commission for the Evaluation of Research Activity (CNEAI) and National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA)</li> <li>• Greater internationalization of Spanish research</li> <li>• Creation of the CIMIE conference</li> </ul>

autocratic and authoritarian regime for higher education institutions were particularly noticeable during the first period of Franco's government (1939–1954) (Claret, 2006; Fuertes, 2016). A strong repression and purge, known as *depuración*, affected state officials, including university staff. Diverse repression techniques were used ranging from disqualification and expulsion of university professors to imprisonment, exile and murder. Furthermore, vacant chairs were granted to candidates defending the ideology of the dictatorial regime. Thus, universities were a key political agent for the 'cultural restoration' of Franco's regime, based on anti-intellectualism, nationalism and catholic values (González, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

The tenets of Franco's regime implied the elimination of the main bodies of educational and scientific promotion mentioned above: the JAE and the Free Educational Institution (Otero, 2001). Efforts to internationalizing Spanish science were replaced by the anti-intellectual and nationalist foundations of Franco's regime. Following this stance, the Spanish Society of Pedagogy was created in 1949 by Víctor García Hoz (Polo-Blanco, 2009). The ideological and cultural basis of the dictatorship, the scientific endogamy,<sup>2</sup> and the loss of human capital in universities resulted in a serious setback for the weak Spanish scientific structure (Faber, 2002).

### *The Spanish transition and the university feudal model (1975–1990)*

Franco's death in 1975 led to the period known as *Spanish transition* (Share, 1987) in which Spain transitioned from a dictatorial regime to a social and democratic constitutional state. The process experienced by Spanish universities would be framed into the so-called *third wave*, which comprises a set of dynamics of democratization identified in different countries between 1960s and 1980s (Huntington, 1993).

Flecha (2011) noticed that the Spanish transition involved a series of minimal reforms rather than a genuine break, which meant that the democratization process was incomplete in the case of Spanish higher education, leading to a *university feudal model*. In this article, we use the *university feudal model* defined by Flecha (2011), to refer to the Spanish university system inherited from the dictatorship and strongly tainted by power structures and relations.

One of the main factors contributing to the perpetuation of this model was the University Reform Act (URA) (Mora & Vidal, 2005; Official State Bulletin, 1983; Rubio, 2015), which increased the autonomy of universities and supported the fragmentation of higher education into isolated areas of knowledge, perpetuating a hierarchical structure whose peak was occupied by full professors.<sup>3</sup> According to Porto (2002), under this system, full professors in Spain have the power to set subjective criteria in the boards responsible for selecting, recruiting and promoting university staff.

Íñiguez and Burgués (2013) explored the negative consequences of this university model. First, some schools of thought promoted by full professors were created and perpetuated over time, even though their theoretical foundations contradict ethical principles and evidence provided by the international scientific community. Second, they referred to the adverse consequences – including instances of intellectual and personal harassment – suffered on many occasions by those scholars who refuted the dominant theoretical frameworks. Nonetheless, research analyzing bullying and harassment in Spanish academia has been limited. As an example, it was not until 2005 that the first project funded by the Spanish government under the National Plan for

Research was launched on gender violence in universities (Valls, Puigvert, Melgar, & Garcia, 2016). The lack of attention to those problems in scientific literature contrasts with numerous cases of unfair promotion practices and harassment identified in Spanish universities (Bosch, 1998; Escudero, 2014).

### *Trends of change in Spanish universities (from 1990s to present)*

Today, structures and practices derived from university feudalism are challenged by new trends that are helping to profoundly transform Spanish universities. These changes have been promoted by new legal frameworks implemented in the 1990s (Vidal, 2003) and by some measures derived from the Organic Universities Act (Ley Orgánica de Universidades, 2001). Among the promoted strategies are the creation of external evaluation agencies such as the National Commission for the Evaluation of Research Activity (CNEAI) or the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) that have introduced a new culture of accountability (Mora, 2001). These measures offer an alternative to the feudal model's recruitment of research staff.

Even though some discussions related to this new meritocratic system have emphasized certain risks – such as the frustration scholars feel in being evaluated continually – research has noticed positive effects on the progress of Spain's science productivity (Rey, Martín, Plaza, Ibáñez, & Méndez, 1998). For instance, empirical research has identified connections between the implementation of these evaluation policies and a greater presence of Spanish social science journals in the Journal Citation Reports (Moreno-Pulido, López-González, Rubio-Garay, Saúl, & Sánchez-Elvira-Paniagua, 2013).

Despite this progress, Spanish academia still has a long way to go to overcome factors that undermine scientific excellence, such as harassment and unfair academic promotion practices. In attempts to improve these situations, *bottom-up* initiatives have been identified along history (Ruiz & Valls, 2016). In many cases, these demands – made by non-tenured staff or feminist and student movements – have been silenced (González, 2015).

This study aims to give voice to the people participating in one initiative which is an example of the trends of change in Spanish academia described above, the Multidisciplinary International Conference on Educational Research (CIMIE). CIMIE was launched in 2012 by the Multidisciplinary Association on Educational Research (AMIE) with the aim of overcoming some of the major issues affecting Spanish educational research, specifically, the fragmentation of areas of knowledge, the limited international research efforts, and the lack of promotion opportunities, and of embracing the dynamics of interdisciplinarity, democratic participation and transparency existing internationally. Furthermore, CIMIE was created in opposition to the dynamics traditionally adopted by the national educational research conferences. These had brought together mainly Spanish researchers linked to specific areas of knowledge (e.g., didactics, theory of education, etc.), and presented a hierarchical organization. Conversely, CIMIE is a non-profit initiative organized horizontally through 37 research networks.<sup>4</sup> Also, two committees – committee of guarantees and procedures and committee for violence prevention – work to ensure equity and transparency and to prevent any form of discrimination or violence. In addition, decision-making about its organization takes place through assemblies.<sup>5</sup>

## Method

The study posed two main research questions: (1) What types of relationships are CIMIE participants building and what implications do those relationships have regarding the power relationships of the feudal university model? and (2) Is there any correlation between participation in CIMIE and new ways of understanding educational research?

### *Communicative methodology*

The research followed the communicative methodology (CM) (Gómez, Puigvert, & Flecha, 2011). The CM follows a dialogic process based on an egalitarian dialogue between researchers and end-users. Furthermore, CM poses a twofold focus: it seeks to identify the exclusionary dimensions – obstacles that contribute to the situation of discrimination being analyzed, as well as the transformative dimensions – elements that contribute to overcome barriers to improve the lives of end-users.

In accordance with ethical standards and guidelines in research with human beings, as well as with the principles that are at the core of CIMIE's mission, informed consent was obtained from participants before data collection. Data collection procedures are described below.

### *Qualitative data collection*

First, interviews were implemented during CIMIE conferences held in July 2014 and July 2015. The scripts included questions on (1) personal and academic information; (2) perception about the scientific and organizational quality of their universities; (3) perception about scientific and organizational quality of CIMIE. We constructed a purposive sample including 13 participants who had attended at least three out of the four editions of the conference between 2012 and 2015. Furthermore, selection criteria included diversity in terms of plurality of positions within the academic organization, gender and age (see Table 2), allowing us to obtain rich and extensive information to address the research questions.

Second, communicative observations were carried out in different CIMIE's settings in 2015 and 2016, including coordinators meetings ( $N = 1$ ), paper sessions ( $N = 2$ ); panel sessions ( $N = 1$ ), plenary acts ( $N = 1$ ), general assemblies ( $N = 3$ ); and assemblies of thematic divisions ( $N = 4$ ). To perform communicative observations we used a field notebook and a grid, including the categories and dimensions described in the analysis section.

Third, we also collected data from secondary sources. Selection criteria implied that they had to be: (1) documentation related to CIMIE's organization and evolution, and (2) documentation about CIMIE produced from 2012 to 2016. We analyzed a wide range of documents including the foundation charter and statutes; data on number and diversity of participants, in terms of professional status, affiliation and country of origin, as well as on the number of papers submitted extracted from CIMIE's databases or minutes of meetings. Analysis of documents aimed to obtain a thorough understanding of the foundational principles of CIMIE and to what extent they have been put into practice.

Qualitative information collected from interviews, communicative observations and secondary sources was obtained in Spanish. Collected data were transcribed, and translated into English, with a special effort to maintain the original meaning expressed by

participants. Furthermore, the manuscript was proofread and edited by a professional editing service.

**Table 2.** Sample of participants.

Pseudonym	Profile	Position	Area
Ricardo	Male, 68 years old.	PhD Retired Professor. Tenured.	Sociology of Education
Sonia	Female, 57 years old.	PhD Associate Professor. Tenured.	Didactics
Marcos	Male, 45 years old.	PhD Associate Professor. Tenured.	Social Education
Nicolás	Male, 42 years old.	PhD Associate Professor. Tenured.	Sociology of Education
Elena	Female, 45 years old.	PhD Lecturer. Tenured.	Sociology of Education
Daniel	Male, 38 years old.	PhD Lecturer. Non-tenured.	Pedagogy
Camilo	Male, 37 years old.	PhD Lecturer. Tenured.	Sociology of Education
Mercedes	Female, 31 years old.	PhD Lecturer. Non-tenured.	Didactics
Emilio	Male, 56 years old.	PhD Adjunct Professor. Non-tenured.	Didactics
Rosa	Female, 49 years old.	PhD Adjunct Professor. Non-tenured.	Sociology of Education
Gaia	Female, 34 years old.	PhD candidate. Non-tenured.	Teacher training
Javier	Male, 34 years old.	PhD candidate. Non-tenured. Kindergarten teacher.	Didactics
Manuel	Male, 29 years old.	PhD candidate. Non-tenured.	Theory and History of Education

### Quantitative data collection

The qualitative data about CIMIE participants' perceptions was triangulated with quantitative information extracted from various secondary sources to strengthen the validity of our findings. Quantitative data were collected from 2012 to 2016 regarding number of participants, diversity of their origins and academic positions, number of submissions received and universities involved, to conduct a longitudinal analysis of the changes experienced between 2012 and 2016.

Public quantitative secondary information – such as number of research networks represented at the conference – was retrieved from several sources, including CIMIE's website and AMIE's online forum. Moreover, CIMIE's organizing committee provided us with documentation focused on the evolution of the initiative.

### Data analysis

Qualitative information was analyzed using Atlas-TI®. A coding scheme was designed and agreed by the researchers. It included eight categories informed by the literature revised, related to the democratization of Spanish universities: (1) *Scientific Quality*, (2) *Interdisciplinarity*, (3) *Collaboration Networks*, (4) *Democratic Organization*, (5) *Egalitarian Relationships*, (6) *Diversity*, (7) *Solidarity*, and (8) *Sense Making*. The contrast of the scientific knowledge from literature with the information collected through fieldwork led us to introduce an additional emerging category: (9) *Science-Society*. For each category, following the postulates of the CM, we explored the exclusionary and transformative dimensions. In what follows, the categories used are presented, taking into account the two dimensions of analysis.

*Scientific Quality* refers to organizational and behavioral factors that contribute to increase the scientific quality of higher education based on quality standards such as rigor or credibility – transformative dimension – or those elements hindering the scientific quality of Spanish higher education (Allen, 2003) – exclusionary dimension.

*Interdisciplinarity* (Bursztyn & Drummond, 2014) involves factors that favor crossing boundaries between disciplines – transformative dimension – or conversely, elements that perpetuate the rigid disciplinary academic framework – exclusionary dimension.

*Collaboration Networks* includes data related to the bottom-up initiatives established with the aim of developing collective projects – transformative dimension – or data related to individualistic dynamics in academia (Kezar, 2012) – exclusionary dimension.

*Democratic Organization* refers to the capacity of higher education institutions to enhance the development of democratic practices – transformative dimension – or to maintain undemocratic structures and relationships (McDonnell & Curtis, 2014) – exclusionary dimension.

*Egalitarian relationships* refers to horizontal organizational models incorporating the voices of the different members of the academy – transformative dimension – or conversely, with organizational models leading to hierarchical relationships and striving environments (Lester, 2013) – exclusionary dimension.

*Diversity* relates to the inclusion of traditionally excluded groups in academic institutions, including issues of gender or race – transformative dimension – or those barriers hindering the inclusion of these groups (Isbell, Young, & Harcourt, 2012) – exclusionary dimension.

*Solidarity* covers the role of bystanders dealing with situations of inequality or interpersonal violence (Lewis, 2003), including supportive and friendship bonds generated among university staff – transformative dimension – or relationships based on harassment and lack of support – exclusionary dimension.

*Sense making* is linked, on one hand, to the emergence of positive feelings such as motivation, illusion, hope, enthusiasm and engagement as perceived by people working in higher education institutions (Eckel & Kezar, 2003) – transformative dimension. On the other hand, it is connected with negative feelings such as loss of meaning, isolation, loneliness or injustice – exclusionary dimension.

Lastly, *Science-Society* refers to the social utility that researchers attribute to research and how that is related to social concerns – transformative dimension – or those elements that lead them to conduct research disconnected from social problems – exclusionary dimension.

Regarding quantitative data, a statistical analysis was conducted consisting of the extraction of frequencies on the number of conference attendees, papers received and participating countries at the five occurrences of CIMIE.

In order to answer the research questions, the main results in relation to the categories used for the analysis have been structured in two sub-sections – (1) building egalitarian relationships and solidarity networks, and (2) rethinking science from below.

## Findings

### *Building egalitarian relationships and solidarity networks*

In this sub-section, we address the first research question, related to the kind of relationships built by participants and the implications of those relationships regarding the power

relationships of the feudal university model. Our data suggest that researchers involved in CIMIE are building more egalitarian relationships and solidarity networks, that contrast with the situations of power and isolation identified in the feudal model.

### *Facing feudal structures through equity and quality*

Interviewees have perceived that transforming power structures is a particularly challenging task. For instance, several interviewees mentioned some anti-egalitarian values and offensive behaviors they have identified in other conferences. This has been especially hurtful for the most vulnerable professionals in the scientific organizations including women and early career researchers, and has influenced these participants' perception of how power relationships can block the possibility for such researchers to engage in an egalitarian dialogue. In the next quote, Ricardo, a retired professor, refers to the contemptuous ways in which professors holding power positions respond to early career researchers who refute their ideas in public. Conversely, he states that CIMIE has generated more positive climates that contribute to the promotion of inclusive scientific debates:

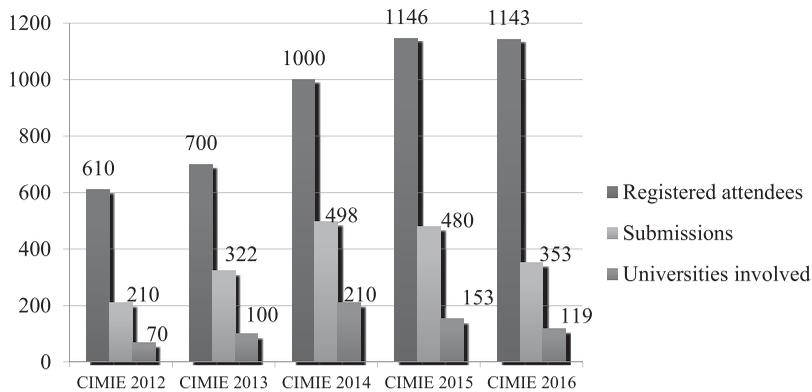
There were Professors who made offensive interpellations to students who were there or to young people, in a very derogatory manner, with little respect. It seemed that hierarchies there were very clear and their scientific arguments well, were not discussed. Now if we want to discuss, we discuss and we are in a relaxed atmosphere. Here [in CIMIE] there is a more comfortable climate and more egalitarian. (Ricardo, Retired Professor)

Participants value the substitution of the restrictive organization of traditional scientific initiatives in Spain for the more democratic, horizontal and participatory approach identified in CIMIE. As an example, in the period between 2012 and 2016 the CIMIE participants held a total of 144 face-to-face assemblies, and a virtual permanent assembly was activated aimed at promoting participation in the decision-making process regarding the conference organization. These assemblies provided transparency and involved researchers who were previously invisible in academic forums.

Analysis of data enabled us to identify a relationship between the establishment of scientific criteria and the reconceptualization of power relations. For instance, the evaluation of papers based on public criteria and a blind peer review process has enabled all contributions to be selected because of their quality, regardless of participants' academic positions. Communicative observations identified how these standards have allowed early career researchers to disseminate their work and establish discussions with recognized scholars on equal footing. This is shown in a quote from Manuel, a 29-year-old Roma PhD candidate involved in the conference's organization<sup>6</sup>:

Here [in CIMIE] we are heard, valued, without knowing our position. People just starting and we are competing with equal opportunity with a full professor at the time of submitting a paper. This is a professional support that in other spaces you wouldn't have. (Manuel, PhD candidate)

The conjugation of scientific quality, positive relationships and a friendly atmosphere motivates people to participate, which is in line with the quantitative evidence collected. As shown in [Figure 1](#), the number of attendees has steadily increased since 2012. From 2012 to 2016, the conference saw an increase of 87.37% in registered participants, reaching a total of 1143 attendees from 119 universities in 2016. Furthermore, in the period 2012–2015 the number of papers submitted has increased by 128.6% – moving from 210 in 2012



**Figure 1.** Participation trends in CIMIE (2012–2016).

to 480 in 2015 – and experiencing a slight decrease in the papers received during the period 2015–2016.

### *Building solidarity networks*

The data analysis identified solidarity as one element characterizing interpersonal relationships generated in CIMIE – an element that stands in opposition to the relational model established in the feudal university. On the one hand, many participants have identified connections between power relations and situations of harassment in their universities. Furthermore, several interviewees, such as Rosa, have highlighted the devastating consequences that this entails. Rosa has been accredited as an assistant professor (tenured) since 2000. In 2014, she applied to be accredited as associate professor. Furthermore, she has published several articles in well-ranked international scientific journals and has led several scientific research and technological development projects. However, she still holds the position of adjunct professor, with an unstable and low-level contract that does not correspond to her merits. At the end of each academic year, as Rosa observes her colleagues with far less merit being promoted, she fears losing her job. In 2011, Rosa reported this situation; however, over the next 3 years her case has remained unresolved. During this period, she suffered various forms of harassment at the workplace by her superiors and colleagues, causing her health problems. In what follows, Rosa condemns the complicity of those tenured staff who perpetuate the destructive consequences of harassment:

If someone supports you, they also harass him/her or not harass but exclude him/her, or he/she is removed from his/her position, or they will neither speak him. So you don't suffer just for you, you are also suffering for the other person who is supporting you. (Rosa, adjunct professor)

Conversely, we identified some participants' perceptions on the positive relationships generated by CIMIE, which are providing hope and encouragement, especially for victims of harassment and for university staff who support them. Nicolás, a professor who has supported Rosa, reflects on how his positioning has led him to be also a target of harassment. However, he states that participating in CIMIE has allowed him to realize that they are not

alone and has brought him in contact with other researchers fighting against this type of abusive relationships:

If we hadn't the relationships we have here [in CIMIE] well, it'd be harder. Because there [in our university] is very complicated because there are very few people who think differently and who are willing to change things, very few people. Come on! To me it'd be impossible. I think I already would have given up without people I meet here. (Nicolás, associate professor, tenured)

Some respondents established a connection between the positive personal ties promoted by CIMIE and a reduced perception of negative feelings such as fear and loneliness. Elena, a Lecturer professor, highlights that while fear is related to the ongoing situations of inequality and submission, support networks generated by CIMIE have given her and others the strength to *break the chains* of university feudalism:

In CIMIE there is no fear and you can only be free when there is no fear. Chains are only broken when there is no fear. [...] CIMIE is quite liberating. You create a support network that you know it gives you strength. I have lived some difficult situations and I realized that I felt very strongly against it because I knew there were people willing to work shoulder to shoulder with me and that's wonderful because you don't feel alone. (Elena, Lecturer professor, tenured)

### **Rethinking science from below**

Our second research question was related to the correlation between participating in CIMIE and building new understandings of educational research. Our results reveal that participants in CIMIE perceive that their involvement has provided them with new scientific approaches that have had a positive impact on their research. Thus, solidarity networks have been shown not only to positively impact the relational dimensions but also to provide benefits for professional development. Thus, CIMIE has connected many researchers who worked in isolation and has promoted the emergence of a collective identity and a sense of belonging. For instance, Sonia states that CIMIE expanded her professional network and made her feel like part of a collective project:

Here [in CIMIE] everyone is welcomed on a basis of academic and personal solidarity. It is a dimension that helps you to build a sense of identity because you are in a department of a university, you can be quiet but you haven't a sense of being part of a group, of an entity. However here, very diverse people we started building a sense of identity. (Sonia, associate professor, tenured)

Several interviewees referred to the experiences provided by CIMIE as leading to a dialogical scientific perspective rooted on the notion that science advances through interaction between diverse people, as well as to an increase in the quality of their research. Also, CIMIE has provided spaces for discussing new prospects and research methodologies. Among the shared scientific approaches, several members referred to CIMIE's commitment to a transformative perspective based on conducting educational research leading to social impact (Flecha, Soler-Gallart, & Sordé, 2015). In this vein, several interviewees have acknowledged that their involvement in CIMIE has helped them to orient their research toward the improvement of social reality. Data obtained from interviews suggest that adopting this new approach is related to emotional benefits for researchers,

such as regaining enthusiasm and motivation for their work. The following quote from Nicolás refers to this transformative perspective:

The transformative approach is another feature that this conference has and it's clearly perceived. Science is not just about publishing and to be cited. That it's also important, but it is about having an application, having a meaning. And the meaning that here [in CIMIE] is given is a transformative sense, that improves inequalities, that improves people's welfare. (Nicolás, Associate Professor, tenured)

The information collected allows us to observe how attending CIMIE is promoting among participants a renewed vision of the role and meaning of educational research, which in turn is contributing to create a new landscape in educational research in Spain. Data about the increase in the number and diversity of participants (see [Figure 1](#)) suggest that this new scenario is consolidating over time.

## Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we have outlined the features of the Spanish university feudal model (Flecha, 2011), shown its connections with the legacy of higher education under Franco's dictatorship and highlighted its incomplete democratization resulting from the *Spanish transition*. Also, we have analyzed the negative impact of these dynamics on the quality of national universities and research work. Nevertheless, emphasis has been placed not only on these limitations, but also on some responses provided to address those same problems. This article contributes to broadening awareness of a new phase in the development of Spanish universities characterized by identifying trends of change.

The study of CIMIE has provided evidence on how researchers occupying different positions perceive this initiative as releasing them from some of the devastating personal and scientific burdens associated with the university feudal model. In this vein, the emergence of solidarity networks has highlighted the critical role of colleagues in promoting feelings of support and giving people strength to confront harassment situations (Lewis, 2003).

Another contribution of this article is to highlight the connection between CIMIE's organizational features, interpersonal behaviors generated in this context, and scientific quality. Replacing hierarchical relationships and power imbalances still present in some Spanish scientific forums with a democratic organization has allowed researchers – and especially those most vulnerable – to gain new opportunities to develop their careers. Thus, CIMIE is catalyzing the potential and the leadership of the most vulnerable groups of academia and is including their voices in scientific debates.

This study has also illustrated how participants have adopted new ways of understanding research. In many cases, this initiative has helped to overcome isolation and disciplinary fragmentation of researchers that characterized the university feudal model (Íñiguez & Burgués, 2013). CIMIE participants have had the chance to rethink their professional performance based on dialogic approaches, factors that have led some researchers to regain a sense of the importance of their work.

The evidence collected in relation to our research questions allows us to state that CIMIE has supported the creation of more egalitarian and supportive professional and social relationships among university professors, which is helping to counteract power relations relative to the feudal university model. Concurrently, this initiative is introducing new ways of understanding educational research in the Spanish context. The study has a

series of limitations that must be mentioned, such as the relatively small size of the sample, or the fact that CIMIE is a still recent initiative. Thus, the work presented supposes a first approach to the issue, which should be addressed in greater depth by future research. However, this case study provides relevant insights that can inform bottom-up transformations in other academic contexts around the world, enabling us to move toward higher education institutions with greater levels of scientific and human excellence.

## Notes

1. These dynamics were imposed in the 12 public universities operating in this period in Spain (Otero, 2001).
2. Francoist authorities established a strong censorship system, which caused a deficit in terms of access and engagement with international debates and internationally recognized authors (Burguera & Schmidt-Nowara, 2004).
3. 'Full professor' is used to refer to 'Catedrático', which is the highest rank in Spanish academia.
4. CIMIE's areas of knowledge and research themes can be accessed on the conference's website: <http://amieedu.org/cimie/en/responsables/>.
5. Decision-making processes are carried out in assemblies open to all attendees. It differs from the organization traditionally adopted by other conferences, in which usually a small group of full professors make such decisions.
6. Roma people are one of the most excluded groups in Spain. For instance, 2.6% of the Roma population access higher education compared to 22% of the whole population (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2013).

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