



Definitions, Driving Forces and Developments

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Chapter A: *Definitions, Driving Forces and Developments* | Subchapter A 2: *Global, Regional and National Developments*

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TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP

TWO COLLABORATIVE INITIATIVES IN LATIN AMERICA

Within the context of continental diversity, institutional autonomy and wide differentiation that characterises higher education in Latin America, the article describes two different collaborative initiatives developed and implemented in the region. One of them emerged from national governments in the MERCOSUR region and deals with a regional mechanism for programme accreditation. The other is a long-lasting association of public and private universities, working together to improve the quality of higher education institutions and to provide inputs for national and institutional policymaking. In both cases, the result has been increased trust, shared learning and useful lessons for collaboration in a region better known for competition and marketisation.

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1. Introduction

100 years ago, the students at the University of Cordoba, Argentina, initiated a strong movement to liberate universities from the guidance of the state and the church. They emphasised the social function of the university and defined university autonomy in terms of the capacity to elect its own leaders with the participation of the different institutional stakeholders, to determine the contents of its programmes and to manage its resources, but with funding provided by the government. As a consequence, since then the public university in Latin America has enjoyed what has been called 'privileged autonomy', that is, the capacity for academic, financial and administrative self-determination, within a context of guaranteed public resources.

Marketisation and competition in higher education

The last decades of the twentieth century brought significant changes. A demand for higher education grew, and what had been mostly elite systems had to accommodate a very different and diverse population of students. Public universities and the elite private universities which existed at that stage were joined by a new breed of demand absorbing, private higher education institutions (HEIs). Public resources did not grow at the same rate as the increased enrolment, and both public and private HEIs had to look to new sources of income. Quality became a growing concern in many countries, and the corporate self-regulation that most systems had in place began to be replaced with external quality assurance schemes.

One of the most important results of these changes was the increased marketisation of higher education, where competition became the driving force for institutional policymaking. This was supported by neo-liberal national policies in many countries, as well as by international co-operation programmes coming from funding agencies. HEIs began to compete: for students (whose fees became one of the main sources of income for many institutions), for qualified academic staff, to take care of the increased enrolment but also for research and management tasks, and for resources. The latter one occurred in a context where public funding not only decreased but in many cases began to be allocated through competitive bids and private income depended mostly on an institution's capacity to attract students. Marketisation also led to a competition for quality, or at least, for accreditation, which evolved into a double requirement: a regulatory one, encouraged by governments, which found it a useful tool to control excessively autonomous HEIs, and a necessary label to reach out to students and staff and for positioning within the higher education environment.

In such a complex higher education environment, providing conditions to promote trust and interinstitutional collaboration became an essential need for the more prestigious universities, with quality as one of its important components. This article will focus on two very different initiatives: The Regional Accreditation Agreement for University Courses, or ARCU-SUR, a joint quality assurance scheme, promoted from the government sector; and the Center for Interuniversity Development (CINDA, for its acronym in Spanish) one of the oldest university networks in the region.

2. Some Basic Background

Latin America is a very diverse continent. It is spread over the Americas, with Mexico in North America, six countries in Central America, two in the Caribbean and the other ten countries in South America. It is defined by language: with the exception of Brazil, all countries speak Spanish, and Portuguese is a close relative. It has a population of over 600 million people, distributed in countries that range from over 200 million in Brazil to 3.5 million in Uruguay. Income differences are also significant, with five countries with a per capita income over 20,000 dollars, and five below 10,000 dollars. In the region, there are over 4,000 universities, two-thirds of which are private.

Latin America, a very diverse continent

Higher education echoes this diversity, in almost all relevant aspects. As an example, Mexico has over 3.5 million students in 2,400 HEIs, while Panama only has 124,000 students in 33 HEIs; the gross participation rate in Argentina is over 80%, while Mexico barely reaches 30%; Brazil spends twice as much per student as Colombia; enrolment in private higher education varies from 80% in Chile to 13% in Uruguay (Brunner & Miranda, 2016).

There is also a significant differentiation within higher education systems, intensified by the limited capacity of governments to coordinate increasingly diverse higher education systems. Universities and non-university institutions co-exist, offering short-cycle, professional and graduate programmes, sometimes in the same institution. Most of the universities focus on teaching, granting professional degrees; others carry out research in specific areas and a few can be considered research universities. Public universities are the norm in countries such as Argentina or Uruguay, but in most countries, private higher education, organised by religious groups (mostly Catholic), corporations or private entities make up a significant part of higher education systems. There is no substantial coordination among the different components of higher education, which operate independently, without clear guidelines about overall mid- or long-term goals. In this context, it is difficult to envisage national higher education systems, which makes it even harder to think about a Latin American Higher Education Area, in spite of the long-standing discourse by heads of state about the importance of such a concept.

Diversity in higher education

This makes Latin American higher education very different from the European model because there are no common grounds—political, economic or academic—as a basis for collaboration. It has been said that Latin America is composed of “island countries, a mosaic of nations grouped by geography, but separated in every other aspect” (Brunner, 2008), and this seems an accurate description of the region’s higher education.

However, in spite of the competitive environment in which HEIs must operate (or maybe, because of it), HEIs have been trying to develop a number of collaborative initiatives for many years, with different degrees of success. The UNESCO Institute for Higher Education which operates from Caracas, Venezuela (IESALC), has identified over 100 different higher education associations, which have been classified as regional

Collaboration in a competitive environment

networks (intercontinental, intra-regional and sub-regional networks), national networks, thematic networks and international organisations. Some cover all types of HEI, others focus only on public or private universities. Some address specific issues, one of the most relevant being quality assurance.

The two that have been selected for this article are very different. One of them is a collaborative effort initiated by the Ministers of Education of MERCOSUR (a political and economic bloc comprising Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay), to provide regional quality assurance and to promote student and academic mobility; the other is a network of universities, whose main goal is to contribute to improved higher education governance and management and to the design of higher education policy, both at the institutional and national levels. The first originated as a top-down, government-led initiative. The second is a horizontal scheme, promoted and carried out by the universities themselves.

The structural differences in both schemes can be seen in the figures on the next page.

3. ARCU-SUR, or a Regional Quality Assurance Scheme

MERCOSUR was created in 1991 with the aim of providing “free movement of goods, services, and factors of production between countries.” (www.mercosur.int, n.d.). Currently, its four founding countries (plus Venezuela which became a member in 2012 but was suspended in 2016) are full members, and Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru are associate members.

Setting up a regional quality assurance mechanism

MERCOSUR has not lived up to its promise in terms of trade, but it developed a strong educational component which has been much more successful. At the higher education level, one of its success stories is ARCU-SUR (MERCOSUR, 2019). This is a permanent regional accreditation mechanism to provide public assurance about the academic level of selected degrees. It was established under a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 1998 by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Bolivia and Chile.

It has three main goals: to promote inter-institutional cooperation, to contribute to student (Leon Velarde, 2015) and staff mobility within the region and to generate trust about higher education offerings in countries with very different higher education systems.

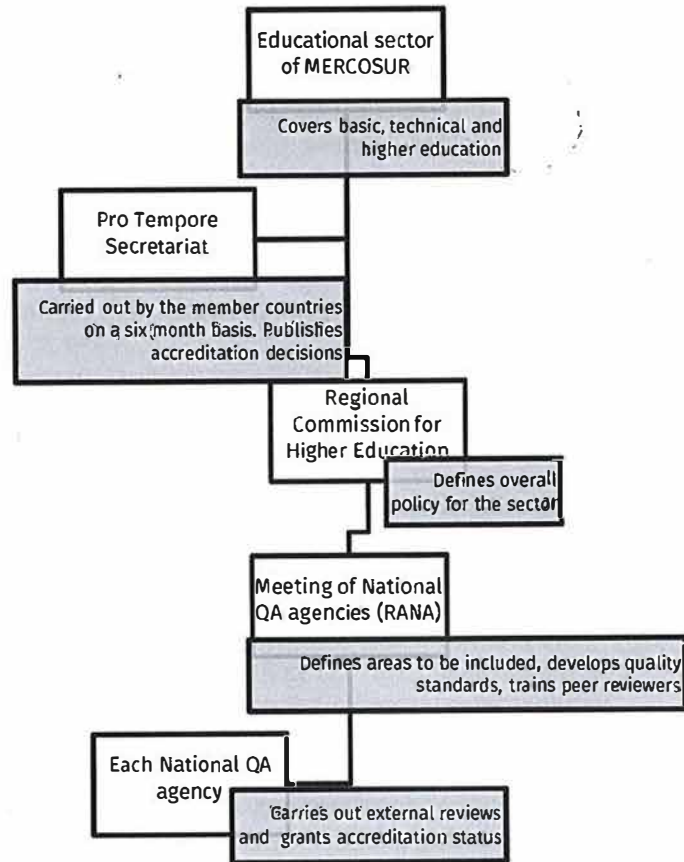


Figure 1 ARCU-SUR



Figure 2 CINDA

Three fields of study were selected for the initial stage: Medicine, Engineering and Agronomy. Each country appointed two experts in each field, and the technical commissions thus formed developed a set of shared expected learning outcomes and quality standards for programmes in these study fields.

A shared regional process, run by national agencies

Quality assurance (QA) procedures were the result of an agreement between representatives of QA agencies in the countries which already had them, or experts appointed by the Ministries of Education.

The responsibility for actually accrediting programmes was allocated to the national QA agencies, provided they followed the ARCU-SUR requirements:

- assessing programmes against the expected learning outcomes and quality standards agreed upon for MERCOSUR; and
- appointing a review team of MERCOSUR trained peer reviewers, at least two of which had to come from a different MERCOSUR country.

National agencies were also allowed to develop regulations applying to programmes in their own country (e.g. ARCU-SUR accreditation could not be granted to national programmes unless they also had or obtained national accreditation), especially when local standards were more demanding than the regional ones.

Each country agreed to recognise accreditation decisions, and the academic validity of degrees granted by accredited programmes. This explicitly excludes professional certification or the automatic authorisation to professional practice, but it is a significant first step for further recognition of degrees.

After an experimental implementation of the mechanism, it was formally established by an agreement of the Ministers of Education. The network of national QA agencies (RANA) meets two times per year and has grown to involve other fields of study beyond the initial three: Dentistry, Veterinary Medicine, Nursing and Architecture.

ARCU-SUR has expanded, both in terms of the programmes it assesses and the countries participating in it, which now include all South American countries. Currently, 175 programmes have a valid certificate of accreditation in the participating countries.

Results and impact of ARCU-SUR

The process of designing, testing and implementing ARCU-SUR certainly contributed to inter-institutional cooperation, at the level of QA agencies. This was not an easy task. In the beginning, only Argentina, Brazil and Chile had any experience with QA, but with different approaches in each case. Reaching an agreement took almost four years of heated discussions, mostly dealing with the role of self-assessment and with the need to preserve the autonomy and sovereignty of national QA agencies while at the same time developing a process that could be accepted and recognised by all countries. The decision to make national agencies responsible for the implementation of regional accreditation in their respective countries, provided they applied ARCU-SUR standards and procedures, opened the way to a good solution, accepted by all.

This is probably the most important lesson to be learned from this experience. It was possible to develop ARCU-SUR and to make it an effective mechanism for regional quality assurance because it managed to balance

- the increased pressure for the development and use of international standards;
- the need to safeguard the specific culture and needs of national higher education systems; and
- to preserve the autonomy of national QA mechanisms, provided they meet international standards.

Its impact on mobility was limited to short-term courses for undergraduate students through the promotion of inter-university agreements. Academic recognition of degrees—one of the goals of ARCU-SUR—was almost non-existent, probably because in most of the countries involved the recognition of degrees is the responsibility of the main public universities, not of the government. In those cases—the majority—where the public university was not included in the agreement, recognition still had to follow the usual complicated and slow bureaucratic process. The ARCU-SUR experience, however, contributed to the establishment of new bilateral agreements between countries for the recognition of degrees, based on the outcomes of accreditation processes, and to the involvement of the public universities in these agreements (Argentina/Chile; Argentina/Colombia and Colombia/Chile are cases in point). It is highly likely that in the future, recognition of accreditation decisions will become a significant component of the national procedures for the recognition of studies and degrees.

The design and implementation of the ARCU-SUR mechanism definitely helped develop increased trust among the main stakeholders in higher education, especially in view of the significant differences in size, level of development of higher education and of QA practices, and the perception of relative prestige and quality of higher education. The harmonisation of a core of expected learning outcomes and quality standards across countries helped introduce changes in the curriculum of some of the programmes (specifically, in Medicine) and to develop increased levels of awareness and concern about quality in countries and HEIs with no significant experience in QA.

An additional outcome—not explicitly stated, but evident in the design of the process—was to help establish QA processes in those countries where these did not exist or were in a very preliminary stage of development. These countries benefitted from the experience of other countries and learnt both from their successes and mistakes. It also contributed to the continuing improvement of QA in those countries which already had them in place.

RANA, the network of QA agencies that meets twice a year, has also proved a very important occasion for learning and sharing good practices and experiences, as well as for making a continuing assessment of the operation of ARCU-SUR.

Balance between international accreditation and national decision-making

Limited impact on mobility

Increased trust in the quality of higher education

A chance to continue with programme accreditation

A new circumstance that may give ARCU-SUR a boost is the fact that many countries (e.g. Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico and Peru) are now moving towards institutional accreditation, mainly because of the high cost of programme accreditation, in terms of time, qualified human resources and financial arrangements. At the same time, evidence gathered on a multinational study carried out with the support of the European Union, showed that programme accreditation can make significant contributions to the quality of teaching and learning, especially through promoting changes in curriculum design and implementation, pedagogical practices and teaching and learning resources (Lemaitre & Zenteno, 2012). It is also a very important component in any international process for the recognition of degrees. Since ARCU-SUR focuses only on programme accreditation, HEIs could use it to ensure the continuous assessment of programmes considered to be of 'public interest', and thus, make a significant contribution to the improvement of teaching and learning.

4. CINDA – The Centre for Inter-University Development

A university network

A second collaborative initiative is that of the Centre for Inter-university Development (CINDA), probably the oldest university network in the region. It was established in 1971, two years after the countries in the Andean region (Colombia, Chile, Ecuador and Peru) agreed to work jointly towards regional educational, scientific and cultural integration. This was formalised in the Andres Bello Agreement, aimed at the harmonised development of the region through the coordination of efforts in the fields of education, science and culture.

Three universities, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Peru and Universidad de los Andes in Colombia, took up the challenge and created CINDA with the goal of channelling their research and teaching capacities towards this integration.

A capacity for anticipation

From the beginning, CINDA and its members highlighted the substantial contribution universities could make to national development and the wellbeing of their population, and agreed to base their work on the recognition of institutional diversity, the value of internationalisation and the importance of collaboration as a driver for continuous improvement of university actions.

These statements now seem obvious, but in 1971 they sounded positively prophetic. It was the first occasion in Latin America where a group of prestigious public and private universities joined forces and put higher

education on the political and academic agenda, by inviting the main stakeholders (other HEIs, government officials, international agencies) to focus on higher education as an issue to be studied in order to improve its capacity to contribute to national and regional development and systematically worked on the gathering and dissemination of good practices in the field. As Ivan Lavados, CINDA's first executive director, and one of the founding members pointed out, "universities carry out research on almost any significant topic, except themselves".

The network began to grow by bringing in new members, soon moving beyond the Andean region, to cover the rest of Latin America. In 1992 it crossed the Atlantic and accepted the application of Universidad Politécnica de Cataluña, the first Spanish university to become a member.

Currently, its membership includes forty universities, from sixteen countries; they represent a good balance of public and private universities, including some of the most prestigious in their respective countries and in the region (ten of them appear among the first 25 Latin American universities listed in the QS ranking), and they all have a strong commitment to regional collaboration and development.

Over the years, CINDA has offered an innovative approach to many issues, dealing with them through programmes and research projects years before they became fashionable. A sample of articles and other texts written between 1972 and 2016 was published that year, to commemorate CINDA's 45th anniversary and can be consulted in the institutional website (CINDA, 2016). Such was the case, for example, of a model for scientific and technological development, which after being discussed in several seminars and studies, was published in 1977. It then became the basis for the national policies in a number of Latin American countries.

Working areas: science and technology, teaching, quality assurance, internationalisation

Another main concern has been that of university teaching. This was the focus of a project on pedagogical strategies started in 1980, which later influenced many of the actions of universities around the region. This continues to be a challenge for universities in the region, especially because of

- the expansion of enrolment;
- the diversification of the student population, its needs and demands; and
- the impact of ICT and the changes it brings to the role of academic staff.

All these are issues that are constantly on the agenda of the members of CINDA. A more recent project focused on the identification of indicators about the quality of teaching; its results were published in 2016 in a book available on the Centre's website (Lemaitre & Lopez, 2016); a seminar held in 2018 at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, in Bogotá, Colombia, analysed different teaching strategies and its contents were then part of the work of the Vice Rectors Academic yearly meeting.

The quality of higher education and its internal and external assurance began to be discussed in CINDA during the 80s, years before the installation of quality assurance mechanisms in the region. It has continued to be a significant concern, which was translated in 2009–11 in a project funded by the European Union aiming to identify the perceived impact of quality assurance processes in the management and teaching and learning practices in universities in Latin America, Spain and Portugal (Lemaitre & Zenteno, 2012). Since 2002, CINDA also offers accreditation services to institutions and programmes; its Institute for International Quality Assurance (IAC, for its initials in Spanish) has been recognised as an accrediting organisation by the Peruvian government and has actively evaluated higher education offerings in Bolivia, Paraguay, Colombia, Mexico and Peru. At present, IAC has evaluated over 25 institutions and thirty programmes and will address 25 new institutional and programme external reviews during 2019 (for a detailed description of accreditation processes, standards and procedures, please check cinda.cl/servicios/iac).

Internationalisation—a concern of network members before it was recognised as an issue—is also an area of work, carried out through an exchange programme for graduate and undergraduate students, academic staff and managers of member universities, in order to promote shared learning about good practices in different fields. In 2018 470 students and academic staff took advantage of the programme, which currently lists over 1,000 different opportunities for exchange or joint projects (piucinda.cl). A project currently being developed focuses on Internationalisation at Home, in order to bring the benefits of an international and global dimension to all students and staff, and not only to those able to travel abroad. This is particularly relevant in a region where the mobility of students rarely exceeds 5% and is usually much lower.

Systematic review of Iberoamerican higher education

Since 2007, CINDA, with the contribution of Universia, has published periodic reports on higher education in Iberoamerica (that is, Latin America plus Spain and Portugal). In 2007, 2011 and 2016 it gathered information from over twenty countries in the larger region through national reports. The results of these reports were then put in a regional perspective, complementing them with information from international sources (such as Unesco and OECD) to provide an overview of higher education which is one of the most important sources of information available to researchers, scholars, university leaders and policymakers. Together with these general reports, CINDA has published specific ones on science and technology (2010), quality assurance (2012) and innovation, technology transfer and entrepreneurship (2015). All of these reports are available for downloading (*Informes de Educación Superior en Iberoamérica*, n.d.).

5. Lessons Learned

The network has proved remarkably effective. The stability of its membership, deliberately kept at a small, selected number of universities, the active participation of university leaders in face-to-face meetings, the involvement of member universities in the different activities, are evidence of the strong commitment from its members. In addition, there is a strong and steady demand for membership, in spite of a high yearly fee.

Combined top-down and bottom-up approach

The effectiveness of the network relies on a double strategy, which combines both a top-down and a bottom-up approach. On the one hand, it is based on the active involvement of the leaders of the member universities: Once a year, the university presidents meet to review the work that has been done and to provide guidelines for the issues that they consider relevant for the near future; in addition, vice-rectors or leaders responsible for academic affairs, research and innovation, and management and finance also meet once a year and select the main issues or challenges they face. But operating mainly through university leaders is not without risks. Leadership in universities—at least in Latin America—is in many cases a short-term activity. University rectors or presidents change every four or five years, and usually, vice-rectors change with them. It is essential, therefore, to go beyond the leaders, to generate links at the level of faculties or programmes and to involve a wide range of academic staff, researchers and managers in the activities of the network, across the different levels of the university. This is a challenge that needs to be constantly addressed, to maintain the links between the Centre and the universities even when persons change.

The people in these positions provide the necessary continuity for the projects in hand and ensure the network remains visible and active in spite of personnel changes. This is the task of the CINDA Executive Director's office: a small staff of nine, based in Santiago, Chile, charged with translating the themes identified by rectors and vice-rectors into projects, which are then implemented through the staff of the member universities.

In a recent meeting of university rectors, they highlighted the capacity of the network to generate trust among universities, in a context where competition is usually one of the main driving forces. This happens mainly because of the way in which work is organised: a small network where members get to know each other, share experiences and good (and sometimes, not so good) practices and learn from each other. In the words of a former rector, "CINDA has addressed the uncertainty and complexity of higher education through the unending solidarity and generosity of universities in Latin America and Europe, who are willing to share their best practices to ensure access to a high-quality education" (Leon Velarde, 2015).

Capacity to generate trust

6. Final Comments

Two experiences, one essentially political and regulatory, the other academic and collaborative

The ARCU-SUR and CINDA initiatives are, as was mentioned above, two very different collaborative experiences. The first started from a political and regulatory approach, leading to the recognition of degrees and trying to enhance mobility opportunities for students and academic staff. In the process, it became increasingly independent from the political and economic management of MERCOSUR, gaining in autonomy as national quality assurance agencies became responsible for the accreditation processes. In order to sustain its operations, ARCU-SUR requires a political commitment to regional integration, which can only be ensured by national governments. However, its viability and legitimacy depend increasingly on the continued involvement of quality assurance agencies, academic and professional staff willing to serve as external reviewers, and universities willing to submit their programmes to an assessment based on international quality criteria.

CINDA, on the other hand, is an academic initiative, sustained through the commitment of its member universities. It has been in place for almost half a century, in a continent where networks are created and disappear with alarming frequency. The basis for its long-standing existence is the capacity of its members to work together, to put quality at the centre of their concerns and to understand that continuous improvement is only possible through collaboration in a context of trust, where successes and failures can be shared and analysed, and learning happens in the joint review of challenges and opportunities.

In both cases, the common factor is the willingness to make collaboration a learning opportunity and to bring together a wide range of stakeholders to deal with the unavoidable changes in higher education. Both experiences—each in its own way—have helped to establish important links between policymakers, government officials, university leaders and academic staff, which point towards the significance a collaborative approach can bring to the increased effectiveness of higher education, especially in an international context.

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