

Convergence of national and regional accrediting processes

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Common markets

Mobility of people, services, and goods for regional integration
⇒ legislation for free circulation of people

- ✓ To assume that the outcome of the university learning process is homogeneous ⇒ mutual recognition of the diplomas
- ✓ To assume that the quality of higher education programs is heterogeneous, as well as the professional knowledge and skills of the university outcome ⇒ mutual recognition of programs and degrees. **MERCOSUR** → Experimental mechanism of undergraduate program accreditation: **MEXA**.

This paper focuses on:

- ✓ The different alternatives that **CONEAU** –as Accrediting Agency of Argentina- considered for coupling the national and regional (MEXA) processes of accreditation of undergraduate programs. Therefore, the effort was directed to respect the diversity of each singular process and institutional autonomy and, at the same time to avoid the duplication of accreditation activities.
- ✓ The analysis of the general process of integration in order to adopt a common mechanism for regional accreditation and applying it to other educational programs.

The National Commission for Evaluation and Accreditation

CONEAU

created by The Higher Education Act # 24.521

Functions:

- ✓ External and regular evaluation of HE institutions
- ✓ Accreditation of post-graduate programs
- ✓ *Accreditation of undergraduate programs of public interest.*

Ministry of Education + Universities Council ⇒ programs of public interest, whose outcomes are state-regulated professions

Medical Education (1999)

Engineering (2002)

Agronomy (2004)

MERCOSUR

Country members: **Argentina - Brazil - Paraguay - Uruguay**

Associated countries: **Bolivia - Chile**



Educational Sector (SEM)

Meeting of Education Ministers

Regional Co-ordination Committee

Technical Commission of HE



Work Group of Specialist in HE designs a mechanism for mutual recognition in HE through evaluation and accreditation process:

Experimental Accreditation Mechanism of Programs MEXA



MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING: Procedures and Standards of quality for Medical Education, Engineering and Agronomy programs (approved 2002)

Experimental Accreditation Mechanism of Programs – MEXA -

- ✓ Academic validation of diplomas among MERCOSUR´s member and associated countries (not implies the recognition for professional labour)
- ✓ Voluntary participation - requested to Accrediting Agencies of each country
- ✓ Institutions authorised to grant degrees into their countries
- ✓ National Accrediting Agencies: conduct the process of their respective country's programs, design the specific tools and organisation of peer committees.
- ✓ Regular Meetings of AA: agreements for developing common and shared activities (Agenda for each call, Manuals for peers, Regional Peers Workshop, etc)

The MEXA experience in Argentina

Coupling regional and national processes

	MEXA call	National call
Agronomy	2002	2004
Engineering	2004	2002
Medical Education	2005	1999

MEXA - National process

Criteria of selection of educational programs

	MEXA	National	Criteria
Agronomy	2002 n =5	2004 n =30	The oldest programs, regional diversity
Engineering	2004 n =6	2002 n =292	Preliminary results of accreditation, regional, institutional and specialities diversity
Medical Education	2005 n =3	1999 n =24	Results of accreditation, regional and institutional diversity.

MEXA - National process

Standards for accreditation

	MEXA	National
Elaborated	Consultative Commissions	Academic authorities
Approved	Ministers of Education Meeting	Ministry of Education Universities Council
Prescribe	Institutional organization Staff Physical resources and equipment Library Research activities <i>Curricula : less detailed</i>	Institutional organization Staff Physical resources and equipment Library Research activities <i>Curricula : exhaustive detailed</i>

MEXA - National process

Standards for accreditation

	MEXA	National
Curricular aspects	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Minimum # total credit hours✓ Basic contents (variable for each program)✓ Professional profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Minimum # credit hours (total and for each area of knowledge)✓ Basic curricular contents✓ Intensity criteria for pre-professional training✓ Specific professional activities for each diploma

MEXA - National process

Procedures

	MEXA	National
Data and reports	Institutional report Self-assessment report (without prescribe frame)	Data collection (software) + Manual and Guide for self- assessment, including <u>Plans for improvement</u>
Peer work	Local and regional training workshop, on- site visit, committee report	Training workshop, on-site visit, committee report, <u>consistency meeting</u> Peers: previously observers
Possible outcomes	✓ Accreditation (\leq 5 years) ✓ Delay accreditation 1 year ✓ Not accreditation	✓ Accreditation 6 years ✓ Accreditation 3 years with <u>commitments for improvement</u> ✓ Not accreditation

The evaluation of Agronomy programs

- ✓ Programs not accredited before.
- ✓ National standards -in advanced stage of elaboration but not approved by EM- were been elaborated based on MEXA ones.
- ✓ To couple both process and to avoid the duplication of workload, CONEAU established that the 5 agronomy programs accredited by MEXA would be national accredited through a

HOMOLOGATION PROCEDURE



Similarities: general normative frame and requirements for calls, self-assessment activities, peer profile, peer selection and functions, and *general aspects of standards*.

MEXA Standards → 3000 hours

National standards → 3500 hours + Basic curricular contents, intensity criteria for training and specific professional activities for each diploma (professional profile)

Agronomy - MEXA

- ✓ CONEAU elaborated specific tools (data collection software and the guide for self-assessment) taking into account the information required for external evaluation of both process.
- ✓ Informative workshop to instruct the evaluation teams of each agronomy program about MEXA accreditation procedure, self-assessment activities, and **HOMOLOGATION** procedure for future national accreditation (Dec. 2002).
- ✓ Peers training: MEXA National workshop (March 2003, 36 Argentinean peers) - MEXA Regional workshop (Sept 2003, Brazil, 10 Argentinean peers + peers of the other countries).
- ✓ Constitution of peers committees: 2 Argentinean peers + 2 peers of other countries. On-site visit: October 2003.
- ✓ Peer reports: discussed and agreed at Consistency Meeting (Nov. 2003).
- ✓ MEXA Resolutions for Argentinean programs (July 2004)

HOMOLOGATION procedure for Agronomy programs

- ✓ The same Argentinean peers were call to analyse the same programs that they had evaluated for MEXA, but with national standards (Oct. 2004).
- ✓ Due to the short passed time, it was not necessary to repeat the on-site visit nor to ask the programs for update the information
- ✓ Specific peer guide was elaborated to overturn the common judgement (derived from the common aspects of both standards) and to highlight the curricular requirement of national standards.
- ✓ Peers reviewed all the information of each program and MEXA resolution
- ✓ Peers committees worked simultaneously →comparative analysis of 5 programs, applying the criteria agreed in the Consistency Meeting.

The evaluation of Engineering programs

- ✓ National accreditation began before MEXA call. Programs (292), were organised in groups, initiating the process in different dates →different stage of national process when MEXA began.
- ✓ 16 programs voluntary asked for MEXA accreditation. CONEAU decided to select 6 different specialities (2 chemical, 2 electronics, 2 industrial). 4 had already received the on-site visit and peers' report →preliminary accreditation result. 2 industrial engineering programs began both process simultaneously.
- ✓ Specific tools (data collection software and guide for self-assessment) fully satisfied information requirement for external evaluation of both process

The evaluation of Engineering programs

Comprehensive similarities among standards:

MEXA

- ✓ Minimum # total credit hours
- ✓ Basic contents according to professional profile - General contents on Basic Sciences
- ✓ Professional profile

National

- ✓ Minimum # credit hours for each curricular core area of knowledge : Basic Sciences, Basic Technologies and Applied Technologies
- ✓ Basic curricular contents for each area of knowledge
- ✓ Intensity criteria for training (credit hours and kind of training)
- ✓ Specific professional activities for each diploma (specialty)

The evaluation of Engineering programs

MEXA Procedure: Peer training and Staff functions

- ✓ National workshop – peers selected by CONEAU (most of them have been participated as peers before).
- ✓ Regional workshop (Asunción –Paraguay, Nov. 2004).
Plenary or group activities → promote the interchange and discussion among the peers.
Focused on the diversity of self-assessment reports formats in which each country, terminological details or language definitions, specific characteristics of training for engineers in each speciality and modalities of work of each agency.
- ✓ Staff of agencies organised and co-ordinated the workshop activities → knowledge of the experience, capacity and style of peer evaluators that will possibly act in their own countries.
- ✓ Peers have considered that their training at the workshops and the role of professional staff supporting their work were the most important aspects to close the breaches of information and interpretation

The evaluation of Engineering programs

MEXA Procedure:Preliminary results

- ✓ 4 programs: the MEXA on-site visit (4 days) was performed by the same Argentinean peers and 2 peers of other countries. Easier writing of the MEXA report → final version of the report at the end of the visit (based on national peer report) → facilitated the development of the Consistency Meeting.
- ✓ 2 programs: simultaneously evaluated by both processes, will receive the on-site visit of the MEXA committee (2 Argentinean peers and 2 peers of other countries) and the National committee (the same 2 Argentinean peers and other one peer). Specialist peers (industrial Eng..) have not experience on this kind of evaluation and they will have to analyse the same program with 2 standards and produce 2 reports.

The evaluation of Medical Education programs

- ✓ 24 Medical education programs accredited – Resolutions 2000-2001
- ✓ CONEAU invite 3 programs to participate at MEXA process (2 accredited for 6 years and 1 for 3 years due to it has been recently created and have not graduates yet).
- ✓ Specific manuals and guide for self-assessment elaborated for national accreditation fully satisfied the information for external evaluation of MEXA. Due to the time passed since the national process, the education programs have to update the information.
- ✓ MEXA committees: Argentinean peers and peers of other MERCOSUR countries + international observers.
- ✓ Workshops for peer training: Group activities → will discuss the conflictive situations found in the national evaluation (instead of discuss hypothetical cases). Professional staff that will organise and co-ordinate the workshop activities, had participated in the previous national process → knowledge of the cases that will facilitate the peers' work.

The evaluation of Medical Education programs

MEXA and National Standards

MEXA

Contents of Basic Sciences

Programs should guarantee the professional practice training.
Characteristics of health services where to develop the clinical training.

National

Basic curricular contents with a core of Basic Sciences.

Prescribe an instance of training in clinical and other matters of professional practice.

Minimum # of credit hours for clinical and professional practice

Reaching these standards guarantee the training in order to achieve the professional degree.

Some considerations about the processes

Criteria of selection:

Besides taking into account regional, institutional and specialities diversity, in all cases were selected programs of high **quality**

- ✓ Engineering and medical education: those accredited for six years or three years without commitments of improvement
- ✓ Agronomy: the oldest programs, assumed to be of high quality.

Whole education programs → different levels of quality → would not reach National or MEXA standards ⇒ divergence among results of accreditation.

Standards and the guarantee of learning outcomes for MERCOSUR

MEXA standards require training for the professional performance. Therefore, programs must grant to give training according to degree and professional profiles.

National accreditation guidelines

National guidelines are more specific and prescriptive on the agreements of each academic and professional community. The regional workshops inform to peers into these particular developments.

Procedures and outcomes of accreditation

Differences among outcomes of accreditation for MEXA and National processes → Improvement plans

National: Accreditation for 3 years with commitments when a program includes pertinent and viable improvement plans in order to comply with the standards.

MEXA: not include this alternative.



Resolutions have not automatic equivalence → CONEAU repeats the analysis and the on-site visit.

Training and composition of peers committees

The peers have been trained in two instances: the national workshop and the regional workshop.

National workshop - Agronomy → first contact of peers with accreditation processes. Regional workshop demanded a more intense training on the standards and procedures.

Engineering workshop → peers had already experience at the national accreditation

Medical workshop → less time will be destined to the general information and will work on real situations



Future regional workshops → the agreement on how to interpret conflicting situations will be facilitated.

MEXA committees in Argentine were integrated by two Argentinean peers and two foreigners, but to balance the weight of the criteria of national peers, the co-ordinator of the committee was a representative of another country.

Peer´s judgements

The procedures adopted help to the homogeneity in the treatment of cases, but these aspects are responsibility of the staff from the agencies that works with the peers and are granted by the consistency meeting.

Peers of different countries appreciate the technical instance of co-ordination and revision of the reports by the education programs.

CONCLUSIONS

Preliminary evaluation of MEXA - Ministers of Education

Positive aspects:

- ✓ High interest of institutions in participating;
- ✓ The foundation of accrediting agencies or the creation of commissions ad hoc;
- ✓ The knowledge of the context in which programs are developed in the region.
- ✓ The joint work of national agencies

Negative aspects:

- ✓ The complexity of the regional processes: organisation and combination of agendas of agencies and ministries.
- ✓ It suggests the revision of criteria and dimensions and the evaluation of the processes in order to design a regional system of accreditation.

CONCLUSIONS

Debate in different countries and regions about appropriate alternatives to guarantee quality assurance within the framework of regional agreements and for the mobility of students and professionals.

Other alternatives to the accreditation such as the credit systems, the agreements for recognition of titles and degrees or the recognition of training for the temporary period of practice, are also advancing and defining themselves with more precision

This paper would contribute with the definition of a permanent model, taking into account the diversity of traditions of the countries, their university systems, disciplines and experience.