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Abstract:

This paper addresses Argentina's experience on linkage and convergence of national and regional – MERCOSUR- accreditation processes whereby diversity of fields, institutional background, national accreditation experiences, peer profiles and academic community's interests have been taken into account, with the target of avoiding superposition and effort duplications. CONEAU's participation will be analyzed in this frame, with the objective of bringing into attention the different alternatives that were considered, the arguments on which decisions were founded and the differences with other cases.

Introduction

The creation of common markets has among its goals to facilitate the mobility of people, services, and goods, within the spaces defined by international agreements for regional integration.

The debate on the legislation for free circulation of people across national borders within common markets can be synthesised in to positions:

- To assume that the outcome of the university learning process is homogeneous through the mutual recognition of the diplomas awarded within each country. In this case, the policies are directly oriented to the professional labour market in order to lift barriers for professional supply from abroad.
- To assume that the quality of higher education programs is heterogeneous, as well as the professional knowledge and skills of the university outcome among nations. Thus, countries focus their policies on mutual recognition of programs and degrees in order to negotiate later an agreement that allows freedom of academic and professional exercise. This is the case of MERCOSUR, which is applying this policy through an experimental mechanism of undergraduate program accreditation (MEXA).

The MEXA's agronomy accreditation was developed before the national process; MEXA and national engineering accreditation procedures were set simultaneously, whereas the national accreditation for medical education was developed before the MEXA process. This helpful array of situations allows us to analyze the decision-making process in order to point out the different alternatives that were considered and also the procedures that were adopted. This has become a valuable experience, allowing

us to think about a general model to be applied for both regional and international accreditation, respecting national diversity of MERCOSUR countries

So, 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.

MEXA: Experimental Accreditation Mechanism of Programs

The Educational Sector of MERCOSUR was entrusted to design a mechanism for mutual recognition in higher education, based on quality assurance through evaluation and accreditation processes. A Work Group of Specialists in Accreditation of Higher Education (GTEAE) was in charge of the elaboration of both bases and procedures for this task. All MERCOSUR country members (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay) and the associated countries (Bolivia and Chile) approved the Experimental Accreditation Mechanism of Programs -MEXA- by means of a Memorandum of Understanding in 2002.

MEXA pursues an academic validation of diplomas among MERCOSUR's member and associated countries, but not implies the recognition for professional labour across-border. Participation in MEXA is voluntary and universities from each country might request it to the national accrediting agency. These universities have to be authorised to grant degrees into their countries.

According to MEXA's Memorandum, the national accrediting agencies are responsible for regional accreditation processes of their respective country's programs. Therefore, national agencies define both the specific procedure of each call and the evaluation tools and logistic for the peer committees. Agencies' actions take under consideration the agreements and recommendations derived from regular meetings of the Agencies in order to develop common and shared activities. Indeed, national agencies are responsible for quality assurance and improvement of institutions and programs at their respective countries.

MEXA, which is already being developed in all MERCOSUR countries, will be evaluated at the end of the accreditation processes, that include Agronomy, Engineering and Medical Education programmes. The usefulness of this mechanism to certify the quality and equivalence of university degrees will be analysed, and it will be modified if needed, in order to sign new agreements on mutual recognition of diplomas.

CONEAU AS NATIONAL ACCREDITING AGENCY FOR THE MEXA

The National Commission for Evaluation and Accreditation (CONEAU) is the Argentine agency, created by The Higher Education Act # 24.521. In the pursuit of its goals, CONEAU is empowered to do -among others functions- external and regular

evaluation and accreditation of undergraduate programs of public interest. The Ministry of Education determines, in accordance with the Universities Council, what programs are considered of public interest, whose outcomes are state-regulated professions. Up to the moment, Medical Education, Engineering and Agronomy programs were considered of public interest.

THE MEXA EXPERIENCE IN ARGENTINA

In order to describe the different alternatives that were considered and to analyse the results of the particular processes of each educational program we will consider the following aspects:

Criteria of selection of educational programs

Considering the experimental character of MEXA, the regular meetings of the national agencies set an agreement about the maximum number of programs that each country was able to present. Afterwards, each agency/country applied different criteria to select the institutions.

Standards for accreditation

Both national and MERCOSUR accreditation processes are carried out attending standards of quality.

In Argentina, the groups of academic authorities of almost all HE programs elaborated the standards of quality. The Ministry of Education, in accordance with the Universities Council, analysed and approved the standards through Ministerial Resolutions. These standards include institutional organisation, staff, library, physical resources, laboratories, research, services and an exhaustive detail of curricular structure. About the curricular structure, the standards prescribe the curricular basic contents, minimum number of credit hours to curricular completion of each core, intensity criteria for training, and the scope of activities reserved for each particular diploma in state-regulated professions.

MEXA's standards were developed by "Consultative Commissions" integrated by representative experts from each country. These standards were approved by the Ministers of Education Meeting and were recorded at the document "Dimensions, components, criteria and indicators". Within the process of definition of standards, a substantive principle was taken into account: to preserve the differences among the learning processes undergone by each country and simultaneously granting the educational quality.

MEXA's standards ensure the comprehensive evaluation of programs, including curricular structure, staff, library, physical resources, laboratories and others. Although, they are less prescriptive in terms of curricular requirements (basic curricular contents, minimum number of credit hours, intensity criteria for training) than national ones.

Coincidences between Argentine and MEXA's standards are comprehensive. It may be due in part because some members of the Consultative Commissions of MEXA also participated in the elaboration of national standards.

Procedures

The Memorandum establishes that the educational programs should present an institutional report and a self-assessment report without prescribing a unique frame.

CONEAU elaborates software for data-collection, specific Manuals and Guides for the self-assessment that fully satisfy information requirements for both processes (national and regional). These tools also guarantee the required information for complementary processes as national recognition of diplomas and degrees.

The evaluation of educational programs and the accomplishment of quality standards ultimately lean on the work of the peer committees. Therefore, the process is granted by the international training workshop for peers and by the consistency meeting.

From the first national calls, CONEAU has included as observers, experts from other countries into the peer committees. Their reports were very useful in order to know the experiences of other agencies and the situation of the educational programs oversees. Also, many of those observers were invited as peers for MEXA.

MEXA's agreement includes a national workshop for peers training before the international workshop by discipline where all of them are trained in both the procedures of each agency and the context of the educational programs in each country. The Memorandum also establish the peer profiles and the elaboration of the MEXA Peer Registry, which may be supplied by each country in order to allow to each national agency to ask to another the participation of those peers whose were considered appropriate to integrate the Committees.

The evaluation of Agronomy programs

The first call for MEXA accreditation in Argentina was organized for Agronomy educational programs in August 2002. Hitherto, these educational programs have not been accredited at the national level since the Ministry of Education had not yet approved the standards. Therefore, MEXA accreditation was in this case previous to national accreditation.

CONEAU invited to participate in MEXA accreditation all country's programs. This call was very successful: 23 educational programs of the existing 30 were registered. For the case of Agronomy, MEXA imposed a limit: only five educational programs for each country. In Argentina, the criterion adopted by CONEAU was to select the 5 oldest educational programs, considering regional representation as well.

The national quality standards for Agronomy, that became public after MEXA's, were elaborated based on the regional ones. The main difference between them is in the detail of the curricular requirements. Thus, the national standards include basic curricular contents, minimum number of credit hours to curricular completion, intensity criteria for training, aspects that are not contemplated in MEXA standards. In this sense, the national standards describe a more accurate professional profile of agronomist than the one that arises from MEXA standards. Additionally, MEXA standards imply that the credit hour to curricular completion should be 3.000 hours, whereas in the national standards this requirement is 3.500 hours.

The national standards were in an advance stage of design when MEXA accreditation began. Therefore, there was a preliminary document about national standards for accreditation, anticipating the MEXA process. CONEAU decided that the five agronomy programs accredited by MEXA would be accredited at national level via the homologation mechanism. This mechanism intended to avoid the duplication of workload in the accreditation processes, such as data collection, self-assessment report, the visit of peers and committees' meetings, as they demand important efforts to the institutions.

The homologation between national and MEXA accreditation processes was founded on the similarities between general normative frame, requirements for calls, self-assessment activities, peers selection and operation, standards and peer profiles.

In order to guarantee the whole information for this mechanism, the five agronomy programs developed their self-assessment using the data-collection software and the specific Manual and Guide, that fully satisfy information requirements for external evaluation. Moreover, it was asked for "improvement plans" for those items or aspects that did not fulfil the requirements.

MEXA procedure for Agronomy in Argentina included an Informative Workshop in order to instruct the evaluation teams of each educational program at the beginning of their activities of self-assessment (December 2002). In addition, it included a National Workshop to train Argentine peers (March 2003), and an International Workshop for peer evaluators (September 2003, Curitiba, Brazil). This workshop fundamentally allowed the contact among peers of all the countries as well as exchange of information on accreditation procedures and on characteristics of the Agronomists learning process in each country. CONEAU chose to constitute each peer committee with two Argentine peers and two peers from other countries of MERCOSUR, who did the on-site visit in October of 2003. The peer reports were discussed and agreed in a Consistency Meeting (November 2003). After fulfilled the corresponding legal steps, CONEAU passed the resolutions for MEXA accreditation in July 2004.

Once CONEAU passed MEXA resolutions of Argentinean Agronomy programs, the same Argentinean peers were called by CONEAU in order to participate at the homologation process. In that opportunity, the peers had to analyse the same program that was evaluated at MEXA accreditation process, but using the national standards. Therefore, and due to the short passed time, it was not necessary to repeat the on-site visits.

In order to make the evaluation, those peers analysed all the information presented by each program to MEXA (data bases, the institutional report and of self-assessment, etc.), and the resolutions of MEXA accreditation. It was issued a Peer Guide for the homologation, so that the peers could overturn the judgements about the common aspects to both standards, stressing on the fulfilment of basic curricular contents, minimum number of credit hours to curricular completion, intensity criteria for training

In that opportunity the committees worked simultaneously, which allowed them to carry out a comparative analysis of the five educational programs included in the process. Therefore, it was possible to apply the evaluation criteria, which had been agreed at the Consistency Meeting.

The evaluation of Engineering programs

National call for accreditation in Engineering programs was made previously to the MEXA's one. With the process of national accreditation going on, CONEAU called for voluntary inscription. Six educational programs were selected from the sixteen presented, taking into account the preliminary results from the national accreditation, the representation of the different regions and the university characteristics.

By the time of MEXA process, the educational programs had already developed or were developing their self-assessment using the data-collection software and the specific Manual and Guide for national process. The self-assessment report was organised in a section dedicated to the Academic Unit or Faculty and another one to the educational program, and included "improvement plans". These documents fully satisfy information requirements for national and MEXA processes.

Four of these six programs had already received the national on-site visit and the peer report. In these cases, the programs were informed that it could be required additional information during the MEXA on-site visit. The other two programs, whose national call was made simultaneously to the one of the MEXA, are finalising the preparation of data and self-assessment, and the on-site visit will be schedule simultaneously for both accreditation processes in the current year.

National engineering standards prescribe basic curricular contents, minimum number of credit hours and intensity criteria for training by each curricular core area of knowledge (Basic Sciences, Basic Technologies and Applied Technologies). The prescriptions of basics curricular contents by core area guarantee the learning outcomes corresponding to the professional profile. MEXA standards also establish specific contents according to the professional profile and prescribe general contents of basic sciences, avoiding both the possible differences among degrees and the accreditation of technical careers. Dimensions, components and criteria in MEXA standards for engineering are coincident to CONEAU's ones: institutional context, curriculum, students, research activities, technological entailment, extension activities, physical resources.

The most important aspect in order to close the breaches of both information and interpretation has been the training given to peers and the role of professional staff supporting the work of the peer committees. That training was made in 2004 through a national workshop. These peers were selected by CONEAU and most of them have already participated as national peers. Their training was completed in an international workshop.

At the regional workshop, either plenary or group activities were organised with different sort of slogans promoting the contact and the discussion among the peers of the different engineering specialities. In addition, the workshop focused on the diversity of formats in which each country presents the information, terminological details or language definitions, specific characteristics of training for engineers in each speciality and modalities of work of each agency.

Also they could meet the professional staff of those agencies that participated as coordinators and observers of the different activities within the workshop. As it can be seen, the worth of the regional workshop not only resides on the training that peers received but also in the benefit which the agencies obtain through the participation of

their professional staff in the different activities. Moreover, the later can take advantage from the knowledge of the differences between the countries and the capacities and styles of peer evaluators that will possibly act in their own countries.

At the deadline, peers have met with a CONEAU professional staff member in order to set details about the information, interchange preliminary ideas and made the 4 days on-site visit. Simultaneously, they were producing the evaluative judgements with the support of the professional staff.

In the case the four programs that had already received the national on-site visit and the peer report, the writing of the MEXA report was easier because peers had a final version of the report at the end of the visit, which facilitated the development of the consistency meeting. Conversely, in the other two educational programs, which are going to be simultaneously evaluated by both mechanisms, perhaps the writing of these reports would be more complicated.

The evaluation of Medical educational programs

Medical educational programs have been previously accredited by CONEAU, with Resolutions from years 2000 and 2001. It will be invited to participate at MEXA process to those programs that were accredited for 6 years and only one that was accredited for three years, which does not have graduates yet.

The MEXA criteria and dimensions imply that medical educational programs should guarantee the professional practice training and also specify characteristics of health services where to make the clinical training.

In this sense, reaching these standards guarantee the training in order to achieve the professional degree. National standards, besides to require an instance of training in clinical matters and another one of professional practice, define quantity of hours for each case (clinical training and professional practice) and educational contents that might be taught. Both groups of standards require a core of basic sciences.

As far as the procedures, Manuals and Guides for the national accreditation assure the necessary information for MEXA accreditation. Nevertheless, it has been asked to the educational programs for updating the information, since these programs have been accredited in years 2000 and 2001.

For MEXA evaluation, international peers will integrate the committees with international observers. Thus, it will modify the peer workshops, in which peers usually work based on a hypothetical case. In this opportunity, the workshop will be developed taking into account the conflictive situations detected in the previous work.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENT OF A GENERAL MECHANISM FOR REGIONAL ACCREDITATION

Criteria of selection of programs

The selected programs of engineering and medical education have accredited by the national agency for six years or three years without commitments of improvement. In the case of agronomy, although national accreditation had not been made yet, the oldest selected educational programs were assumed to be of high quality. If the mechanism would be extended to the whole educational programs of the same disciplines, it would be possible to find educational programs with different levels of quality, thus programs that would not reach the national or MEXA standards. Thus, some criteria of selection must be adopted in relation to the national accreditation.

Standards and the guarantee of learning outcomes for MERCOSUR

The equivalence of training for the professional performance is assured by the standards requirements. Therefore, they seem to be able to embody different realities within the learning process, guaranteeing that programs give training according to degree performances and the professional profiles.

National accreditation guidelines

It can be said that national guidelines are more specific and prescriptive on the agreements of each academic and professional community that has a particular development within each country. The regional workshops inform to peers into these particular developments.

Procedures

The possible outcomes of accreditation procedures for MEXA are 1) accreditation, 2) to delay the accreditation by the term of a year considering the plans for improvement and 3) not accreditation

At the national process of accreditation the improvement plans are included as positive data, when they are pertinent and viable, granting the accreditation. Thus, a program can be accredited for three years with pending actions for the fulfilment of standards. This alternative is not included in the MEXA process. If it would be adopted by the governments an automatic device of extension of the accreditation from one to another scope, it would make a necessary revision of the national resolutions. Thus, there is no an automatic equivalence resolutions. This is the reason why CONEAU repeats the analysis and the visit in the cases of engineering and medical. In agronomy, the homologation procedure has made take part to the procedure to national peers; whose have been taken part at the MEXA in order to do not reiterate the visit and the treatment of the common standards.

Peer judgements

The procedures adopted by CONEAU and MEXA help to the homogeneity in the treatment, but these aspects are responsibility of the staff from the agencies that visits and works with the peers. Within the subjects evaluated by peers in different countries, the existence of a technical instance of co-ordination and revision of the documentation sent by the educational programs is considered very positive.

Training and composition of peer committees

Two considerations can be done: on one side, in Argentina the MEXA committees 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. On the other side, the peer training, that has taken place in two instances, has prepared them in the particular aspects of each national university system.

The peers have been trained in two instances: the national workshop and the regional workshop. In the case of agronomy, the national workshop was the first contact of the peers with the accreditation processes. Then, the regional workshop demanded a more intense training on the standards and procedures than engineering workshop, whose peers had already experience at the national accreditation. The current organisation of the medical workshop gathers this experience, so less time will be destined to the general information. Consequently, in the future regional workshops, the agreement on how to interpret conflicting situations will be facilitated.

CONCLUSIONS

A preliminary evaluation of MEXA was done in the Ministers of Education of MERCOSUR Meeting, in November 2004. It shows as positive aspects:

- High interest of institutions in participating;
- The foundation of accrediting agencies in those countries which did not have them at the time of beginning the MEXA mechanism or the creation of commissions ad hoc that will be valuable experiences for the creation of agencies in other countries;
- The knowledge of the context in which agronomy programs is developed in the region. This allowed making resolutions with an integrated vision of the system of each country.

The joint work of national agencies makes possible these positive results and contributes, among other things, to facilitate the mobility and interchange of educational students and teachers in future programs.

The preliminary evaluation indicates as negative aspects the complexity of the regional processes in relation to the 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.

At the present, a debate in different countries and regions are the more appropriate alternatives to guarantee quality assurance within the framework of regional agreements and for the mobility of students and professionals. Other alternatives 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. We believe that this paper contributes with the definition of a permanent model, which include subjects such as the diversity of traditions of the countries, their university systems, disciplines and experience.