

Policy Diffusion and Higher Education in the 1990s: Is MERCOSUR a good case study?

Mercedes Botto (FLACSO, CONICET)¹

Introduction

The 1990's were key years in the reform of Higher Education (henceforth HE) in Latin America. However, this region would not be an isolated example. The reform process had been initiated in European countries, under the conservative governments of the 1980s and became part of most global and regional forums in the following decade. In each of these areas, although the significance and methods differed, the discussion revolved around the need to articulate academic training to the demands of the global market and the use of new technologies.

In the case of Latin America, this reform has generated a vast academic literature. Most studies, with few exceptions², approach the topic from a state-centric point of view stressing the decisive influence that international financial institutions have gained, notably the World Bank, through the promotion of so-called “structural reforms”³. The aim of this paper is to reopen this debate by analyzing the role regional blocs have played and continue to play, particularly MERCOSUR, in spreading these global ideas in South America. Following the words of Solingen (2012), we intend to answer the following questions: to what extent does MERCOSUR contribute to spreading these ideas? Is this integration process a containing wall or a transmission mechanism for fashionable ideas? In order to answer these questions, our research examines and compares the experience of

¹ The author thanks the collaboration of Rodrigo Liscovsky in the elaboration and translation of this work.

² Among the studies analyzing the issue from an international perspective are the thesis of Hermo (2006) Perrotta (2012), Vallerini (2013).

³ This organization focused its recommendations on the privatization of undergraduate and postgraduate academic offer so the state could concentrate its scarce resources on primary and secondary education. Because of this reform, new needs emerged: the creation of an evaluation system to monitor academic quality; the establishment of new funding lines and mechanisms to foster competition; strategic planning and accountability (Mollis, 2005). However, these forms, in contrast to privatization, would not be carried out in all countries, nor the same procedures were adopted.

MERCOSUR with other processes of regional integration and concludes that in all of them pro-market reform has been part of the process through two specific policies: degree accreditation and student mobility. Nonetheless, in the case of MERCOSUR, its scope has been severely limited by the rejection of nation states, especially Brazil, to build a regional educational area.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first outlines the two visions that frame the debate on HE since the 1990s and the stance taken by the main players and global institutions. In the second section we compare and analyze the scope of higher education policy in different regional blocs, namely the European Union (EU), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the ASEAN. Lastly, the third section analyzes in detail the scope of MERCOSUR, characterizing its peculiarities in terms of its agenda and implementation.

1. The global debate on HE reform and the stance taken by the different actors: internationalization vs. transnationalization

Literature on the reform of HE systems in the 1990s aspires to two goals. The first propounds a process of transnationalization where nation states are detached from their traditional role as regulators of educational activity within their own borders. The second, however, puts forward the internationalization of HE where nation states promote cooperation and networking activities, buying and selling cross border services while they keep domestic control by defining the rules for suppliers and consumers (Knight, 2002; Herno, 2006; Verger, 2010).

Internationalization, as a practice, is not a recent phenomenon. As we shall see, it has been an activity previously used by governments to assure greater international presence and visibility as well as for strengthening solidarity and cooperation bonds with other states in the region and in the world. The novelty introduced in the 1990s referred to the the process of transnationalization which is a result of different factors: on the one hand, the globalization of markets which not only includes tradable goods but services as well; and

on the other, the development of new educational technologies that allow the virtual exchange of educational activities.

The transnationalization and internationalization of HE refers to alternative visions of global governance concerning exchange activities. In the former, education is seen as a market asset where the quest for excellence, understood in terms of efficiency and optimization of expenditures and resources, would allow justifying its utility (Didriksson, 2008). The superiority of the fittest is achieved through the free play of market supply and demand without any intervention from public authorities except to punish those who put up resistance. In the latter, however, cooperation and equity criteria prevail, which correspond to the idea of state interventionism – whether national or supranational – whereby resources are redistributed to the weakest in society.

Both internationalization and transnationalization are conceptual stylizations, which belong to the world of ideas that are oftentimes difficult to reflect in reality. On the contrary, these two dynamics rather coexist within each international regime. Nevertheless, as discussed below, in each of them one of the two visions will come first and each regime will seek to spread it through different global diffusion mechanisms⁴.

For decades, issues relating to education lay in the hands of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which has the stated goal of promoting people's development and access to their individual rights.

While its priority is basic education, UNESCO rules on specific issues of higher education. For instance, in the framework of the debate on pro-market reforms in the 1990s, UNESCO pointed out the need to guide reform towards research and development, training and cross-border knowledge transfer, and to that end, it created the so called UNESCO Chairs

⁴ By diffusion we mean the process of transmission and transference of policies, institutions and / or regulations from a context to another. Regarding diffusion mechanisms the literature identifies persuasion, imposition, learning and competition (Solingen: 2012).

program, the goal of which is to build university networks that promote inter-university cooperation⁵.

Nonetheless, this issue would not remain exclusively in the hands of UNESCO. With the signing of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (henceforth GATS) in 1995, higher education became a part of the agenda of the WTO multilateral negotiations. Thus, though far behind the interest generated by trade in financial services, transportation, etc., services related to undergraduate and postgraduate training were subjected to deregulation by the WTO.

The goal of this forum for multilateral trade negotiations and of all the commercial agreements reached within the organization is to limit the room for maneuver of governments (*policy space*) to define regulations and norms to protect suppliers (national universities) from foreign competition. To achieve this, the WTO promotes intergovernmental negotiations in which the parties agree to open competition with the threat of trade sanctions for non-compliance with their commitments. With this, the WTO seeks to assure continuity and predictability in the behavior of nation states with global suppliers⁶. This way, HE is no longer viewed as a right – as UNESCO saw it – but rather as a commodity to be sold and bought between countries according to global regulations. As it occurred within the framework of the UN, transnationalization ideas were also spread through persuasion mechanisms there. Negotiations at the WTO are voluntary and there are no enforcement mechanisms that oblige member states to move forward on discussions if they do not consider them beneficial. The liberalization of a service requires prior negotiation between WTO member states as well as their consent on each of the sectors/services to be liberalized⁷. This statement helps us to understand why the progress

⁵ This initiative was approved by UNESCO General Assembly at its 26th session (1991) establishing the UNITWIN program – UNESCO Chairs Program – and the UNITWIN networks.

⁶ Among deregulations to be reached are the following: tax collection on profit repatriation of companies that sell educational services abroad, the provision of legal personality to be adopted by educational centers; for instance, in some countries profitable companies are forbidden to provide formal education, at the same time foreign companies and universities are not allowed to settle in the country and control measures are established to control the quality of educational services.

⁷ This negotiation is carried out in negotiation rounds involving two countries at least, where each country provides its peer with a list of services available for liberalization and another list where the country displays the services which it wishes to access in compensation. This dynamic is also combined with the complexity of

reached so far and the interest in liberalizing services has been confined to only a small number of countries, mostly English-speaking countries – i.e. USA, Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand – which are considered to be net competitors in the area. However, for many authors, this constitutes a temporary situation that will slowly move towards multilateral openness (Kalher, 1997; Botto & Peixoto, 2007; Verguer, 2009). This is due to various reasons: because of the technical complexity of the negotiation, power imbalances between the parties, or because less developed countries have taken the decision to use it as an exchange currency that allows them to move forward on other issues (access to markets)

A third global player that had an important weight in national reforms of HE was the World Bank (WB). The WB brought a proposal to break the HE model that had been dominant since the late 1980s in Latin America which experts have described as university autonomy. Other characteristics of this model are the strong presence of public monopolistic education, its free access, a corporatist management structure in its core and the role of the state as main financial resource supplier (Rama, 2005, pp. 36)⁸. This model performed well until the 1960s when student enrollment begun to grow geometrically both in the region and in the world. The situation became untenable by the 1970s due to the lack of funding and public investment. Instead of increasing the budget, the military governments in the region decided to restrict access to public education (through quotas and entrance exams) which contributed to the generation of an alternative private academic supply which started to rise and proliferate apart from a clear public regulation on the matter. With the restoration of democracy by the mid-1980s this situation was maintained with a few cosmetic changes until the foreign debt crisis forced governments to draw on international

the contents included. Under GATS, services are not only those that are bought and sold in the country but they can rather take four forms/ activities, such as: 1) cross border supplies; 2) consumption of services abroad; 3) the establishment of foreign universities in a country; 4) professional services (Botto & Peixoto, 2007).

⁸ Public universities grew as self-governed territories within the nation states due to the autonomy regulations. However by the 1960s and 1970s this model experienced radical changes. The expansion of enrollment was not accompanied by an increase in funding, which produced a deterioration of the quality of education while no mechanism and procedures for quality control were developed. The relationship between cost and quality was established by controlling access through quotas and limiting the expansion of public autonomous universities.

bank loans, especially structural adjustment loans, demanding profound changes in the structure of the state (Fernández Lamarra, 2002).

Known as the Washington Consensus, these reforms compelled governments/states to get rid of certain activities of their own: they helped to privatize management, deregulate existing norms and to be open to the world, which in other words meant adjusting to global regulations. These reforms began with the management of economic policy but then quickly spread to social policy areas through the sectoral adjustment programs (SAP).

Among all global institutions, the WB became the clear leader in the reform of HE. The WB proposes to concentrate all limited resources on the basic levels (preschool, primary and middle school) and open the supply to private actors, making “the management of public resources allocated to universities more efficient through the diversion of the growing social demand to a different kind of educative institution more in line with the development of market ideology” (Mollis: 2004). The private sector was expected to get involved not only in the academic supply but also in the concentration of academic services and in a new co-managed model composed of three parts: the academia, the private sector and the state. Public university depended on public funds – the state provides between 50 - 70% of its resources⁹ – but it was supposed to procure the rest of funds by itself and in a competitive manner, whether through the collection of tariffs, student loans, or private investment and resources (López Segrega 2005). The WB proposal was not limited to privatization. Next to it was the need for states to establish order, control and regulate the proliferation of public and private supply through quality criteria. This supposed the creation of institutions devoted to the evaluation and accreditation of higher education, which were thought to be independent from the government in power, although funded by the state. UNESCO also participated in this proposal¹⁰.

⁹ Public funding remained a tool enabling governments to steer university autonomy. The 1990s introduced changes in the way this funding was transferred. To the total amount (80/90% corresponding to salaries) were added new and more competitive products (via tenders) and special programs (from specific objectives) (Fanelli, 2010).

¹⁰ Other international organizations were included in this design, such as UNESCO who incorporated into the World Bank speech the need to abandon the laissez faire attitude of the 1980s and to adopt an active position through certification and evaluation policies that would regulate without interrupting the development process of higher education institutions (López Segre, 2004)

These major outlines of the reform of HE materialized in more than a dozen actions. Among them we highlight the following: the expansion of enrollment in all levels and modalities of the system; diversification of institutional types, functions and funding sources; the growing presence of private investment in the supply, the strategic partnerships between universities, corporations and the public sector (consortium); coordination initiatives at national and regional levels; interaction between institutions, stakeholders and civil society organizations; decentralization and regionalization of public and private supply, strategic planning, assessment and accountability, mechanism to assure academic quality; academic reform, curricular flexibility and distance learning forms (Rodríguez Gómez, 2005: 88).

Each of these reforms was spread in Latin American countries through enforcement mechanisms and with the conviction of international credit organizations that if the solution had been successful for one country, it could solve the problems for all the rest. However, the variety of results achieved by such reform proposal in the American continent, in general, and in the Southern Cone in particular, proved the fallacy of this reasoning. The abundant literature on structural reforms in Latin America, explains the importance that domestic factors acquired when it comes to designing and implementing a global idea (Torre, 1998). Another conclusion reached by these studies refers to results, noting that while these reforms put “order” in the national educative systems, they failed to resolve structural problems related to access, equity and financial resources, which were identified as the reason for reform (García Gaudilla 2005; Segreña, 2004, Rama, 2006).

II. HE in the processes of regional integration and their contribution to the global debate

The idea of internationalizing higher education was not new to regions. All countries had a long record of cooperation agreements between them, even before the formation of the bloc. The novelty introduced by new regionalism to this debate in the 1990s refers more to the idea of transnationalizing HE in an enlarged space, promoting the articulation between academic and professional training with the demands of regional productive sectors and the competitive insertion in the global market promoted by the WTO.

In this sense, it is possible to identify the regional blocs as new actors in the debate and in the global diffusion of the reform. The cases analyzed here exhibit points of convergence and difference. Among the former, the progress reached over the following three policy areas stands out: mobility programs, the accreditation of studies and the establishment of a regional educational area. Differences, however, are reflected in the agents for change: while in the EU the regional authority is the one that leads the process, in NAFTA and ASEAN, companies and public universities took the initiative respectively.

a. The European Union

Higher education was not part of the early agenda of the bloc but rather was incorporated later during the 1980s. The first intervention took place in 1987 and it focused on student mobility through the Erasmus Program, whose main goal was to promote the idea of European citizenship¹¹. It was the first comprehensive action taken towards inter-university cooperation that sought not only to promote the learning of the host country's culture, but also above all to build a community sense of belonging and cohesion among students from different European countries (Barros de Barros, 2009).

The initiative was brought to the European Commission by an academic network of regional scope, the AEGEE¹², and it was embraced by the European Commissioner for Education, Manuel Marín, and the socialist presidents of France and Spain – François Mitterrand and Felipe González – who sponsored its incorporation into the official programs of the European Union. The implementation of this program was conducted by the Directorate-General for Education and Training - a branch of the Directorate-General

¹¹ The Erasmus program offers students the opportunity to live and pursue their studies for a period of three to twelve months in another European country. These studies are computed and recognized as part of the curriculum at their home university. Since its creation until today, this program has mobilized around 2 million students and 140 thousand academic personnel. The program currently involves 90% of all higher education institutions in the EU, which is equivalent to 3150 universities in 31 countries. The annual budget required for the implementation of this program is € 400 million (Barros de Barros, 2009).

¹² European Students' Forum (Association des Etats Généraux des Etudiants de l'Europe) is the largest student interdisciplinary organization of Europe and was created in 1985. It is a nonprofit organization, with no links to any political party, which is devoted to promote cooperation, communication and integration among young Europeans and has volunteers spread through 241 cities across Europe.

for Education and Culture of the European Commission – which is responsible for managing and proposing new initiatives on the subject.

Over time the Erasmus program expanded its scope. In 1995 it was integrated into a larger educative plan called *Socrates* that in addition to student mobility promoted exchanges of information and experience on design and implementation of educative reforms among countries in the region. One of its achievements was the establishment of the European Credit Transfer System; a fundamental tool that allows students to validate the knowledge acquired abroad in their home universities.

The implementation of the Socrates program was divided into three parts and incentives to ease the harmonization process were provided in each of them. In the first phase (1995-1999), about 200 transnational cooperation projects were incorporated into the Erasmus program that sought to promote networking between the departments of different universities through academic mobility, large-scale curricular innovation and a full recognition of studies and grades throughout the EU. In the second phase (2000-2006) the budget was increased to €1.850 million as well as its coverage, totaling eight different regional areas in education policy. During this period, the program placed more emphasis on teaching staff exchanges, in the establishment of a credit validation system that would allow taking similar courses in different countries, transnational curricular development and in pan-European thematic networks. Currently, the Socrates plan is in its third phase (2007-2013) and is called LLL (Lifelong Learning).

Though academic mobility was the first step taken towards European integration in the field of HE, it was not the only one. In 1998 a quality leap took place thanks to the Bologna process, which resulted in a further development of European HE: the accreditation of studies and the forming of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010¹³. The EHEA not only sought to homogenize all national higher education systems within the

¹³ The process begun with the signing of the Sorbonne Declaration between the Ministers of Education of Europe's four major countries (Germany, France, Britain and Italy) who committed themselves to harmonize the architecture of the European Higher Education system. A year later, this agreement was endorsed in Bologna by 29 European Ministers of Education that agreed to launch the European Higher Education Area in 2010.

bloc, but also to place the EU ahead of competition with the United States in the global market as the *“most competitive and dynamic knowledge economy in the world before 2010, capable of ensuring sustainable economic growth accompanied by a quantitative and qualitative improvement of employment and greater social cohesion”* (Lisbon Declaration).

Among the substantive changes introduced by the Bologna process the following two stand out: the standardization of the accreditation system and the curricular adaptation towards a convergent model. For regional accreditation, the EC forced universities to adopt a legible and comparable certification system. The goal was not to homogenize the contents and knowledge of each degree, but to promote convergence in curricular terms (certifications) through three instruments. First, the adaptation of the curricular structure to the British system which is divided into only three cycles (degree, master and PhD), and which meant that many countries had to eliminate all intermediary degrees (as the distinction between diplomas and degrees). Second, the use of new technologies in teaching methodologies among teachers, avoiding traditional lectures and including a system of continuous evaluation and a pedagogy that is designed to focus on practical questions. Finally, a change in the funding system that would recapitalize the university promoting the diversification of income sources (student fees, private investments) and fostering universities, not states, to be responsible for their own funding.

The Bologna process was widely welcomed by EU governments and by extra-communitarian countries as well. To ensure this support, the European Commission made use of material benefits through inter-institutional cooperation programs, networking within and outside the region, and technical cooperation with other regions outside the bloc. Nevertheless, there was strong criticism over its content in favor of the commercialization of knowledge and because of the lack of democracy in its procedures. In this sense, the most consulted and influential sector in the decisions of the European Commission has been the private sector through the European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT) (Sanz Fernández, 2006).

Results, on the other hand, have not been homogeneous in all countries. In some of them, such as Spain, the reform was introduced quite late and by changing the university organic

law, passed in 2007. In the rest of Mediterranean countries – Italy, France and Greece – even though the reform was approved in advance, its implementation suffered delays and amendments by domestic lobbies.

b. NAFTA

As in the European Union, the issue of education was a constitutive part of this bloc's initial agenda. Signed in 1993 between Mexico, Canada and the United States, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is a "closed" type arrangement whose scope is limited to the free movement of goods, services and investments. However, the idea of regionalizing HE entered the regional debate in its two versions.

The first of them, the idea to transnationalize the buying and selling of educative services, was filtered into the governmental discussion through articles 11 and 12 which are related to the deregulation of investment items and the liberalization of cross-border trade in services respectively. Through the interpretation of these two standards, NAFTA paved the way for Canadian and American suppliers to invest in educative programs and short technical degrees on either side of the border thus meeting the requirements of industrial clusters (Aboites; 2004). While the attitude of the Mexican government during the negotiation was to establish clear restrictions on foreign direct investment (FDI) in education-related activities, once the treaty was signed it promoted changes in its own legislation to adapt to the new pro-market logic¹⁴.

In opposition to the European case where the reform process lay in the hands of governments, in NAFTA the internationalization agenda of HE, instead, was driven by the private sector related to services¹⁵ which, even before the agreement was implemented,

¹⁴ Among the rules that were substantially modified is Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution that guarantees the right to education; and the laws of foreign investment and general education (Arriaga Lemus, 1999).

¹⁵ Initially the presence of the private sector was small but with strong lobbying power, such as the American Council on Education (in the U.S.), the Director-General Condumex Group (on the Mexican side) and the presidents of Northern Telecom and the Max Bell Corporation (on the Canadian side). Over time, their presence and leadership was expanded at the expense of other sectors, which did not necessarily share this view of the market (Holland and Barker-Lebo, 2002).

organized a series of meetings with representatives from the government and the academic community. The first meeting was known as the Wingspread conference and took place in Racine, Wisconsin (USA) in 1992, the second in Vancouver (Canada) in 1993, and the last in Guadalajara (Mexico), in 1995. The mercantilist vision was promoted by service companies from the beginning of this discussion and was captured in the Wingspread declaration¹⁶ stating that education should be a tool to improve competitiveness by adapting the bloc's productive workforce and applied research to the needs of the global market.

The debate over these pro-market reforms was not conducted without any difficulties. Teacher unions from the three countries of the bloc gathered in a Coalition for the Defense of Public Education¹⁷ that regarded education as a fundamental social right and organized several protests against the reforms imposed by NAFTA (Arriaga Lemus, 1999). In spite of these protest demonstrations, the Wingspread Declaration succeeded in setting down two initiatives that sought to promote academic mobility. The first was called *Regional Academic Mobility Program (RAMP)*. The RAMP was originally envisioned as a pilot test and had a subsidy from the FIPSE (*Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education*) which belongs to the Department of Education of the United States. This program was essentially a grant contest for students run jointly by the three governments.

International cooperation between universities would take the form of consortiums, each consisting of 6 or 9 universities (two or three in each of the three NAFTA countries). The first year was devoted to establishing a memorandum of understanding between the institutions of the consortium; and after the second year academic and student exchanges were supposed to get started. Each university was compelled to accept students from the other two countries and to refuse demanding the payment of an additional fee. The

¹⁶ The document emphasizes five main goals: modernizing higher education by removing "obstacles and reducing barriers to enhance trilateral cooperation in the field of higher education (sic)" what could be read as privatization; promoting university internationalization through student mobility programs; improving academic quality starting with the collaboration between academic institutions, public authorities, business sector and other organizations with an interest in higher education; increasing the efficiency of institutions; promoting the use of media technology, such as distance learning, interactive video communication, which are regarded as support tools for the aforementioned initiatives.

¹⁷Its creation dates back to January 1993 (about the same date of the Wingspread meeting) when it was summoned a Conference at the Job Training Center in Olympia, Washington (Leahy, 2007).

implementation of this program also demanded curricular changes in the universities that were part of the consortium. Among the changes were the evaluation system of student performance which reproduced the principles and the scheme of the credit transfer system designed by the European Union.

After three years as a pilot program, the governments decided to launch the second initiative called *North American Mobility Program*, currently known as the *Program for North American Mobility in Higher Education*. This phase had two new features - firstly the number of courses was expanded. While initially these exchange programs were restricted to engineering, business and environmental studies, in this new phase additional disciplines were also included. Secondly, the governments of Canada and Mexico got more actively involved in these regional efforts by providing funds and participating in its management¹⁸.

Over time these changes became permanent and the mobility policies forced governments, as in the EU, to make changes in the system of degree accreditation. However, in the case of NAFTA, the goal was not to standardize national structures but to create accreditation institutions where there was no¹⁹. In this sense, the literature indicates that, even though university education in Canada was public, the transfer was routed exclusively to Mexico and – in contrast to the EU – there were neither material incentives nor learning mechanisms for its diffusion.

In terms of results, NAFTA introduced two major changes: on the one hand it included the private sector in university management, which had previously enjoyed autonomy. Now a

¹⁸ Indeed, while the RAMP was unilaterally financed by the U.S. government, the NAMP was settled trilaterally and jointly administered by FIPSE, Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) and the Directorate of University Development of the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP in Spanish) of Mexico. Something similar happened with the first scholarship contest of the NAMP held in 1995 which, during the first years of the program, was funded by the U.S. However from 2001 the contributions from the governments of Mexico and Canada reached exceeded that of U.S.

¹⁹ In both the United States and Canada, accreditation was compulsory and pre-existed NAFTA. In both countries the accreditation of diplomas and degrees requires the submission of examinations for obtaining the license in order to exercise a professional activity once the diploma had been issued. This process of evaluation and accreditation is made by professional associations through their accreditation or certification schools

tripartite institution –government, academia and industry – leads university education where higher education institutions are a small part of the management structure and perform an instrumental role (Aboites, 2005)²⁰. On the other, it included a system of evaluation and accreditation for both undergraduate and postgraduate studies. The system, however, is not managed by the civil society, as it occurs in the rest of the bloc, but by the state, which attests the quality and reliability of a professional or postgraduate. In this regard, it is worth noting that the quality and accreditation criteria implemented by the Mexican state to the transnational supply are lax. (Didou Aupetti, 2002)²¹.

c. ASEAN

As in the previous examples the formation of ASEAN in 1992 led to the inclusion of HE on the governments' agenda. The peculiarity of the case is that it was born out of a joint effort between UNESCO and the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) who had been working since the mid-60s in favor of inter-university cooperation²². A second peculiarity of ASEAN is that the process started, unlike in the previous two cases, with initiatives related to accreditation, and then moved onto partial attempts at academic mobility and the building of a regional area to vie for global positioning.

In terms of quality assurance, the first steps taken aimed at establishing a university network that, through a Secretariat (based in Bangkok at Chulalongkorn University), would

²⁰ The influence of the American model over the Mexican is manifested, among other things, in the participation of the private sector and domestic and foreign entrepreneurs in the management of higher education. This form of government-business coordination is present in all the levels of higher education, from concrete institutions (the Directory Board of technologic universities), right up to national institutions devoted to the planning of higher education (CONPLES). In the middle we find incentives for university-industry linkages both national and foreign, training agreements for companies' staff, the use of university labs a personnel in industry-led projects and the emergence of university institutions (Aboites, 2004, p 60).

²¹ The national law that legislates this dates from 1993 and through its art. 5 it is allowable with respect to the private sector, which transnational providers ascribe to (Didou Aupetti.pág 17).

²² SEAMEO is an international organization established in 1965 by the Ministers of Education of Southeast Asian countries. Among its contributions is the establishing in the 1970s of the *Regional Institute of Higher Education and Development* (RIHED) – that sought to promote the training of specialists with the help of UNESCO. In 1985 it was reorganized into SEAMEO-RIHED and is currently engaged in political tasks, planning and administration of higher education in ASEAN.

be responsible for assessing universities and managing different cooperation programs – for example exchange, scholarships and research programs and for managing information. It also included managing the ASEAN Virtual University, administered from Manila, which launched the ASEAN's first study program.

At first, the evaluation was seen as an internal requirement by the universities to improve their performance. However, over time and as a result of the growth of student mobility programs, assessment became a sine-qua non-condition. That was when universities first, and governments later, created networks responsible for disseminating and sharing good practices and promoting voluntary processes for grading harmonization at regional level.

By the year 2000 the ASEAN University Network (AUN) organized the *Quality Assurance Alliance* (AUN-QA) that incorporated a group of Chief Quality Officers elected by the universities themselves to explicitly develop discussion workshops and to disseminate good practices that promote harmonization of educational standards in the region (APEID / UNESCO, 2006). Years later, in 2008, SEAMEO-RIHED, in collaboration with the Malaysian Qualifications Agency, decided to change this mechanism and establish a network of quality assessment called AQAN ASEAN (ASEAN Quality Assurance Network). The main difference between the AUN QA and the system developed by SEAMEO-RIHED is that the former aims to promote these criteria at the level of higher education institutions, while the latter does it at the level of national quality assessment agencies (Aphijanyatham, 2010).

Thus far there is less progress in student mobility in ASEAN. Initially launched in 2008, it covered only three countries: Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand (*M-I-T*). This pilot test was managed by national agencies of higher education in each of the three countries and the SEAMEO – RIHED, and was restricted to just five undergraduate disciplines considered of regional interest: Agriculture, Language and Culture, Hospitality and Tourism, International Business and Science and Food Technology. While this first initiative aimed to establish a regional infrastructure to help develop a workforce with intercultural experience and to respond to the individual needs of the countries of the region, it is still only in the beginning stages. In this sense, Aphijanyatham (2010) points out the need to

expand to other countries and building its own credit transfer system, since the one used so far, the *University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific Credit Transfer System* (UCTS) is a copy of the European model without any adaptation. In this direction, in 2010, SEAMEO-RIHED launched a new student mobility program reaching, in this case, the whole of Southeast Asia.

The last SEAMEO-RIHED initiative that is worth highlighting is its progress towards the creation of the *Southeast Asian Higher Education Area* (SEA-HEA), which, like the European system, would involve the mobility and accreditation of a total of 10 thousand institutions and 41 million students of higher education in the region. However, unlike the Bologna process, it is intended to harmonize national standards, rather than impose a “superior” standard. In this sense, it is important to note the difference between the concept of standardization that subscribes to a single scheme as in the case of regional standard in the EU and NAFTA, with the idea of harmonization which is based on finding comparability and coordination between different national systems, preserving the cultural identity and diversity of each country (as reflected in each education system).

III. The peculiarities of MERCOSUR

So far we have analyzed the scope of HE reforms on both global and regional levels. Before we move onto the peculiarities of MERCOSUR vis-à-vis other blocs, we will describe the situation that each member country was in, in terms of the scope of unilateral reforms sponsored by the WB at the national level prior to the formation of the bloc in 1992. It should be noted that the regional discussion and its implementation would not only involve MERCOSUR full members – Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay – but also its commercial partners (+ Chile and Bolivia).

a. Backgrounds

If we assume that the educative reforms of the 1990s were basically set out on two consecutive processes – privatization (deregulation) and accreditation (quality control) – the main differences between South American countries are posed in terms of accreditation

and the level of institutionalization achieved²³. While the policies of the opening of tenders (private or decentralized) were implemented in all countries of the region, accreditation policies only came to fruition in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica and Cuba (García Guardilla, 2005). However there were differences between them, in terms of background and scope.

Of them all, Brazil was the only one with previous experience in the area. In the 1960s/70s it created an institution – *la Cordinacão para o Aprofundamento da Educação Superior* (CAPES) – for the assessment of postgraduate degrees. Therefore, the 1990s reform updated and extended its scope to undergraduate degrees and institutions. Additionally, evaluation mechanisms for official accreditation were included and delegated to two public agencies (the Secretariat for Higher Education of the Ministry of Education (SESUS) and the National Institute for Educative Research (INEP). This accreditation incorporated an external evaluation and a national quality review exam called “*Prova*”.

In Argentina, however, accreditation came in the 1990s with the creation of the Secretariat of University Policies (1993) which called for a voluntary evaluation process for all postgraduate degrees that was widely accepted by the academic community. With the 1995 Higher Education Act (N24521) this process became institutionalized and mandatory for all levels of higher education (undergraduate, tertiary and postgraduate). To this end the CONEAU (an autonomous institution) was created as a branch of the Ministry of Education and made up of 12 experts appointed by the National Executive and proposed by a group of university presidents and national legislators. As in Brazil, the evaluation not only includes an instance of self-assessment but also an instance of external assessment whose input is required.

Democracy was restored to Chile in 1991 and the government inherited an evaluation mechanism that was established by the 1990 Constitutional Education Law (LOCE) that entrusted to an independent body (the Higher Education Council, HEC) the evaluation of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees created since 1981. Subsequently, in 1998 a

²³ While countries such as Chile, Argentina, Brazil and Colombia decided to translate the reform in a national law that would ensure continuity over time, other countries decided to leave it to the decision of the government in power.

system of accreditation was created that, unlike the above, is voluntary and run by two special commissions (the National Undergraduate Accreditation Commission – NUAC – and the Postgraduate Accreditation Commission – PAC) that are dependent on the National Executive, even though its members come from different organizations.

b. The scope of the regional agenda

All of the ideas that were spread globally in the 1990s on HE reform had an impact on MERCOSUR. However, they arrived at different times and with the help of different institutional actors. The first ones to arrive were the ideas of internationalization of HE which were brought by the ministers of education. On their own initiative and out of the bloc's institutional structure, the education ministers of the expanded MERCOSUR began meeting and agreed on an agenda for regional cooperation which identified three priority areas: basic education, technology and higher education. All of them, except technical education, showed progress²⁴ yet, without doubt, higher education advanced the most.

The proposal for the transnationalization of HE was brought to MERCOSUR by the ministers of foreign affairs and as a result of negotiations with the European Union that started in 1995 and aimed to create a bi-regional free trade area which would include, among other things, the liberalization of services (Botto & Peixoto, 2007). Although the foreign ministers, who along with the finance ministers controlled the higher decision-making body of MERCOSUR, initiated the issue, negotiations carried on rather ambiguously. While on the one hand, the Common Market Council approved MERCOSUR's Services Protocol²⁵ in 1997 to comply with the requirement imposed by the

²⁴ The most important is the one that assures the free movement of students between countries and the requirement of automatic enrollment in public institutions due to the immigration of parents. This agenda was accomplished through the recognition protocols at the regional level, but is now spreading across America. (<http://www.sicinep.gov.br>)

²⁵ This protocol promised to move gradually in liberalizing trade in services within the region, deregulating all services in its two basic modes, access and national treatment, within a period of ten years and largely followed the parameters set by the WTO at the global level.

EU – MERCOSUR was thought to speak with one voice – in fact its implementation was never achieved and was largely tied to the pace and success of negotiations with the EU.

The ideas of internationalization of HE soon became concrete proposals, although their approval and implementation was slower and cumbersome. The initiatives pointed in the same direction as the other blocs and as they were carried out simultaneously, it became very difficult to clearly identify the leadership of one or the other. Differences, however, were due to the priorities given to some agendas and/or the instruments chosen to carry them out. In this sense, in both MERCOSUR and ASEAN the accreditation agenda was given preference over mobility. The programs were basically two and succeed each other in time. In 2002 a pilot program known as the Experimental Mechanism of Accreditation (MEXA) was launched and it included the evaluation of three degrees: medicine, engineering and agriculture. In 2006 the program known as University Degree Accreditation System (ARCU-SUR in Spanish) for the recognition of degrees expanded its scope to all states partners and new degrees, such as veterinary, nursing, odontology, and architecture²⁶. ARCU-SUR aspired to convert the accreditation into a permanent and binding mechanism in the region to all levels of higher education.

The purpose of the accreditation policy in MERCOSUR was to harmonize national systems seeking the comparability of degrees through a common quality seal without intervening in defining curriculum, teaching methods and/or evaluation systems; but rather to ensure respect for national legislations and the university autonomy in each country. In this sense, the way to set up quality criteria was quite different from the EU and NAFTA. While in the latter national systems were forced to adjust themselves to the system considered most competitive, in MERCOSUR the quality criteria would be developed in advance by regional experts – on the basis of curricular profile, teachers' quality and the number of graduates among others things– and applied to each of the degrees participating in the evaluation process. With regard to funding, this process resulted in being much more expensive than the above since it required a process of exchange and dialogue through

²⁶ In the RME XXXIII (Montevideo, November 9, 2007) the Memorandum of Understanding for the Creation and Implementation of ARCO-SUR was approved and became an Agreement between the countries through the resolution N° 17/08 of Common Market Group (CMG).

meetings and workshops nationally and regionally, with travel expenses and professional fees paid out of the accounts of states and national universities.

With regard to academic mobility, two consecutive proposals were also designed and confined to the group of degrees accredited by MEXA and ARCU-SUR respectively: first, the Regional Academic Mobility Program for Accredited Degrees (MARCA in Spanish) and second the MERCOSUR Mobility Program (PMM in Spanish). In both cases, the goal was to create inter-institutional cooperation networks that would help improving the teaching quality, promote joint research, help to adapt management and institutional infrastructure to the needs of foreign students; and finally, to promote mutual understanding of languages and cultures. As for funding, it was originally thought to be provided by the states, yet in practice it was from the beginning strongly tied to and conditioned upon funding and technical support from the EU, whose technicians also participated in its design and implementation²⁷.

The third and final focus of the work of the Meeting of Ministers of Education (RME in Spanish) on higher education – inter-institutional cooperation – was poorly developed. Although there were enough proposals for joint action²⁸, autonomous and permanent funding lacked at the regional level. In 2004 governments agreed to create the Education Fund of MERCOSUR (FEM in Spanish) which was formally established in 2010 when Brazil made effective its contribution. The budget is a small fund formed mainly by the contributions of the member and associated states of MERCOSUR, in addition to incomes, extraordinary contributions by third parties, other organizations and the private sector. The contribution of each state mirrors the logic of the Structural Compensation Fund of

²⁷ As an example, the PPM was developed based on a diagnosis made by regional officials (from the CRC-ES) and experts from the European Union which, between the months of September and October 2005, visited the institutions of higher education of four member countries. In terms of funding, from the current budget (2012) that is being handled for this policy, 75% ran on behalf of the U.S. and the rest by the interests left by the FEM (interview with an official in charge of university affairs of the Ministry of Education from Argentina).

²⁸ It is not that it lacked initiatives, among them was the creation and a regional postgraduate specialization course “Agricultural Production and Integration” (Resolution 02/93 of the RME) or the creation of a regional teaching and research center for Meteorology based in Uruguay (CRC-ES 2005).

MERCOSUR (FOCEM in Spanish) where richer countries are those that contribute more, and its administration is in charge of the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF)

To conclude the policy mapping in HE, in 2007 the RME incorporated into the agenda the idea of creating a Regional Area of Higher Education (RAHE) in line with other regional blocs. However, while in the rest of the regional blocs the RAHE is regarded as a space for the projection of accreditation and mobility policies towards the transnationalization of HE at the regional level, in MERCOSUR the initiative was reduced to the internationalization of HE through the creation of an Institute for Advanced Studies²⁹.

c. The implementation

Of all work areas, the only one that really generated positive results and showed progress was the accreditation policy: MEXA was implemented in the period 2002-2006 through consecutive calls while ARCU-SUR was launched in 2008 and is currently underway.

Just as in the previous stage (agenda), policy-making lay in the hands of political officials (the RME and the Regional Coordinating Committee of Higher Education (CRC-ES in Spanish)). The implementation of both initiatives was in charge of the National Accreditation Agencies (NAA) which, as noted above, takes different names in each country (CONEAU in Argentina, CAPES and CONAES in Brazil, and CAF in Chile)³⁰. National officials meet at the regional level in the Meeting of National Accreditation Agencies (RANA in Spanish). The REM had created RANA in 2002 and its role was to serve as an intermediary body between the RME and the NAA, taking charge to convene various national experts and technicians in the so-called Consultative Committees, which are conducted in an *ad hoc* fashion, according to the discipline, and develop quality criteria. This was combined with the implementation of an evaluation process and lastly, the creation and maintenance of an updated evaluators' database for the region.

²⁹ For the design of RAHE a high level group was created composed of national delegates. The proposal by the representative of Brazil was to create an Institute for Advanced Study of MERCOSUR, the creation of a University of Latin American Integration (UNILA), which failed to gain quorum. Instead of deepening these initiatives, Brazil decided to move unilaterally by creating the IMEA.

³⁰ Most of these national agencies were, as we saw earlier, part of a new public structure, which acted with considerable autonomy and was composed of a group of recently hired officials, with an academic background and a technical management task.

While eligibility and accreditation criteria were defined at the regional level – the MERCOSUR seal – the epicenter of the process was taking place at the national level. In each country, the NAA is the one that convenes all national universities to participate in the accreditation process and apply such criteria. The process of accreditation consisted of three stages: self-assessment (by the degree itself); external evaluation (carried out by the Peer Committee); and the accreditation resolution (in charge of the National Accreditation Agency). The accreditation would be valid for six years and would be recognized by all MERCOSUR Member States and Associated countries (which adhere to the agreement).

Unlike other initiatives of HE, the process steadily progressed not least because of the presence of NAA technicians and a small group – no more than 80 non-governmental expert consultants, mostly coming from the local academic world – that formed together epistemic networks with strong personal ties. These networks managed to overcome selfish and chauvinist visions from national bureaucracies, which dominated the intergovernmental structure of MERCOSUR. Of all the countries of the bloc, the CONEAU of Argentina provided real leadership in these learning processes and regional training, transferring knowledge and financing workshops, mobilizing people, and sometimes through regional or bilateral agreements within MERCOSUR (Chile, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Venezuela) and UNASUR (Ecuador).

Nevertheless, the implementation of these initiatives was not free from obstacles and difficulties. The first of them was the resistance from private national lobbies, especially public universities and Brazilian professional chambers that, far from contributing to the consolidation of the process at the regional level, ended up limiting its scope and initial goals. In this sense, the MERCOSUR seal was restricted to academic training and performance, excluding its legality in the field of professional competence³¹. The second

³¹ In this sense, the only progress made by MERCOSUR in terms of the harmonization of postgraduate degrees materialized in the mutual recognition through the signing of protocols (such as Educational Integration Protocol on the Recognition of University Degrees for Pursuing Postgraduate Studies in Universities of MERCOSUR countries and the Educational Integration Protocol for the Training of Human Resources at the postgraduate level in the countries of MERCOSUR (Resolution 02/95 RME) and regional building programs. In this sense, three axes are mentioned: the partnership programs between the strongest and weaker postgraduates, the mobility of students and the association for research projects (SEM-work program 2011-2015)

was the decision to not include postgraduate degrees in the regional accreditation process³². In this case, resistance was put up by both Brazil and Argentina, although for different reasons. While in the case of Brazil opposition was in line with the interest for unlinking academia from the labor market, Argentina rejected it because it would have implied reproducing in the regional level something that has already been implemented at the national level and thus duplicating limited resources. It should be noted that Brazil's resistance remains today through different mechanisms of obstruction, such as the delay in meeting the deadlines established in the ARCU-SUR schedule; the designation of technicians and officials unconnected to the networks with expertise in the subject³³; and/or the refusal to comply with the protocols signed and regulated by the national executive itself³⁴.

The second obstacle arose from the lack of financial mechanisms of regional scope that would ensure an equal implementation in all countries and regions of MERCOSUR. Consequently, the economic asymmetries between MERCOSUR countries were quickly exposed. While it was expected that the state would assume the costs in all countries, the absence of a regional fund ended up tipping the balance in favor of richer countries. This was the case of Argentina and Brazil, where funding was entirely public, in contrast to Paraguay, Uruguay and Chile where due to the lack of a public budget, funds came from universities and the private sector. These internal imbalances reflected in the numbers: from a total of 267 accredited degrees in 2012, 167 were Argentine, 18 Uruguayan and 7 from Paraguay.

The result was not even between accredited degrees. By the end of 2006, about 62 degrees were said to be accredited, of which 19 corresponded to agronomy, 29 to engineering, and

³³ Since the beginning of the process, representatives from the Ministry of Education and the CONAES participated in the meetings of the RANA; however recently they have been replaced by technicians from the INAES unfamiliar with the practices of the institution (interview with an official from the Ministry of Education of Argentina, October 2012).

³⁴ This resistance is usually explained by the visions and disagreements between the various agencies and departments of state, as it happened with the decree requiring the recognition of postgraduate studies taken abroad, which, despite having been signed by Lula, it was never implemented (interview with an official from CONEAU, September 2012)

14 to medicine. In terms of MARCA, 130 students were recorded (Acta Belo Horizonte, November 24th 2006). Six years later (late 2012) numbers showed significant progress: 267 accredited degrees and a total of 800 students with scholarships for studying abroad.

Beyond numbers and internal asymmetries, the accreditation process helped raise quality criteria at regional level. All universities, regardless of their origin, learned from this experience the importance of developing an institutional and permanent project and a training plan for both teachers and administrative staff management (Hermo, 200: 81). Countries also managed to harmonize their differences and break down historical prejudices and mistrust between them about the quality of education in countries coming from very different academic traditions. This process not only helped to harmonize the region but also within each member country, adding and disciplining universities and degrees, which until then were opposed to the unilateral accreditation process³⁵.

In the specific case of countries with fewer resources, such as Bolivia, Paraguay and Uruguay, the process did not manage to incorporate technical capabilities and resources within an area of public policy in which they had no experience. In the case of Paraguay it was created an Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education (ANEU). In Uruguay although they did not created a NAA, ad hoc commissions were organized and officials were trained so they could participate in the regional accreditation process. Certainly Bolivia is a special case since in 1995 created by law a national system of accreditation and measurement of educational quality (CONAMED) that was never implemented due to the opposition of universities that considered it an intrusion³⁶.

Conclusions

³⁵ This disciplining of regional diffusion mechanisms were evidenced in the case of the Agronomy degree of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), who refused to join the process of accreditation that was being conducted nationwide because it considered an interference in the university autonomy. However, UBA eventually had to accept the accreditation process in order to obtain the seal MERCOSUR and thus not be excluded from the regional competition for incentive and public and private resources. (interview with an official from CONEAU, September 2012)

³⁶ The coordinators of universities create their own parallel mechanism (autonomous system of evaluation and accreditation) and perform evaluations and accreditations in parallel (Hermo, 2006).

In this paper we set out to analyze the impact of MERCOSUR on the diffusion of reform ideas in the region using the tools provided to us by the study of the global spreading of public policies and the comparative experience of other regional integration processes. The conclusions that we draw are that regions matter and they exert their influence on the diffusion of transnationalization and internationalization ideas that were fashionable in the 1990s. However, there are differences in the way they do so depending on the characteristics of the process and the dominant political culture in each member country.

In MERCOSUR, as in the rest of the integration processes studied here, both global ideas of internationalization and transnationalization converge. In each case the political networks and institutional spaces that were used differed greatly. In the transnationalization, these ideas are promoted from global and regional forums, such as the WTO and the negotiations for establishing free trade agreements with the European Union and the United States through the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and reach the region through the actions of the ministers of foreign affairs gathered in the Common Market Council. In the case of internationalization ideas, they are in turn spread by the ministers of education of expanded MERCOSUR.

In all these processes of integration, internationalization, or better said, regionalization of HE is an issue unrelated to the initial objectives of regional integration and appear more or less simultaneously, with the exception of student mobility that is included by the EU in order to promote European identity. In all cases, the regionalization proposal materializes through two major initiatives: student mobility and the accreditation of degrees, a sine-qua non condition in order to ensure the recognition of credits earned in other countries of the region.

Differences appear instead when we compare the different experiences in terms of the actors that drive the reform (driving forces) and scope thereof. As for the former, differences exist between the European and Latin American process, where the effort for reform is led by the states. Regarding processes like NAFTA and ASEAN the leading role is performed by private actors involved in educational management, namely private companies and universities. As for their scope, differences arise between northern blocs,

where the advances are realized equally in accreditation and mobility agendas, while in the southern blocs, mobility loses centrality and importance in favor of the agenda of degrees accreditation.

MERCOSUR however, presents some peculiarities that differentiate it from the rest. The main peculiarity refers to the presence of strong national resistance that hinder the implementation of the initial objectives for vocational training and its productive articulation into the regional market, as it occurs or is likely to occur in the other regions. Faced with this resistance from professional lobbyists and university institutions, the accreditation process managed to progress in terms of the harmonization of accreditation experiences in the region, creating institutional capacities and resources in countries with smaller economies who had no experience and whose unilateral reform processes did not foresee these internal quality mechanisms. These advances are mainly due to the possibilities that this policy generated in contrast to others, in terms of epistemic networking formed by new bureaucracies that arise in the heat of unilateral reforms and by experts from the private sector.

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