Enhacing Quality Across Borders –
Regional Cooperation in Quality Assurance in Hiuer Education
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Notes

1. The most part of the higher education quality evaluation and accreditation agencies in the world were created since 1970 and, the great majority, during the 90´s (See Appendix I)

2. The starting schemes about the evaluation and accreditation processes are similar (technical, methodological and legitimacy schemes), as well as subsequent modifications and innovations that have been introduced, first as a result of the implementation processes; second by the effects of changing scale, from national to regional and global in the search of mutual confidence among the spaces assessing higher education quality; and finally, in the recent years, as a consequence of the efforts towards the formal recognition of the quality of both degrees and institutions, and of course, the agencies which guarantee those qualities.

We can identify four stages in the definition of quality assurance mechanisms and the evaluation and accreditation practice:

- **STARTING AND BASIC SCHEMES**
- **ADJUSTMENTS BEFORE THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS**
- **REGIONAL SCHEMES**
- **ADJUSTMENTS FOR THE MUTUAL FORMAL RECOGNITION**

3. **STARTING SCHEMES**. A survey of the agencies' starting schemes shows, for the evaluation and accreditation processes, the following common components:

Contextualized Self-Evaluation

The processes begin with an institutional self-evaluation of the universities, their academic units or programs. These are carried on within the guidelines established by the agencies, with the previous agreement of the institutional or disciplinary spaces.
The guidelines and the self-evaluations give to the agencies an array of contextualized interpretations.
On one hand, the interpretations which arise from the debates about the design of self-evaluation guidelines (institutional, educational programs) On the other hand, those which stem from the application of such guidelines (singularities relating capacities and conditions within territorial, institutional and academic contexts where the higher education spaces are located)

Peer review evaluation

After the self-evaluation follows an external evaluation with the participation of peer evaluator committees trained to the task.
Besides having the external evaluation instruments, the agencies use a register of experts coming from the universities and different fields of knowledge. Indeed:
- It has been defined the criteria to be part of the register;
- The agencies have instruments and a staff of professionals to both search and select peer evaluators, and also to train them.
- It has been set confidentiality rules and codes of ethic.

Final Report Publication

Once the external evaluation is finished, and after sending the report to the institutions in order to receive their formal response, the agencies write the final reports and published them.
The agencies have report formats and publicity rules on the disclosure of specific information.

Development and publication of the evaluating instruments

The agencies develop instruments and mechanisms to carry out the evaluations. They need phases of elaboration, legitimation, adjust and diffusion in order to contribute to an evaluation culture and achieving the stakeholders involvement. To those agencies with diverse evaluation typologies, it is required assessing the consistency among the instruments.

Production of information

The agencies have systems for surveying, processing, diffusing and preserving the information. Those systems range from computer developments for self-evaluations to systems devised to monitor the evaluated cases; from the internet searching of accredited programs to the generation of strategic reports to the peer review committees.
The stock of information about the system is huge and strategically useful.

Cooperation among the agencies

The reticular character of the university's world and, namely, its legitimacy, leads the agencies to interact with other agencies since their beginnings or since their conception.
It is usual to find in the antecedents of the evaluation processes the relationship between the agencies, not only from the same region countries but also from very distant ones.

4. **ADJUSTMENTS BEFORE THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS**

As a result of the implementation of the evaluation processes and the encounter of programs and institutions with the "real world", the major part of the agencies incorporate innovation.

Continuous improvement of the evaluated units

The standards at stake, after the evaluation practice, have not admitted the only existence of binary answers such as "accomplished/ not accomplished" Structural reasons and principles of pertinence observed through contextual interpretations, add the possibility of improvement to the binary answer. The agencies not only accredit the achievement of a threshold of quality, but also, in many times, they accredit the real possibilities to achieve it.
Although it is true that the younger agencies have included such a principle since their inception (because of the light shed by other experiences), for the older agencies this change was substantive. The evaluation practices were adjusted: the self-evaluations included an exhaustive chapter devoted to the improvements to achieve the quality threshold; the technical analysis adds to the "ex post" approach, the necessary "ex ante" approach for the design of an improvement plan for the future; the systems have to incorporate monitoring components of the improvement plan; etc.

Validation of instruments and indicators

The implementation of the evaluation shows room for subjectivity. In order to diminish it and ensure equity in the processes, the great majority of the agencies have introduced adjustments to both instruments and indicators. Likely, one of the most relevant facts is the incorporation of the "consistency meeting" among the peer evaluator committees.
However, what is special it is not the adjustment of instruments and indicators but the change in their legitimacy after have been discussed by the most relevant groups in the field and have been applied in the real context where the programs and institutions function.

The incorporation of foreign peer evaluators

Once again, the reticular character of the University and the professions promotes the incorporation of peer evaluators from abroad as a means of the progressive legitimacy of the national academic quality in foreign academic environments.
Moreover, the evaluation practice shed light over certain "corporative behaviors" among groups of both scholars and institutions. In order to temperate them, the register of experts has been expanded through the inclusion of foreign peer evaluators.

Reports on the State of the Evaluation — Impact Analysis

As a consequence of the progressive involvement of institutions and programs in the evaluation and accreditation processes, it was required from the federal administration and some academic groups, the production of reports on the state of the evaluations as a whole.

It is usual, indeed, to observe the agencies requiring the services of scholars or research groups in order to a better use and interpretation of the information arising from the evaluation processes – in general, under strict confidentiality clauses.

As in the former cases, although these reports are new contributions to a better understanding of the system, their sole existence does not make them special, but the way people use the reports. For instance, some funding programs have been created from these general reports and, therefore, it is common to use the results of accreditation for the distribution of scholarships or agreements between the federal government and the university. Also, it is clear that the evaluation and the accreditation create a new negotiation scale within the universities, under the sole presence of the evaluation report. The state and impact reports allow contextualizing the changes promoted by different academic groups.

National Evaluation and accountability of the agencies

Through the advances in the implementation of the processes of evaluation and accreditation, new demands to the actions of the agencies were producing. The perpetual question "¿Who evaluates the evaluator?" should be answered. It is common the accountability reports delivered by the agencies under the request from university association, ministries or external funding bodies

5. REGIONAL SCHEMES

A new turn to the agencies actions have occurred after the advances in the international cooperation between agencies, the interchange of evaluators, the effect of international paths within professions and universities, and the students and young professionals' expectations on international mobility.

Agencies Networks

The agencies have been joining to preexisting networks and have created new ones. Through the networks, in addition to the strengthening of the international cooperation and the interchange of information and the new experiences among agencies, it was achieved a differential position to the region since the ease of the assessment of the evaluation processes and the institutions which conduct them, and the organization and creation of new systems, agencies and bodies of evaluation and accreditation of higher education in those countries without them.

Likewise, these efforts to compare qualifications and quality in higher education are the initial steps towards the progressive development of an

accrediting system in favor of the recognition of degrees and institutions of higher education.

This statement is clearer when it is read the mission, ends and characteristics of a network like, for example, RIACES:

- Red Iberoamericana para la Acreditación de la Calidad de la Educación Superior – RIACES. http://www.riaces.net/home.html
    - Characteristics
        - Association of agencies and bodies for quality assurance, promotion and improvement of higher education
        - Non profit Organization
        - Independent from any State
    - Ends:
        - To promote among Iberoamerican countries the cooperation and interchange for evaluation and accreditation of quality in higher education
        - To contribute to guarantee the quality of higher education among the countries of the region
        - Strategic axis of development and components:
        - Strengthening the agencies' actions towards the external recognition
            - Development of quality assurance mechanisms in the region
            - Creation of a regional clearinghouse
            - Professional staff development
        - Agencies actions and contents towards the regional integration
            - Development and program training
            - Peer evaluator training

Harmonization and Convergence of evaluation criteria

The agencies have progressed through the convergence of evaluation criteria exercises among countries.

Although it is usual that the convergence exercises do not involve modifications in national systems of evaluation and accreditation, they have promoted the revision and an effort for the harmonization in the entire practice of evaluation.

Moreover, the accreditation has its foundations in common quality criteria accorded among countries. They are explicit in the dimensions, components, criteria and indicators designed for the undergraduate program evaluation and the common definition in the graduate profile.

The transcendence of these actions was possible because of a triple legitimacy process: from the governments, from the agencies and from the academic and professional fields.

For instance,

- Experimental Accreditation Mechanism for MERCOSUR, Bolivia and Chile - MEXA

  Spanish: http://www.coneau.edu.ar/index.php?item=45&apps=80
  English: http://www.coneau.edu.ar/index.php?item=45&apps=80&idioma=en

Number of undergraduate programs evaluated by MEXA

	AGRONOMY	ENGINEERING	MEDICINE
ARGENTINA	5	6	3
BRAZIL	3	6	4
BOLIVIA	4	5	3
CHILE	5		
PARAGUAY	1	5	1
URUGUAY	1	5	

Harmonization and Convergence of the requirements and training for peer evaluators

All about the harmonization of norms and criteria for peer evaluators calls, selection and training deserve a special chapter.
The convergence exercises for higher education quality evaluation processes need agreements in the following definitions:
- The creation and maintenance of a peer evaluator register in the region;
- The basic and common requirements to be a peer evaluator within the register;
- The profiles of peer review committees;
- The evaluators training standards (contents and organization);
- The criteria to consider former evaluations;
- The definition of a code of ethics

International Evaluation of agencies

Through the progress of the evaluation and accreditation processes as well as the convergence exercises among countries, the need for international legitimacy of those actions was being apparent.

In this sense, some agencies are demanding their own evaluation within international criteria based on good practices related to qualified processes of university evaluation and accreditation. On this issue, our continent is less developed than Europe.

6. ADJUSTMENTS FOR THE MUTUAL FORMAL RECOGNITION

¿Are these actions enough for the mutual recognition of degrees?

In order to progress in the mutual recognition of degrees it is necessary not only to enhance both the assurance of good practice within the agencies and the general acceptance on the standard contents between the systems, but also it is relevant to take into account other aspects:

Program quality accreditation and the recognition

The relationship between quality accreditation and recognition varies among countries. This aspect has a double meaning. From the practice, those countries with regulative frameworks relating quality accreditation to recognition have a comparative advantage since they have not to develop and legitimate new changes in the regulations. However, the situation is clearly different in countries where the recognition is tied to accreditation than those where not.

Agencies' actual coverage

The evaluation and accreditation coverage is a key issue. An agency can have a perfect evaluative design as well as international recognized standards, but it is necessary the internal acceptance, in other words, an adequate percentage of the system involved into the evaluation and accreditation processes.

From this involvement depends how pertinent are the adjustments to the processes as a result of both the implementation devised and the scope of institutional, professional, and territorial context interpretation. Likewise, the coverage has direct effects over the intensity and extension of the convergence exercises and the international cooperation.

Frequency of evaluation and accreditation rounds

The legitimacy conferred through periodical evaluations to the processes of accreditation makes sense the quality improvement component. The accreditation of actual possibilities to achieve the established quality standard thresholds it is only feasible through periodical processes.

Transparency in the peer evaluator records within the register of experts

Publicity of peer evaluators background from the register of experts, beyond to make more transparent the process of meeting the admission requirements to be part of the register, bestows the evaluation and accreditation processes with a new dimension of legitimacy built on the reputation of the experts in their academic or professional field.

Relationship between quality assurance and the diffusion of recognized programs

The agencies endorsement over the list of recognized institutions and programs, that is published, constitutes an advanced step towards full transparence.
In this sense, it is important the agencies' active participation in the UNESCO's Portal on recognized higher education institutions and programs.

7. **CONCLUSION**

It is about the 20 issues corresponding to the Quality Guarantee Mechanisms and the Codes of Good Practices directly related to the evaluation and accreditation processes and the declared purpose of mutual degrees recognition.
It is clear the necessity to continue and reinforce the links among agencies and units responsible for the evaluation and accreditation, not only to enhance the mutual knowledge about the internal quality guarantee mechanisms in such spaces, but also in order to build a serious platform for the mutual recognition at regional scale to go beyond the experimental exercises, gathering the individual efforts carried on by each country and going in depth to the actual relevant learning outcomes certified by degrees, and the denomination and contents thereof.
Only from a careful scheme of educational integration, incremental and progressive, we can achieve the synergy between our quality evaluation experiences and the mutual recognition of degrees.

APPENDIX I. LATIN AMERICAN ACCREDITING AGENCIES

México — CIEES-1992
COPAES-2000

Cuba — JAN-2000

CENTROAMÉRICA
CCA
2003

Rep. Dominicana — ADAAC-1987

CdeA-1995 — El Salvador

CNA-2007 — Nicaragua

Venezuela — SEA-2001

SINAES-1999 — Costa Rica

SINAEVA — Panamá
En proceso

Brasil — CAPES-1951
INEP-2004

CNA-1992 — Colombia

CONEA-2002 — Ecuador

En proceso — Perú

CONAES - En proceso — Bolivia

Paraguay — ANEAES-2003

CSE-1990 — Chile
CNAP-1999

Uruguay — ME-1995

Argentina — CONEAU-1995

País	Sigla	Año	Nombre
Argentina	CONEAU	1995	Comisión Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación Universitaria
Bolivia	CONAES	en proceso	EL CONSEJO NACIONAL DE EVALUACIÓN Y ACREDITACIÓN DE LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR
Brasil	CAPES	1951	Coordenaçao de Aperfeiçomento de Pessoal de Nivel Superior
Brasil	INEP	2004	INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE ESTUDOS E PESQUISAS EDUCACIONAIS ANÍSIO TEIXEIRA
Centroamérica	CCA	2003	Consejo Centroamericano de Acreditación
Centroamérica	CSUCA-SICEVAES-SICAR	1962/1998	Consejo Superior Universitario Centroamericano
Chile	CNAP	1999	COMISIÓN NACIONAL DE ACREDITACIÓN DE PREGRADO
Chile	CSE	1990	El Consejo Superior de Educación
Colombia	CNA	1992	CONSEJO NACIONAL DE ACREDITACIÓN
Costa Rica	SINAES	1999	SISTEMA NACIONAL DE ACREDITACIÓN DE LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR
Cuba	JAN	2000	JUNTA DE ACREDITACIÓN NACIONAL
Ecuador	CONEA	2002	CONSEJO NACIONAL DE EVALUACIÓN Y ACREDITACIÓN DE LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR
El Salvador	ME-Sistema de Supervisión y Mejoramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior.	1995	Ministerio de Educación
España	ANECA	2001	AGENCIA NACIONAL DE EVALUACIÓN DE LA CALIDAD Y ACREDITACIÓN
México	CIEES	1992	Comités Interinstitucionales para la Evaluación de la Educación Superior
México	COPAES	2000	CONSEJO PARA LA ACREDITACIÓN DE LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR
Nicaragua	CNA	2007	CONSEJO NACIONAL DE UNIVERSIDADES
Panamá	SINAEVA	en proceso	Sistema Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación de las Universidades en Panamá
Paraguay	ANEAES	2003	AGENCIA NACIONAL DE EVALUACION Y ACREDITACIÓN DE LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR
Perú	AN	en proceso	Asamblea Nacional de Rectores
Perú	CAFME	1999	Comisión para la Acreditación de Facultades o Escuelas de Medicina Humana
Rep. Dominicana	ADAAC	1987	ASOCIACIÓN DOMINICANA PARA EL AUTO ESTUDIO Y LA ACREDITACIÓN
Uruguay	MCE	1995	Ministerio de Cultura y Educación
Venezuela	SEA	2001	SISTEMA DE EVALUACIÓN ACADÉMICA