Accreditation as an Incentive for Internationalization:
A South American Case Study

Pablo Landoni, Director of the Graduate School
Universidad Católica, Uruguay

Warren Roane, Director of Study Abroad Program in Montevideo
Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas.

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This paper will briefly look at the history and purposes of accreditation in the United States, examine its basic elements, and note its tendency to encompass ever-increasing geographic areas. We contrast those with the experience of Uruguay within MERCOSUR and its history of accreditation. In order to make this comparison across both regions, we focus on the negotiation of engineering standards.

U.S. HISTORY OF ACCREDITATION

Introduction

The United States is not the first country to implement or seek a mechanism of accreditation. A review of history shows that many universities in the Americas were founded by religious orders, with authorization of the Catholic Church. In France, the university was successful in its bid for some academic autonomy as early as 1231 when Pope Gregory IX issued a papal bull ending the dominance of the local bishop over the university (Lewis, 2003). What is intriguing about the U.S. system is that it has several overlapping layers of accreditation mechanisms and that its accreditation beginnings seem to be unclear.

Some scholars credit the formation of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges and the Southern Association of Schools in 1885 as the first of the regional accrediting bodies in the United States (Lewis, 2003). Others state that accreditation mattered very little before 1950, as accrediting bodies were made up of college officials "who sought merely to maintain academic vigor" (Sandefur, 2002). In other words, it was basically a movement by university leaders to insure admission of quality students. Prior to 1870, the University of Michigan sent faculty to certify each high school's ability to prepare students for higher education, and many other institutions later adopted this strategy (Shibley, 2004). Regardless of the date given for its origins, most scholars concur that the G.I. Bill contributed to the growth of the accreditation process, as federal funds required federal recognition (Eaton, 2003; National Association of Private Catholic and Independent Schools, 2004; Sandefur, 2002).

Other authors attest to the breadth of accrediting bodies, with Eaton (2003) counting as many as 80 recognized accrediting organizations which can be sorted into three types: national, regional, and specialized. Five national and six regional agencies accredit a variety of postsecondary institutions, including theological seminaries, distance education institutions, and for-profit institutions (Shibley, 2004). Another way to group these agencies is by focus: institutional and specialized. Institutional accreditors, such as regional accrediting agencies, examine the university as a whole educational institution, while specialized agencies evaluate specific programs (Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, 2004a). This expansion of mission is not just a phenomenon of U.S. accrediting agencies, as the management of accreditation has also shifted in Europe from "direct state control to non-government institutions" marking a "major change in European higher education" since the 1990s (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004, ix).

State and Regional

There is a trend to increase the geographic scope of accrediting agencies of both types, institutional and specialized. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, an example of a regional accrediting agency originally focused on the area from Texas to Virginia, now encompasses at least 18 Latin American countries, including all of those comprising the MERCOSUR (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2005). Teacher certification, which fits in the category of specialized accreditation, has long since been held to be the domain of the individual states. For example, on occasion, one could use a Texas teaching certificate in a border state such as Oklahoma, but today, the Texas State Board for Educator Certification allows for recognition of many other states' certificates, based on agreements and testing practices (State Board for Educator Certification, 2005). This new type of certificate acceptance allows Texas teachers to travel to other states, and out of state teachers to work in Texas. Similar practices occur in other states; for example, the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (2005) accepts Texas Teaching certificates. In addition, those teachers who successfully pass the examinations by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards Assessments (NBPTS) are accepted as meeting testing requirements in a variety of states. "The advanced system of National Board Certification is voluntary and complements, but does not replace, state licensing. It is a professional certification increasingly used by states as an option for advanced licensing status" (National Board for Professional Testing Standards, 2005). This has led to many states indirectly recognizing other state certificates held by teachers who have NBPTS certification. Although there has been no national adoption of standards and teacher certification, the trend is for more states to have reciprocal agreements than in the past.

National and International

The movement in the United States is toward increasingly larger regions encompassed by accreditation bodies, as in institutional and teacher education noted above, and in engineering education, which we will consider later. Nevertheless, most agencies remain within the national boundaries. Some dual degree programs, however, cross borders. These are jointly administered and offered by universities in binational, bilateral agreements, but the institutions, rather than the joint programs, are accredited by their respective accrediting agencies. We will look at three examples, considering first the Joint Master of Arts program in Transborder Public Administration, then the Pan America project, and finally, the Franco-Argentina degrees.

The Joint Interdisciplinary Master of Arts in Transborder Public Administration and Governance comes from the Partnership for Prosperity Program created in 2000 (Sparrow, 2005). San Diego State University and the Autonomous University of Baja California, Mexico administer the program where students receive degrees from both universities. There is equal participation of both students and faculty from the United States and Mexico; logistics require that classes be taught in the border area of Mexico and the United States, using both English and Spanish as instructional languages.

Similar to this Master's degree program is the Pan America project which allows students to receive degrees from up to three universities in three countries simultaneously (Berrelleza Carrillo, 2005). It also involves San Diego State University and the Autonomous University of Baja California, Mexico, with the addition of the

University of Valparaiso, Chile. Students are required to study one year in each country of the program partnership, but they graduate in four years with an undergraduate in international business from each of the universities. This greatly enhances graduates' employment prospects, as work visas often require transcripts and diplomas in the official language of the country; graduates in this program can seek work in Mexico, Chile, or other Latin American countries that recognize Mexican or Chilean degrees.

The University del Salvador in Argentina has created agreements so that it issues dual degrees with French universities, with the graduates of its business and administration programs receiving degrees from both the University del Salvador and the Sorbonne (Universidad del Salvador, 2003).   Similar to the expectations of the Pan America project, it is hoped that students will be able to work in Argentina, France or in another of the EU nations. The issuing of degrees by two different institutions is seen as a guarantee of academic excellence, and it is this notion of quality that has initiated a basic change in the role of accreditation.

Outcomes

The purpose of accreditation has shifted from one of standardizing admissions to the current quality assurance role based on the desire to understand the outcomes of higher education (Shibley, 2004). In other words, accreditation today is more focused on student outcomes. One example of this change is in the Middle States and the New England associations, two groups which participate in the Student Outcomes Assessment Project (Nettles, 1997). This trend coincides with accreditation organizations focused on specific disciplines, such as the Washington Accord-- an agreement that deals with engineering, which states that its accreditation encourages the implementation of best practice for the academic preparation of engineers as it relates to their professional practice (Lewis, 2003).

ENGINEERING ACCREDITATION IN THE U.S.

In this paper, we will focus on the accreditation process for engineering, with its potential for internationalization and stress on outcomes. For this specific discipline, the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) is a professional organization that accredits programs, not institutions, in the United States. Its accreditation tells parents and prospective students that a program has met minimum standards, shows faculty and administrators ways to improve the curriculum, and most importantly, tells employers that graduates are prepared. Other agencies may use the results from the ABET--state licensing boards and certification programs may require graduation from an ABET-accredited program as part of the registration or certification process for professional practice, and also ABET accreditation may permit students to receive federal funds in the form of scholarships, loans and grants. ABET clarifies that what it does is accreditation; institutions and programs are accredited, and individuals are certified (Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, 2004a). Nevertheless, "(a)ccreditation of engineering academic programs is a key foundation for the practice of engineering" (Lewis, 2003, 9).

Regional

ABET is the sole agency responsible for accreditation of educational programs in engineering, and its philosophy of Engineering Criteria 2000 allows institutions to meet the needs of constituents. Continuous program improvement, based on input from constituents, is composed of outcomes, assessment and program objectives (Whiteman, 1999). Most state authorities recognize ABET-accredited programs as satisfying requirements for licensure, and the benefits from graduating from an ABET-accredited program are better job prospects, as access to certain professional engineering posts are limited by law (Farr & Bowman, 1999). In addition, there is a virtuous circle where recognition brings money and resources which contribute to a high quality education.

National and International

There have been some measures taken to broaden the accreditation process in engineering from a regional to national and international scope. In 1989, influenced by ABET, the Washington Accord sought to recognize the substantial equivalency of accreditation systems of organizations holding signatory status and the engineering education programs accredited by them (Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, 2004b). This agreement covers eight English-speaking members, with Japan, Germany, Malaysia and Singapore as provisional members, and is based on the recognition of the relative equivalency of the accreditation systems of the member organizations and the engineering education programs accredited by them (Lewis, 2003). It also permits graduates of programs accredited by the corresponding organizations of each member nation to practice engineering at the entry level (Washington Accord, 2003). The Institute of Industrial Engineering (IIE) also added accrediting agencies from those in the Washington Accord, basically recognizing degrees across international borders (IIE embraces Washington Accord, 1995).

Outcomes

ABET changed its focus from ensuring acceptable programs to ensuring that an institution's students are attaining specific learning outcomes. One scholar's reaction: "this changes everything" (Banta, 1997, p.3). This means that for a Level 5 institution, the highest level of recognition, "world-class outcomes are apparent in every area" (Banta, 1997, p.3). ABET has specific criteria in which engineering programs must demonstrate that their graduates possess the following abilities: solve engineering problems, design experiments, interpret data, function on teams, and communicate effectively, among others (Koehn, 1997). In summary, the new standards place considerable stress on outcomes assessments (Soundarajan, 2004). These guidelines consist of customer-focused criteria that assess performance objectives of constituents needs (Farr & Bowman, 1999).

MERCOSUR'S ACCREDITATION PROCESS

MERCOSUR[1], the trade block agreement between Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay with which Bolivia and Chile are also associated, has chosen accreditation of university programs as an instrument for integration. In June 2001, the Ministers of

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[1] MERCOSUR is the Spanish term; MERCOSUL is the Portuguese form.

Education of the six countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the implementation of an experimental mechanism for the accreditation of degree programs. (Universidad Católica, 2004). The first three areas of knowledge to be considered for implementation are Agronomy, Engineering and Medicine.

Mixing National and International Accreditation Processes

MERCOSUR followed the European Union's model in which accreditation is conceived as a means of exchanging scholars and students, and, therefore, internationalizing their higher education institutions. In Europe as in the MERCOSUR area, accreditation is a relatively new phenomenon (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). Most countries introduced evaluation and accreditation practices to increase accountability, informing society about the quality of the universities and their programs. In Europe, the Bologna process was the main driver for introducing accreditation. In Central and Eastern Europe, most countries created accreditation agencies not only to evaluate the rapid expansion to accommodate the increased demand for higher education, but also to allow their institutions to participate in the European higher education area.

The MERCOSUR's experimental mechanism combines national and regional processes, with the standards defined regionally by teams of experts of the six countries. The universities participating in the process will be evaluated by groups of at least three members, two of them coming for the other countries. A true effort of training peers for the process has been made, taking into account the different characteristics of the universities of the region. The national accreditation agencies of the six countries are working together developing evaluation procedures and manuals, learning from the best national practices (Landoni & Luján, 2003).

Argentina, Brazil and Chile have national accreditation agencies and experience in accreditation processes, with evaluation schemes developed at all levels: program, institutional, and national. Paraguay also recently created an accreditation agency; however, Bolivia and Uruguay do not have national agencies, but have begun the process by creating specialized commissions to participate in the MERCOSUR process.

The mechanism follows the common scheme which encompasses self evaluation reports made by the university, external review committees including a site visit, reports by the committee to the accreditation agency, and decisions by the agency. The international standards defined have four dimensions: institutional context, academic project, human resources (including students, graduates, faculty and administrators) and infrastructure. Focus is more on inputs than on outcomes, despite the fact some indicators concentrate on outcomes such as publications in the evaluation of faculty and labor access in the case of graduates.

It took two years to complete the accreditation process of the discipline of agronomy and the results were published in early 2004 (MERCOSUL, 2004). The process for engineering started in 2004 and its implementation is proving quite challenging due to the different fields in engineering involved: civil, industrial, electrical, and chemical. It has also proved difficult to build the regional pool of evaluators and organize the teams for the visits, because this requires a complex organizing effort for agencies not prepared to work internationally.

Outcomes

Six programs per country are being evaluated, with the impact in each country being quite different. In the case of Brazil, the process is not representative of the programs in the field of study, increasing the "experimental" nature of the process. On the other hand, in Uruguay, the evaluation of six academic programs in engineering is almost the complete offering that the country has in that field of knowledge.

The results of the MERCOSUR accreditation process are only at the academic level. This means that the graduates of accredited programs will move freely in the region to continue studying at the graduate level or apply to academic positions, but they will not be able to perform professional activities in other countries.

Accreditation is proving in practice to be a steering mechanism for internationalization. Universities without experience in evaluation processes have contacted partner institutions in the region to train administrators, and regional university networks are being used for support. MERCOSUR is searching for international resources to fund a network of accredited programs including an exchange of scholars and students. For the time being, international or double degree programs are not participating in the process; they are an expected product after the accreditation procedures are concluded.

A current topic among US institutions is how issues of race and social class are embedded in accreditation (Kingser, et al., 2004). A related issue is the connection between accreditation, engineering standards, and increased enrollment of female students in fields of engineering (New Standards, New Attitudes; 2002; Rosser, 2001). There is optimism that the new standards will encourage greater participation of women in engineering: a traditionally underrepresented group in this field. University accreditation in MERCOSUR has not played a direct role in social class distinctions. Within MERCOSUR there are different policies for access to the university system. For example, Uruguay and Argentina have no entrance examinations while Chile and Brazil do. This screening process, rather than accreditation, impacts the diversity of social classes of the entering freshmen.

CHALLENGES FOR URUGUAYAN UNIVERSITIES

Uruguay's higher education system faces a challenge participating in MERCOSUR's accreditation process, as Uruguay lacks an accreditation agency. In fact, the one public national university (Universidad de la República) has a complete autonomous status, while on the other hand, private universities are regulated by the Ministry of the Education through an Advisory Council in which the national university participates.

MERCOSUR recognized the different characteristics of the higher education systems in the region and accepted the creation of ad hoc commissions for the accreditation process. Uruguay created and installed the ad hoc commission for engineering in 2004, with two representatives of the Ministry of Education, two from the national university and one from the private higher education institutions.

Accreditation brings at least three important innovations for Uruguay's higher education system. Perhaps the most important is that for the first time, the academic quality of all higher education institutions will be evaluated by the same mechanism. Also, because participation in the process is not mandatory, the national university does not consider accreditation to violate its autonomy status. In addition, for the young private universities it is an opportunity to evaluate if their programs are as good as the national university, which was the sole university in the country until 1985. The private higher education subsystem was regulated in 1995; since then, four private universities and 12 university level institutes have been created. All universities are preparing themselves in the "culture of evaluation." A second innovation, which is related to internationalization, is that most Uruguayan universities have important links with other universities abroad, which are evaluated by international standards. The whole system faces the challenge of high academic standards, such as the quality of research and publications, and the academic background of their faculty, particularly the number of Ph.D.s in their departments. Premier universities in Brazil and Chile are far better prepared for accreditation than any of the engineering programs in Uruguay. Nevertheless, accreditation has proved to be an important incentive for universities to allocate resources in the programs being accredited and also to be proactive using the experience as a learning process.

A third innovation relates to the role of the State in higher education. Because the ad hoc commission will be an important precedent to create a National Accreditation Agency, the institutions have an important opportunity to shape its functions and instruments. It is interesting to see how institutions cooperate as members of the commission, as previously this process would have been considered an arena for competition.

CONCLUSION: APPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Two main lessons can be learned from MERCOSUR's accreditation process. The first is that accreditation can be an interesting model to increase internationalization of university programs. The definition of accreditation standards at the international level could be an excellent way to improve faculty and students exchanges among accredited universities or programs. Although the United States receives an important share of international students, American students can increase their readiness for the international labor markets by spending at least part of their studies in programs with their quality accredited by international standards.

A related lesson is that accreditation opens an opportunity for cooperation between the State and the universities due to the international challenge. The gain of having an "international recognition of quality" mobilizes resources both within the institutions and among them, and it also improves their relationship with the State. Being part of international networks and being able to receive international resources has provided important incentives for quality assurance.

A second lesson is that the U.S. can learn from the MERCOSUR's approach to accreditation where the focus is on the institutional context, specific academic projects, human resources, and infrastructure available. The MERCOSUR, in turn, can learn to embrace outcomes, particularly of students and internal efficiency (graduation rates), as part of accreditation, as in the U.S. process.

Despite the positive attributes of the relationship of accreditation and internationalization, there is concern in Europe and MERCOSUR alike about the pressure for harmonization due to the possible rigid application of standards. Even though these requirements were created for different types of universities, international peers come from different backgrounds. Therefore, a possible outcome could be to limit the ability of institutions (and their programs) to be distinctive in ways "unapproved" by peers and accreditation bodies (Levy, 1999). Nevertheless, it is our hope that as accreditation expands its geographic scope, it can contribute constructively to the internationalization of universities in the U.S. and MERCOSUR.

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