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Short bio (150 words max):

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Proposal

Title: The Arcu-Sur System: an accreditation system for South America?

Abstract (150 words max):

This work aims to discuss the expansion of the *University Degree Accreditation System for the Regional Recognition of the Academic Quality of University Degrees in the MERCOSUR and Associate States* (the ARCU-SUR System) throughout South America. The ARCU-SUR System was designed to foster the circulation of academic personnel, and to improve quality assurance of higher education, especially in the MERCOSUR. However, this System has spread and currently covers almost all countries of South America. In addition, the actions predicted for the ARCU-SUR System within 2016 and 2020 have been connected to another regional organization that involves all the South American States, the *Union of South America Nations* (UNASUR). This study included interviews with regional actors from Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay as well as the analysis the ARCU-SUR System and the UNASUR documents. The study pointed out that the ARCU-SUR System development may result in a South American accreditation system.



Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details.

No, this paper has not been fully published elsewhere, excepted partial content related to precedent phases of the study, which has been used in previous articles (in Portuguese).

Text of paper (3000 words max):

The Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), a regional economic bloc, was created in 1991 by the Treaty of Asunción, which was signed by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. From the very beginning, education was included as a central aspect of regional integration and the Educational Sector of the MERCOSUR (SEM) was institutionalized in 1992.

The circulation of degree-holding professionals was considered a key subject with regard to higher education concerns. Initially, an attempt was made to create a table of equivalence between courses, but it failed because the process was considered excessively complex (FERNANDEZ LAMARRA, 2010). Then, in 1998, the Experimental Mechanism for the Accreditation of University Degree Programs of the MERCOSUR, Bolivia and Chile (MEXA) was created to provide equivalence recognition between the undergraduate courses of the bloc's members and associated countries.

The Education Ministers established the voluntary participation of universities in accrediting agronomy, engineering and medicine courses in the MEXA, thus creating Specialists Commissions for each course. These commissions defined the evaluation processes, including institutional self-evaluation and evaluating peer visits.

According to interviewees from Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, the choice of these three courses was by consensus because they represent classic careers of distinct areas which require a university degree and a universal character, i.e., without strict connection to national contexts such as the course of law, for instance. It should also be noted that the focus on undergraduate courses is because it is the minimum academic degree required for professional training.

The implementation of evaluation procedures in the countries was the responsibility of each National Accreditation Agency, thus forming the Network of National Accreditation Agencies (RANA) to coordinate the process at the regional level. The RANA set its own rules and makes consensus-based decisions (MERCOSUR EDUCATIVO, 2008), particularly due to the bloc's intergovernmental nature.

Before the final version of MEXA, a pre-test was applied from 1998 through 2000 in order to verify the adequacy of its criteria and indicators, and the operability of the process. Each participating State could indicate up to two Higher Education Institutions for each course (HERMO, 2011).



After the revision of the MEXA in 2002, the procedures were applied between 2002 and 2006, and 62 courses were accredited, as shown in the following table.

Table 2 – Courses accredited per State in the MEXA

Country	Argentina	Brazil	Paraguay	Uruguay	Bolivia	Chile	Total
Career							
Agronomy	5	3	1	1	4	5	19
Engineering	6	6	6	5	6	0	29
Medicine	3	3	1	1	3	3	14
Subtotal	14	12	8	7	13	8	62

Source: Hizume (2010).

Based on the experience with the MEXA, a permanent system using the same model was proposed in 2006, which resulted in the creation of the *University Degree Accreditation System for the Regional Recognition of the Academic Quality of University Degrees in the Mercosur and Associate States (the ARCU-SUR System)*. It was approved in 2008 by the Common Market Council (Decision CMC n. 17/08) (MERCOSUR EDUCATIVO, 2008).

The System was presented as a tool to provide the region with economic, social, political and cultural development by encouraging quality improvement to university degrees and allowing the circulation of academic personnel, interinstitutional cooperation and mobility programs, based on solidarity. The upgrading of the universities degree was expected especially because one of the main System's principles is that regional criteria and quality profiles should be as demanding as those required in the national evaluations (MERCOSUL EDUCACIONAL, 2015).

Just like the MEXA, the ARCU-SUR System promotes the voluntary participation of universities, and accreditation is the result of an evaluation process that consists of self-evaluation, external peer evaluation and the issuing of an accreditation resolution valid for six years. Fernandez Lamarra (2010) notes that course accreditation does not grant the right to practice a profession in another country because it depends on diploma recognition. It also requires the authorization by the respective national board as each country adopts its own procedures.

Setting up another mechanism for recognizing degrees and diplomas was foreseen in the Plan of Action 2011-2015 of the Educational Sector of MERCOSUR, and accreditation is assumed to become the initial criterion for conducting the revalidation of degrees. Thus, recognizing a diploma was considered a second phase of the accreditation process and a Working Group was formed to formulate a Regional Mechanism for the Recognition of Diplomas.

For the first cycle of the ARCU-SUR System, covering the majors of agronomy, engineering and medicine, was added with the courses of architecture, dentistry, nursing and veterinary medicine were



added and participated as associated states two more countries, Colombia and Venezuela¹. This cycle was applied from 2008 through 2014 and 235 courses were accredited, far below the 500 expected (MERCOSUR, 2015).

Currently, the ARCU-SUR System has open calls for its second cycle², which includes the majors in economy, geology and pharmacy as part of its expansion plan, as well as the participation of Ecuador. Table 2 displays the ARCU-SUR System enlargement.

Table 2 - Expansion of accreditation of undergraduate courses in Mercosur

	Participating States	Courses	Number of Accredited courses	Period
Mexa	Argentina Brasil Paraguay Uruguay + Bolivia and Chile (6)	Agronomy Engineering Medicine (3)	19 29 14 Total: 62	2002-2006
The ARCU-SUR System 1st Cycle	6 + Colombia and Venezuela (8)	Agronomy Architecture Dentistry Engineering Medicine Nursing Veterinary Medicine (7)	46 31 11 78 21 22 26 Total: 235 Predicted: 500	2008-2014
The ARCU-SUR System 2 nd Cycle	8 + Ecuador (9)	(7) + Economy Geology Pharmacy (10)	Ongoing	2015 - present

Source: Prepared with data obtained from the ARCU-SUR System website:
<<http://sistemaarcusul.mec.gov.br/arcusul/pages/pesquisaexterna/pesquisarCursoExterno.seam>>.

The current Plan of Action of the Educational Sector (2016 – 2020) projected an increase of 30 percent of accredited courses in general and of 100% in the number of courses accredited *per country* in the second cycle, similar to the way the ARCU-SUR System was implemented in other countries (MERCOSUL EDUCACIONAL, 2016).

It is interesting to note that, for the first time, an Education Sector's Plan relates its actions to other international organizations. All the activities predicted for the ARCU-SUR System are linked to the Five-Year Operating Plan (2015-2019) of the South American Education Council of the *Union of South America Nations* (UNASUR), as well as to the objective four – education of quality – of the Agenda 2030 of the United Nations (UN), which demonstrates the efforts to achieve the international recognition of the System and to spread it beyond the economic bloc.

¹ Venezuela became a member of MERCOSUR in 2012.

² The Arcu-Sur System website includes the call from Argentina for the architecture course, and Chile and Uruguay calls for agronomy and architecture courses. Cf: <<http://edu.mercosur.int/arcusur/index.php/es/convocatorias-actuales>>.



The purposes to converge the ARCU-SUR System and the South American Education Council recorded in official documents could be seen as a confirmation of some prognosis for the ARCU-SUR System as a South American Accreditation System, due to its expansion and to the fact that all the countries of South America somehow participate in MERCOSUR, as shows the next table.

Table 3 – Countries participating in the MERCOSUR

Year	Country	Category of participation
1991	Argentina	Original members
	Brazil	
	Paraguay	
	Uruguay	
1996	Bolivia	Associated members
	Chile	
2003	Peru	Associated member
2004	Colombia	Associated members
	Ecuador	
2012	Venezuela	Member
2013	Guiana	Associated members
	Suriname	
Total	All countries of South America (12)	

Source: Prepared with data obtained from <<http://www.mercosul.gov.br/saiba-mais-sobre-o-mercossul>>.

According to some of the interviewees from Argentina, the ARCU-SUR System should be consolidated properly on the international level as it covers the South American sub-continent entirely, in addition to the effective operation of the Recognition Mechanism. A possible overlapping between the MERCOSUR and UNASUR in issues regarding the quality of higher education could be overcome by means of joint actions, although the future of the UNASUR is uncertain³.

About the dissemination of the ARCU-SUR System, Perrota (2017) argues that:

The regulation was not implemented in every South American country, but as the mercosur launched a regional accreditation policy, there was an expected (or unexpected) creation and reinforcement of a regional regulatory framework on accreditation that had effects on the domestic policies and institutions of the countries in the region (p. 2).

Spreading ARCU-SUR System does not mean that it is consolidated and, in fact, the System is under construction and old questions remain unsolved, even in relation to MERCOSUR's original members. For instance, Brazil and Uruguay still do not have National Accreditation Agencies established according to regional norms. In Brazil, the implementation and application of the ARCU-SUR System procedures have been conducted by bodies operating in the national evaluation system, while *ad hoc* commissions play the role of ANA in Uruguay (BARREYRO, HIZUME, 2017).

³ UNASUL has been passing for crisis in the last years and its restructuring is forecasted for the next presidency *pro-tempore*, which will be under Brazil's leading.



Whereas, on one hand, some topics could be seen as obstacles to the large-scale implementation of the System, on the other hand, an alternative process to join national and regional accreditation processes was approved. The obstacles are: (a) the diffuse form of the System financing, since each country decides whether to pay for regional accreditations or to have them charged by the universities (HIZUME, 2013; GUILAYN, 2012); b) the high cost of participation of foreign peers in regional accreditation (HIZUME, 2013); and c) the different criteria that the ANAS use to select the courses that will pass through the regional accreditation (Cf. BARREYRO, HIZUME, 2017; PERROTA, 2017; HIZUME, 2013;). For the accreditation processes, they would occur after the meta-evaluation of the first cycle by Rana in order to optimize the System. Thus, since 2015, the countries have the option to ask permission to Rana to conduct both processes simultaneously, under the conditions described in the Revised Arcu-Sur System Manual. For example, the foreign peers must be members of the national evaluation commissions and their analyses should be based on the regional indicators and patterns of quality established for each major.

Another factor that cannot be ignored about the System's enlargement is the rearrangement of Rana's political power dynamics as a result of each new country becoming a member. This could affect essential assumptions about higher education, including what is meant by quality and its very nature: it is a right, a service or a good?

In developing this study, qualitative research was combined with documental analysis and semi-structured interviews with regional actors from Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay who participated in the regional accreditation system. Regarding the documents, special attention was given to Plans of Action of the Educational Sector of the MERCOSUR (SEM), Meeting Minutes of the bodies that form the SEM, such as RANA, the contents of official ARCU-SUR System website as well as documents of UNASAUR and its South American Education Council.

The growth of the ARCU-SUR System and its expansion throughout South America could be interpreted as a collective concern of the countries of the region to grant international recognition to the quality assurance of their higher education systems. The process would be based on regional values and the concept of quality, cooperatively devised, to meet the demands of the labor market involving the circulation of skilled professionals and the accreditation culture.

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Discussion questions:

Could the ARCU-SUR System be considered an accreditation system of higher education for South America?

Is the ARCU-SUR System compatible with other international accreditation systems of higher education?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2018 to QAForum@eua.eu. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. *Smith_Jones.doc*. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.