

The diffusion of quality assurance policies in mercosur

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the process of formulation, decision and implementation of the regional policy of quality assurance in MERCOSUR and assesses its diffusion in the domestic legal and political systems. The effects of regional regulation are assessed in each country, identifying institutional changes, as well as highlighting the elements that led to such courses of action. The analysis of the process and its results allows us to identify the mechanisms of influence that operated in the process of diffusion of policies and the actors, interests and ideas about regional accreditation and a globally competitive academic market. Key words: policy diffusion, accreditation, higher education, MERCOSUR, regulatory regionalism.

Introduction

Regional agreements shape domestic regulatory frameworks in different sectorial agendas of public policies, penetrating even in areas that national governments have been unable to regulate. Such is the case of higher education policies in several regionalisms: whereas the most emblematic case is the regionalization within the European Union after the start of the Bologna Process, a significant number of regionalisms have program agendas for education, the university, and scientific policies. Moreover, most of the issues addressed are academic mobility, mechanisms for recognition of studies, and regional accreditation systems. Thus, this kind of agreements and their policies have helped shape the governance of higher education.¹ Likewise, the regulatory framework that gives shape to regionalism is also embedded in processes of diffusion of policies and ideas. Therefore, our goal in this paper is to analyze the process of formulation, decision and implementation of a regional university policy, paying special attention to its diffusion in the domestic legal-political-institutional legislation based on the case study of the accreditation policy of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR). We analyze the effects of regional regulation on the national regulations of its member countries to identify the insti-

¹ The concept of the governance of higher education is a “conceptual shortcut to analyze how higher education institutions and systems are organized and managed” (Neave, 2006: 4).

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tutional and political changes derived from them, and highlight the elements that explain such results. The analysis of this process allows us to identify the direct and indirect mechanisms of influence operating in the process of policy diffusion.

In the case of higher education, the quality assurance policies of university degree programs during the structural reform process became one of the core ideas of the program of control over educational institutions. 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. The construction process of the regional regulatory framework distinguishes the presence of governmental and non-governmental actors who sped up the process and contributed to its diffusion, to varying degrees and different timing, in the other States, as well as those who prevented it from reaching the goal of professional mobility. Thus, in the regulatory regionalism of higher education of MERCOSUR we can identify both epistemic communities and supporting coalitions that seek to reinforce the regulatory framework of accreditation and its effect on the States. Within this kind of formations we can find extra-regional actors (non-South American) linked to a global agenda interested in the accreditation (regulation of the trade in services), or the European regulatory regionalism based on its normative power.

In this paper we argue that the launching of a regional policy of quality assurance in the MERCOSUR allowed national governmental actors to legitimize their domestic position, both to strengthen itself and to carry out processes of reform of national policies. This was done through the process of diffusion of policies that operated in two ways: from the national environment of the country that assumed a position of leadership to the regional sphere, and from the regional sphere towards national legislation, with an impact on the countries that had no existing regulation on these issues. In the process of diffusion, the mechanisms that explain the results achieved are those of a constructivist type, through processes of socialization and persuasion.

This paper is organized in two major sections: the first presents the conceptualization of the approach chosen to regulatory regionalism and policy diffusion, and the second presents the case study and analyzes domestic changes in the four countries chosen (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay) and the direct and indirect mechanisms that operated in the influence of regional over national regulation.

The empirical material analyzed was obtained through qualitative research that combined the use of documentary sources and semi-structured interviews with regional actors in the four countries.² As for the documents consulted, we used around 150 meeting minutes of the bodies that constitute the Educational Sector of the MERCOSUR and around 50 rulings of the Common

² Based on the systematization of the field work done for a doctoral research (2008-2012), which was broadened in the post-doctoral stage (2014-2016). Both stages received funding from Argentina's Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (mincyt).

Market Council and/or resolutions of the Common Market Group. We gathered legislation on higher education, especially on the accreditation of degree programs in the first four member States (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay). The statistical information used was collected from different sources, such as yearly publications or statistical synopses of the four countries, the CEPAL, and UNESCO. We also conducted 25 interviews with key actors in the four countries at different stages of our research.

Regional public policies and diffusion in the national sphere

This paper suggests that the study of national public policies must incorporate as an analytical dimension the regional environment of the shaping of a policy, since regional integration agreements and regionalisms launch programs and policies in different sectorial agendas. Thus, the region-under-construction contributes to the global governance of different issues, including some that involve higher education policies. For this reason, this paper forms part of the theoretical framework of regional integration and regionalism through the analysis of processes of policy diffusion and the contributions of the regulatory regionalism approach. Thus, we have built an eclectic proposal with the potential for later use in other higher education policies and other sectorial integration agendas.

The link between regional and national policy is a discussion at the core of the field of studies of integration through the delimitation between cooperation and integration, a discussion that is connected to proposals on legal/institutional formats, decision making systems, and the process of construction of regional regulations, whereas for the (new) regionalism approach the main thrust of the search has been on the different actors that explain – from the international political economy – how certain regional regulations are arrived at, whom they benefit and/or harm, and how they relate to the process of globalization. From the start, specific frameworks have been created along the way for the regional policies of the integration of the current European Union (Pollack, 2005; Wallace, H., 2005; Wallace, Wallace and Pollack, 2005), which have been complemented by other approaches to studies on Europeization (Wallace, 2002; Wallace, W., 2005) and multi-level governance (Hooghe y Marks, 2001; Jordan, 2001; Marks, Hooghe y Blank, 1996; Morata, 2007), with its particular approach to policy networks in their different varieties (Haas, 1992; Peterson, 2012; Rhodes, 1997; Sabatier, 1998). Nevertheless, in an attempt to escape the traditional problem of the (European) theory of integration – *problem n=1* (i.e. the EU as an only case) our view has been broadened towards approaches to the processes of policy diffusion (Börzel and Risse, 2000, 2009, 2011a, 2011b) and regulatory regionalism (Hameri, 2009; Hameri and Jayasuriya, 2011).

This framework allows us to incorporate the particular features of (especially) South American regionalism, given the institutional configurations within which policies are adopted. We conceive regional policies as those actions undertaken by the regional government agencies

(i.e., the particular system of governance the region has created for its functioning) to reach the goals towards which the exercise of political power is oriented, both in the nation-states that have given shape to and participate in that process of regional integration, and the regional government institutions (which may or may not have decision-making capabilities) (Perrotta, 2013). The definition allows us to include the distinction that, on the one hand, regional policies are not the exclusive competence of a single decision-making set and that, on the other hand, the actors and institutions involved have different capabilities and resources depending on the issue at stake. The aims of the regional policies (i.e., its orientation towards serving the goals laid out by the political power) imply taking into account the power relationships established between the State, the market, and society on many levels (regional, national, and local), and recognizing that even apparently “technical” decisions are linked to political processes.

Regulatory regionalism is the institutional space of regional regulation that functions within the national politics and political institutions, thus modifying and transforming domestic institutions and policies (Hameri y Jayasuriya, 2011). Indeed, the emerging forms of regional regulation, with a view to its reinforcement, rely more on the active participation of national agencies in regulatory practices than on formal international treaties or organizations. However, regulatory regionalism is a contested process that creates and restructures territorial spaces within the State, which involves developing mechanisms to impose regional disciplines on national policies and institutions. It is associated with the emergence of a territorial policy shaped by tensions, conflicts y accommodations between the regional and national regimes. Rather than the emergence of a supra-national authority, it is a re-scaling of governance and politicization in the regional spaces located within the State or throughout already established domestic regulatory institutions (Hameri, 2009).

The study of policy diffusion processes allows us to explore how these regional regulations generate changes at a domestic level (by creating new policies and/or institutions). This literature postulates three rationales of social action: instrumental (rational choice), normative (rationale of what is appropriate) and communicative (argumentative), which account for five mechanisms of diffusion: coercion, manipulation of the profit calculation, socialization, persuasion, and emulation (Börzel and Risse, 2009) (See Chart 1). The influence of ideas, policies and institutions may be exerted directly or indirectly: direct mechanisms (diffusion) imply that there is an active diffusing agent who is promoting models while interacting with other actors (receivers), whereas indirect mechanisms (emulation) consist of the imitation by an actor of what another agent is doing; the reasons mentioned in the literature refer to the need to solve a local crisis local and the search for good practices, a mere “unloading” of policies or institutions because that is “what has to be done”, etc. (Börzel and Risse, 2009, 2011a; Heinze, 2011).

Chart 1. Direct and indirect mechanisms of influence

Type of influence			
Direct: Diffusion		Indirect: Emulation	
Underlying mechanisms and social theory of action	Promoting ideas (addresser)	Social theory of action	Mechanism
Coercion (legal force or imposition)	Coercive authority, legal force		
Manipulation of the profit calculation (instrumental rationale)	Incentives (both positive and negative) and construction of capabilities	Instrumental rationale	Competition (functional emulation) Lessons learned (functional emulation)
Socialization (normative rationale)	Promotion of ideas based on an authoritative model (normative pressure)	Normative rationale	Mimicry (normative emulation)
Persuasion (communicative rationale)	Promotion of ideas as true or legitimate based on reasoning or arguments		

Source: Created based on Börzel and Risse (2011a)

Direct influence comprises four types of mechanisms: physical or legal coercion, manipulation of profit calculation by offering incentives, socialization, and persuasion. The first one is related to military actions and legal reinforcement. In the case of the manipulation of profit calculation, the incentives offered may be both positive and negative. Thus, political influence may depend on provisos (external incentives) or the creation of capabilities (both technical and of financial support). Socialization, on the other hand, results from learning processes of the actors through regular contact within regional institutions. Social learning is the process through which actors, through their interaction with broader institutional contexts (discursive norms or structures) acquire new interests and preferences (i.e., the agents shape their interests and identities through interaction) (Checkel, 1998). Social learning takes place in special contexts when the group of actors shares a professional environment, copes with a crisis or a frustrated political episode, meets regularly and has an intense interaction, or is isolated from direct poli-

tical pressure and exposure (Checkel, 1999: 549). Persuasion refers to “situations in which actors try to convince others of the inherent validity of casual or normative claims” (Börzel and Risse, 2011a: 8). Situations that can persuade the agents are: when they are in a new and uncertain environment, when they have deeply rooted beliefs that are incompatible with the persuader’s message, when the persuader is an authorized member of the group to which the persuaded actor belongs or wants to belong, when the persuader acts guided by principles of argumentative deliberation, or in less politicized and more isolated environments (Checkel, 1999: 550).

But receivers are not passive actors. Quite the contrary: adoption and adaptation to the norms, rules and institutional models in national or regional structures often imply active processes of interpretation and incorporation of new norms in existing institutions, as well as resistance to particular norms and regulations (Börzel and Risse, 2011a).

There are three indirect mechanisms of influence (emulation): competition, lesson learning, and normative emulation or mimicry. In competition, the receiving agent adjusts his/her behavior to what is recognized as “better practices” when competing on different issues or criteria (economic growth, global competitiveness, etc.). In the second mechanism, the receiving agent seeks to solve a local problem by observing possible responses “outside” (effective responses which are provided by the diffusing agent). Normative emulation or mimicry implies that the receiving agent emulates or imitates the diffusing agent for normative or value reasons (Börzel and Risse, 2011a).

As for the mechanisms linked to socialization, it is necessary to incorporate the notion of epistemic community proposed by Haas (1992), who sought to understand policy adoption processes in contexts of uncertainty and technical complexity of problems of global nature. Faced with these scenarios, he observed that international political co-ordination tended to solve such issues based on the role of epistemic communities,

a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular field, and the demand of authorities for relevant knowledge for politics within that field or thematic area [who share] 1) a rationality based on values for the social action of the members of the community, 2) causal beliefs derived from their analysis that are the basis to discover the multiple links between political actions and desired results, 3) an inter-subjective criterion defined internally to validate knowledge in their field of expertise, and 4) a policy of enterprise (Haas, 1992: 3).

A complementary approach is that of Sabatier (1998) and his conceptualization of advocacy coalitions: political changes occur when the sectorial agenda is empowered openly by political networks formed largely by activists for some policy (including government officials at different levels of administration) who share a system of beliefs and have worked together for

a considerable period of time (ten or more years) with a view to forcing some political change (Peterson, 2012).

This body of literature is helpful to understand regional agreements beyond the European Union, provided that in the analysis we take into account the particular features of the region (in this case, the MERCOSUR) and of the public policy to be discussed.

Higher education in MERCOSUR and policy diffusion: the case of the degree programs quality assurance

The MERCOSUR, created in 1991, institutionalized the agenda of educational integration in 1992 after creating the Educational Sector of the MERCOSUR (SEM). Since then, one of the areas towards which its work has gravitated has been higher education, through three lines of action: accreditation or quality assurance, mobility and inter-institutional cooperation.

In the specific case of the regional degree program quality assurance policy, there is now a University Degree Accreditation System for the regional recognition of the academic quality of university degrees in the MERCOSUR and Associate States (ARCU-SUR), signed as an international treaty in 2008 (DEC CMC N° 17/08) for majors in Agronomy, Medicine, Engineering, Veterinary Medicine, Architecture, Nursing, and Dentistry. The ARCU-SUR was created after a previous initiative that assessed regional quality standards for Agronomy, Medicine and Engineering from 2002 to 2006: the Experimental Mechanism for the Accreditation of University Degree Programs of the MERCOSUR, Bolivia and Chile (MEXA).

It must be pointed out that the initiative was not initially directed towards quality assurance. When it was proposed by the Common Market Group (GMC) to the SEM, its aim was to give recognition to degrees for the mobility of staff and professionals. Indeed, the original version of the proposal (expressed in the Memorandum of Understanding in 1998) indicated that the ruling of the experts would be binding if the decision was made unanimously – which would create, *ipso facto*, a supra-national body above the national agencies of quality assurance. This first formulation was contested, on the one hand, by universities as part of the defense of their autonomy, and on the other hand by professional associations, because in the countries of the region the practice of a profession is authorized by associations and colleges and not exclusively (or only) by awarding university degrees. The MEXA, in practice, moved from the goal of recognition of professional practice to that of quality assurance – based on a quality criterion approved by regional consensus. Moreover, it restricted the application of this criterion to a “club” of universities: while the mechanism is voluntary, national delegations invite their most prestigious institutions to participate, and there are pre-defined numbers of degree programs (quotas) for each country in order to achieve a balance among all the national delegations.

The creation of ARCU-SUR consolidated the focus of regional policies on quality assurance and swept definitely aside the original goals of recognition of university degrees for staff mobility.

The early development of ARCU-SUR was characterized by the lack of implementation (between 2008 and 2012) of the Brazilian delegation, while the new States associated to MERCOSUR began to be part of the System.

Characteristics of the development of the regional policy

The Meeting of National Accreditation Agencies (RANA), created in 2002, is in charge of formulating and executing the regional accreditation policy. Its task is to push ahead the whole regional accreditation process, and its results (accredited degree programs) are endorsed by the Education Ministers Meeting.

Each national accreditation agency (ANA) of the countries that subscribe to the regional policy is a component of RANA and, in case they do not have an agency, the agreement provided temporarily for *ad-hoc* national commissions while they created their own agency. This requirement of national regulation is key to understanding the policy diffusion process in each one of the countries.

In 2002, of the four Member States, only Argentina had an ANA, the National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation (CONEAU), created in 1996 by Law N° 24.521 (Ley de Educación Superior, LES). Brazil had an evaluation system that incorporated functions related to degree program accreditation: a body for the accreditation of graduate programs – the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES) – and another one for undergraduate programs, the Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (INEP). In 2004 Brazil created the System for the Evaluation of Higher Education (SINAES), setting up the National Commission for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CONAES) to coordinate that system. Paraguay and Uruguay, meanwhile, did not have an ANA or any similar structure to work towards accreditation, so in the two countries the launching of the regional accreditation policy (in its MEXA stage) was coordinated by creating *ad-hoc* commissions that participated in the RANA.

Shortly after the Experimental Mechanism started in 2003, Paraguay had already created its ANA, the National Agency for the Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education (ANEAES), but in Uruguay the agreements to create one have not been reached. In the case of Uruguay it is worth mentioning that, due to the particular characteristics of its higher education system, the Universidad de La República (UdeLaR) participates, along with representatives of the Ministry of Education and private universities, in the *ad-hoc* commission.

Chart 2. Domestic and regional institutional characteristics

Argentina	Brazil	Paraguay	Uruguay
DOMESTIC AGENCY			
National Agency of Accreditation: CO-NEAU (since 1996)	SINAES (2004, on the basis of previous actions) based on the CONAES. There is a proposal for a law of an accreditation agency.	National Agency of Accreditation: ANEAES (created in 2003)	There is no agency for the accreditation of degree programs. Several projects to create an Agency for the Promotion and Quality Assurance of Higher Education (APACET) have been put forth. None has succeeded.
DOMESTIC CHANGE (CREATION OR MODIFICATION OF POLICIES OR INSTITUTIONS) BASED ON THE REGIONAL DIMENSION			
No	No	Yes	No
ACTORS PARTICIPATING IN THE NATIONAL DELEGATION			
Governmental (CO-NEAU)	Governmental (CONAES)	Governmental (ANEAES)	Three-part ad-hoc commission: Ministry of Education, UdeLaR and private universities

Source: based on our research

This allows us to see that, at least in one case, the process of policy diffusion from the regional to the national level generated an institutional and/or policy change: Paraguay. At the same time, it is important to know why in the case of Uruguay there was no domestic change leading to the creation of domestic institutions based on a regional policy. Likewise, the cases where there was an existing regulation previous to the regional norm (Argentina and Brazil) are important to understand how regional policy takes shape. Now we will describe and analyze the situation in each one of the countries.

Policy diffusion from the regional to the national level in the four countries chosen

Argentina was the only member State that already had a regulation on the quality assurance of university degree programs: the CONEAU, which allowed this national agency to influence the

drafting of the regional policy, especially in the areas related to the goals and methodology to develop the accreditation, when the 2002 Memorandum that created the MEXA was defined. Consequently, the central features of Argentine domestic policy were mapped onto the regional accreditation policy. The procedures, instruments and methodologies of the MEXA and ARCU-SUR are similar to the procedures, instruments and methodologies of the CONEAU: the emphasis was placed on professional degrees, the two main stages are institutional self-evaluation and evaluation by expert peers, and the accreditation resolution is public and has a limited duration. The difference is that the peer group in the regional process is made up of experts from the MERCOSUR countries (while in the domestic one they are all national peers). Additionally, in the passage from the MEXA to the ARCU-SUR the Argentine position of CONEAU was able to have the coordination of regional accreditation adopted with their domestic chronograms to avoid duplicating effort and resources.

Among the motives that explain the influence of the CONEAU in the shaping of regional policy are, especially, its being recognized by national delegations of other countries as the “expert” agency in the matter for its “know-how”, stemming from the fact that it was the only one among the four of them to have developed a national system of accreditation. When the CONEAU joined the regional negotiation – especially after 2000 – it did so from a dominant position thanks to its technicians, who had acquired experience in the field. Additionally, the CONEAU performed technical cooperation actions with other delegations, which further legitimized it due to its expertise and knowledge of the issues. The CONEAU and its technicians were and continue to be diffusing agents. Indeed, the creation of Paraguay’s agency is linked to these actions, with the ANEAS replicating the CONEAU to a great extent. One of the most recent actions of international cooperation of the CONEAU has been the one conducted with the government of Ecuador with a view to creating its own agency.

As for Brazil, the fact that this country had policies for the evaluation of the university system and its actors – as has been mentioned – allowed them utilize the existing structure without major innovations for regional negotiation and execution of the policy (in an action coordinated among the Ministry of Education, CAPES, and INEP, together with the CONAES). Likewise, since 2012 a project to create an accreditation agency has been presented to Parliament. During the execution of the MEXA, Brazil was a key partner of Argentina to develop the mechanism and collaborate with the smaller countries. While Argentina collaborated strongly through its technical cooperation, Brazil allocated some resources to cover the expenses of the regional process. Thus, the first stage of the regional policy counted on the active participation of this country, which decreased in the early years of the launch of the permanent ARCU-SUR system. Between 2008 and 2012, the failure to implement the ARCU-SUR in Brazil – which generated discomfort among the other partners – may be understood because, among other elements, the existence of quotas restricts a massive participation of Brazilian institution, which results in a

paradox: the “regional seal” may be unattractive because not all of them participate but, simultaneously, the institutions that do participate get a prestige “plus” derived from the “regional seal”. On the other hand, the ARCU-SUR stage coincided with the launching of a unilateral policy of internationalization of competitive higher education pointing to central countries (not only South America, as it happened during the Da Silva administration in Brazil). Besides, it is also likely that, to the extent that the higher education evaluation system in Brazil has been developed and involves all actors (students, teachers, researchers, institutions), the regional policy has come to be regarded as having a lower status than the national policy.

Nevertheless, in our view Brazil continues participating in the regional policy due to a combination of the following elements: first, because of the positive incentives (the prestige obtained by institutions thanks to the MERCOSUR seal of quality) and the negative ones (the possible consequences of leaving the MERCOSUR) in an arena of competition for markets of higher education, and second, due to the socialization process of regional officials (who are also national officials) who believe that the initiative is important and “their own” (although, as we shall see, this has diminished through time).

The greatest impact of the regional policy in terms of domestic change (creation of institutions) may be observed in the case of Paraguay. Here we can see how direct and indirect (i.e., of diffusion and emulation) mechanisms operated thanks to socialization and persuasion processes, which included learning lessons that had an effect on the institutional mimicry of the CONEAU into the ANEAES. First of all, the Memorandum that originated the MEXA includes the legal requirement that those countries that did not have an accreditation agency had to create one. While this did not turn out to be a strong legal coercion, for the Paraguayan group that sought to get a higher education law passed – and had not yet had a political opportunity to do so – it was used to generate a favorable public opinion and succeed in creating the agency. Thus, the “regional obligation” allowed countries to engage in discourse favorable to the degree program accreditation and the need to review their domestic regulatory framework. The MEXA became a window of opportunity for these actors to force a discussion on a law and create the ANEAES. Secondly, the similarities between the ANEAES, the MEXA and the CONEAU allow us to identify a combination of socialization and emulation processes: socialization, because regular contact between delegations resulted in processes of social learning and the shaping of a budding regional identity in this field by these actors; emulation, because through the legitimacy of the CONEAU as an expert institution its technical cooperation actions resulted in the Argentine national accreditation model being diffused into the Paraguayan model, in agreement with the regional model (that uses the Argentine experience as a model). Thus, learning lessons and institutional mimicry were combined.

Altogether, the ANEAES model is similar to that of the CONEAU, and therefore similar to the MEXA (mimetism). The CONEAU was able to diffuse the model into regional negotiation, and for the

countries that did not have an agency but had a domestic coalition that supported reform (as in the case of Paraguay, but also of Bolivia, not addressed in this paper), this process it contributed to their self-legitimization from a discourse built on the foundation of the agency's knowledge and technical expertise. Moreover, this took place in the framework of the socialization process of regional officials and the self-reinforcement of the RANA. Indeed, in the cooperation between Argentine and Paraguayan technicians we witnessed the drafting of joint documents on the subject (such as the one by Robledo and Caillón in 2009). This was in turn linked to the position of the MERCOSUR countries (members and associates) in a broader organization: the Ibero-American Network for the Quality Assurance of Higher Education (RIACES), in which Argentina had a leading role until 2011. This, in turn, accounts for the conformation of an epistemic community around these issues, made up of experts, government officials and scholars from the region, as well as other geographic and political regions and international bodies: Ibero-America, the European Union, the Latin America and Caribbean International Institute for Higher Education (IIESALC), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The case of Uruguay is also somewhat peculiar, because there was no domestic change and the result has been the coexistence of two regulatory frameworks: the regional system of quality assurance of a number of degrees, and a domestic normative framework characterized by the segmentation and differentiation of national policies of accreditation and evaluation, oriented towards the private institutions, together with the self-regulation of the UdeLaR. This does not imply, however, that after the shaping of the regional regulation the situation would stay the same: the pressure for the creation of a national agency has been growing steadily, as has the systematic rejection of the public university.

To understand why a domestic change (the creation of an accreditation agency) was not viable in Uruguay, it is important to underscore the weight of the UdeLaR in its higher education system: it is the only public university in the country, it concentrates more than 85% of student enrolment, and its status in the Constitution means that it is ruled by its Organic Law, without any interference from the Ministry of Education. For this reason, the UdeLaR is the only university in the MERCOSUR countries that participates in the arena of regional negotiation and, in the case we are discussing, the *ad-hoc* three-part commission that manages the regional accreditation policy. Some actors (governmental and private) tried to use the regional prerogative (the obligation to create an agency) to reform the legal framework and create an agency with regulatory authority over the public university, but – unlike what happened in Paraguay – there was no political space to get it started. Several projects were presented to create an Agency (APACET), but they were always opposed by the UdeLaR because they were regarded as a diminishment of its autonomy.

However, even though it rejects domestic regulation by external actors, the UdeLaR participates actively in the regional accreditation process (in the MEXA and ARCU-SUR). Some diffusion

mechanisms can be observed to be operating here: first, academic competition in the regional and the international markets makes a seal of prestige a powerful incentive to avoid being excluded from the MERCOSUR “club” of universities of quality; second, the MERCOSUR model has some autonomous aspects regarding world trends that tried to be installed here (the “Bolognization” of MERCOSUR), due to the presence of two strong university systems (in Argentina and Uruguay), and third, the socialization process of regional officials and the shaping of a set of good practices in accreditation, which give them a sense of regional identity built on their interaction.

In this section we have identified the relationship between regional and national regulations in this sphere of public policy, highlighting diffusion processes and identifying some of the mechanisms that operated in each country. The next section will focus precisely on these direct and indirect diffusion mechanisms, which will in turn allow us to discuss the actors, interests and ideas in dispute in this field.

Mechanisms, ideas, interests and actors in the diffusion of MERCOSUR policies

As discussed above, policy diffusion may be started through direct mechanisms – diffusion proper – or indirect mechanisms, such as emulation. In the first type, a diffusing agent promotes the model to be transferred, while in the second the receiving agent emulates or imitates it based on different elements. After studying the regional accreditation policy of the MERCOSUR we can point out that the main diffusing agent in the regional analytic context has been the CONEAU, the national Argentine agency, which has been able to transfer its domestic model to the regional sphere. If we broaden our scope of analysis to the extra-regional environment, the CONEAU is no longer the diffusing agent: the region, as an actor, forms part of a global context marked by the conformation of an internationalized academic market of university degrees. The region, therefore, is influenced by accreditation models, and some of its actors participate in the global epistemic community around this subject. Also, has been pointed out in the literature, diffusion processes are not univocal, nor are they exempt from being contested, and receiving agents are not passive actors who merely unload policies. Quite the contrary: there are internal adoption processes (in the countries) linked to each country’s limitations and capabilities, as well as supporting coalitions for or against specific courses of action, just as the MERCOSUR model reflects a situation that differs from the model that some tried to impose as soon as the experimental model was proposed.

Coercion. The MEXA document (Memorandum of Understanding, 2002) makes it compulsory for the procedure to be implemented by the national accreditation agencies, and for countries that have no such agencies to create them. In the meantime, it allows for *ad-hoc* commissions created to this end. This legal requirement, due to the specificities of the MERCOSUR negotiations, did not result in a binding coercive action, but it was used as an “argument” to generate domestic changes.

Manipulation of profit calculations based on incentives and the construction of capabilities. The main incentive linked to the maximization of benefits according to an instrumental rationale is that the results of the policy (the MERCOSUR's seal of quality) confer prestige to institutions (and their countries) in a growing and competitive academic market. This incentive becomes clear in a global analytic framework (leaving aside the CONEAU as a diffusing agent in the regional space). The construction of capabilities had the CONEAU as its main agent. On the other hand, this kind of reasoning was also present when creating the mechanism for each country's quotas: the aim was not to follow a criterion that was proportional to the size of each country's educational system to avoid having only one country (Brazil, in this case) obtain most of the "quality seals". Thus, Argentina and Uruguay were the countries most interested in the policy of distribution by quotas.

Socialization: promotion of ideas through normative pressure. In the regional context, the RANA was the space for the socialization of the actors who make up the national delegations (mostly government actors, except in the case of Uruguay, which included private actors and the UdeLaR). The "ranned ones" (a nickname given by these actors to themselves during their field work) created the mechanism, and through their regular contacts – sharing a similar professional environment and not at the center of the stage in the MERCOSUR or in any of their countries – social learning processes were generated in which they internalized norms, values, and ideas. This socialization is one of the elements that explain the process of transfer and diffusion of policies from the regional to the national spheres, on the basis of the particular characteristics of the regional sphere and the dominant role of one of its actors, the CONEAU. This latter aspect is crucial to understanding the CONEAU as "the" diffusing agent of the accreditation policy. In the extra-regional space (the region as an actor in the geopolitics of knowledge and the internationalization of higher education) the previous socialization process becomes stronger and is nurtured by the conformation of an epistemic community around quality assurance.

Persuasion: promotion of ideas as legitimate based on arguments. The argumentative persuasion that placed the CONEAU as the "experienced institution", and therefore the one with the legitimacy to launch the process of constructing the regional policy, underpinned the aforementioned socialization process. A discourse was thus generated around the "authorized word" of the Argentine agency on the way to get the process started. In the global context, the arguments used within the epistemic community (both the Ibero-American and the international ones), strongly defended by the RIACES with the support of the IIESALC-UNESCO, contributed heavily to the discourse on the need for accreditation in a critical context for higher education: the group of actors aligned with the defense of public education found in these arguments the possibility of controlling the emergence of private institutions and assuring the traditional quality of the public university. The group oriented towards the consolidation of the educational market found

in the arguments used the possibility of increasing the benefits of institutions through the “seal of prestige”.

Competition. Emulation by competition can be explained both in the regional and the extra-regional environment. In the former, government actors as well as university institutions share a reference to the “importance” of the mechanism in terms of the benefits gained in the regional, South American and global academic markets. The competition is among themselves (which, as mentioned before, derived in the deployment of “quotas” in the number of majors that can participate for each country) and between MERCOSUR and other regions. On an extra-regional level, the goal of the agents who emulate internationally established policies – with a component of local (in this case, regional) appropriation – is linked to the aim of generating “world class” universities.

Learning lessons. This mechanism operated, at the level of MERCOSUR, in the emulation (mostly by the two cases without prior experience in accreditation) of the CONEAU and the MEXA/ARCU-SUR through the learning obtained from the experience in the participation in regional policies, supported of course by the direct influence of the main diffusing agent. In the extra-regional environment, the MERCOSUR policy emulates the most salient aspects of the “way to launch accreditation internationally”, that is similar to the United States model and has also been the prevailing one in Europe since the late 1990s, especially with the Bologna Process (a model of regulatory regionalism that seeks to be diffused through resources and its normative power). Indeed, in the early formulations of what later became the MEXA, actors of the European Union tried to promote the system of transferrable credits, which was rejected at the time by the actors of MERCOSUR. However – although not the subject of this paper – the European Union has been able to exert its normative pressure in the field of academic mobility, together with the provision of resources to launch it.

Mimicry. Mimicry situations are less frequent due to the operation of the mechanisms we have mentioned. Nevertheless, when comparing the regional mechanism with Argentine regulation, and both with the creation of the agency in Paraguay, we may observe the imitation of regulations.

Based on the above (see Chart 3), we can detect the complex process of policy diffusion since, although we have focused on the aspect of regional diffusion over the national framework, there are also aspects of diffusion of global tendencies – promoted by actors such as international bodies, powers, and other regional actors – that diffuse practices and policies, underpinning the global governance of higher education. However, there are interests, ideas and values at stake in the modality of launching regional accreditation regional and its goals. Therefore, analyzing this public policy goes beyond the exclusive view of the nation-State: we need to widen the lens towards governmental and non-governmental actors who are organized transnationally through different types of cooperation networks and regional integration agreements.

Chart 3. Diffusion mechanisms – a summary

Mechanism	Case study
Coercion	Existence of a legal requirement that was not binding for the parts in the practice. It was used as an argument.
Manipulation of profit calculations based on incentives and the construction of capabilities	Businesslike rationale encouraged an instrumental rationality: improving the position of each country and its university institutions in a regional and global academic market of knowledge. It prevailed in the creation of policy with an exclusive character: a club of institutions with a seal of quality (which institutions and how many per country)
Socialization: promotion of ideas through normative pressure	After regular exchanges, sharing similar professional backgrounds, and the goal of building a regional policy, the actors of the RANA experienced a regional socialization process that favored group cohesion and their work. Norms, values and ideas were diffused and socialized, especially after the start of MEXA (2002) and the creation of ARCU-SUR (2008). In this process, a group of actors showed their leadership, after identifying themselves and being identified by others as the actors with the most “expertise” and technical skills to develop policy. They formed a community of belonging that was linked to an epistemic community (that was global-regional and with a certain mainstream profile of the issues analyzed).
Persuasion: promotion of ideas as legitimate based on arguments	Setting up a discourse favorable to national and international accreditation, strongly promoted by UNESCO (IIESALC space), with echoes in RIACES and strengthened by the EU.
Competition	Linked to the growing commercialization of higher education, the search to imitate the actions with better relative positions (in terms of a stratified distribution of prestige) led to adopt certain courses of action. The emulation of European experience was present, but is not the only element that explains it (since in the MERCOSUR region there were already some movements of resistance to Bolognaization).
Learning lessons	As a complement to socialization processes, learning the ways of “doing accreditation” constituted one of the elements that explain the domestic change processes (namely in Paraguay) based on the regional policy.
Mimicry	Does not apply. While Paraguay’s ANA has very similar characteristics to Argentina’s CONEAU, it is inaccurate to view it as a case of mimicry.

Source: based on our own research.

Conclusions

The central argument we have addressed based on our case study has been that regulations for higher education are shaped within institutional spaces that surpass and broaden the national (or domestic) environment due to the influence of international processes of diffusion of policies and ideas. The emergence of regionalisms on a global scale and the presence of regulations on higher education in these spaces accounts for the importance of understanding the complex decision-making processes and the blurred boundaries between national policy and regional policy.

In this paper we have observed how the MERCOSUR contributes to the conformation of a domestic regulatory framework in the policy of quality assurance, showing to what extent national accreditation agencies can develop policies in the regional sphere (through the RANA) that, in practice, amount to a “by-pass” in the national context of political action. It is especially interesting to see how national agencies that have been questioned in each one of the countries have been able to generate agreements on a regional level – perhaps because this space is far from the influence of certain criticisms and after some time was allowed to develop a process of institutional self-reinforcement – with direct impacts on national regulatory frameworks.

When looking at policy diffusion processes through the literature of regionalism studies we achieve two results: on the one hand, to understand the case study under this theoretical framework that sheds light on relevant aspects of the process of adoption of university policies – where we put the explanatory capabilities of diffusion mechanisms to the test – and, on the other hand, to broaden conceptual discussions in the field of studies of the university which, at least in Argentina, is characterized by the scarce incorporation of theoretical approaches from the discipline of international relations, leading to a certain level of parochial attitudes in the analysis of the mutual influences between the global and the local.

Finally, since focusing on regional policy broadens the view of the national and global governance of higher education, this paper outlines a research agenda for further studies on comparative university and higher education policy.

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