“MERCOSUR Brand”: regionalism and higher education

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Abstract

This article introduces the assessment of MERCOSUR’s regional policies in the field of higher education in order to discuss whether its main effect is to improve national higher education systems –based upon social justice premises and therefore contribute to the overall development and scientific autonomy of the region– or to enhance certain institutions as world class universities –therefore perpetuating the inequities and exclusion of many social actors–. We argue that regional regulations, norms and policies are by-passing domestic policy process in the higher education agenda, mainly supported by epistemic communities and/or advocacy networks, in order to boost national top universities global competitiveness as well as improving cooperative linkages within the region. In order to understand how regulatory regionalism is by-passing domestic policy processes in the HE agenda and assessing the outcomes of policy diffusion, we present an embedded case of study –MERCOSUR’s AQA policy–.

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1 This paper recalls on previous work, see: Perrotta (2013a, 2013d).
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Introduction

Current regional integrations schemes in Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC) are characterized by their institutional hybridity as well as their inherent tensions regarding scope, depth and motto for regionalism. That is to say that the landscape for regional integration in LAC is complex due to its multiple and varied arrangements, sometimes overlapping and even contesting models. On one hand, the so-called institutional hybridity refers to the fact that there is no one regional integration arrangement (RIA) whose policy-making architecture has created supranational institutions with binding power on domestic policy arenas. On the contrary, as most RIAs lack such an institutional dimension, they rely on a “voluntary binding effect” by which the compromises agreed at presidential summits and/or high executive decision-making regional bodies are to be fulfilled within the boundaries of Nation States. On the other hand, even this shared peculiarity of regional institutional frameworks in LAC, the map for regional integration is not homogenous as divergent models for pursuing political and policy unity prevail. This may seem obvious as the political landscape in the region is not that uniform either and those diverse and even contesting national policy projects are reflected in governments’ regional choices: RIAs that are still tied to the Neoliberal paradigm vis-a-vis RIAs that are discursively in clear opposition and are building a wide range of regional policies to fulfill the demands for development and autonomy –with divergent degrees among them about how deep they are contesting the basis of the accumulation models– but that can be understood as post-hegemonic regionalism (Riggirozzi y Tussie, 2012a). Such a complex map also highlights the fact that every RIA –as regions are socially constructed and therefore politically contested (Hurrell, 1995)– is not exempt of tensions and divergent interests and values are hold by an array of actors within its boards.

As a result, when combining these two main characteristics (the inexistence of supranational institutions at the regional level and the consideration that RIAs are policy instruments both for fulfilling development goals and to solely improve economic competitiveness of countries) and adding the consideration that agendas for regional social policy is a widespread phenomenon of the 21st Century regionalism in LAC, it is possible to question whether regional policies have indeed policy impacts/effects at the national level; and, if so, whose interests are being benefited from the regional regulation framework. This is crucial as regionalism is a policy priority of most current LAC governments and that social policy delivery at the regional level has increased its importance.

Therefore we argue that in South America, especially regarding the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), regional regulations, norms and policies are by-passing domestic policy process in certain agendas of integration, mainly supported by epistemic communities and/or advocacy networks, in order to prompt domestic change (policy change / institutional change) so as to support these groups interests. Consequently, the concept of regulatory regionalism is fruitful to assess MERCOSUR’s regionalism in higher education (HE), the implications of regional policies on domestic arenas and discuss whether its main effect is to improve national HE systems—based upon premises of social justice and therefore contribute to the development and autonomy of the region— or,  

3 According to Riggirozzi and Tussie: “Latin America today represents a conglomerate of post-trade and political integration projects, and trans-societal welfarist projects reclaiming the principles of cooperation and solidarity. In this overlapping and sometimes conflicting scenario the term regional governance is being redefined as each project is faced with substantially divergent visions of what regionalism is and is for. [...] By post-hegemonic we mean regional structures characterized by hybrid practices as a result of a partial displacement of dominant forms of US-led neoliberal governance in the acknowledgement of other political forms of organization and economic management of regional (common) goods” (Riggirozzi y Tussie, 2012a: 11-12)
contrary, to enhance specific HE institutions as world class universities—hence perpetuating inequities and exclusion of many social actors—.

We focus in this article in HE because it is one of the first regional social policies implemented within MERCOSUR—the Educational Sector of MERCOSUR, aka SEM, was created by the end of 1991 and HE was the first initiative set in force. Thus, regional policies in HE have, indeed, created several impacts at the domestic level. In addition, as part of the rise of “New Leftist” governments in South America since the beginning of the current Century, national policies have focused in fostering inclusive policies in HE but there has not been a direct translation into the regional policy domain; so, it poses the question about the overall “model” of regional integration and the difficulty of current regionalism to surpass the trade-oriented bias.

In order to achieve this goal, we proceed with an in depth study of MERCOSUR’s regional policies for higher education: accreditation and quality assurance of undergraduate university degrees; academic mobility; inter-institutional cooperation. It must be quoted that the most developed regional policy is MERCOSUR’s accreditation and quality assurance (AQA) initiative and, as a result, much attention would be paid to this area. However, we have advanced the analysis of academic mobility initiatives and inter-institutional cooperation agreements and project, which have been set in force more recently. The methodological strategy was qualitative and we assumed a flexible research design. The field work was conducted between 2008-2012 and was both intensive and extensive (Perrotta, 2013a) as multiple sources were triangulated. The documentary research covered: 120 records of meetings of the SEMs bodies; around fifty decisions of the Common Market Council (CMC) and/or resolutions of the Common Market Group (aka GMC); domestic HE legislation—in particular, AQA regulations. We proceeded to a qualitative analysis of statistical information obtained from various sources (ECLAC and UNESCO Statistics Yearbooks / Synopsis; national statistics). We conducted twenty interviews with key players in the four countries at various stages during the development of research. We also introduced as primary data (academic) documents made by officials that participated in the regional bodies (that is to say, national representatives from Ministries of Education and AQA agencies or similar bodies). This material was selected as a means to study socialization process and dissemination of norms through process-tracing (Checkel, 1998, 1999). The field work was completed afterwards in order to assess changes and continuities after 2012, so as to cover SEM’s development in the HE area up to present time.

We define regional policy as the actions (political decisions) undertaken by regional governmental bodies (i.e., the unique governance system that the region has created for its functioning) in order to achieve the goals prompted by the exercise of the political power. Such political powers are both Nation States that have crafted the regional integration agreement, as well as regional governance institutions (which may or may not have decision-making authority). The definition allows to incorporate: first, the claim that regional policies are not the exclusive competence of a single decisional game; second, the appreciation of the actors and institutions involved have different capacities and resources (according to the regional integration agenda); third, the blurred boundary between the categories of

\[\textit{4} \text{ MERCOSUR's regional policy for the accreditation and quality assurance of undergraduate university degrees, was implemented in two phases. The pilot phase was launched in 2002: the experimental mechanism for the accreditation of undergraduate university degrees in MERCOSUR, Bolivia and Chile (aka MEXA). The experimental mechanism ended in 2006 and was submitted to an evaluation process in order to assess the possibilities of implementing a permanent system. After two years of negotiations, the second phase was agreed in 2008 with the creation of the accreditation system of undergraduate university degrees for the regional recognition of their academic quality in MERCOSUR and Associated States (aka ARCU-SUR).}\]

\[\textit{5} \text{ This definition stands from Carlos Vilas definition of public policy: see, Vilas (2011).}\]
integration and cooperation (i.e., the delegation of national sovereignty or not). In addition, the consideration of the “purpose” of the regional policy at stake (i.e., its orientation to serve the goals that have been set by the political power) involves taking into account the different power relations that exist between State, markets and Society at multiple levels of analysis (regional, national and local) and to recognize that even decisions that are apparently “technical” are also political.

We also argue that the study of regional integration policies in South America ought to take into consideration the following issues: the situation of asymmetry between member States, the tension between divergent regional and national political projects and the institutional architecture of the RIAs. Additionally, to apprehend the development of regional policies it should be considered not only the formal decision-making process set by the institutional framework of the regional agreement but also the various interactions and relationships (formalized or not) between actors and organizations at the domestic level. Finally, global and international trends of the policy area at stake are to be considered (in this case: HE⁶). In this sense, both the content and the characteristics of regional policies are the result of the complex interaction of various actors positioned at different levels or scales of action and that hold different resources, interests, ideas and values. This implies that socialization processes that occur at the regional level may lead to a gradual process of transferring allegiance from the State to the region. Hence, it could be noted, according to Wendt (1992) and his interpretation by Tussie and Riggirozzi (2012a) that “regionalism is what States and/or regional institutions make of it”.

The paper organizes in three main sections: first, we provide some conceptual considerations so as to build a theoretical framework for the study of regulatory regionalism and policy diffusion. Secondly, we focus on the assessment of our case-study. Finally, we provide some conclusions and leave room for further discussion.

1. Regulatory regionalism policy diffusion and HE: conceptual considerations

It is possible to identify that regionalism (MERCOSUR) is creating a regulatory framework in certain policy areas (HE) by state agencies involved in regional integration policies but, at the same time, those regional policies are by-passing the domains of the Nation State with no direct implications in the creation of supranational structures. Thus, it is proposed to analyze the construction the regulatory framework for HE within MERCOSUR by addressing the literature on regulatory regionalism and policy-diffusion processes. General insights from the literature about regionalism and regional integration and HE are therefore to be mentioned in the current section.

1.1. The study of regional policies and regulations: some selected insights

Regulatory regionalism is defined by Hameri and Jayasuriya (2011) in terms of the institutional spaces of regional regulations within national policy and political institutions (i.e., regionalism modifies and transforms political and domestic institutions). Thus, the focus of inquiry is no longer placed on the creation of supranational rules and institutions; instead, attention is paid to the political process of region building, which is national and regional simultaneously. This point of view allows, on one hand, to overcome the traditional division (quasi antagonistic) between Nation States versus supranational regional institutions that is posed by both neo-

⁶ Specially, the introduction of higher education as a service in the General Agreement on Trade of Services (GATS) – World Trade Organization (WTO).
functionalist and intergovernmentalist literature (Perrotta, 2013b). On the other hand, it allows us to move away from narrow studies that are focused mainly on the commercial aspects of the integration so as to proceed with the study of social policies at the regional level. Indeed, according to Phillips (2001) emerging forms of regional regulation rely more on the active participation of national agencies in regulatory practices rather than in formal treaties or international organizations. As a result, regulatory regionalism is

“a contested process that creates and restructures territorial spaces within the State, which involves the development of mechanisms for the imposition of regional disciplines within national policy and political institutions. It is associated with the emergence of a territorial politics shaped by the tensions, conflicts and accommodations between ‘regional’ and ‘national’ regimes within the State. What regulatory regionalism represents is not the emergence of supranational authority but the recasting of governance and policy making to regional spaces located within the State or alongside the established institutions of domestic rule” (Hameri, 2009; Hameri y Jayasuriya, 2011).

However, in order to unpack related phenomena to regulatory regionalism, it is necessary to highlight some understandings from the field of study of regional integration. In European Integration Theory, the assessment of regional policies—especially their impact of domestic change—has been nurtured by Europeanisation studies and governance approaches.

Europeanisation research has focused on the analysis of how the EU has shaped domestic institutions, policies and policy-making procedures: attention was paid, first, to the impact on member States and later, on the countries that were obtaining membership (Börzel y Risse, 2011b). In order to grasp domestic change, Börzel and Risse (2000) argue that there are two conditions that generates pressures over the national structure: on one hand, Europeanisation should be inconvenient—i.e. there is an incompatibility or misfit between processes, policies and institutions at the national level and processes, policies and institutions at the regional level. Such an incompatibility generates adaptive pressures on national structures, which is a necessary condition to promote domestic change. On the other hand, there are facilitating elements and/or conditions—actors, institutions, etc.—that respond to the adaptive pressures and, therefore, promote the adjustment (sufficient condition). As a result of their inquiry, the authors pinpoint three levels of domestic change: absorption, accommodation and transformation (Börzel y Risse, 2000).

Governance studies have provided insights to clarify the complexity of the decision making procedures, which combines multiple institutions and levels of government. Among this perspective, the study of policy networks has advanced in unpacking the political process so as to understand the interactions between governments and interest groups according to the issue at stake (Peterson, 2012; Rhodes, 1997). In fact, it is argued that: the structure of the networks diverge due to the peculiar political issue and therefore results in multiple policy outcomes; the almost federalist policies—as in the case of the EU—creates a governance system by means of policy networks; such a process generates a concern about the management and legitimacy of the governance system (Peterson, 2012). Finally, regarding international policy coordination, Peter Haas (1992) fostered the approach with the concept of epistemic communities: “a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area” (Haas, 1992: 3). The epistemic community meets three shared concerns regarding normative and principle beliefs, casual beliefs and notions of validity and a fourth element of common policy enterprise (Haas, 1992: 3).

More recently, the inquiry surpassed the traditional approaches of the European Integration Theory by the inclusion of diffusion literature, especially because the frontiers of policy impact have been moved forward as it has been recognized that the EU exports its procedures,
policies and institutions to other regions (Börzel y Risse, 2011a). Three logics of social action are highlighted in the diffusion literature—instrumental rationality (rational choice), normative rationality (logic of appropriateness) and communicative rationality (logic of arguing)—, which, in turn, pinpoint five mechanisms of diffusion: coercion, manipulation of utility calculations, socialization, persuasion and emulation (Börzel y Risse, 2009). Ideas, policies and institutions’ influence could be exerted by direct or indirect diffusion mechanisms: a) direct mechanisms (diffusion) means that there is an active agent of diffusion that is promoting models while he interacts with other actors (receiver); b) indirect mechanisms (emulation) involve an actor that imitates what has been done by another agent (several reasons could be highlighted: the need to solve a local crisis and the search for best practices, merely downloading policies/institutions because “it is the right thing to do”, etc.) (Börzel y Risse, 2009, 2011a; Heinze, 2011).

As Borzel and Risse (2009, 2011a) clarify, direct influence involves four types of mechanisms that could be present in the EU actions to third countries or group of countries: 1) Physical or Legal coercion. The EU hardly uses military force to impose a course of action; legal enforcement is, indeed, more commonly used. 2) Manipulating utility calculations by offering incentives, either positive or negative. In this sense, the EU could offer rewards or impose costs to third countries. Policy influence could rely on conditionality (external incentives) or on capacity-building (technical and financial assistance). Certainly, “research has identified the differential empowerment of domestic actors who are then enabled to promote institutional change by providing political elites with incentives [...] as an effective mechanism of Europeanisation” (Börzel y Risse, 2011a: 7). 3) Socialization is the result of processes of learning by means of assiduous contact and by which actors change their identities and interests. Checkel conceives social learning as a process by which actors, through interaction with broader institutional contexts (norms or discursive structures) acquire new interests and preferences (agents form their interests and identities through interaction). The author provides four hypotheses to explain how the process of social learning works, namely: i) in groups where individuals share a common professional background; ii) when the group faces a crisis or a possible fault political episode iii) when the group meets regularly and interaction is high, iv) when the group is insulated from direct political pressure and exposure (Checkel, 1999: 549). Furthermore, the hypothesis suggests that communication plays a central role in what relates to persuasion, which is understood as a cognitive process that occurs through social learning and involves changing preferences and redefining interests. From the emphasis on persuasion, he develops five hypotheses about situations that allow agents to be argumentatively persuaded: i) when the persuaded is in a new and uncertain environment, and therefore actors are motivated by analysing new information; ii) when the agent has pre-rooted beliefs that are incompatible with the message of persuader; iii) when the persuader is an authoritative member of the group to which the persuaded actor belongs or wants to belong; iv) when the persuader acts guided by principles of argumentative deliberation; v) in less politicized and more insulated environments (Checkel, 1999: 550). In addition, the EU could be seen as a Teacher of Norms, according to Finnemore (1993) writings. Finally, as Borzel and Risse (2011a) argue, the ways domestic actors enable reforms are different. 4) Persuasion rely on the argumentative rationality type of social action and refers to “situations in which actors try to persuade each other about the validity claims inherent in any causal or normative statement” (Börzel y Risse, 2011a: 8).

These four types of direct diffusion mechanisms do not assume that receivers are just passive. On the contrary, “the adoption and adaptation to EU norms, rules and institutional models into domestic or regional structures mostly involve active processes of interpretation, incorporation of new norms into existing institutions, and also resistance to particular rules and regulations. Social learning as
a process of acquiring and incorporating new norms and new understandings into one’s belief systems, for example, involves active engagement, not passive ‘downloading’ of some new rules and institutional ‘software’” (Börzel y Risse, 2011a: 8).

Emulation or indirect mechanisms of influence: 1) Competition: the receiver agent adjusts his behaviour according to recognized “best practices” because he is competing over several criteria (economic growth, global competitiveness, etc.). 2) Lesson-drawing: the receiver agent seeks to solve a local problem and look “outside” for the answer (effective responses provided by the diffusion agent). 3) Normative Emulation/Mimicry: the receiver agent emulates the diffusion agent because of normative reasons or because it is right to mimic him.

This theoretical framework was built for the study of accession countries and/or neighbouring countries as well as for the relations of the EU with other countries or regions (far) away from its borders. By focusing on this last grouping, Börzel & Risse conclude that soft mechanisms – such as technical and financial assistance (capacity-building), political dialogue and technical cooperation (socialisation) – are relevant at times where the EU compromises with distant regions. In fact

“with the opportunities of the EU to exert direct influence declining, its role becomes less of a promoter, although the EU does seek to actively export its policies and institutions. Yet diffusion is much more indirect and driven by demand for institutional solutions rather than active EU promotion of its model” (Börzel y Risse, 2011b: 195-196).

Among their findings, they came to know that other regions or countries do not undertake the EU model as the most rational solution to their (institutional) problem. On the contrary, the adoption of the European response is the result of an informed choice on which model is considered to be the most legitimate and not a cost-benefit calculation\(^7\). Therefore, the distinction between normative and functional emulation is crucial. All in all, their perspective is agency-centred as special attention is given to diffusion mechanisms and scope conditions.

So far, we have discussed how European Integration Theory has developed during the last fifty years in order to apprehend the regional integration process in its complexity. However, it is not the only perspective to address the creation of RIA’s: during the nineties, new regionalism scholars (New Regionalism Approach) aiming at analyzing the new-fangled regional arrangements as a global phenomenon started developing theory (Warleigh-Lack and Van Langenhove, 2010; Perrotta, 2013)\(^8\). Both research agendas have remained separated in tight compartments during the nineties and much of the first decade of the XXI Century. However, nowadays, in light of the current experience of regionalisms (regionalisms, in plural), it is imperious to transcend such isolated reflections. In order to do so, Warleigh-Lack and Van Langenhove (2010) propose three areas of comparison so as to make European Integration Studies and New Regionalism Approach scholars dialogue: processes, projects and products of region-building. Processes refer to history; projects refer to the presence of various visions of intellectuals, social actors and interest groups linked to the region; and products have to do

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\(^7\) There is a widespread sense of conceiving the European regional integration process as a success. This legitimacy is present both interested stakeholders (pro-integration governmental elites) and the academic community in various regions.

\(^8\) In fact, the distance between European Integration Theory’s scholars and New Regionalism scholars has been derived from a particular situation: the former study under the comforting myth that the European Union is a *suis generis* entity while the latter reject any of the conceptual frameworks of the first ones on the ground that the dependent variables are different in each case (Warleigh-Lack y Van Langenhove, 2010). Another explanation is that the former have mainly concentrated on the study of regionalism and its relationship with States, while the latter in relations between regionalism and globalization (Söderbaum y Sbragia, 2010).
with treaties, institutions, regional policies and effective practices integration. Consequently, they propose four strategies to advance comparative studies of regions: unfold regions according to the properties of stateness; link integration with geographical and historical issues; combine an overall logic with an understanding of the differences; gathering intra-regional and inter-regional processes.

On the other hand, Jetschke and Lenz (2013) argue that European Integration Studies have had an excessive role in comparative studies of regionalism and, for this reason, it has managed to create a picture of the EU as the gold standard of regionalism (as a role model). Therefore, the key is to advance the empirical study (rather than normative) of the EU as a pioneer regional integration process that has been able to influence the decisions of policy-makers in other parts of the globe—such as Latin American regionalism—. They propose to improve the study of policy diffusion processes. In this line, Söderbaum and Sbragia (2010) consider that the distance between perspectives can be corrected from the combination of two elements that are related to regionalism: States and Globalization, i.e. the endogenous and exogenous dimension of regionalism. The starting point takes into account Björn Hettne’s (2002) definition of regionalism:

“regionalism needs to be understood both from an exogenous perspective (according to which regionalisation and globalisation are intertwined articulations of global transformation) and from an endogenous perspective (according to which regional integration is shaped from within the region by different forms of states and a large number of different actors)” (Söderbaum and Sbragia, 2010: 564).

In addition, Fawcett and Gandois (2010) argue that too much attention has been paid to the study of the EU and little to addressing peripheral regions, despite that regionalism is a global phenomenon regardless of size, economic prosperity and political regimes of the countries that participate in RIAs. For this reason they consider important the study of “Third World” regionalism so as to have a broader perspective of regional phenomena in general, and challenge the hegemony of EU studies in particular. Consequently, the study of Comparative Regionalism stands as a productive and promising research agenda. Such a study is greatly nurtured by the introduction of transnational policy/ideas diffusion research (Börzel y Risse, 2011a, 2011b; Jetschke y Lenz, 2013; Lenz, 2011). As a result, both sub-fields of study have initiated a fruitful dialogue so as to advance theory.

### 1.2. Regionalism and higher education: regional experiences across the globe

Scholars from the HE field of knowledge have advanced in the study of process of regionalism and regionalization of HE. Therefore, even though this research is not a comparative study, we provide a brief outlook of three regional experiences where HE has been a subject of policy debate: Europe, North America and East Asia. The idea is to illustrate some points that should be considered in the analysis of MERCOSUR’s HE policy. We conclude providing some insights from the commented literature about South American regional integration and HE.

#### 1.2.1. Europe

The European experience can be studied from different angles: indeed, much of the literature focuses on describing and analysing current policies, such as academic mobility and the system for the transference of credits, and how these impacted on Member States and HEIs. However, we focus here on the contributions made by Susan Robertson (2009), who defines the UE actions as a model of regulatory State regionalism in which the EU diffuses the model of HE regionalism to other parts of the globe as a normative power.
Robertson (2009) considers that regionalism implies a political project that is associated dialectically with other levels and scales of political action (national, regional, global, etc.) – which relates to the notion that regions are socially constructed and politically contested (Hurrell, 1995) –. It is recognized that the political project behind the construction of the region has changed over time, and this has impacted on the way that the EU assumes its regional dimension – and how the EU is projected as a global player –. First, between the late fifties and early-nineties:

> “With the notable exception of the United Kingdom (and to a lesser extent France and Germany), the ‘internationalisation’ of study programmes, curricula, student mobility, and research career paths were primarily oriented towards European partners and Europeanizing processes. Key markers during this period were the institutionalizing of regular meetings between the European education ministers, the eventual creation of the European University Institute in Florence in 1971, and the establishment of the EU’s Erasmus mobility programme in 1987 which facilitated the movement of students and staff between universities of the Member States” (Robertson, 2009: 5)

Specifically, the political goal implicit in the previous initiatives was to form European citizens – committed to the concept of culture and the shared values of “Europe” –. However, Robertson notes that after the signing of the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), at the same time that the single market and the EU was being created, the regional integration (political) project shift towards neoliberalism. As a result, education became a commodity and a strategic asset so as to improve the EU’s position in the world, i.e. turn it more competitive in a “knowledge-based” economy:

> “The imperative to advance Europe as a political and economic project more generally and a knowledge-based economy more specifically, is linked to the USA and Europe’s declining share of good’s production globally. For this reason, both the USA and the EU share a common interest in expanding the global services economy – including higher education as a market, as an engine for innovation, and a key sector in developing new forms of intellectual property” (Robertson, 2009: 6).

Therefore, to the previous policy goal related to building regional citizenship (so as to provide a support to regional integration), it was added a new one: to contribute to the creation and consolidation of the single market. While there was a modest policy space to enhance actions in the education area, as it was included within the scope of the “additional activities” of the Commission under the leadership of Jacques Delors, more comprehensive actions could be initiated. Since then, several steps would be taken in order to create the HE regulatory framework: Sorbonne Declaration (1998), Bologna Declaration (1999), Prague Communiqué (2001), Berlin Communiqué (2003), Bergen Communiqué (2005), London Communiqué (2007), Leuven Communiqué (2009), Budapest Declaration (2010)

It is possible to highlight a first stage from 1999 to 2003 where the focus was placed on building HE regional regulations. In 2000 the “Lisbon Strategy” prompted activities for HE in line with the prerogatives of turning the region more competitive, dynamic and knowledge-based so as to promote sustainable economic growth, better jobs and greater social cohesion. This document posed a mandate and an agenda to achieve these tasks, confirming that this region had moved towards “a neo-liberal understanding of higher education’s contribution to the socio-economic well-being of the region; building and securing human capital” (Robertson, 2009: 7). Alongside the Lisbon agenda, another process was set in force: Bologna, a “distinctive and ambitious project driven by national governments and other key stakeholders to create a common architecture and a European area for higher education” (Robertson, 2009: 7). Indeed,
the Bologna Process was created over the strategic articulation between domestic and regional agendas. As a result, a regional higher education area was created based upon the mobility of students and staff—which requires that national AQA procedures converge, compatible degree structures, the adoption of a system for transferring credits and a common framework to describe qualifications. These regulatory mechanisms could be understood as a strategy for increasing the attraction of students towards Europe and becoming a global competitive market.

Since 2003, Robertson highlights that there is a change in the regional regulation strategy of the EU: from an intra-zone perspective it moved forward an extra-zone action. The extra-zone strategy has both direct and indirect effects: a) direct effects relates to the “products” of the Bologna Process—Erasmus Mundus Programme, Neighbourhood Policy, GATS negotiations, etc.—; b) indirect effects refers to reactions of key world economies, which consider Bologna as a threat—USA, Australia—, as a model for national restructuring of HE systems—China, Brazil—and as a base for establishing regional processes—Africa, Latin America—(Robertson, 2009).

In 2005 a new Lisbon Strategy was launched, which fostered the need to include “third countries” by means of cooperation agreements, so as to divert the flow of students going to USA. The major programmes are: Erasmus Mundus, Marie Curie and Tunning. As a consequence, “it is clear that the techniques of regional governance [...] have their potency not only in terms of internal regulation, but have increasingly been viewed as having the potential to challenge the basis of normative leadership in the education services sector” (Robertson, 2009: 10). The Bologna Process—and the creation of a European HE area—has inspired new ways of shaping regions by introducing the role of HE in regional schemes.

1.2.2. North America

The North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Canada, USA and Mexico was established in 1994 and is a clear example of the new regionalism schemes that were prompted during the nineties—due to its emphasis on trade liberalization, the asymmetries among parties and the openness to the multilateral trade regime—. HE services were not included in the agreement (because it was signed prior to the inclusion of HE services in the GATS) but nonetheless, the creation of the region encouraged some regional initiatives for HE. On one hand, the investment chapter of NAFTA was used to foster North American capitals in Mexican private HEIs (Rodríguez Gómez, 2004). On the other, professional mutual recognition agreements (MRAs) were signed so as to contribute to labour mobility. For the purpose of this paper, we concentrate on the latter.

According to Sá and Gaviria (2011) professional mobility is not a recent phenomenon, in fact, it is related to the creation of professions itself: professionals are cosmopolitan experts that are connected by their own networks—nationals as well as internationals—(Gouldner, 1957). Even if what is considered as a profession could vary across jurisdictions, within the framework of free trade of services, professionals are considered to be an occupational group where the “functions of training and licensing practitioners, and maintaining international standards are likely to be undertaken by state or jurisdictional agencies, professional regulatory bodies licensed by the state or jurisdiction, professional associations, or a combination of such

10 The Bologna Process has been highly contested (Amaral, et al., 2009; De Wit, 2006; Musselin, 2009).
11 By focusing on the members of the Bologna Process, it should be noticed that initially Australia, Canada and the United States of America were included—as they were signatories of the Lisbon Convention (1997)—; however, over time, membership oriented towards Europe (EU + European continent) and in 2003 (European Cultural Convention) the former extra-zone countries were excluded. Roberton (2009) affirms that such exclusion relates to the fact that EU is challenging the USA role on setting global standards in this field.
bodies” (Allsop, et al., 2009: 489 quoted in Sá and Gaviria, 2011: 309). All in all, the creation of new regionalism schemes influenced the establishment of MRA’s.12

NAFTA’s signatories selected the MRA mechanism: the Annex 1210.5 of the trade agreement indicates a set of rules and procedures so that the professional bodies of the three countries could reach mutual recognition for international professional practice. 12 professions are listed in the Annex, but only 3 (engineering, accounting and architecture) have reached some level of trinational mutual recognition. After the analysis of the three cases, Sá and Gaviria noticed that the regional negotiations were permeated by the situation of asymmetries between Canada, the USA and Mexico: Canadian and North American professional bodies had already been cooperating bilaterally before NAFTA and, as a result, they shared similar standards; however, the organization of Mexican professions was different, so the country was influenced to promote changes.

The conclusions of their analysis affirm that: first, related to educational issues, as a result of the MRAs national boards for the accreditation of professions were settled in close liaison with professional bodies and new standards for professional education were established. This led to the reduction of disparities between programs: Mexico developed standards comparable to those existing in Canada and the USA. Second, MRAs introduced new certification systems in the case of accounting and architecture in Mexico and, as a consequence, professional bodies started regulating professional practice which allowed them to gain control over the access to those professions. Professional associations were strengthened and began to participate in various international networks. Third, MRAs signed under NAFTA reflect a vertical approach focused on harmonization. In fact, a certain level of harmonization was settled as a pre-condition even if the new rules and systems coexist with the traditional structure of recognition of professions. Consequently, this situation led to the differentiation between professional programs (depending on whether they are accredited or not); the differentiation between accreditation systems (professional versus amateur) and professional stratification (in relation to whether professions are certified or not). Fourth, even if the MRAs did not result in an increase of professionals mobility, the changes introduced widened the gap between the HEIs that are accredited (as the process is voluntary, public universities have benefited from an incentive structure) and HEIs that are not. The result is the deepening of the stratification of institutions and programs at the expense of minimizing the discrepancies in terms of quality (Sá y Gaviria, 2011).

1.2.3. East Asia

In East Asia, the emergence of the so-called regulatory regionalism –that is, the new forms of regional governance that transcend the territory of national spaces (Robertson, 2009)– is a trend affecting the governance of HE (Mok, 2012: 31). In fact, according to Ha Ko Mok (2012), the emergence of the regionalization of Asian HE could be understood as part of a broader strategy of universities to achieve both regional and global leadership. This is expressed in the

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12 It must be noticed that in order to fulfill the goal of professional mobility, there are at least to ways of pursuing it: a) centralized regulation (vertical approach) and b) mutual recognition of regulatory frameworks (horizontal approach). The former requires a harmonization process where new standards are agreed and national standards are to be changed in order to fulfill the centralized premise. This process of harmonization relates to regulatory convergence as the goal is to assure the equivalence of technical standards, professional qualification and licensing requirements. This is the case of the EU. The latter approach is based upon the idea of acceptance among jurisdictions that their professional regulatory system meets certain standards. As a result, it is built around the cooperation between professional bodies and/or governments (Sá y Gaviria, 2011: 309-310).
many efforts of Asian universities to establish regional networks and international partnerships through research collaborations, joint academic programs and academic exchanges.

An interesting feature of this situation in East Asia (mainly China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore and Malaysia) is that HE systems are characterized by strong and persistent State intervention. East Asian governments are looking to aggressively improve the efficiency of their systems and “in a short period of time, they have adopted new strategies to meet local, regional and global challenges [.... mainly by adopting] pro-competition policies” (Mok, 2012: 17). While almost every country has changed HE policies in order to meet the challenges posed by globalization, the case of East Asia differs as it combines simultaneously deregulation (or decentralization) in the restructuring of the market with the persistence of a strong regulatory State (“market facilitators States” or “market accelerator States”) (Mok, 2012: 29).

Thus, some universities (the most prominent public ones) aim to reach an Emerging Global Model (EGM) which is defined by eight characteristics: intensive research, global mission, diversified funding, student recruitment worldwide, increasing complexity, new roles for teachers, new relationships with government and industry and global collaboration with similar institutions (Mok, 2012: 31). This model is drawn (and promoted) by major public and private universities. In order to achieve this EGM university status, the internalization by means of the English language has been the focus, especially in the former British colonies (Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia). This means that those HEIs have a “comparative advantage” by the fact that they offer courses in English. A second strategy has been to create regional centres of excellence through transnational linkages: these transnational agreements are becoming popular as they provide a way to diversify university systems (Mok, 2012: 39).

Mechanisms are not yet fully developed. However, we can highlight the following efforts, both from the non-governmental sector as well as from governments. On the side of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) we identify two initiatives: 1) the Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning (ASAIHL), a consortium of major public institutions several Southeast Asian countries gathered in order to deepen cooperation, especially through academic exchanges; 2) the Association of East Asian Research Universities (AEARU), a forum for the presidents of 17 research universities. On the side of government’s initiatives, they fit into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). On the one hand, the Agreement on Trade in Services in the orbit of the free trade area between ASEAN and China includes a provision for educational services. On the other, the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) is composed mainly of members of ASEAN (except East Timor) to promote regional cooperation in education, science and culture in Southeast Asia. SEAMEO is the educational branch of ASEAN and provisions for HE are under the regional centre for higher education and development (SEAMEO-RIHED). The latter has been in charge of the creation of the ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN). The first meeting of this network in 2008 issued the Kuala Lumpur Declaration recognizing the crucial role of quality assurance in order to advance the process of regional harmonization of HE.

1.2.4. Latin/South America

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the development of the Bologna Process generated the inquiry of scholars so as to assess the limits and possibilities of this region to set in force a similar experience.

To begin with, Norberto Fernandez Lamarra (2004, 2006, 2010) argues that as Latin American HE systems are characterized by their institutional diversification and the increase of private HEIs –with no quality standards and little infrastructure--; therefore, he calls for convergence among HE systems as a way to articulate and improve them. Such a convergence should start
from the recognition of diplomas, which would create the favourable conditions for student mobility. The convergence scenario is still not a reality because of institutional segmentation persists (given the diverse and overlapping organizational models), national disarticulation and dissimilar regulatory frameworks, which adds to the strong trend towards the privatization of services. This scenario “affects and restricts the possibilities of regional convergence” (Fernández Lamarra, 2010: 37) In addition, international cooperation activities of universities are not exempt from this trend towards divergence as they “lack of common performance standards” (Fernández Lamarra, 2010: 37). A result, he prescribes as a priority that governments, international institutions and agencies ought to join efforts so as to promote the convergence of HE. It must be mentioned that Fernandez Lamarra advocates for the creation of a Latin American HE space similar to the European HE area, and to fulfil a convergence between Latin America and Europe.

From the literature that focus on regional AQA policies, we selected the contributions from Hermo (2006), Martínez Larrechea and Chiancone (2005) and Solanas (2009).

Hermo (2006) analysed the MEXA process in order to shed light on linkages between knowledge and capital, that is to say: between education and globalization. An interesting fact to note is that the author was an official of the Ministry of Education in the area of international cooperation (he participates in SEM’s bodies) during the first negotiations of MEXA. Precisely for this reason, his work is, on one hand, a conceptual contribution about capitalism and the new economic order based on knowledge and, on the other, a policy proposal for improving the mechanism –as MEXA should “consider a variety of political factors from a prospective view, both specific to HE and the future of evaluation and accreditation in the region, among others” (Hermo, 2006: 141). Among these other factors, he quotes:

“[...] a review of education policies that set general guidelines for [the needed professional profiles] is required. Besides, [it should also be considered] the role within overall national priorities, given the increasing importance of education for citizenship and democratization, as well as for the development of a more just and equitable society. Also [it should be highlighted] by the centrality of education to increase the overall competitiveness of the economy by the development and deepening of dynamic competitive advantages” (Hermo, 2006: 152).

From the perspective of comparative education –and the fact they come from a particular HE system, Uruguay (see below)– Martínez Larrechea and Chiancone Castro (2005, 2011) focus on the peculiarities of regional AQA policies and the need to advance from a flexible approach:

“[...] A new matrix with a flexible articulation between higher education and society is emerging and there must be an answer even more relevant and transformative, which could give knowledge production a genuine role in the transformation of the system and review the overall design of quality assurance policies, incorporate more flexibility in the academic structure and enhance education throughout life” (Chiancone Castro y Martínez Larrechea, 2005: 10).

Finally, Solanas (2009) have focused on the institutional changes that MEXA has had over MERCOSUR’s HE systems from the perspective of Europeization studies13. As a result, he proposes the notion of mercosurization, which refers to the process of adjustment of institutional, strategic, cognitive and normative settings induced by international organizations that have been incorporated by discourse, domestic political structures and public policies of the major MERCOSUR’s Member States [...] from its internal consolidation they have succeeded in expanding the influence to the block. He concludes that there has been a

13 He argues that europeization refers to “the ways in which the European integration process had implications on the construction of the policies of Member States, but [...] in recent years, as a result of the complexity of the integration process, Europeanization cannot be reduced to a top-down construction (from community to national)” (Solanas, 2009: 10).
mercosurization process in the field of HE policies. In our opinion, we consider the concept to be fruitful to understand globally the results of regional AQA policy but it does not explain the divergent process of accommodation between domestic policy and regional policy.

2. **MERCOSUR’s regional policies: a case of regulatory regionalism in HE**

Throughout his more than twenty one years of development, MERCOSUR’s Educational Sector (aka SEM) has consolidated a solid institutional framework so as to fulfil the goals of educational integration. It could be pinpointed that SEM’s functioning recognizes at least three phases (Perrotta, 2011a, 2013c): the first (1991-2001) aimed at building its institutional structure, establishing bonds of trust among the governments officials through the exchange of information about the characteristics of each national educational system and creating common indicators to obtain comparable information from the different systems. During the second phases (2001-2008), the first regional programmes started to be implemented. The greatest political achievements were the establishment of protocols for the recognition of qualifications (for academic purposes) and the implementation of the first regional policy: MEXA. Within the period, other areas started designing and implementing policies: mainly, in secondary education. It could be observed a process of deepening as the experimental AQA policy turned into a permanent system (ARCU-SUR) and a regional fund started to be negotiated (MERCOSUR’s Educational Fund, aka FEM). The third period began in 2011 as a result of the modification of the institutional structure and the implementation of regional policies in various areas of action (elementary and secondary education; special programs – human rights--; a Youth Parliament; etc.), and a new policy line was created: teacher training. A detailed analysis of the regional policies in all the areas could be found in: Perrotta & Vazquez (2010) and Perrotta (2013c). Regarding this third stage, a question that is posed relates to how MERCOSUR is going to process the incorporation of a new full member (Venezuela) as well as the incorporation of more associated States to the negotiation arena.

As for the institutional structure (see Graphic N° 1), the decision-making body is the Meeting of Ministries of Education (aka RME), followed by the regional coordinating Committee (aka CCR), composed by officials (politicians and technicians) from the ministries. The CCR, in turn, is assisted by four regional commissions for the coordination of areas (aka CRC) in four working areas: basic education (aka CRC-EB), higher education (aka CRC-ES), teacher training (aka CRC-FD)\(^{14}\) and technological education (aka CRC-ET). Finally, there are temporary bodies like project management groups (aka GGP), which are called by the CCR for the development of approved actions. The information and communication system (aka SIC) provides connectivity and communication among national delegations. In 2002, the Meeting of National AQA Agencies (aka RANA) was created. The institutional map is completed with a body in charge of MERCOSUR’s educational fund: advisory committee for MERCOSUR’s educational fund (aka CAFEM).

It must be highlighted that the composition of these bodies is purely intergovernmental, as they are representatives from Nation States; that is to say, officials that represent domestic interests.

\(^{14}\) The area of teacher training is the newest (it dates from 2011). The work within this area is supported by SEM Support Program (aka PASEM), which was created as a result of inter-regional cooperation (MERCOSUR – EU).
Within the institutional structure of MERCOSUR, SEM is subordinated to the Common Market Council (aka CMC, the top decision making body of MERCOSUR). This situation suggests that non-trade agendas have a peripheral position within the policy-making arrangements of the RIA. Another element to highlight refers to the composition of the bodies: they are purely intergovernmental and national delegates (officials that represent member States interests) are in charge of the process. For further data on the institutional dynamic of SEM, see: Perrotta (2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2013a, 2013c).

Provisions for the regional integration of HE are subject of three policy lines: accreditation, mobility and inter-institutional cooperation. The first regional policy was the implementation of the experimental mechanism for the accreditation of undergraduate university degrees in MERCOSUR, Bolivia and Chile (MEXA). As a result of MEXA, not only an accreditation system of undergraduate university degrees for the regional recognition of their academic quality in MERCOSUR and Associated States (ARCU-SUR) was created but also the first student mobility programme was launched: the regional academic mobility program for the courses authorized by MEXA (aka MARCA) was designed in 2005 and first implemented in 2006 – 57 students participated. When ARCU-SUR was created, the programme continued, but under a new denomination: regional academic mobility program for accredited courses under the accreditation system of university degrees in MERCOSUR and Associated States (aka MARCA). Since its inception in 2006 up to 2010, 985 places have been available. However, the number of students actually mobilized is much lower (580 in total). The EU has been close to the implementation of the mobility policy: actually, it has funded many actions and set some requirements (like the need to have free visas for students’ mobility).

After MARCA, mobility policies have been strengthened in several directions: a) mobility of teachers from courses that have been accredited by ARCU-SUR; b) a broader mobility policy that includes Social Sciences and other careers (as the previous relate to the professions that could receive MERCOSUR’s quality stamp), “MERCOSUR Mobility Program”, supported by the EU; c) mobility within post-graduate courses. Finally, two more policies are to be highlighted: the funding of research networks (settled in 2013) and the creation of a nucleus of higher
education studies (aka NEMES) in 2012, which includes the launch of a MERCOSUR journal for the communication of key research\textsuperscript{15}.

In order to understand how regulatory regionalism is by-passing domestic policy processes in the HE agenda, we present an embedded case of study --MERCOSUR’s AQA policy--.

The AQA regional policy was first discussed in the late nineties: the goal was to establish a procedure to evaluate undergraduate degrees so as to promote the recognition of diplomas as a way to increase regional mobility of workers. The policy was a request made from the GMC in 1996 in order to expedite cross border professional mobility. The underlying idea was that a procedure to homogenize degrees would allow mutual recognition\textsuperscript{16}.

However, MERCOSUR did not undertake the homogenization path because of two main reasons: first, the strong autonomy of public universities and the consequent strong opposition to control mechanisms. Second, the role of professional associations: in many countries, the exercise of professions is regulated by permissions obtained by different types of mechanisms settled by associations: the creation of a comprehensive regional accrediting body would largely reduce the sovereignty of States, the autonomy of universities and the professional’s association’s prerogatives\textsuperscript{17}.

By the year 2000 (while a pre-test was conducted) the Argentinean National Commission of University Evaluation and Accreditation (aka CONEAU) begun to participate regularly in the regional negotiation as the agency had completed the first domestic accreditation process (Medicine). Since then CONEAU moved from a situation of indifference (as it was not relevant to its domestic agenda) to leadership in the process.

In 2002, MEXA was passed, which incorporated MERCOSUR’s Associated States (Chile and Bolivia) and the original goal of recognition of degrees for enhancing the labour market shifted towards a more precise and reachable objective: to assess regional quality standards as a stepping stone for degree recognition and validation. There was a need to assure academic quality and not to interfere with the regulation of the professions. Thus, freedom of movement of professionals was set aside: the Ouro Preto Protocol consolidated (leaving no space for advancing in the common market) and the “quasi-automatic” recognition of diplomas implied undermining sectorial interests (universities and professional associations) was left out of discussion. Consequently, the initial trend was disrupted: the validation would only be academic and would not interfere in the certification for professional practice. MERCOSUR reproduced the domestic differentiation between recognition of degrees and permits for professional practice: SEM is in charge of recognition of degrees while the professional practice --and therefore labour mobility-- is under the Group of Trade of Services (within the GMC).

\textsuperscript{15} See: http://nemercosur.siu.edu.ar/

\textsuperscript{16} These ideas recall in the initial stepping stones of the European Higher Education Area and the creation of the Bologna Process. Indeed, the EU tried to promote the creation of a system of credit transfers but MERCOSUR’s position was not in favour of such a homogenization and settled, instead, a mechanism based upon quality assurance that could respect of both national and institutional particularities. In broad terms, we can say that the European model prioritized homogenization in order to promote a high mobilization of students. In contrast, MERCOSUR countries have not opted for the homogenization of criteria and, therefore, academic mobility is reduced. All in all, MERCOSUR promoted an autonomous way to encourage HE policies and separate from some of the ideas prompted by the EU as a normative power.

\textsuperscript{17} The 1998 Memorandum stated that the dictum of the experts would have a mandatory character if the decision was reached by unanimity. Such a situation would create a supranational agency --above the national AQAs-- which was not viable then.
As a result, the creation of “MERCOSUR’s quality stamp” (or “MERCOSUR Brand”) strengthened some universities’ position within a regional and global HE market. But there is also a cooperative goal so as to promote regional integration within institutions that collides with the creation of competitive institutions. Such a tension between a cooperative and a competitive model of HE regional integration relates to the more general trend of MERCOSUR’s integration path (Perrotta, 2011b) and South American regionalism.

MEXA was implemented and, by 2006, 55 undergraduate degrees/diplomas obtained MERCOSUR’s quality stamp: Medicine, 8; Engineering, 33; Agronomy, 19. Argentina accredited 14 diplomas; Bolivia, 9; Brazil, 12; Chile, 5; Uruguay, 8 and Paraguay, 7. First, the decision to proceed to the accreditation of the quality of professional diplomas relates to the fact that the productive model of MERCOSUR’s and its parties was to be reinforced: stimulate intra-regional labour mobility, especially in those areas that are crucial in terms of the economic structures of the countries, on one side, and the particular needs posed by an underdevelopment context –such as a demand for health assistance–, on the other. It must also be consider that one of the most salient characteristics of our HE systems is the influence of the professional model of university; MERCOSUR re-enforces that trend.

Secondly, the mechanism was based on a particular logic: the club logic. As the original goal had shifted towards a more practical –and competitive– one related to improve the recognition of undergraduate degrees within the region so as to strengthen a regional HE market and enhance HEIs on the global market, quotas per country were established. There are two reasons that explain why not all HEI could apply for the regional AQA procedure. On one hand, alike the functioning of a club –in this case, a group of HEI that share certain characteristics and whose organization reports them benefits–, there are conditions for membership: only the most prestigious universities could obtain MERCOSUR’s quality stamp and therefore fulfil with the goal of enhancing top HEI to compete in the global market. On the other hand, the establishment of quotas also worked as an instrument to deter a massive participation from Brazilian HEI: the idea was to prevent Brazil from obtaining all the benefits of the quality stamp itself and leverage the distribution of benefits per country. Therefore, the distribution of quotas per parties relates to the competitive bias already discussed. However, the “club logic” of functioning had a positive consequence in terms of regional cooperation: a club is also based on the principle of solidarity. The value of MERCOSUR’s quality stamp relates to the fact that all the parties comply with the procedures, especially during the experimental mechanism –because all the undergraduate degrees under assessment were subject to a regional discussion and the dictum was decided within that common space–. As a result, the more developed members (in terms of technical expertise, material resources and institutional capacities) ended contributing to the less developed ones in order to implement the procedures. Such contributions resulted in transferring know-how, financing activities and organizing the regional meetings in strategic locations.

In 2008, MEXA became a permanent system which expanded not only to other diplomas (Veterinary, Architecture, Nursing and Dentistry) but also to other Associated States. ARCU-SUR was signed as an international treaty, which locked in the focus of the regional policy on quality assurance, leaving aside the original goals of recognition of degrees and mobility of workers.

By the first semester of 2012, the results of ARCU-SUR were that 109 degrees obtained MERCOSUR’s quality stamp: Argentina, 36; Bolivia, 10; Chile, 5; Colombia, 10; Uruguay, 14; Paraguay, 23; Venezuela, 11 and Brazil, none. During the 1st semester of 2012, 38 undergraduate courses were implementing the procedure: Argentina, 18; Paraguay, 4; Uruguay, 2 and Brazil, 113. As it is noticed, Brazil only started to implement ARCU-SUR in 2012
to fulfil the regional commitments. Such a situation generated tensions with the rest of the members—and mainly with Argentina, one of the main promoters of the regional AQA policy—.

All in all, three are the major changes from MEXA to ARCU-SUR are: first, convergence of policies proved to be crucial for AQA agencies in order not to duplicate efforts. That is to say that, currently, regional schedules match national ones. The underlying motto is that, as the AQA process is expensive and demands an important technical effort, national calendars meet regional ones. Secondly, that need for time convergence have affected negatively the AQA regional policy: it has led to the mechanization of the implementation, leaving aside the important effect in terms of region-building (as experts per discipline do not currently meet to discuss the situations of the diplomas under assessment). Third, the policy has been broadened as new members are participating: Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela. The enlargement of the mechanism poses new challenges: for instance, Argentina’s position could be challenged by the Colombian delegation as it is a country that has been implementing AQA policies for a long time but stands for a more privatized HE system.

2.1. AQA, policy diffusion and regulatory regionalism: considering asymmetries as a starting point

In order to comprehend the main characteristics of the AQA regional policy it should be acknowledged: i) the varied ways in which public policy attempts to tackle structural and regulatory asymmetries between the HE systems; ii) the different academic cultures and university traditions of each country and iii) the divergent capacities of the governmental agencies. These elements provide an understanding of the process of accommodation and/or domestic change.

To begin with, structural asymmetries in HE relate to the size of the national systems (institutions, students, professors, etc.) and the amount of public expenditure on HE as part of overall public expenditure and the gross domestic product (GDP). Regulatory asymmetries in HE pinpoint to the divergent policy instruments and regulations regarding the provision of education –accession, permanence and completion conditions via scholarships, quotas for minorities, etc.— as well as scientific and technological development –priority areas, policy promotion instruments, intellectual property rights regulations, etc.—(Perrotta, 2013a). Third, we add the consideration of different academic cultures and university traditions that predominate in each country. Shortly, we highlight two broad topics, of many, that form peculiar university traditions: the defence of public HE and guarantee of the right to education, on one hand, and the strong defence of university autonomy, on the other. These two trends proved to be determinant when choosing specific paths of action regarding the AQA regional policy of MERCOSUR and explain the differences among countries in terms of domestic change.

The four countries present both divergent and convergent characteristics that, in terms of asymmetries, pose challenges for the configuration of a regional policy and explain the possibility and intensity of domestic change. To begin with, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay share the Hispanic origin of universities—during the Spanish colonization—while in Brazil—as a former Portuguese colony—the foundation of university is a phenomena of the 20th Century. Secondly, even though the four countries have signed several declarations that affirm that access to HE, is a human right (and therefore the State is to guarantee such condition), the map is rather complex, for instance: the composition of the students’ enrolment shows that only Argentina and Uruguay have public HE systems (the enrolment rates in the public sector
are 79.5% and 86.2%, respectively); while Brazil and Paraguay are the most privatized systems of the region (with enrolment rates in private HEIs of 72.2% and 80.8%, respectively).

Another difference between countries relates to governments’ capabilities –especially of the agencies in charge of the implementation of AQA policy–. By capabilities we refer to the tangible and intangible resources of the State (i.e. Ministries of Education and National Agencies for AQA) in terms of human resources (technical expertise as well as bargaining experience at the regional arena), material resources (equipment) and financial resources (public expenditure or access to other sources of funding). Also, the support of other government agencies and relevant stakeholders (power resources) is important to comprehend such capabilities. The starting points of the four governments were dissimilar, for instance: some countries had previous experience in the field of AQA – regulation, agency and technical resources with expertise--; while for others it was the first time such policies were being discussed.

All in all, the differences of size, policies and traditions explain the multiple and varied policy decisions (and consequently policy products or domestic impact) regarding MERCOSUR’s HE policy. As the regulatory starting point were dissimilar, and the most important feature of such contrast was the existence or not of AQA regulations, the impact of the regional policy must be addressed separately.

- Argentina

Argentina was the only of the four Member States that already had an explicit AQA regulation: CONEAU was created in 1996—as it was introduced in the HE Law N° 24.521 in 1995–. Therefore, by the moment of implementation of MEXA (2002), Argentina had already settled the AQA process and as a result CONEAU influenced the process of establishing the mechanisms and instruments for the AQA regional policy. Therefore, we argue that the typical features of the domestic AQA policy were transferred to the AQA regional policy model.

The procedures, instruments and methodologies of MEXA and ARCU-SUR are alike the national model of AQA: the emphasis is placed on professional degrees and the two main stages are self-evaluation (HEIs) and external evaluation (experts).

The first undergraduate AQA procedure was implemented in Argentina in the year 2000 (medicine), CONEAU’s officials were the most experienced during the negotiation of the regional AQA model. The incorporation of Argentina to the discussion of the pre-tests and procedures was done from a preponderant position as officials had technical expertise and had gained experience in the field. In this sense, Argentina became the leading voice—“they knew how to do it...” quoted both the Paraguayan and Uruguayan actors interviewed— and influenced the overall configuration of the AQA regional policy. But mainly, the Argentinean delegation became a crucial policy transfer actor as CONEAU officials started transferring expertise to the other members—and continue doing so nowadays as more associated States are participating of ARCU-SUR—by offering courses, technical support, etc.

As a result, there is harmony between domestic and regional regulations and such a harmonization did not imply nor policy neither institutional changes. On the contrary, the AQA regional policy, according to CONEAU officials, is considered to be less exhaustive than the national policy (the quality standards diverge).

- Brazil

In the case of Brazil, by the moment of the regional negotiation there were no specific AQA regulation nor did a national agency exist. Instead, there was a strict regulation regarding the
evaluation of the HE system: institutions, courses, scholars, students. It is a comprehensive model of control that started in the decade of the eighties which continues nowadays and has even been reinforced: the HE evaluation system (aka SINAES). This regulatory framework was adapted so as to cope with the provisions established in the regional mechanism without creating major institutional innovations\(^\text{18}\).

During the experimental phase, Brazil contributed to the implementation of the AQA policy by assuming a technical and financial support to the process. Brazil indeed became a paymaster by means of its material and financial resources in order for the mechanism to be fulfilled. The position changed after the signature of ARCU-SUR treaty because domestic implementation of AQA policy stopped until 2012. This situation caused some misunderstandings and mistrust between the national delegations, as attempted the prevailing “club logic” –in order for the quality stamp to be worthy all members should participate–. On the Brazilian side it was argued that national provisions impeded the application of AQA procedures.

It could be argued, especially during the period of stagnation (2008-2012), that Brazil did not consider AQA regional policy a political priority. Such a statement is supported by the fact that, in quantitative terms, the number of HE institutions that could participate and obtain the MERCOSUR quality stamp is insignificant due to the size of the system. But, by broadening the lens of analysis, the fact that only the most prestigious institutions would effectively participate –as mentioned before– reinforces the idea that the quality stamp is worthy in a highly competitive HE market; and, therefore, important for the country in terms of a national strategy that accounts for the settlement of globally recognized institutions which relates to the consideration of Brazil as an emergent power.

During Lula da Silva’s presidency, Brazil pursued explicitly the rapprochement of bilateral relations with Argentina and the strengthening of MERCOSUR. The latter goal meant that Brazil became a paymaster as, for instance, is the member that delivers more money to MERCOSUR’s structural fund. Focusing only on the HE agenda, several bilateral programs were launched related to the creation of research networks, the promotion of mobility of students and scholars, the establishment of reciprocal courses at the postgraduate level, among others. As a result of the bilateral cooperation, the policies were regionalized: according to an Argentinean official “if the bilateral programs prove to be effective, then they are developed at the regional level, including the other parties”. Therefore, bilateral programs diffuse to the regional arena.

All in all, we argue that Brazil did not have to undergo major changes to cope with regional AQA policy and depended strongly on the national structure and regulation. It is neither a priority policy issue –unlike unilateral HE internationalization’s policies, which have been strengthened–. However, we pinpoint that there is a process of coordination with Argentina (the leading voice in AQA).

- **Paraguay**

The major impact of AQA regional policy in terms of domestic change is observed in the case of Paraguay. The experimental mechanism (MEXA) indicated that the process was to be organized by national agencies of accreditation and that the countries that did not have such a body should proceed to create it. Paraguay had no AQA regulation, so they passed a new HE law and set in force the national agency for the evaluation and accreditation of HE (aka

\(^{18}\) However, since 2012 it is being discussed at the parliamentary level a project to create a national AQA agency.
ANEAES). Consequently, the process of domestic change could be partly explained by the policy diffusion process from the regional level and the socialization of actors within this arena.

First, domestic political actors used the “regional obligation” to install the discourse of AQA policy and the need to improve the HE regulatory framework. Before MEXA, the process of reform had been difficult and there was no political consensus to advance in the discussion of a HE law (Rivarola, 2008). Therefore, when MEXA was signed, local decision-makers realized there was a window of opportunity to force the discussion and change the regulatory framework.

Secondly, the characteristics of MEXA (procedures, instruments, methodologies) shaped the configuration of the national AQA policy. It is clear that Paraguay’s current AQA procedures are similar to the regional ones. This relates to the fact that Paraguay first advanced with the regional accreditation of undergraduate degrees by implementing MEXA. However, if we take into consideration that the regional AQA policy was built upon the Argentinean AQA policy: was the policy diffusion process top-down (from MERCOSUR to Paraguay)? Or, was the policy diffusion process horizontal (from Argentina to Paraguay)? What was CONEAU’s role in this process?

The answer is not univocal: the policy diffusion process developed in this case relates to both situations (top-down and horizontal influences). On one side, as mentioned, the existence of the regional policy was used as a catalyst to promote domestic change by national policy makers. In this process, the Paraguayan HE sector fully adopted the regional trend in AQA. On the other side, the data collected evidences that the National Model of Accreditation –AQA regulations and the creation of the ANEAES– is the same as the Argentinean framework. An interviewee from Uruguay highlighted it in this term: “Paraguay’s agency law is a copy of the Argentinean CONEAU”.

In fact, CONEAU had an important role during the implementation of the regional AQA policy by training the national delegations of other countries, especially the ones that had no agency and formed ad-hoc commissions (Paraguay, Uruguay, Bolivia). Therefore, Argentina was able to impose the domestic AQA model in the regional negotiation and to legitimate such a position from a discourse of being the only one with the expertise to do so. Meanwhile, an epistemic community regarding AQA became more visible as the experimental mechanism was being implemented and it was crystallized with the creation of the Iberoamerican Network for Quality Accreditation in Higher Education (aka RIACES). The existence of this epistemic community collaborated in the dissemination of the AQA procedures, which were applied following the peculiarity of each State. At the same time, this process fed back to the regional policy. This epistemic community included, among its members, the presence of European scholars and practitioners on the field; and was supported by UNESCO’s International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (aka IESALC) and bi-regional experiences. The socialization process that was generated as a result of the intensity of contacts within the regional framework also favoured the creation of this epistemic community, which even resulted in joint academic productions between officials of different countries.

All in all, in Paraguay the diffusion process derived in the convergence of polices that led to a harmonization of procedures.

- Uruguay

The case of Uruguay is quite unique and such novelty relates to its university tradition. As a result of the regional AQA policy there is a current situation of peaceful coexistence between
In order to comprehend such complexity, it must be highlighted that the National Constitution states that UDELAR is regulated by its own organic law—therefore it could be considered as a Ministry of Higher Education itself. As a consequence the national Ministry of Education has no binding power over UDELAR. Thus, UDELAR has composed the national delegation of SEM accompanied by governmental officials and representatives of the private HEIs.

Unlike Paraguay, that created a national accreditation agency, Uruguay set in force an ad-hoc commission with presence of the three actors (government, UDELAR, private institutions) which continues up to present. Several projects to create an agency for the promotion and quality assurance of tertiary education (aka APACET) have been discussed, but none of them could be adopted (and would not be adopted in the medium term). The APACET project was introduced, similarly to the Paraguayan case, based upon the condition established in MEXA: national agencies should be in charge of the AQA regional policy. The discourse about the need to adjust to the regional requirement was prompted by the government and the private sector but it did not lead to domestic change as the contesting position of UDELAR is stronger. Both the government officials (Ministry of Education) and the private institutions advocate for the creation of an agency because their interest is to control UDELAR: the government has never been able to exercise any control over UDELAR; representatives of the private institutions demand that the same controls and regulations they must fulfil should be applied to all institutions, including UDELAR. As for UDELAR’s position, the university rejects the creation of APACET because its autonomy would be significantly reduced.

However, in this scenario the AQA regional policy was implemented in Uruguayan HEIs, both public and private ones. The interesting results are: first, UDELAR submitted to the AQA policy of MERCOSUR even though it rejects to do the same at the national level. Therefore, UDELAR considers that “MERCOSUR’s stamp” is valuable and they should not be left aside. Second, it was the first time that the three actors sat together at the same negotiation table to discuss HE public policies.

As a consequence, the domestic regulatory framework remains the same while coexisting with the regional policy requirements.

Finally, the Uruguayan case adds another element of analysis: the State capabilities to set a particular policy agenda and fulfil it. So far, we have mentioned two governmental capabilities, material and financial resources, on one side, and human resources with technical expertise, on the other. Nevertheless, the study of Uruguay and Paraguay demonstrates that the possibility to lead a domestic change (for example, to create an AQA agency) does not rely only on such capabilities (it is necessary but it is not sufficient). It depends deeply on the policy space to develop such changes.

Consequently, even though Uruguay had better material capabilities and more trained human resources than Paraguay, there was no policy space for government officials (at the Ministry of Education as well as the Legislative Power) to succeed in passing the AQA agency law. One of the reasons of this lack of political space refers to the strong opposition of one of the most important actors of HE governance: UDELAR’s autonomy and, therefore, its capacity to block the AQA law. As mentioned, such a situation is fully understood if the creation of the public HE

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19 UDELAR has been very active regarding the regional integration of higher education institutions. An example of this is the creation of the Association of Universities of the Montevideo Group (aka AUGM), a network of more than 20 public institutions in 1991.
sector is taken into account (the Constitutional supremacy of UDELAR, its history and its strong autonomy). On the contrary, Paraguay that presented weaker capabilities in terms of material resources and expertise, could indeed promote a domestic change as there was policy space to do so.

3. Conclusion

As a result from the analysis, we are able to discuss our main problem-question: is MERCOSUR fostering development or enhancing marketization of HE by means of establishing regional regulations? The answer is not univocal and we observe that the regional AQA policy reflects the tension between contesting projects of regionalism: commercial project vis-a-vis a welfarist project. The idea of tension therefore reflects the competing and contesting interest, values and ideas that craft South American Regionalism and could be addressed as post-hegemonic (Riggirozzi y Tussie, 2012b).

The most salient characteristics of the regional AQA policy reflect the commodification bias:

A) The original goal oriented towards the free circulation of workers (which, for the economical literature means a more developed RIA) shrank towards the consolidation of a quality stamp profitable in a highly competitive market of HE. Therefore, MERCOSUR’s strategy aims at creating world-class universities in line with foreign policy goals of becoming more competitive economies. This is the case of other RIAs, such as South East Asia and the European Union. Actually, the EU fosters mechanisms of enhancing HE markets and became a normative power to diffuse the model to other regions. The case of North America is different as the hegemonic power (USA) concentrates the most prestigious HEIs within international rankings (rankings that were created by this hegemonic and neo-colonial powers that feedbacks the procurement of top positions by the same HEIs).

B) The peripheral position of SEM also contributes to the creation of an alternative (to trade) model of HE regionalism. Many institutional features of MERCOSUR and SEM constraint the fulfilling of a welfarist political project even though there has been a radical change since the beginning of the 21st Century (alongside the arising of Latin America “New Leftist” governments) that posed an influence on the overall orientation of the RIAs. The concentration of the decision-making in the GMC and CMC, the informal articulation among agencies, the lack of clear social participation, the absence of nurtured regional funds and the failure to create a permanent secretariat for SEM impede the consolidation (lock in effect) of a progressive agenda for educational policies. So far, SEM has relied on the favourable political context but such a situation does not assure mid-term sustainability.

C) The diplomas that are submitted to the AQA process are all professional careers aligned with the productive model of the region and the most important sectorial interest groups.

However, we also pinpoint that indirect and unintended secondary effects prove that renewed linkages among institutions and scholars –as a consequence of MEXA and ARCU-SUR– are shaping alternative paths to internationalization and regionalization based upon solidarity and mutual understanding of asymmetries. Those unintended consequences reflect that several actors are reclaiming a welfarist project for the region based upon socio-economic development, political autonomy and geopolitical power.

A) The club logic, as stated, crafted solidarities that also enhanced a socialization process within experts and officials. As a result, several programs of academic mobility have been established as well as inter-institutional cooperation networks.
B) MERCOSUR could create an autonomous path or model to regionalizing HE: contrary to the Bologna Process set in Europe, MERCOSUR focused on a more qualitative policy goal instead of setting a massive mobility programme based upon the homogenization of credits. This could be considered as a goal in terms of political autonomy of the countries and the MERCOSUR region, but also regarding universities autonomy.

C) so as to tackle the geopolitical objective, we came to another tension: how is it possible for MERCOSUR (and MERCOSUR member States) to enhance developmental goals without taking into account the need to be more competitive globally? It is a problematic situation because in order to promote development (by achieving top-class universities) national and inter-national asymmetries are reproduced, which in turn reflects the challenges of current “New Leftist” governments: how to redistribute benefits within a neoliberal model still ongoing?

The case of AQA regional policy reflects the contradictions that are also present at the national level and further analysis is needed so as to tackle their difficulties. A question that arises is: why if –it is true– national governments in many MERCOSUR countries (Argentina and Brazil, mainly) have promoted inclusive domestic policies for the HE, at the regional level little has been done? So, if MERCOSUR is shaping a regulatory process that is by-passing national policy-making dynamics, how could regulatory regionalism diffuse a policy project that contributes to a developmental model of integration?

AQA regional policy has placed the stepping stone, if participation of non-governmental actors (students, teachers, institutions) is broadened, we could imagine mid-terms results in terms of reclaiming a renewed welfarist project that could target both improving South America geopolitical power (being knowledge one of our most important resources) and, consequently, broadened our political autonomy. The discussion of the national cases shows the different elements of the political context (policy space) we should consider in order to do promote regional policies based upon mutual understanding and the consideration of HE as a human right.
Annex

Graphic N° 1: Students mobility during MARCA`s initial phase (2006)

Source: own elaboration from SEM documents.

Graphic N° 2: Students mobility and available places within MARCA (2006-2010)

Source: own elaboration from SEM documents.
### Table N° 1: Number of students enrolled in the higher education (HE) sector and quantity of higher education institutions (HEIs), 2011

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students enrolled in HE</th>
<th>HEIs</th>
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</thead>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>%</td>
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<td>Uruguay</td>
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</table>

Source: elaborated from Argentina’s Statistic Yearbook 2010 (Ministry of Education). Brazil’s Statistic Synopsis 2011 (INEP). Uruguay’s Statistic Yearbook 2010 (Ministry of Education). Paraguay access to data was difficult and these features were reconstructed from two documents: a) Data from Paraguayan HE 2012 (Ministry of Education) and b) Cernuzzi, L., Vargas, E., y Gonzalez, V. (2007). *Educación superior y desarrollo del capital humano*. Asunción: Grafitec.

### Table N° 2: Gross enrolment at tertiary level, both sex (Percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2001</th>
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Source: Elaborated from CEPALSTAT, which is based upon UNESCO-IEU. The indicator shows the proportion of students enrolled at the tertiary level of education, regardless of age, within the population that officially corresponds to that level of education.

References:
- a / Latin America and the Caribbean. Includes 41 countries: Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Netherlands Antilles, Argentina, Aruba, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Plurinational State of Bolivia, Brazil, Cayman Islands, Turks and Caicos Islands, British Virgin Islands, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Granada, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Montserrat, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Dominican Republic, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago and Uruguay.
- b / Estimates of the UNESCO-IEU.

### Table N° 3: Number of students in tertiary education per 100.000 inhabitants

<table>
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<th></th>
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Source: Elaborated from UNESCO – IEU.
Table N° 4: Public expenditure on education (percentage)

a) As percentage of gross national product (GNP)

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b) As percentage of gross domestic product (GDP)

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c) As percentage of total government expenditure

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Source: Elaborated from CEPALSTAT, which uses UNESCO – IEU data. The indicator shows Current and capital expenditure allocated to education by the local, regional and national levels, including municipalities (excluding household contributions).


--------- (2009). Diffusing (Inter-) Regionalism. The EU as a Model of Regional Integration. Working Paper KFG The Transformative Power of Europe, 26


