

Experience of expanding regional accreditation – the case of South America

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Summary

This article describes the ARCU-SUR system established in 2008, which defined a voluntary institutional policy for regional accreditation of the academic quality of a number of bachelor degree courses, including veterinary medicine. The cornerstone of the process is external evaluation and its main criterion is a veterinarian profile described for the region. So far, 28 veterinary degree courses have been accredited by the ARCU-SUR system in South America: 11 in Brazil, 8 in Argentina, 3 in Chile, 3 in Venezuela, 1 in Uruguay, 1 in Paraguay and 1 in Bolivia. ARCU-SUR has created a culture of international evaluation in South America and this process should be expanded, consolidated and meta-evaluated to review its scope. Veterinary statutory bodies and organisations, such as the Pan-American Association of Veterinary Sciences (PANVET), are able to develop accreditation mechanisms for OIE basic and advanced competencies and for individual professional certification.

Key words: international accreditation – globalisation of degrees, –MERCOSUR, –professional certification.

The aim of modern higher education should be to train professionals to meet regional demand, while looking ahead to a future of globalisation. This has led to growing internationalisation of higher education dynamics, students, courses, curricula and teachers. It is becoming increasingly common for recent graduates to work in different regions of the world.

Since the 1980s countries in the region have, to varying degrees, experienced an expansion of their higher education systems, coupled with low public investment (Rama, 2006). There is currently a great need for the region's institutions to adapt to the internationalisation of higher education, new information and communication technologies, new demands for public access, the growing presence of knowledge societies promoting lifelong learning and constantly updated knowledge. In light of this, the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), through its ministries of education, undertook to develop a higher education sector as part of its remit. The key aim of this education sector is to promote and consolidate the integration of human resource training and to improve higher education in the region. Three thematic areas were defined: accreditation, mobility and inter-agency cooperation. As follow-up, in 1998 the education ministers of MERCOSUR member states, plus Bolivia and Chile, signed a memorandum of understanding on the implementation of an experimental mechanism for the accreditation of bachelor degree courses in MERCOSUR (MEXA), which established the design for developing university evaluation and accreditation activities, initially for degrees in agronomy, engineering and medicine and later for degrees in veterinary medicine, architecture, nursing and dentistry.

To move the process forward, in 2008 the MERCOSUR Common Market Council endorsed an agreement between education ministers to establish the ARCU-SUR system for accrediting university degree courses in MERCOSUR (Brazil, 2008). The highest level of the system is the meeting of ministers of education (RME), while the network of national accreditation agencies (RANA) is the intermediate level and national accreditation agencies (ANA) are the national level (Argentina's National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation [CONEAU]; Brazil's National Institute for Educational Studies and Research [INEP]). National accreditation agencies are responsible for the evaluation and accreditation system relating to ARCU-SUR. Degree courses are accredited under ARCU-SUR system procedures (MERCOSUR, 2008). Since the ARCU-SUR system was implemented, 28 veterinary degree courses have been accredited in the region: 11 in Brazil, 8 in Argentina, 3 in Chile, 3 in Venezuela, 1 in Uruguay, 1 in Paraguay and 1 in Bolivia. ARCU-SUR has created a culture of international evaluation in South America and this process should be expanded, consolidated and meta-evaluated to review its scope.

To strengthen the profession in the region and ensure that society is served by better trained professionals, two important approaches are required: (1) international accreditation, which is already underway and will ensure minimum quality of schools to enable them to better prepare students (and hence future professionals); (2) individual professional certification, to be managed by veterinary statutory bodies, which has made only slow progress so far. For both these approaches it is very important for supranational organisations, such as the OIE and the Pan-American Association of Veterinary Sciences (PANVET), to make recommendations to key national government bodies to ensure that needs become legislation and that this legislation is implemented as soon as possible.

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