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THE MERCOSUR EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AND THE CHALLENGES OF CURRICULAR HARMONIZATION: AN ANALYSIS OF REGIONAL INTEGRATION AND ITS EVOLUTION

AUTHOR

Luciana Carvalho dos Reis Fim: Doctoral candidate in Education Sciences at Universidad de la Integración de las Américas (UNIDA), Asunción, Paraguay. Basic Education teacher of Portuguese Language and Literature in the Espírito Santo state school system.

Contact: luciana.prof94@gmail.com | orcid.org/0009-0007-6388-3946

ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the evolution and current challenges of the MERCOSUR Educational Sector (SEM), focusing on curricular harmonization and degree recognition among the member states. The central research question examined how the bloc's documentary framework reflects the pursuit of such harmonization and which regulatory obstacles continue to hinder the realization of regional educational citizenship. A qualitative documentary and bibliographic methodology was employed at an exploratory-descriptive level, based on content analysis of official agreements and regulations. The main findings indicate that, although significant progress has been made in establishing a regulatory foundation for academic mobility, practical implementation is hampered by national asymmetries, bureaucratic barriers, and the absence of unified information systems. The study concludes that harmonization requires moving beyond unilateral views of sovereignty toward shared regional systemic responsibility. Effective educational integration depends on continuous monitoring mechanisms that ensure transparency and mutual trust among the bloc's educational institutions.

Keywords: Curricular harmonization. Degree recognition. Educational cooperation. Regional integration. MERCOSUR educational sector (SEM).

INTRODUCTION

Regional integration within MERCOSUR, established by the Treaty of Asunción in 1991, outlined a vision that extends beyond mere economic and trade convergence, encompassing the educational and cultural spheres as fundamental pillars of sustainable development and social cohesion among the member states. In the contemporary context, education is understood as a strategic asset that underpins regional identity and the bloc's competitiveness in the face of globalization. The MERCOSUR Educational Sector (SEM) therefore emerged with the mission of coordinating a permanent space for collaboration aimed at facilitating student and professional mobility through the recognition of studies and degrees, thereby promoting what is known as regional citizenship.

Nevertheless, the historical trajectory of the SEM shows that building this common educational space is not a linear process, but rather a journey marked by structural complexities and national resistance. The diversity of educational systems, disparities in curricular structures, and heterogeneity of national legislation pose serious challenges to the intended harmonization. Political intentions expressed in agreements and ministerial declarations often encounter obstacles in the bureaucratic and technical realities of Ministries of Education and higher education institutions, resulting in a gap between regional standards and local practice. This fragmentation ultimately shifts the burden of integration to the individual—the student or professional—who faces study-validation procedures that are slow, costly, and sometimes ineffective.

The scientific and social relevance of this study rests on the need to uncover these obstacles through a critical analysis of the bloc's evolving documentary framework. Investigating regulatory asymmetries and the theoretical factors that advance or constrain integration is essential to provide evidence for more assertive and less exclusionary transnational policies. The tension between educational sovereignty and regional integration lies at the center of current pedagogical debate and calls for a redefinition of the role of universities and funding agencies in developing quality criteria that both respect national identities and converge toward regional standards of excellence.

Against this background, this article is based on the premise that technical cooperation and intercultural dialogue are the mechanisms capable of transforming integration—currently perceived by many as merely theoretical—into a tangible and productive reality for regional citizenship. The overall objective of this study is to analyze the evolution of the MERCOSUR Educational Sector (SEM), focusing on the regulatory and theoretical challenges of curricular harmonization and degree recognition in consolidating regional integration.

METHODOLOGY

This study was characterized as qualitative documentary and bibliographic research, adopting an exploratory-descriptive level of inquiry to analyze the phenomenon of regional integration. The research design focused on an exhaustive analysis of the bloc's official agreements, declarations, and regulations in order to examine the historical development and contemporary challenges of the MERCOSUR Educational Sector (SEM). The research universe comprised all regulations, resolutions, and minutes produced by the SEM and the Associated States concerning educational integration and harmonization. An intentional, nonprobability sample was used, consisting of the most consequential regulatory frameworks that explicitly address curricular harmonization and degree recognition.

The analytical corpus consisted of publicly available official materials, including the Treaty of Asunción (1991), minutes of meetings of the Common Market Council (CMC), ministerial declarations, and specific regulations on academic mobility and institutional cooperation. The inclusion criteria established the rigorous selection of documents directly focused on educational

issues, regional integration, and degree recognition. Conversely, the exclusion criteria eliminated materials of a purely commercial, customs-related, or foreign-policy nature that had no direct connection to or impact on the bloc's educational sector. The analytical process was structured in three interdependent stages: assembling and systematically organizing the documentary corpus; conducting an exhaustive exploration of the material through thematic coding; and critically interpreting the findings in light of the study objectives.

Content analysis was applied to process and categorize the information extracted from the collected material. Four central analytical categories were established: “Integration Mechanisms,” focused on cooperation programs; “National Asymmetries,” addressing differences among systems; “Bureaucratic Barriers,” referring to implementation obstacles; and “Cooperation Programs,” examining support for mobility. To ensure scientific rigor and precision in data processing, simple descriptive statistics were used to count the frequency of keywords and categories in the official documents. Regarding ethical criteria, the study maintained strict academic rigor and was exempt from review by the Research Ethics Committee (CEP/CONEP), pursuant to CNS Resolution No. 510/2016, because it relied exclusively on public, official, publicly available documents; the accuracy and proper citation of all sources were ensured.

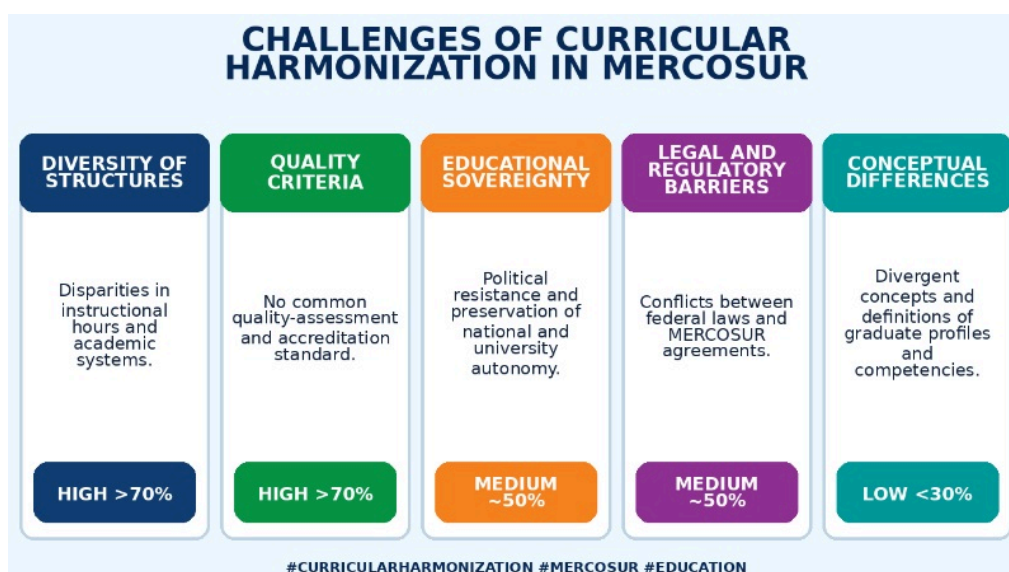
PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Curricular harmonization

The documentary and regulatory analysis conducted in this study identified that official bloc records treat curricular harmonization as the cornerstone and sine qua non requirement for successful regional educational integration. The convergence of knowledge and equivalence of competencies are not merely technical goals; they are prerequisites for consolidating a regional identity that transcends geographic borders.

Figure 1, developed from the methodological process of content analysis and term-frequency analysis, systematizes the main categories of challenges identified in the regulations examined—such as the Treaty of Asunción and SEM meeting minutes—that directly affect curricular convergence within MERCOSUR.

Figure 1: Matrix of Structural Challenges to Curricular Harmonization in MERCOSUR



Source: Prepared by the author based on the documentary analysis of the MERCOSUR Educational Sector (2025).

The data show that diversity of structures and the absence of unified quality criteria are the barriers most frequently identified in official documents and constitute serious impediments to seamless harmonization. Harmonization requires educational systems to converge toward common quality standards without erasing national identities or homogenizing cultures. This, in turn, demands systemic responsibility involving multiple institutional actors, from ministries to funding agencies.

Educational integration, under the paradigm analyzed, requires a broad reorganization of the educational space, including the restructuring of governance arrangements, validation mechanisms, and the political positions of states so that the cooperation system becomes truly effective. This means ensuring that all students and professionals can have their degrees recognized promptly and can participate actively and meaningfully in building regional citizenship. In the words of Almeida (2019):

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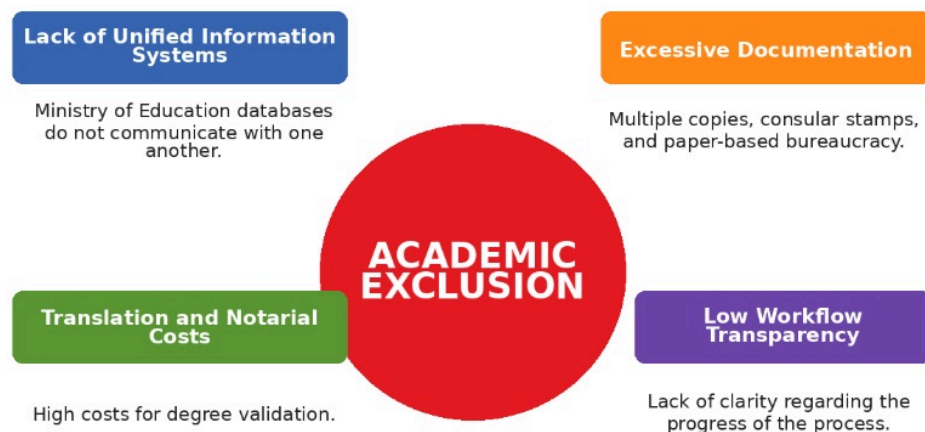
As Azevedo (2009) argues, integration within MERCOSUR faces a historical dilemma between market-oriented regulation—focused solely on the provision of services—and the construction of a public educational space, where curricular harmonization often runs up against the absence of supranational governance with binding authority. The lack of political coordination noted in the documents analyzed supports the view that nonconvergence generates isolation and weakens exchange programs, perpetuating a gap that disconnects education and training from the actual needs of an integrated regional labor market.

Degree Recognition

The recognition of degrees and diplomas is the fundamental technical and legal mechanism for making regional citizenship a reality, allowing intellectual capital to move freely across the borders of member states. However, the documentary analysis reveals that the transition from policy to practice is obstructed by a dense layer of procedural requirements that discourage academic and professional mobility.

Figure 2 systematizes the bureaucratic obstacles identified in the documentary processes of the MERCOSUR Educational Sector (SEM), highlighting the gap between political rhetoric and institutional implementation.

Figure 2: Matrix of Obstacles to the Automatic Recognition of Degrees in the SEM, 2025.



Prepared by the author based on an analysis of the MERCOSUR Educational Sector (2025).

(Interpretive description: The lack of unified information systems and limited transparency in validation workflows create a “perpetuation of the theoretical view of integration,” in which individuals bear the burden of state bureaucracy and fragmented data across the bloc's Ministries of Education.)

The results indicate that opaque procedures and limited timeliness of institutional responses are the most critical shortcomings of the current integration system. Although international agreements point toward automatic recognition for the purpose of continuing one's studies, national oversight bodies frequently impose revalidation criteria that disregard the principle of mutual trust. Overcoming these barriers requires mobility planning grounded in the rigorous validation of quality criteria and regional accreditation systems, such as ARCU-SUR, which ensure institutional credibility without undermining university autonomy.

Degree recognition, in its various forms, creates specific challenges in the area of curricular equivalence. Regulatory diversity requires information management to serve as the principal pillar for overcoming equivalence barriers, establishing a direct relationship between streamlined processes and a genuine increase in mobility flows. As Soares (2023) notes:

The recognition of degrees and diplomas, in its various forms, creates specific challenges in the areas of curricular equivalence and institutional credibility. Regulatory diversity requires information management to serve as the principal pillar for overcoming equivalence barriers, establishing a direct relationship between streamlined processes and a genuine increase in mobility flows (SOARES, 2023, p. 115).

Silveira (2016) supports this analysis by noting that the SEM has sought regulatory mechanisms to ensure quality; however, national asymmetries and the lack of integrated databases continue to create legal uncertainty for both institutions and graduates. The findings of this study confirm that informational and bureaucratic barriers prevent regional bodies from optimizing validation workflows, making the process selective and exclusionary for a large part of the academic community, whose members ultimately abandon mobility plans because of the cost and lengthy nature of the process.

Educational Cooperation and the Role of University Networks

This study analyzes educational cooperation within MERCOSUR as the driving force for reducing structural and pedagogical asymmetries among the member states. The documentary analysis revealed that the bloc relies on horizontal governance models grounded in solidarity and the sharing of best practices, which are essential to strengthening regional education.

Figure 3 details the support strategies identified as most effective in promoting integration, based on the records of the programs and university networks mapped in the study.

Figure 3: Strategies for Fostering Regional Integration and Observed Impacts

OBSTACLES TO AUTOMATIC DEGREE RECOGNITION IN MERCOSUR Main Challenges in Validating Degrees and Certificates in the Region		
OBSTACLE CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION OF THE CHALLENGE	MAIN IMPACTS
1. LACK OF UNIFIED INFORMATION SYSTEMS	Member-state Ministries of Education databases do not communicate with one another; digital integration is lacking.	Manual processes, slow verification, and a high risk of human error.
2. EXCESSIVE DOCUMENTATION	Multiple paper copies, consular stamps, authentication, and excessive documentary bureaucracy are required.	High administrative costs for applicants, frequent loss and misplacement of documents.
3. TRANSLATION AND NOTARIAL COSTS	Certified translations and notarized document validations are mandatory, generating high costs.	A financial barrier for students and professionals that makes the process more expensive.
4. LOW WORKFLOW TRANSPARENCY	Procedures lack clarity; online status tracking is unavailable and deadlines are undefined.	Uncertainty for applicants, difficulty planning careers, and a perception of inefficiency.

Diagnostic Study — MERCOSUR Corporate Perspective, 2025

Source: Prepared by the author based on the research project and analysis of SEM regulations (2025).

The data indicate that creating joint funding channels and using transparent calls for proposals are essential to translating regional needs into projects with tangible impact. Nevertheless, participation in discussion forums and the use of tools to monitor regional indicators still face engagement challenges, suggesting a partial disconnect between political bodies and the day-to-day practices of educational institutions.

The effectiveness of this integration depends on a paradigm shift that replaces unilateral logic with reciprocity. As the theoretical framework of this study indicates:

South-South Cooperation Theory will be firmly anchored in methodologies that promote horizontality, solidarity, and the sharing of best practices, all of which are essential to strengthening education within the bloc. The premise is to use cooperation as a focal point capable of generating and mobilizing joint projects in priority areas such as teacher education and technical education.

It is therefore concluded that the strategic use of information and the synergistic use of resources are indispensable tools for cooperation to promote genuine regional citizenship. The analysis of the strategies identified in the documentary research validates governance models that center academic mobility as the principal driver of integration.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that the evolution of the MERCOSUR Educational Sector (SEM) has been characterized by robust regulatory development that has not yet been fully reflected in the everyday administrative and pedagogical practices of the member states. The objective of analyzing the challenges of curricular harmonization was achieved by demonstrating that the diversity of systems, national asymmetries, and persistent bureaucratic barriers act as forces of resistance to the consolidation of effective regional citizenship. The research showed that educational integration goes beyond merely signing international treaties; it requires a profound restructuring of political and institutional culture that privileges reciprocity and intercultural dialogue over the unilateral logic of educational sovereignty.

This study contributes to scholarship and the field of Education Sciences by critically mapping transparency gaps and identifying information management as the central strategic pillar for overcoming barriers to degree recognition. It advances the discussion by establishing a theoretical relationship between streamlined bureaucratic procedures and a genuine increase in mobility flows, providing a framework for analyzing comparative educational policies in regional blocs. In addition, the study strengthens the theoretical foundation for South-South Cooperation by validating horizontal governance models and university networks as essential mechanisms for mitigating asymmetries and promoting regional cohesion.

For future research, new studies should move beyond purely regulatory and documentary analysis and adopt empirical approaches that measure the actual impact of SEM policies on citizens' trajectories. Research should track graduates who have used regional mobility mechanisms in order to determine whether degree recognition has, in practice, enabled employment and academic advancement without the bureaucratic obstacles identified here. Such assessments would be essential to evaluate the effectiveness of regional citizenship beyond the language of legal instruments.

Within this framework, technological solutions should be implemented, including unified information systems and digital networks for real-time degree verification, to eliminate the need for slow and costly paper-based procedures. Another relevant line of inquiry would examine the continuing education of administrators and program coordinators within universities, seeking to understand how disseminating a culture of integration at the institutional level can reduce resistance. Understanding these mechanisms is a crucial step toward MERCOSUR's definitive consolidation of a common, supportive, and human-centered educational space.

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