

# **Networks, policies, and cooperation: the internationalization of higher education in Argentina and MERCOSUR.**

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## **Networks, policies, and cooperation: the internationalization of higher education in Argentina and MERCOSUR**

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Since the 1990s, the internationalization of higher education has been a significant trend in Latin America, especially in Argentina and the broader MERCOSUR region. The phenomenon encompasses more than academic exchanges—it reflects a strategic transformation of educational policies, institutional missions, and regional cooperation mechanisms. This essay analyzes the networks, policies, and cooperative efforts shaping the internationalization of higher education in Argentina and MERCOSUR, highlighting key actors, programs, and structural limitations.

### Defining Internationalization: Theoretical Foundations

Internationalization of higher education can be defined through multiple conceptual lenses. According to Sylvie Didou Aupetit, it represents a *sustained effort to align higher education with global standards and dynamics* (Didou Aupetit, 2008). Meanwhile, Jane Knight and Jocelyne Gacel-Ávila frame it as a *holistic process that incorporates international and intercultural dimensions into teaching, research, and governance* (Gacel-Ávila, 2001). These definitions emphasize not only mobility and exchange but also

structural adaptation and institutional reform. The theoretical consensus underscores that internationalization is not merely a peripheral activity but integral to modern higher education's core mission.

A synergy between strategic planning, internationalization, and academic and scientific diplomacy suggests that universities should develop institutional strategic plans (ISPs) that integrate these dimensions, empowering the academic and scientific sectors through a culture of internationalization that promotes coherent organizational and communication actions, while highlighting the importance of consensus and agreements within the university community to implement international policies with the support of competent authorities and structures (Quiroga, 2021).

The possibilities for change and transformation of university communities in the face of current trends in higher education, especially internationalization processes, raise the question of whether university communities are willing to incorporate changes in their culture and regulations that promote new actions or roles, emphasizing new forms of internationalization, such as campuses abroad and distance education programs, which require a cultural transformation that allows universities to adapt to global dynamics without losing their local identity (Quiroga, 2019a).

The analysis of cooperation, internationalization, and student and faculty mobility activities at an Argentine university, identifying and characterizing the development of exchange processes between faculty and undergraduate and graduate students, explores how stakeholders engaged in these initiatives, and evaluates their experiences and perceptions. This analysis highlights the importance of understanding the motivations and practices of faculty and students in order to design effective internationalization strategies (Quiroga, 2019b). In addition, Quiroga and Trujillo Fernández (2020) address various perspectives on the concept of internationalization, its management, effectiveness and links with teaching motivations, presenting results of studies carried out in Latin American university contexts. Argentine academic Fernandez Lamarra has made significant contributions to the study of higher education and internationalization in Argentina. The creation of a Common Latin American Space for Higher Education (ECLAE), inspired by the European Bologna Process, raises the need to coordinate educational policies and systems in the region to foster integration (Fernandez Lamarra, 2004).

The great diversity and disarticulation among national systems, which hinders mobility, degree recognition, and interinstitutional cooperation, requires a coordinated approach between governments and universities to advance common goals while respecting cultural and structural diversity.

Fernandez Lamarra (2020) critiques the hegemonic model of internationalization and questions the uncritical adoption of global frameworks based on competition and rankings, highlighting the risks of academic dependence and the loss of regional identity. He defends a model based on cooperation, equity, respect for diversity, and reciprocity among institutions in the Global South. He reaffirms the role of networks such as the AUGM in strengthening internationalization from and for Latin America, with an emphasis on regional interests.

The Argentine academic proposes a renewed approach to public policies in higher education in the face of contemporary challenges such as inequality, technological change, and geopolitical tensions, emphasizing equitable access as a human right and a tool for social justice, and the strategic role of universities as drivers of development, inclusion, and critical thinking in democratic contexts.

### Institutional and Policy Frameworks in Argentina

Argentina's approach to internationalization reflects a dual reality: strong normative commitment but limited structural implementation. While successive governments and educational institutions have embraced the discourse of internationalization, practical outcomes have been constrained by insufficient funding, institutional fragmentation, and inconsistent policy continuity (Rama, 2013). The Ministry of Education has developed frameworks for promoting mobility, research collaboration, and academic equivalency, yet these efforts often lack the evaluative mechanisms and strategic coherence needed for sustained impact.

Observatories such as UNESCO's International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) have recently contributed to policy development by promoting best practices and fostering data-driven decision-making (UNESCO-IESALC, 2021). These institutions play a vital role in standardizing evaluation and accreditation processes, essential for mutual degree recognition and student mobility.

### Regional Integration through MERCOSUR

MERCOSUR has served as a regional platform for cooperation in higher education, enabling dialogue and convergence among member states. The creation of the ARCU-SUR accreditation system represents one of the most significant advancements in this field. Established in 2008, ARCU-SUR ensures mutual recognition of university degrees among Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, enhancing academic mobility and professional integration (SESu/MERCOSUR, 2008).

### The Association of Montevideo Group Universities (AUGM)

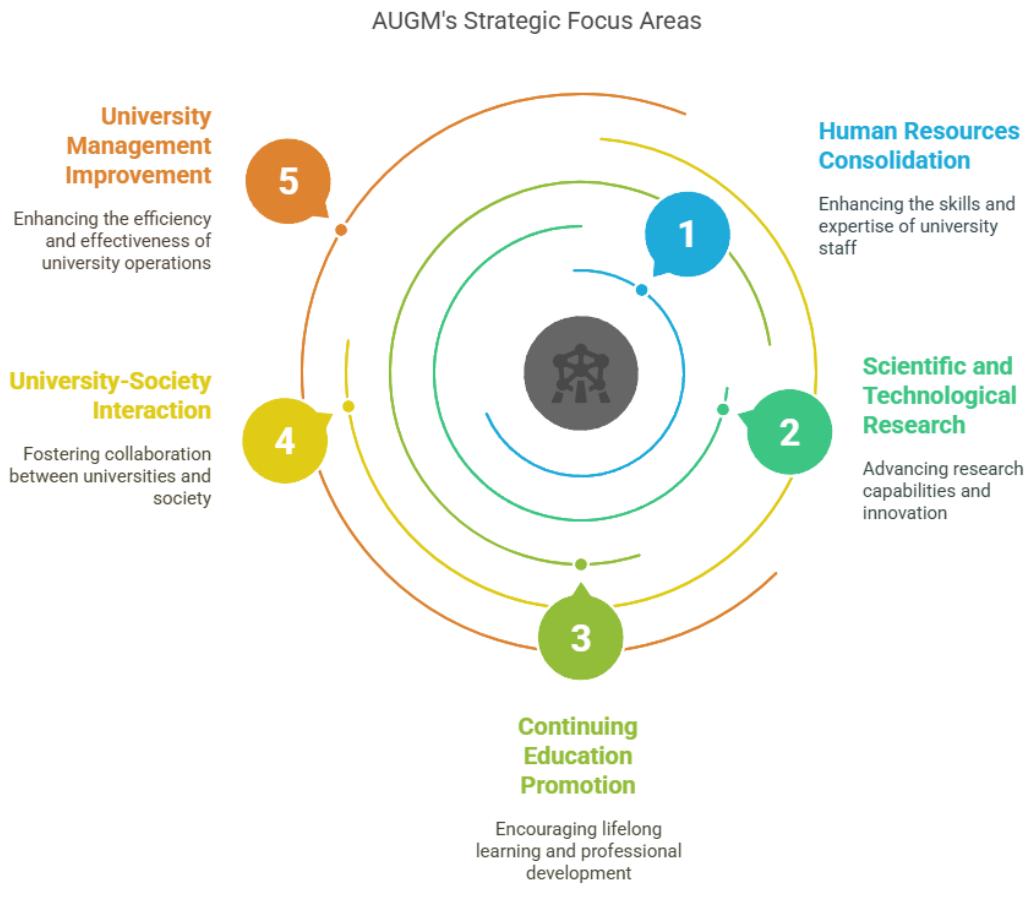
The internationalization of higher education involves complex dynamics that oscillate between local particularism and global internationalism. In this context, the Association of Montevideo Group Universities (AUGM), made up of public universities in Latin America, stands as a network that seeks to integrate regional efforts in academic, scientific, and cultural cooperation. This article analyzes the role of AUGM in promoting the internationalization of higher education from a regional perspective, identifying its programs, structural challenges, and its positioning amidst the tensions of particularism and internationalism. University networks such as the Association of Universities Montevideo Group(AUGM) and the Unión de Universidades de América Latina y el Caribe (UDUAL) have also contributed by organizing academic events, funding joint research, and facilitating student and faculty exchanges. These networks promote South-South cooperation and academic solidarity, crucial for a region historically dependent on North-South academic ties.

The internationalization of higher education is a phenomenon that has gained prominence in recent decades. Despite its global nature, this trend manifests itself differently depending on the region, sociopolitical context, and institutional capacity. Founded in 1991, Association of Montevideo Group Universities (AUGM) this network seeks to strengthen academic integration among public universities in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Bolivia, promoting scientific, technological, educational, and cultural cooperation.

#### AUGM as a regional internationalization network

AUGM is a network of public, autonomous, and self-governing universities. The mission focuses on:

- The consolidation of highly qualified human resources.
- The strengthening of scientific and technological research.
- The promotion of continuing education.
- University-society interaction.
- The improvement of university management.



To achieve these goals, it implements academic mobility programs, conferences for young researchers, summer and winter schools, and international seminars. It also promotes interdisciplinary initiatives, programs focused on the environment, and strategies for linking with productive and cultural sectors.

#### Structural Obstacles and Challenges to Equitable Participation

The effective participation of universities in the AUGM is conditioned by multiple factors:

- Budgetary constraints, which restrict mobility.

- Diversity of institutional priorities, which leads to unequal participation in the network.
- Lack of internationalization infrastructure, especially in universities with little experience in international cooperation.

Internal bureaucracy and national regulations, which hinder program implementation.  
 Asymmetries between member institutions, which create barriers to equitable collaboration.  
 These conditions reveal the limitations of the ideal of homogeneous internationalization and expose the need for models adapted to Latin American realities.

### Particularism and Internationalism: Conceptual Tensions in Internationalization

The literature on internationalization identifies two contrasting approaches:

#### 4.1 Particularism

This approach emphasizes:

- The cultural, economic, and historical particularities of national contexts.
- The need to adapt internationalization strategies to local realities.
- The impact of internationalization on local communities.

In this sense, the AUGM can be understood as a form of particularist internationalization, prioritizing regional cooperation and responding to needs shared by Latin American public universities.

#### 4.2 Internationalism

This approach highlights:

- The adoption of international quality standards.
- The global mobility of students and academics.
- The integration of international curricula.
- The creation of global alliances between institutions from different countries.

Although the AUGM does not respond directly to a globalized logic, it does align with internationalism in that it promotes cooperation between countries, transnational mobility, and the strengthening of regional academic networks.

The Association of Montevideo Group Universities represents a model of internationalization anchored in the Latin American context, which articulates elements of particularism and internationalism. Although it faces structural limitations, its work demonstrates that university cooperation can be built on regional logics that engage with global trends, without being subordinated to them. Strengthening these types of networks is essential to democratize access to the benefits of internationalization and consolidate a more equitable and relevant higher education in Latin America.

The Inter-American University Council (CUIB) has supported the development of the Ibero-American Knowledge Space, promoting joint degrees and shared research agendas (CUIB, 2010). These initiatives reflect a growing awareness that regional integration in education is essential for economic and cultural cohesion.

### Global Partnerships and European Influence

Argentina has actively participated in globally funded programs such as the ALFA and ALBAN initiatives, financed by the European Commission. These programs fostered university networks and academic exchange, particularly at the postgraduate level, with a

focus on quality assurance, curriculum harmonization, and research collaboration (European Commission, 2009). Argentine universities have been among the most active participants, benefiting from funding, training, and access to European institutional standards. The Fulbright Program and the Fundación Carolina are other prominent actors facilitating exchanges with the United States and Spain, respectively. These institutions not only provide scholarships but also strengthen bilateral educational diplomacy.

### Limitations and Challenges

Despite these advances, the internationalization of higher education in Argentina continues to face critical barriers. First, there is a lack of systematic evaluation of cooperation programs. Many initiatives lack rigorous monitoring and assessment mechanisms, resulting in limited understanding of their long-term impact (Didou Aupetit & Jaramillo, 2009). Second, there is a disconnection between national policies and institutional implementation, as universities often pursue international partnerships without national coordination, leading to duplication and inefficiencies.

Moreover, language barriers, bureaucratic hurdles, and insufficient funding hinder student and faculty mobility. While Argentina is perceived as a culturally and economically attractive destination for regional students, its outbound mobility remains modest compared to other Latin American countries.

The internationalization of higher education in Argentina and MERCOSUR is marked by significant rhetorical commitment and intermittent policy success. Networks like AUGM and UDUAL, alongside international programs like ALFA and ALBAN, have been instrumental in advancing academic cooperation and regional integration. Nevertheless, progress remains uneven due to structural weaknesses, insufficient evaluation, and policy fragmentation. Strengthening institutional capacities, promoting South-South cooperation, and enhancing policy coherence are essential steps to consolidate internationalization as a transformative force in Argentine and regional higher education.

A true internationalization of higher education requires strengthening research networks, joint knowledge production, active participation in global scientific agendas, and the inclusion of institutional actors in multilateral decision-making spaces. For this to happen, a coordinated vision between universities and science is required, as well as governance that fosters inter-institutional cooperation and long-term strategic planning.

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