

ly in the lower-level ranks (assistantships). At the same time, in response to student demand, UBA has increased the openings in the traditional professional fields such as law, accountancy, medicine, architecture, and psychology. Most of the 300,000 students at UBA are now concentrated in these professional fields in faculties with scarce research activities. These professional faculties have average enrollments equivalent to those of large universities in other countries. For example, the Faculty of Economics and Business Studies has 45,000 students. In contrast, the Faculty of Exact and Natural Science has only 6,000 students, and the research activities are highly developed. Moreover, unlike the professional faculties, the majority

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of the academic staff at the Faculty of Exact and Natural Sciences work full-time, and there are no *ad honorem* faculty. But, as the expansion of UBA enrollments has taken place mainly in the professional fields, the actual structure of the university is clearly biased toward the professional-oriented model. As a consequence, given UBA's huge size and complexity, it is quite difficult to reach a consensus on the university's institutional mission. The present political conflict at UBA clearly reveals a cleavage between the professional faculties (which back the candidacy of the dean of the Faculty of Law) and the academic-research-oriented ones (which support the candidacy of the molecular biology researcher in the Faculty of Exact and Natural Sciences).

#### **PARTISANSHIP AND CORPORATE INTERESTS**

According to the UBA statute, the president is elected by the university assembly, which is composed of the deans and academic bodies of the 13 faculties and the university council. In the tradition of the 1918 Cordoba Reform, the university council and the faculty bodies are tripartite bodies formed by representatives of professors, students, and alumni. One characteristic of these representatives, as well as those from student unions, has been their ties with major political parties. Consequently, there has been an element of partisanship concerning the way votes from the constituencies have been cast. Likewise, the majority of the student population and the faculty are not motivated to become involved in university elections and academic politics. Moreover, at least 60 percent of students work and study at the same time and 85 percent of faculty teach part time. They simply attend their classes and then return to their activities outside the university. The vacuum created by the faculty members' and students' lack of commitment to university governance has been filled by those actors who are more interested in their personal or political careers

than in the well-being of the academic community.

#### **THE POLITICAL REPRESENTATION ISSUE**

Student leaders also protest the actual composition of the assembly, questioning the election mechanisms, and faculty representation on academic councils. The main issue revolves around the point that only "regular" faculty can participate in institutional governance. This means that they can be elected to political posts—such as president, vice-president, or dean—or become members of the academic bodies. They can also vote in the elections to these posts. As the 1966 UBA statute establishes, "regular" faculty are appointed on the basis of periodic open competitions. Nonetheless, at UBA, only half the professors hold regular posts (i.e., a stable tenure-like status). Given the complex set of factors, a large proportion of the faculty are currently employed as "interims," without having been appointed through open competitions and without the periodic reviews of their performance. Student leaders are now demanding that these interim professors and assistants should also be able to participate in the university governance. This could only worsen the partisanship of UBA's political life. Faculty could be hired or fired depending on their political sympathies with different political parties or corporate groups. The only possibility to deepen democracy at UBA is to increase the proportion of faculty hired under open competitive procedures.

Ultimately at stake in the present conflict are three key issues: first, whether UBA, given its huge size, should be a federation of autonomous institutions or a university with a clear-cut common institutional mission; second, whether the partisanship of university politics can be replaced by greater involvement and representation of university actors in academic decision making; and, finally, whether university authorities have the ability to address the issues posed by the failures in open competition so that faculty can be elected under more transparent procedures that guarantee both academic freedom and quality in performance. ■

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## Building a Regional Academic Credit System in Latin America

**JANE KNIGHT**

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SICA and CAT are new tools that have been developed to help create a common academic credit system and a “community of higher education” in Latin America. SICA stands for Sistema de Creditos Academicos (System for Academic Credits) and CAT is an abbreviation for Complemento al Titulo (Complement to the Title). Both of these tools are part of the 6x4 UEALC (European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean Common Space for Higher Education) project—a “bottom-up initiative” of higher education institutions and organizations from across Latin America. The project’s four major areas of work include the creation of (1) strategies to describe and evaluate competency-based learning, (2) a region-wide academic credit system, (3) a common reference framework for integrating the evaluation of competencies into quality assurance and accreditation systems, and (4) a list of key competencies for research and innovation and related training strategies. The lead organization to design and manage the project was CENEVAL (National Centre for the Assessment of Higher Education) in Mexico, and ASCUN (Colombian Association of Universities) is now taking the leadership for the next phase. The overall goal is to improve the quality of higher education in Latin America and to facilitate greater collaboration and mobility among the higher education institutions within the region and with the higher education sector in Europe.

#### **SICA—SISTEMA DE CREDITOS ACADEMICOS**

Regionalization is an increasingly important phenomenon and is very evident in the higher education sector. New regional networks and initiatives for quality assurance, credit systems, research, recognition of qualifications, among others, are being implemented in all regions of the world. This is true in Latin America—but to a lesser extent. The development of SICA and CAT are important instruments to develop a regional community of higher education and to enable greater cooperation and harmony among the higher education systems in Latin America. SICA aims to contribute to the quality of higher education through using a common and transparent system for the measurement and expression of the academic work and learning outcomes achieved by a student in an academic program and to facilitate the mutual recognition of credits and qualifications. SICA has been developed in response to the particular needs and characteristics of the higher education institutions and national education systems in Latin America. At the same time, it is compatible with the European Credit Transfer system in order to promote further collaboration and student mobility with higher education institutions in Europe and elsewhere in the world.

By working directly with academics and higher education institutions, a bottom-up approach was used to develop SICA. The first step was to compare the existing credit systems used at institutional, national, or subregional levels in the different countries of Latin America. After an extensive information

gathering and consultation process, common reference points among the diverse systems were identified in terms of duration of academic programs, definition of a common academic credit unit, and the range of credits for different levels of qualifications. A preliminary set of assumptions and criteria for the accumulation and transfer of credits was developed and tested by higher education institutions across the region. This was followed by a feasibility test of three different proposals for the measurement of student workload in hours. The results of this pilot indicated that one SICA credit equal to 32 hours of study was the optimal value. At the same time, an opinion survey was distributed to over 1,400 higher education actors in Latin America, and the results showed strong support for the development of a regional academic system based on student workload and the desire for it to be compatible with the European system.

The basic concept of SICA is based on the total amount of work that a student completes during a specific academic period in order to achieve the learning objectives and outcomes. A fundamental assumption is that an academic credit measures all of the work the student has completed including contact teaching hours with an instructor in classes, seminars, laboratories, or field work, as well independent study time in the library, group or individual work, and preparation for exams. SICA is based on the premise that agreements of equivalencies will be established for the common academic unit according to the norms of each country. Thus SICA acts as a common currency for the translation of student workload into academic credits that are recognized and understood across the countries in Latin America.

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#### **CAT—COMPLEMENTO AL TITULO**

CAT is a document that provides data on the student; the name, level, and function of the qualification; the results obtained, the program of study; and the institution that is awarding the qualification and/or where the studies took place. The appendices give reference information on the higher education system of the country where the qualification was conferred and the type of quality assurance systems for higher education institutions and programs. This information adds value to the qualification in terms of facilitating access to the labor market and further education. CAT has used the Diploma Supplement from Europe as a guide but has adapted and added to it in order for CAT to be useful to the particular conditions and needs of students and higher education institu-

tions in Latin America.

The intended purpose of CAT is to increase the transparency and comparability of different qualifications within and between countries in Latin America and to expedite the recognition of qualifications for further academic studies and/or professional purposes. CAT has been designed as both an electronic and paper document and will be beneficial for students, higher education institutions, employers, and professional associations.

#### NEXT STEPS

The widespread adoption and implementation of SICA and CAT are critical next steps for higher education institutions, organizations, and governmental bodies at local, national, and regional levels. The work to promote the use of SICA and CAT will include a wide variety of activities that will differ from country to country and even from institution to institution. At the regional level there is an opportunity to have these two instruments directly linked to the Latin American Regional UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications. At the current time, important efforts are being made to update and promote the use of this UNESCO Regional Convention given the diversity of new providers, new programs, new types of qualification, and the increasing mobility of students and new graduates seeking further education or employment in other countries. It is timely that SICA, CAT, and the UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications can collectively and individually contribute to the quality of higher education in Latin America, facilitate a more transparent and common system for the recognition of qualifications and the accumulation/transfer of academic credits, and help create a vibrant regional community of higher education in Latin America. ■

## The German “Initiative for Excellence” and the Issue of Ranking

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In January 2004, the then minister for education and research of the federal German government—the social democrat, Edelgard Bulmahn—went public with the idea to organize nationwide competition among existing universities

for considerable extra funding and thus to identify about 10 universities that showed potential to become elite universities. This proposal caused an outcry among most of the relevant stakeholders in German higher education and broke a long-standing social democratic taboo—by supporting and promoting elite institutions. Ever since (as well as prior to) World War II, the social democratic approach to education and higher education had been one of open access, equal opportunity, and education as a public rather than a private good—and hence no tuition fees, and treatment of higher education institutions of a single type as basically all the same. These perspectives did not necessarily equal a contradiction to rankings and elite institutions, but it was argued that the money given to the few would degrade the others and take much-needed funding away from them.

As the only stakeholder group supporting—even applauding—the initiative, the employers argued that German higher education institutions were good on average but that there was a lack of “lighthouses.”

*The ministers responsible for education and higher education of the 16 German states remonstrated immediately against the proposal.*

The ministers responsible for education and higher education of the 16 German states remonstrated immediately against the proposal. While they were interested in getting money from the federal government for higher education, they strongly disliked what they interpreted as another attempt of the federal government to meddle in an area for which they considered themselves to be responsible. They insisted on negotiations, which were started immediately.

#### THE COMPROMISE

In March 2004 the federal government and state governments agreed on a compromise consisting of a concept of competition, although funding issues were still under negotiation. Basically, universities had the opportunity to compete within three categories for extra support, by submitting respective proposals: (a) graduate schools, (b) centers of excellence with international reputation, and (c) whole institutions aiming to become elite universities. To become eligible for the competition to become an elite university, an individual institution had to succeed in getting funding for at least one graduate school and one center of excellence. In addition, the institution had to submit a coherent and convincing development concept.

In June 2004, the funding issue was finally agreed upon. Until 2010, the federal government and the state governments plan to invest, altogether, €1.9 billion (about US\$2.3 billion) into this initiative for excellence. From 2006 until 2010, the federal government will contribute €250 million annually to the project and the German states €130 million (together about