

Asymmetrical Regionalism in North America: The Higher Education Sector since NAFTA

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the regional dynamics that prevail in North America within the higher education sector. The coming into effect of NAFTA in 1994 raised expectations of greater integration among the higher education systems of Canada, Mexico, and the United States. While NAFTA did not involve education, it had implications for higher education through professional mutual recognition agreements, trilateral programs, and indirectly through regional advocacy. The higher education sector provides interesting insights for the broader debate on North American regionalism whereby asymmetries among partners shape policy developments with special implication for Mexico.

Key words: asymmetrical regionalism, NAFTA, higher education.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza las dinámicas regionales que prevalecen en América del Norte dentro del sector educativo. La entrada en vigor del TLCAN en 1994 creó expectativas de una mayor integración entre los sistemas de educación superior en Canadá, México y Estados Unidos. Si bien el TLCAN no incorporó la educación, sí tuvo implicaciones en la educación superior a través de los acuerdos mutuos de reconocimiento profesional, los programas trilaterales e, indirectamente, por medio del apoyo regional. El sector de la educación superior provee perspectivas interesantes sobre un debate más amplio sobre el regionalismo norteamericano, donde las asimetrías entre los socios moldean el desarrollo de políticas con una implicación particular para México.

Palabras clave: regionalismo asimétrico, TLCAN, educación superior.

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INTRODUCTION

World regions have become more salient political, economic, and social domains in recent decades, attracting significant attention of scholars and policy makers. Around the globe, regional processes and actors have included the higher education sector to differing degrees with the aim of creating supra-national policy spaces and enhancing cooperation across national systems (Yepes, 2006; Watson, 2009). The European efforts to create common areas for higher education and research have been the most comprehensive attempt to promote an operating regional level in this sector and are a touchstone for sustained scholarly debates (for example, Enders, 2004; Tomusk, 2006; Amaral et al., 2010; and Robertson, 2008). This article approaches the regional dimensions of higher education from a North American perspective.

North America has been seen as a world region, especially since the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 (for example, see Cameron and Tomlin, 2000; Kingsolver, 2001; and Poitras, 2002). Still, such is the nature of the region and the agreement that political scientist Stephen Clarkson, who has long investigated it, has recently raised the question: does North America exist in any way like the European Union does? The question is warranted on many grounds, not the least the huge asymmetries among the three partners, and the absence of a European-style system of multi-level governance. Clarkson (2008) argues that NAFTA created a “new” North America by including Mexico in policy debates that were previously taken up differently by the U.S. and Canada as part of their historical “special relationship.” Through careful analysis of many sectors, Clarkson reveals a nuanced and varied landscape: in some sectors (for example, water management and the steel industry), there is greater integration than would be expected; in others (like intellectual property and financial services), bilateral relations and globalization are more powerful forces than regional convergence; and in yet others (for example, border security), U.S. unilateralism prevails. The unique role of the U.S. as a global superpower in many ways conditions the possibilities of regional arrangements in North America.

Negotiations and statements from a Trilateral Steering Committee in Higher Education established in 1991 raised expectations of true trilateral cooperation among Canada, Mexico, and the United States in this sector (Altbach, 1994; Knight, 1995; De los Reyes, 1997; Mallea, Malo, and Pendergast, 1997). Academics and practitioners in the higher education sector thought that North America would move toward more deliberate regional policies involving postsecondary education and that momentum was gathering around building a common higher education space leading to NAFTA. Some viewed this as an opportunity for internationalization agendas (de Wit, Jaramillo,

and Gacel-Avila, 2005), whereas others alarmingly proclaimed that NAFTA would “fundamentally restructure postsecondary institutions” (Buchbinder and Rajagopal, 1996: 284). While the final NAFTA agreement did not include an explicit higher education component, it did generate two important spillovers. Mexico underwent major system-level policy reforms to participate in professional mutual recognition agreements, among other aims. Mexico’s reforms occurred on the sidelines of bilateral and trilateral initiatives to promote a higher education area emerging from the regional space created by NAFTA.

A number of studies have followed from the passing of the agreement, seeking to probe its impacts on higher education (Crespo, 2000; Barrow, Didou-Aupetit, and Mallea, 2003; Green and Knight, 2003; Gacel-Avila, 2003), but scholarly attention to NAFTA and higher education has evanesced since the early 2000s. Like the literature on the European higher education area, these studies typically frame regional initiatives as a form or byproduct of globalization. In perhaps the most comprehensive treatment on the topic, Barrow, Didou-Aupetit, and Mallea (2003) argued that the regional agenda for higher education was subsumed under economic concerns. This and other studies suggest that NAFTA-related initiatives follow a market model, and they are not coordinated around shared objectives for academic integration in the region. These arguments often oppose two distinctive forms of interaction: one that is driven by social and cultural objectives, and another that flows from economic imperatives. By opposing the “market model” to a “socio-cultural” one, such studies assume that for a higher education regional area to exist, regulation of broader areas of social and economic life ought to have been included in the agreement.

Rather than upholding idealized models of academic regional integration (i.e., the Bologna model) as an implicit evaluative lynchpin, this study sought to investigate the specific dynamics prevailing in North America within the higher education sector. Examining NAFTA in terms of regional asymmetries, we look at how the trade relationship Canada, United States, and Mexico embarked on has influenced higher education. Hence, we focus on how regional asymmetries can shape change in the sector, despite the absence of institutional mechanisms compelling a regional project for higher education. Our findings reveal that the most far-reaching impacts have been felt in Mexico’s higher education system.

The main sources of data include a range of documents such as legislation, policy reports, official statements, and program descriptions. These documentary data are augmented by national statistics on cross-border interactions. Key data sources include the NAFTA Secretariat, Canada’s Foreign Affairs Ministry and the U.S. State Department; the Vice-Ministry of Higher Education in Mexico; the United States Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education; the Consortium for North American

Higher Education Collaboration; U.S., Canadian, and Mexican associations of higher education institutions; and licensing bodies in Canada, Mexico, and the United States in which mutual recognition agreements are underway. Elite interviews were also conducted with these organizations' senior administrators to gain insight from knowledgeable informants on regional interactions.

The first section of this article reviews NAFTA as a case of asymmetric regionalism. Next, it examines different NAFTA cross-border related initiatives in higher education that have been sustained through the 2000s, looking at how regional asymmetries affect their potential for further trilateral interaction. The final section highlights the main findings and presents conclusions.

NAFTA: A CASE OF ASYMMETRICAL REGIONALISM

NAFTA was the first agreement to start a process of economic integration involving a developing country and industrial G8 powers (Haggard, 1995; Lawrence, 1996; Pastor, 2008). Seen as a platform to participate in the global economy on an equal footing, NAFTA is rooted in neoclassical principles whereby less developed countries could improve their situation by accepting the rules of liberalized trade and investments. Accordingly, by eliminating trade barriers, less developing countries would benefit from dealing with more developed ones by moving up the industrial and technological learning curve, which in turn would level the economic playing field (Easterly, Fiess, and Lederman, 2003; Wise, 2009). Deeming the market the main equalizer, NAFTA partners agreed on a minimalist institutional framework, although for different reasons. According to Carol Wise (2009), Canada and Mexico chose not to pursue a supranational form of agreement to prevent further U.S. control. Conversely, it was not in the U.S. interest to commit to a customs union that would diminish its capacity to reach trade deals in the global market on its own. Agreeing on keeping trilateral tariffs and regulations to the minimum with no consensus on the political rationales for doing so, the three countries embarked on a model of open regionalism (Bulmer-Thomas, 2001; Koshiha and Parker, 2001). This move allowed building a bloc for further global liberalization at a time when the Uruguay Round of global trade negotiations were stalled (Carranza, 2002; Abbott, 1993).

NAFTA has fulfilled its mandate by promoting economic integration and growth via liberalization of goods, capital, and services (Wise, 2009; Pastor, 2008; Zamora, 2008). For instance, trilateral trade in goods and services tripled from almost US\$3 billion in 1993 to over US\$9 billion in 2010 (Secretaría de Economía, n.d.; USCB, 2010; Statistics Canada, 2010). Moreover, inward foreign direct investment (FDI) quadrupled

since 1994 (Statistics Canada, 2012) and the gross domestic product per capita increased over 40 percent in each country since the inception of NAFTA (OECD, 2010). In terms of trade, that of NAFTA countries is on average 17 percent higher than the European Union, positioning it as the world's largest free trade area (EUROSTAT, 2011).

Even though NAFTA has proved to be successful at a macro level, microeconomic figures cast doubt on the equalizing power of the market. First, trade growth has experienced negative fluctuations stemming from post-9/11 security regulations and a lack of U.S. support for further integration (Pastor, 2008; Wise, 2009). Second, foreign trade disparities between the countries remain significant. In 2010, the value of Canada's foreign trade represented 50 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP), with the U.S. accounting for 75 percent of its total exports (*Trading Economics*, 2012). In the same year Mexico's foreign trade represented 60 percent of the country's GDP, with the U.S. accounting for 80 percent of all its exports. Conversely, trade represented 25 percent of the U.S. GDP, of which 6 percent can be attributed to NAFTA (OECD, 2011). Third, the higher focus of the Canadian and Mexican economies on the U.S. has not translated into increased technological capabilities to allow for the convergence of productivity levels in all sectors (Wise, 2009; Easterly, Fiess, and Lederman, 2003; Clarkson, 2008). Lastly, given the lack of institutional safeguards to deal with the side effects of the economic and social gap between Mexico and its northern neighbors, NAFTA has exacerbated social inequalities within Mexico (Kingsolver, 2001; Cameron and Tomlin, 2000).

All in all, persisting economic asymmetries between and within countries are partly attributed to NAFTA's institutional deficit both at a domestic and a trilateral level (Wise, 2009; Pastor, 2008; Easterly, Fiess, and Lederman, 2003; Poitras, 2002; Zamora, 2008). In fact, asymmetries are not the product of free trade itself but of an agreement between a dominant partner and two trade-dependent countries forced away from protectionism to accept liberalization and integration (Finbow, 2006; Ethier, 2001). Increased dependence on trade with the U.S. deepens a relationship of "penchant unilateralism" (Pastor, 2008), whereby common problems (such as security, immigration, and infrastructure) are dealt with in an *ad hoc* and bilateral way (Poitras, 2002). The downward trends in trade growth, income, and productivity, as well as decreasing public support for integration signals that "NAFTA has basically been frozen in place and is sorely out of date when it comes to tackling today's structural challenges" (Wise, 2009: 142). Central to this thesis is the acknowledgement that NAFTA has a future if differences are institutionally addressed tackling labor mobility, security, technology transfer, and infrastructure (Pastor, 2008; Wise, 2009; Poitras, 2002).

REGIONAL ASYMMETRIES AND HIGHER EDUCATION: THE EYES ARE ON MEXICO

Among the fundamental asymmetries between partners, production gaps are in part related to differences in educational performance. The working assumption is that Mexico is at a disadvantage since competency and productivity of partners relies on highly qualified human resources (Varela, 2006; Easterly, Fiess, and Lederman, 2003; Bloom and Lopez-Acevedo, 2007; OECD, 2011). Accordingly, competitiveness and eventual income convergence rely on systemic changes in education, especially at the tertiary level (Zamora, 2008; Easterly, Fiess, and Lederman, 2003). In 2007 for instance, the World Bank deemed Mexico's higher education below the level expected for a country with its income and development levels (Bloom and Lopez-Acevedo, 2007). The World Bank report highlights how Mexico's manufacturing exports were built around cheap labor producing goods for the North American market. With shifts in the way labor is used globally, Mexico faces intense competition for which it is ill prepared. However, a closer look at what has happened in Mexico's higher education system before and since the signing of NAFTA shows that there were clear intentions to change the policy landscape. Efforts were made to prepare Mexican higher education to face NAFTA's long-term impact on the institutions, the organization of studies, and professional practice.

In 1994, right after the agreement came into effect, Mexico became a member of the Program for North American Mobility in Higher Education (NAMHE). According to Henry (2001), the United States supported Mexico's membership since it would facilitate policy making to ease trade and capital market liberalization. When Mexico joined the intergovernmental forum of developed economies, it agreed to observe and follow up on the organization's recommendations for public policy in all sectors including higher education (Rodríguez Gómez, 2007). As requested by the Mexican Ministry of Education, the NAMHE conducted two major reviews of the country's higher education policies. Receiving input from foreign and national experts, the first NAMHE review in 1997 put forward a series of recommendations that brought changes into the sector. Within less than a decade, the system included new types of institutions, and the private sector experienced significant expansion, from 332 institutions in 1994 to 1 179 in 2005 (SEP, 2006). Furthermore, Mexico introduced new policies and managerial structures into the system tying public resource allocations to performance and diversified funding sources (OECD, 1997; OECD, 2008; SEP, 2006; Rodríguez Gómez, 2007; Rhoads and Mina, 2001). While the introduction of outcomes-based planning mechanisms during the 1990s started a few years before the signing of NAFTA, the agreement and the new membership in NAMHE contributed to

the shaping of different policy instruments. Reflecting the political and economic context, NAMHE recommendations were deemed appropriate to deal with higher education diversity, the effects of the 1994 crisis, and the requirements for competing in a free market (Luengo Gonzáles, 2003; Mendoza Rojas, 2002).

In 2006, the NAMHE conducted a second review of the Mexican higher education system, followed by an analytical assessment including policy recommendations. This report endorses increasing the share of private support for the tertiary system and recommends introducing quality assurance processes, strengthening research and innovation, and internationalization (SEP, 2006; OECD, 2008). Most NAMHE recommendations are reflected in the National Program for the Educational Sector 2007-2012 (SEP, 2007). Recent progress reports suggest that Mexico has developed and implemented programs to comply with it (Tuirán, 2011; OECD, 2011). It is important to note that the outcomes of the different policy instruments implemented in the past 15 years are difficult to measure at a system level. The Mexican system includes centralized and decentralized features and more research is required for a thorough evaluation. However, for the purposes of this article, it is important to highlight the concurrence between regional integration and the adoption of higher education reforms that were compliant with the economic model Mexico has been pursuing since the late 1980s. This was made financially possible in part by the multilateral cooperation from the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank involving US\$1.2 billion in funding for projects that coincide with NAMHE reviews and recommendations (Maldonado, 2000; Rodríguez Gómez, 2007).¹

Despite the reforms, Mexico continues to lag behind its partners as well as other similar economies (OECD, 2011). Up until now there appears to be no correlation between higher levels of education and the reduction of income and productivity disparities. Systemic reforms in the sector corroborate Wise's conjecture that Mexico "seized NAFTA membership as a way of locking in a new market-oriented reform model, one for which there has been insufficient preparation or follow-up" (2009: 145). Asymmetries leading to reforms are also seen in Mexico's professional higher education programs as a trickle-down effect of NAFTA's provisions for mutual recognition agreements.

¹ Projects funded targeting post-secondary education World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank between 1994 and 2011. World Bank projects amount to 83 percent of all relevant funding (World Bank, 2011; IDB, 2011).

REGIONAL ASYMMETRIES AND MUTUAL RECOGNITION AGREEMENTS IN THE PROFESSIONS

As part of a regional agenda to promote professional mobility, NAFTA's Annex 1210.5 includes provisions for developing equivalent professional standards in 12 fields.² Such provisions involve several aspects of professional education, training, and certification, including the accreditation of schools and academic programs.³ Altogether, Annex 1210.5 provides a blueprint of rules and mechanisms for regional professional recognition.

Progress on the development, approval, and implementation of mutual recognition agreements (MRAs) in the 12 professions covered by NAFTA is uneven. In medicine, psychology, veterinary medicine, and dentistry, bilateral recognition agreements pre-dating NAFTA continue to exist between Canada and the United States and outside the scope of NAFTA (LCME, 2012; ASPPB, 2012; NBVME, 2012; CDA, 2011).⁴ In the actuarial profession, nursing, land surveying, and agronomy, some progress has been made toward developing the frameworks for mutual recognition (CCPE, 2008; NCARB, 2007; CASACT, 2007; CCLS-CCAG, 1994; CAN, 2011; OECD - Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2004).⁵

The engineering profession was the first to commit to a trilateral MRA. In 1995, the Canadian Council of Professional Engineers, a U.S. consortium of three national engineering associations, and a Mexican team with representatives of jurisdictional bodies negotiated an MRA, which was signed in June of the same year and ratified by the Free Trade Commission in 1997. While all national-level engineering licensing authorities endorsed the agreement, getting support from licensing authorities at a state/provincial level proved difficult due to the lack of reciprocity on the technical components of recognition. As of 2011, Canada and Texas were the only jurisdictions to have implemented the original NAFTA-MRA with some amendments to the professional experience requirement (CCPE, personal communication, 2010). As for Mexico, recognition entails not only changes in the legislation regarding professional licensing

² In the following 12 professions: actuarial sciences, accounting, agronomy, architecture, dentistry, engineering, law, medicine, nursing, pharmacy, psychology and veterinary science (NAFTA Secretariat, 1993).

³ Other provisions concern examinations for licensing, professional experience, ethical conduct, professional development and re-certification, scope of practice, local knowledge, and consumer protection.

⁴ Information obtained through published reports by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME), the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards (ASPPB), the National Board of Veterinary Medicine Examination (NBVME), and Canadian Dental Associations (CDA).

⁵ Information gathered from interviews and published sources from Canadian Council of Professional Engineers (CCPE), National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB), Casualty Actuarial Society (CAS), Canadian Council of Land Surveyors (CCLS), the Canadian Nurses Association (CAN), and NAMHE-CERI, 2004.

but also a state-by-state recognition in the U.S. of the Mexican licensing processes (ANFEL, personal communication, 2010). All in all, reaching a wide endorsement in the U.S. is reported as the main obstacle to making progress in the trilateral agenda reflecting a dual bilateral strategy whereby Mexico and Canada negotiate agreements independently with the U.S.

The other two professions that have MRAS in place are accounting and architecture. In 2002 the corresponding bodies for the accounting profession in the three countries signed an MRA.⁶ Renewed in 2008, the five-year agreement grants recognition for certified accountants who pass an examination specific to the jurisdiction where they want to practice their profession (the CARE exam in Canada, Iqex in the U.S., or Mexqex in Mexico) and who fulfill the minimum period of experience in the country where reciprocity is intended (National Association for State Boards of Accountancy, 2008). Since its inception, 90 percent of all applicants are Canadians wishing to practice in the U.S., followed by 7 percent U.S. applicants wishing to practice in Canada, and only 3 percent Mexican applicants wishing to practice either in the U.S. or Canada (Roxas et al. 2007; ICAO, 2010). Despite the low number of Mexican applicants, the agreement is thought to have offered an opportunity for Mexican accountants to meet higher standards in their professional education and who can still practice in their country without taking the new national examination (CPC), but have better chances to work internationally or with international partners by taking it. Almost 10 000 accountants have taken the CPC exam since 1999, 43 percent of whom have attained the new designation (CAC, personal communication, 2010b; IMPC, personal communication 2010b).

In 2005, representatives of professional bodies in architecture reached an agreement on the terms of reference and documentation procedures for mutual recognition.⁷ The requirements for recognition include the completion of an accredited architecture program and a minimum of 10 years in certified post-registration licensure.⁸ It has taken the council a few years since the signing of the agreement to reach a point of

⁶ The American Institution of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA), and the United States National Association of State Boards of Accountancy (NASBA) in the United States, The Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants in Canada, and the Comité Mexicano para la Práctica Internacional de la Contaduría and the Instituto Mexicano de Contadores Públicos in Mexico signed a trilateral mutual recognition agreement.

⁷ The bodies involved were the Comité Mexicano para la Práctica Internacional de la Arquitectura (Mexican Committee for the International Practice of Architecture [COMPIAR] in Mexico, the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB) in the United States, and the Committee of Canadian Architectural Councils (CCAC) in Canada.

⁸ Accredited by the corresponding boards: NCARB in the United States, the Asociación de Instituciones de Enseñanza de la Arquitectura (Association of Architectural Teaching Institutions, or ASINEA) in Mexico, and CCAC in Canada. There are particular requirements for Mexican architects who must fulfill federal licensing requirements and comply with professional registration exams. Requirements for Canadians and U.S. architects are the same since they share the same examination (ARE).

pre-implementation. In 2010, a trial period of eight to ten months got the process started. A team of observers from two countries is monitoring the third country's certification process. It will be up to each jurisdiction in the United States and Canada to fully recognize the license without further requirements. The Tri-national Council was scheduled to review the trial by the end of 2011 to make the final adjustments to the process itself and to its monitoring and evaluation (NCARB, personal communication 2010).

The progress in the development and implementation of the trilateral MRAs in accounting and architecture reveals the impacts the process has had on higher education, particularly in Mexico. For instance, Mexico was required to change its qualification and licensing processes in order to reach the same standards as the U.S. and Canada (Sá and Gaviria, 2011). This entailed a lengthy process that included negotiations on curriculum standards, institutional accreditation to ensure consistency and quality of education, changes in licensing regulations, the introduction of examinations and the assessment of relevant experience, and the establishment of councils to oversee licensing.⁹

The introduction of program review, accreditation, and new licensing processes has resulted in a two-path professional system whereby graduates can either go the national route and get their professional status and license to practice from the Ministry of Education, or attend a NAFTA-trilaterally accredited school and follow the newly standardized certification process. This second route is the only one that guarantees equivalent education, examination, and experience requirements to those of U.S., and Canadian professionals (CAC, personal communication, 2010a; IMPC, personal communication, 2010b; NCARB, personal communication, 2010).

The MRA processes in these professions have also influenced U.S. and Canada's standards for certification, mostly to achieve simplification and commonality of the licensure process among jurisdictions. This includes convergence of educational standards and competence requirements to assure recognition of licensure. For example, both Canada and the U.S. are moving toward competency-based professional exams for the certification of accountants, with Canada leading the way (Roxas et al., 2007). In architecture, the U.S. Architecture Registration Examination is widely used in Canada where professionals choose this examination over the Canadian one for seamless recognition. Despite these convergences, the impact of recognition arrangements on the delivery of professional programs is more indirect. Unlike Mexico, licensing of the professions in the U.S. and Canada is distinct from the educational process (NCARB, personal communication 2010).

⁹ These councils are the Instituto Mexicano de Contadores Públicos, Federación de Colegios de Arquitectos de la República Mexicana, and the Consejo de Acreditación de la Enseñanza de la Ingeniería.

The development of MRAS in the professions is driven by professional bodies in charge of advancing the professional mobility agenda further in the form of memoranda of understanding or working agreements to pursue MRAS. The NAFTA provisions for professional MRAS have allowed Mexico to join in longstanding bilateral relations between professional bodies in the U.S. and Canada. The trilateral patterns observed in achieving MRAS are similar to those observed in NAFTA as a whole, with the alignment to U.S. norms and standards requiring more adjustments from Mexico than Canada (Clarkson, 2008; Morales, 2008). The question here is whether such adjustments leveled the regional playing field for professional mobility. If labor mobility is an indication of this, the answer is no. For instance, in 2009 the number of NAFTA professionals temporarily in the U.S. was around 99 000, of whom 79 percent were Canadian and a 21 percent Mexican (USDHS, 2009). The conditions MRAS may create to equalize opportunities for mobility within a profession are unlikely to spill over into a supranational labor mobility policy. In this sense, the dynamics that MRAS display are more of a “catching-up” process through which Mexico adopts some elements of the Canadian and U.S. higher education systems.

REGIONAL ASYMMETRIES AND CROSS-BORDER INITIATIVES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Before the NAFTA agreement was reached, the U.S. initiated a Trilateral Steering Committee (TSC) to discuss the possible benefits of regional cooperation in higher education. The committee initiated a series of conferences with government officials, business executives, and higher education leaders. The conferences resulted in two main statements that created a framework for trilateral cooperation: the Wingspread Statement (1992) that established principles, objectives and actions to shape that cooperation, and the Vancouver Communiqué (1993) that set the specific initiatives to implement it. Approved unanimously, both statements sought to minimize barriers for cross-border academic activities. Subsequent meetings in Guadalajara convened by the TSC continued to endorse a North American higher education agenda. Given the fiscal constraints to publicly fund trilateral initiatives, the regional agenda was left open to actors willing to build on the trilateral commitments and to leverage resources from different places. Under these conditions, two trilateral initiatives emerged directly from the TSC endorsements: the Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration (CONAHEC), and the Program for North American Mobility in Higher Education (NAMHE).

In 2005, the trilateral Security and Prosperity Partnership endorsed further cross-border interaction to strengthen cooperation in the development of human capital in

North America as a component of the parties' commitment to trilateral cooperation initiated by NAFTA (Council on Foreign Relations, 2005). Following a minimalist approach, this goal was neither matched with a coordinated policy nor funding. Hence, by the end of the 2000s, the only cross-border initiatives stemming from NAFTA continue to be the aforementioned CONAHEC and NAMHE.

Receiving support from governmental and non-governmental agencies as well as from its members, CONAHEC has provided a trilateral space to advance a shared agenda.¹⁰ At its 8th North American Higher Education Conference held in 2002, CONAHEC convened the Priorities Committee, enlisting recognized higher education experts in the region. The consortium adopted the committee's recommendations as the basis for a working agenda, known as the Calgary Recommendations for North America Collaboration. Still in effect, these recommendations position CONAHEC as an advocacy organization promoting a North American dimension in higher education, focusing on fostering student and professional mobility, information sharing, and regional partnerships.

Fifteen years after its inception, CONAHEC has consolidated its mission in five major programs: the Information Clearinghouse,¹¹ the Student Exchange Program,¹² the Annual Conference,¹³ Educamexus,¹⁴ and Border-Pact.¹⁵ The first three carry forward the Calgary Recommendations. Educamexus and Border-Pact go beyond that agenda, aiding Mexicans through access and international development programming. Membership in CONAHEC has more than tripled since 1995, totaling 115

¹⁰ Sponsors include the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), the United States Department of State, the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAIT), the Mexican Ministry of Public Education (SEP), the Ford Foundation, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), the Lumina Foundation for Education, and the University of Arizona, which hosts CONAHEC.

¹¹ CONAHEC manages a resource library available to registered users. Resources on higher education issues pertaining to North America are classified by topic, media type, region, year, and conference (CONAHEC, 2012a).

¹² The student exchange program shows sustainable inter-institutional mobility outcomes offering tuition reciprocity programs in 3 Canadian universities, 3 Canadian colleges, 11 U.S. universities, 35 Mexican universities and 8 Mexican institutes of technology (CONAHEC, 2012b).

¹³ The conference hosted by CONAHEC, gathers key stakeholders of the higher education sector every 18 months. The conference proceedings constitute a source for materials exploring facts, figures, and issues in North American Higher Education cooperation (CONAHEC 2007).

¹⁴ Administered by CONAHEC and funded by Mexico's Ministry of Education (SEP), a not-for-profit organization, Educamexus, runs four access programs: the Mexican high-school accreditation test, the advice-line in Spanish on issues regarding access to post-secondary education, the online high school program, and the online higher education programs in Spanish (Educamexus, 2012).

¹⁵ Convened in 1997 by CONAHEC, the American Council on Education (ACE), and the Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior (ANUIES) and funded by the Ford Foundation, Border PACT is a network of U.S. and Mexican higher education institutions dedicated to building human capacity through education and training in four border regions. Since 1999, Border PACT has provided seed money to 48 collaborative projects between higher education institutions, non-governmental organization and community based organizations (CONAHEC, 2012c).

North American members and 21 affiliates in 2010.¹⁶ Universities comprise the majority of members (80 percent), followed by higher education associations and other related not-for-profit organizations (15 percent), and community colleges (5 percent). Mexico makes up the majority of the North American CONAHEC membership (54 percent), followed by the U.S. (28 percent), with Canada as a minority member (17 percent). The total number of affiliate members is 28, most from Latin American countries (54 percent).

Established in 1995, NAMHE is a grant competition program jointly funded and administered by the governments of the United States, Canada, and Mexico.¹⁷ NAMHE encourages collaborative projects with a focus on student mobility, tuition reciprocity, and mutual recognition of academic credits. The overall purpose is to promote a North American dimension to education and training in a wide range of academic and professional disciplines. Over the past decade, the program has funded an average of eight projects per year in different areas, with an emphasis on the social sciences. At least two institutions from each country collaborate on the projects and carry out all activities involved in the student mobility life cycle. Up to 2010 each project was funded at around US\$300 000 for up to four years (United States Department of Education, 2010). Approximately 350 institutions in the three countries have participated in the program, and over 60 universities have collaborated in more than one project. On average, 60 students are exchanged under each project (FIPSE, personal communication, 2010; HRSDC, personal communication, 2010; CONAHEC, personal communication, 2010a).

Framed in the original ministerial agreement that has remained in place over the past 15 years, NAMHE requires much administrative effort to operate relative to its budget. The three agencies jointly define priorities for the program, advise potential applicants, carry out the selection process, monitor progress, and evaluate overall results. In 2009, an attempt was made to review the tri-national agreement to consider whether regional priorities have been achieved and the agreement should be renewed. This effort revealed differences in the way Mexico approached program guidelines with respect to Canada and the U.S. Failing to agree on common guidelines, NAMHE continued to operate its grant programs without any clear mechanisms to assess their regional relevance until 2010 (FIPSE, personal communication, 2010; HRSDC, personal communication, 2010). Signaling U.S. leadership in the program's sustainability, U.S. congressional action on the fiscal year 2011 budget reduced funds

¹⁶ Affiliates are regular paying members located outside the North American region. These members do not have voting privileges (conahec, 2007).

¹⁷ The NAMHE program is collectively managed by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education - U.S. Department of Education (FIPSE), Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), and Mexico's Ministry of Public Education (SEP) (HRSDC, 2010).

available for new NAMHE grants. Consequently the 2011 call for proposals was cancelled in the three countries (FIPSE, 2011). It is uncertain whether the program will be open for a next round of proposals or remain on hold for the time being.

CONAHEC and NAHME are undoubtedly the most visible —if modest— efforts to promote a trilateral agenda related to NAFTA. However, bilateral and trilateral initiatives nurturing a North American dimension not under the auspices of NAFTA have emerged involving higher education institutions, foundations, governmental funding agencies, and other actors. A review of publicly available information from relevant sources provides a glimpse into the nature of these efforts (See Appendix 1). Deliberately following strict inclusion criteria, we identified 22 formal partnerships with a regional mandate.¹⁸ As illustrated in Table 1, partnerships in our sample tend to be bilateral rather than trilateral, and publicly rather than privately supported. All collaborations come to over 350 programs, mostly favoring student mobility between universities over other post-secondary institutions.¹⁹

Scope	Govt. Support	Institution/Private Support	Total
Canada - Mexico	4	2	6
U.S. - Canada	3	2	5
U.S. - Mexico	4	3	7
Trilateral	1	3	4
Total	12	5	22

Source: Authors' compilation. Different Sources (See Appendix 1).

¹⁸ Once a partnership met the basic criterion of “regional relevance,” meaning that a North American dimension was integrated into its purpose, the following categories were employed to organize key documents regarding cross-border initiatives: 1) Focus of the initiative; 2) Actors; 3) Relationship type (bilateral or trilateral); 4) Duration; 5) Sustainability (Ongoing partnerships that have lasted at least three years); and, 6) Evidence of outcomes.

¹⁹ Student mobility programs at the vocational, undergraduate, and graduate levels include tuition reciprocity agreements (149 programs); exchange programs with no tuition reciprocity (21); and scholarships, financial assistance, or other awards (43 programs). Research programs entail scholarships, financial assistance, and other awards (27 programs), as well as activities by field of study and research topic (17 programs), where research institutes partner with particular schools.

One way to infer the outcomes of these sustained initiatives is to look at student mobility trends within North America since the inception of NAFTA. Interestingly, there are discrepancies in the mobility between the U.S. and Mexico and the mobility between these two countries and Canada. Since NAFTA was passed, international student numbers have risen. In the past decade, the percentage of Mexican students in the U.S. has increased 50 percent from 8 975 in 1995 to 13 450 in 2009. Similarly, U.S. students in Mexico increased by 49 percent, rising from 6 685 in 1995 to 9 928 in 2009 (Institute for International Education, 2010). This upward trend is comparable to the overall increase of 52 percent in U.S. international students over the same period. Inversely, in the past decade, the total number of foreign students coming to Canada from both the U.S. and Mexico has decreased 30 percent, while the overall flow of international students has increased 23 percent (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2010).

When it comes to partnerships among higher education institutions and related non-governmental actors, academic cross-border interaction appears to take off at a bilateral level of collaboration rather than a trilateral one. When governments endorse cross-border interactions through funding commitments (for example, NAMHE), there appear to be no incentives to induce institutional behavior emphasizing a regional dimension. This is worsened by the perception that education in Mexico is not as good as in Canada and in the U.S. (CONAHEC, personal communication, 2010a) as well as by security issues affecting cross-border interaction with Mexico. According to one of our interviewees, higher education institutions are refusing to send students to Mexico due to security concerns expressed in travel advisories issued by Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, and the U.S. State Department (CONAHEC, personal communication, 2010b).

NAFTA arguably created momentum around a regional agenda in higher education that has been sustained over the years by the efforts of policy entrepreneurs and issue advocates in the field. CONAHEC has been a key actor in advocating for a regional dimension in higher education. Its networking seems to be branching off through the expansion of both membership (i.e., to the rest of the Americas) and programming (i.e., aid programs). NAMHE, although relatively small, created a formal precedent for collaboration in curriculum development, credit recognition, and tuition reciprocity within the region. Yet, failing to sign a new trilateral agreement and operating under the original one, the future of NAMHE is uncertain, as is the future of other partnerships operating without a trilateral coordination framework to counteract perceived asymmetries and address security-related barriers.

CONCLUSIONS

An ambitious project of open regionalism, NAFTA started a process of integration between an emerging economy and two major industrial ones. Reducing trade barriers was expected to benefit all three countries, especially Mexico, through the deepening of cross-border production and intra-industry trade (Wise, 2009; Easterly, Fiess, and Lederman, 2003). At a macroeconomic level, the doctrine proved successful but at a microeconomic one, income, productivity, and competitiveness disparities continue to deepen economic asymmetries among the countries, especially between Mexico and its partners. The working hypothesis is that NAFTA did not provide the institutional framework, nor did Mexico make the necessary adjustments to catch up and reap the benefits of trade.

In the higher education sector, persisting underperformance of Mexico's education indicators with respect to Canada and the U.S., along with the limited trilateral cross-border interaction, are often used to confirm this hypothesis. Following the developments in the sector since the signing of NAFTA, this article offers evidence that regional asymmetries should be factored in as contributors to major reforms in Mexico. As much as reforms have aligned education to a liberalizing economy, they do not appear to have paved the way toward leveling the playing field. For instance, Mexico continues to rely on unskilled labor to compete in terms of productivity (Amoroso, et al, 2008).

The progress in reaching MRAS shines a light on the dynamics of NAFTA trilateral cooperation. In professions where negotiations progressed, pre-existing bilateral professional recognition frameworks (between Canadian and U.S. bodies) became the basis for a trilateral agreement. The process of moving from bilateral to trilateral recognition revealed the vast disparities between Mexico and its northern partners' higher education systems. Geographical proximity, a common language, similar cultures, and comparable institutional features have historically brought the Canadian and U.S. higher education sectors together. This longstanding special relationship manifests in a regionally integrated academic labor market, with few barriers to the flow of scholars and ideas between the two higher education systems over the decades (Pechar, 2007). Whether Mexico can be included in this relationship is a question that goes beyond the convergence of higher education systems. Security and labor mobility barriers may continue to be major obstacles for Mexico to gain equal footing with its neighbors.

The Wingspread Statement and Vancouver Communiqué created great expectations for building a regional area for higher education. By and large, initiatives of the sort have been taken up by leaders of higher education organizations, advocates of

internationalization, and institutional actors engaged in cross-border activities. While sustained initiatives have created the grounds for further interaction, asymmetries appear to inhibit it, limiting the possibilities for consolidating trilateral policies. Policies on credit recognition and tuition reciprocity, among others, are key to nurturing student exchange. With no policy framework, security issues further affect the inclusion of Mexico in different initiatives.

Undoubtedly, the partnership of the world's superpower with a smaller industrial country and an emerging economy involves a stark contrast in the relative importance of regional policy for each participant. The United States can be ambivalent about nurturing regional cohesiveness, advancing its interests globally rather than continentally in many instances (Clarkson 2008; Morales 2008). Canada and Mexico share a common dependency on the U.S. economy, their largest trading partner. When it comes to the higher education sector, where the gains of dependency are less tangible, the vast disparities between the countries' systems condition the degree to which regional initiatives can evolve. Without intergovernmental commitment to enforce or promote a trilateral agenda, the North American region for the higher education sector is a *de facto* bilateral "region" comprised of Canada and the U.S. Initiatives advanced over the last 15 years have contributed to reforms within the Mexican higher education system to make it more similar to the dominant institutional forms and regulations of its regional partners without clear signs of integration.

Appendix 1
LIST OF PARTNERSHIPS

Partnership	Partnership Name	Web-site	Date Accessed	
Trilateral	• North American Consortium on Legal Education (NACLE)	• http://www.nacle.org/	• February 3, 2012	
	• North American Digital Government Working Group (NADGW)	• http://www.ctg.albany.edu/news/onlinenews_dec_2007_NAWG	• February 3, 2012	
	• North American Research Linkages Program	• http://www.international.gc.ca/studies-etudes/narlp-pnarr.aspx?lang=en	• February 3, 2012	
	• The North American Regional Academic Mobility Program (RAMPA)	• http://www.iie.org/Template.cfm?&Template=/programs/ramp/overview.htm	• February 3, 2012	
Canada-Mexico	• Bilateral Cooperation - Research - Economic Development	• http://www.idirc.ca/es/ev-1-2011-1-DO_TOPIC.html	• February 3, 2012	
	• Canada - Mexico Higher Education Opportunities	• http://www.aucc.ca/canada-mexico/index_e.html	• February 3, 2012	
	• Institute of Aboriginal Peoples' Health Partnerships	• http://www.chri-ihsc.gc.ca/e/27083.html	• February 3, 2012	
	• Tecnológico de Monterrey and University of British Columbia Joint Academic Program	• http://www.tec.ubc.ca/	• February 3, 2012	
	• Quebec-Mexico Education Partnership	• http://www.auiies.mx/	• February 3, 2012	
	• University Partnerships in Cooperation and Development	• http://www.aucc.ca/upcd-pucc/about_us/index_e.html	• February 3, 2012	
		• ANUIES (Cooperacion Internacional)		
		• AUCC		

U.S.-Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Association for Canadian Studies in the U.S. • Fulbright Canada • Institute of Aboriginal Peoples' Health Partnerships - National Institutes of Health • Institute of Aging Partnerships • Network on North American Studies in Canada 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASCUS • Fulbright Canada • CHR-IAPH • CHR-IA • NNASC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://www.acsus.org/index.cfm?id=285 • http://www.fulbright.ca/index.php • http://www.chr-isc.gc.ca/e/27083.html • http://www.chr-isc.gc.ca/e/31568.html • http://www.nnasc-renac.ca/index.html 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • February 3, 2012 • February 3, 2012 • February 3, 2012 • February 3, 2012 • February 3, 2012
U.S.-Mexico	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilateral Cooperation - Computer and Information Science and Engineering • Bilateral Cooperation - Research - Science and Engineering • Comexus-Fulbright • Student, Faculty and Researcher Mobility between the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México (UAEM) and the University of North Texas (UNT) • TechBA-Austin • The INVITE Technology Commercialization Program • U.S.-Mexico Training, Internships, Exchanges, and Scholarships Initiative (TIES) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conacyt-NSF-CISE • Conacyt-NSF • Fulbright-Comexus • UNT-UAEM • TechBA-Austin • INVITE • HED-TIES 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/1998/nsf96145/nsf96145.htm • http://www.conacyt.mx/Cooperacion/Cooperacion_Bilateral_America.html#EstadosUnidos • http://us.fulbrightonline.org/program_country.html?id=70#binational • http://www.uaemex-unt.org/ • http://www.ic2.utexas.edu/global/innovative-products-solutions/technology-business-accelerator-te-2.html • http://www.ic2.utexas.edu/global/success-stories/invite-2006-2007.html • http://www.hedprogram.org/Portals/0/PDFs/2007_TIES_English.pdf 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • February 3, 2012 • February 3, 2012 • February 3, 2012 • February 3, 2012 • February 3, 2012 • February 3, 2012 • February 3, 2012 • February 3, 2012

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