



“Prospects for Enhancing EU-LAC Higher Education and Research Cooperation”.

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In the July 2019 edition of this newsletter, Federica Mogherini, then the **High Representative of the European Union**, wrote that “Although separated by geography, Europe and Latin America are closer than any other continents.” This certainly applies to higher education relations between the two regions, as there is considerable research and educational cooperation between their universities. The European University Association (EUA) has a long history of strategic collaboration with Latin America, supporting region-to-region dialogue and the many bilateral and multilateral links between institutions.

Research and education exchanges have been mentioned in practically every EU-LAC summit since 1999. The 2002 Summit even announced the establishment of an EU-LAC Knowledge and Education Area – probably the EU’s first and most ambitious announcement of a bi-regional higher education framework. This was clearly inspired by the example of the then still young Bologna Process, aimed at establishing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and the EU Lisbon Agenda for a Europe of Knowledge.

The prospects of an ‘EU-LAC Higher Education Area’, energised parts of the academic community in both regions, and inspired bottom-up initiatives: Latin Americans saw a key opportunity to embark on a similar convergence process as the one in Europe; Europeans hoped that the EHEA would be endorsed and strengthened through take-up of similar policies and tools in LAC.

Many of these initiatives were supported by projects funded or co-funded by the EU: mobility under the Alfa programme, collaborative capacity development under Alfa, and the current Erasmus+ Capacity Building programme. Such projects contributed to internationalisation of institutions and systems and also to reforms in quality assurance, recognition, and curricula.

While there has been tangible success, EU-LAC collaboration may have some unseized opportunities:

Future EU-LAC agendas should not only reference but also substantiate the role of higher education and research as a driver for social and economic change and innovation, as an active response to the Agenda 2030, and a real commitment in terms of strategic, tangible investments. This would underpin the new EU Commission’s intention to become increasingly geopolitical and offer soft diplomacy as means to overcome, bridge and bi-pass politically difficult situations.

Other bi-regional collaboration initiatives have demonstrated the benefits of having a coherent policy framework with wide ownership, for example the ASEM higher education process, the Eastern Partnership, and the Western Balkan Platform. These may provide some inspiration and lessons learnt for an EU-LAC Higher Education Area. More systematic follow-up by governments at the summits, and engagement and collaboration with the higher education community, could launch a meaningful, more visible and better acknowledged process,



facilitating a better link between top-down policy cooperation and bottom up sector initiatives. A coherent policy approach would also provide a supporting framework for education and research mobility and cooperation under Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020, and it would enable synergies and enhance impact and sustainability. In addition, this would support the higher education organisations in both Latin America and Europe to better align their agendas and to work jointly towards a dynamic process of reform change.

To provide some evidence: EUA, together with some 20 national and regional university associations and networks, supported sub-regional initiatives for collaboration and convergence in quality assurance, recognition and degree harmonisation in Latin America through a structural project (Alfa Puentes, 2011-2014). With the EHEA experience as a key reference point, the project respected the unique characteristics and diversity of the LAC higher education. Importantly, it generated interest among the LAC partners in each other's experiences, demonstrated the nexus between political dialogue, at the level of rectors' associations, and resulted in tangible reform initiatives. It also prepared the ground for the '[Espacio Latinoamericano y Caribeño de Educación Superior](#)' (ENLACES), an association with a governance structure and – for the very first time – some legitimacy to represent the sector at the regional level. But such projects only make sense if there is a policy framework to reinforce synergies and ensure a common agenda.

Another example is the 2017 [EU-CELAC Academic and Knowledge Summit](#) which EUA perceived as a step forward in Europe-Latin America higher education and research cooperation. This was not because of the content of the conference, or its ambitious title, but because all major sector organisations had worked together to make the event happen. This is also due to the work of the EU-LAC Foundation, established in 2011 to “promote and coordinate result-oriented activities in support of bi-regional relations and focused on the implementation of priorities established by CELAC-EU Summits” and “foster fruitful exchanges and new networking opportunities among civil society and other social actors.” This can and should be further

enhanced to play a more eminent role in this regard.

As the world comes together to deal with the coronavirus crisis, it is clearer than ever that cooperation is essential and that universities around the globe need to work together to find solutions to the challenges of our time. Long-term bi-regional links are an important part of the framework for collaboration, and EUA remains committed to fostering its relationship with its Latin American counterparts.