



## Comprehensive Internationalization in Latin America and the Caribbean

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The aim of internationalization strategies is to develop intercultural competencies in students, including an increase in the cognitive capacities required to live and work in an environment shaped by the knowledge society. The aforementioned aim requires the implementation of a process of internationalization framed within a concept of *comprehensive internationalization*, that is, through the integration of the international and intercultural dimension into the substantive functions of higher education, into its culture and the everyday behaviour associated with it, as well as schemes for physical mobility of individuals. Within such a framework, internationalization strategies need to be transversal in relation to policies, and institutional in terms of integrating the international dimension into the three levels of the educational process: the macro (institutional decision-making and policy design), the medium (in relation to curriculum structure), and the micro (in terms of teaching and learning activities), with all of this being carried out in a holistic and systematic way (Gacel-Ávila, 2012).

In order to understand the benefits of comprehensive internationalization it is necessary to realize that there exist basic differences with regard to internationalization. On the one hand, there are activities, such as physical mobility of students, whose impact is limited to the individuals themselves, while there are others, such as the internationalization of the curriculum and research, that have the effect of supporting the transformation of the system of tertiary education (ET) itself, as is required by the global reality of our times. In this article, we examine two complementary issues: To what extent is LAC internationalization in line with the concept of *comprehensive internationalization*? And, in what sense is LAC international cooperation of the traditional type? For these purposes, we analyse the principal findings of the 4th Global Survey of the International Association of Universities (IAU) (Egron-Polak and Hudson, 2014) as they relate to the case of LAC.

### The 4th Global Survey of the IAU

LAC is the region with the lowest percentage of **institutions that have implemented internationalization policies** (47% compared with the world average of 53%); on the other hand, it also has the highest percentage of institutions that *are preparing* such policies and the corresponding strategies (28% compared with the world average of 22%). This confirms that there is strong awareness of the fact that the process of internationalization has been limited up to now and that it is necessary to improve this situation. By the same

token, within LAC, the degree of professionalization of internationalization offices is low (Egron-Polak and Hudson, 2010, p. 103). In a recent report on international cooperation between the European Union and Mexico, it is pointed out that 'The European universities express concern about the high level of instability and the lack of professionalization among the staff in internationalization offices that are their counterparts' (ECORYS, CHEPS, ESMU, 2011, p. 12). This situation serves to limit the accumulation of experience and, possibly, the potential and the viability of the internationalization strategies.

According to the research carried out by the IAU, the first **external factor** that drives internationalization in LAC is *government policy* in the region, followed by the *demand from business and industry* (Egron-Polak and Hudson, 2014). The region is therefore in line with the global tendency for the first time, since in the previous survey the *demand from the private sector* was signaled as the principal external factor driving internationalization in the region (Egron-Polak and Hudson, 2010). As was indicated at that time, this was a symptom of the perceived weakness of governments in the region in terms of promoting internationalization (Gacel-Ávila, 2012), with the result that cooperation between the business and educational sectors has traditionally been weak. It is worth pointing out that in the 4th Survey, the issue of *global rankings* appears for the first time as a factor influencing internationalization in the region.

The principal **benefit** of internationalization in LAC is the *increase in international links between academics and researchers* (Egron-Polak and Hudson, 2014, p. 53), and this is the only region for which that factor is deemed to be such an important advantage. This suggests that LAC sees internationalization as an opportunity to consolidate the quality of its academic profile. After this benefit, come the following: *improvement in quality of teaching and learning*, and *increase in international awareness of students*.

With regard to the **risks for institutions** relating to internationalization, the survey reveals that there is a concern because *access to internationalization opportunities is limited solely to students with financial resources*. This is followed by *difficulties in regulating locally the quality of programmes abroad*. In the case of **risks that affect the entire society**, the principal one is *inequality in terms of sharing the benefits of internationalization*. Another risk of this sort is the *increase in divisions among HEIs in any one country* (Egron-Polak and Hudson, 2014, pp. 62-4). Both of these responses on the part of LAC suggest that the region feels a certain degree of weakness and disadvantage with regard to the global context.

In relation to the **internal and external obstacles**, the 4th Global Survey of the IAU does not differ from the previous one. In both studies *the lack of financial resources* and *limited public funding for internationalization* point to one of the most serious obstacles for internationalization. Other internal obstacles are *the limited internationalization experience of academics* and *a curriculum that is too rigid for internationalization programmes*. The external

obstacles include *lack of languages* and *lack of recognition of qualifications*, both of which are widespread issues in our region.

The **principal internationalization activities** for TE institutions in the region are *outward mobility of students*, followed by collaboration in *international research*. However, Latin America is the developing region which sends the lowest number of students abroad (6.1%); it is also the one that receives the lowest number of students (1.8%), and the one with the lowest percentage of outward mobility in the world (UNESCO-UIS, 2012, p. 137). With regard to internationalization activities in the curriculum, the first position is occupied by the *learning of foreign languages*, a result that distinguishes this region from other parts of the world, and which is in line with the obstacles mentioned earlier (Egron-Polack and Hudson, 2014). With regard to *joint programmes and double degrees* – an increasingly strong trend around the world – LAC also finds itself below the world average, with 29% compared to a world average of 41%, and 34% compared to 44%, respectively; a similar trend exists with regard to *programmes and courses with international content* (Egron-Polak and Hudson, 2010, p. 121).

## Conclusions

In spite of the fact that there are still limitations on the internationalization process in LAC, it is clearly on an upward trend. Definite progress has been made with regard to mobility schemes for students and academics, large-scale grant programmes for postgraduate study abroad, while participation in international networks of teachers and researchers has become a priority, along with command of languages, the latter having been considered an obstacle for decades. Governments, for their part, have increased support and funding, and the institutions are in the process of creating or improving their organizational structures with regard to internationalization.

Nevertheless, in comparison with other developing regions such as Asia or even Africa, LAC is still lagging behind under headings such as student mobility, internationalization of the curriculum, organizational structures and the professionalization of relevant office personnel. Our main concern, however, relates to the fact that current efforts are directed fundamentally at individual strategies, that is, at mobility schemes, instead of those of a systemic nature such as internationalization of the curriculum, of research and of academic profiles. While we cannot deny the value and the positive effect of individual strategies, it should be emphasized that these are not enough to contribute significantly to the transformation of the TE system. This would suggest that decision-makers may be unaware of the potential of strategies of comprehensive internationalization. The political culture and management style, both at institutional and national level, privilege short-term strategies and actions, while internationalization requires strategies that are medium- and long-term. As a consequence, the potential that

internationalization holds for transforming the TE system, in relation to its quality, relevance and innovation, has been seriously limited.

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<http://eulacfoundation.org/sites/eulacfoundation.org/files/Internacionalización%20comprehensiva%20ALC.pdf>

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