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Opportunities for bi-regional cooperation to advance in an inclusive, quality-based and sustainable transformation of the education sector

III EU-LAC Essay Contest on the Bi-Regional Partnership

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2023

The European Union – Latin America and Caribbean International Foundation (EU-LAC Foundation) was created in 2010 by the Heads of State and Government of the European Union (EU) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) member states. Its Members are the Member states of the EU and CELAC as well as the EU itself. The Foundation is a tool of the EU-LAC partnership and its activities feed into the intergovernmental dialogue, in line with the bi-regional Action Plan.

The EU-LAC Foundation was entrusted with the mission of strengthening and promoting the strategic bi-regional relationship, enhancing its visibility and fostering active participation of the respective civil societies. Based on this mission, the Foundation has organised the III EU-LAC Essay Contest on the future of education and the opportunities for bi-regional cooperation to advance in an inclusive, quality-based and sustainable transformation of the education sector.

The main purpose of the EU-LAC Foundation Essay Contest is to encourage the writing of essays on topics of relevance to the bi-regional partnership, and, in particular, analytical papers aimed at increasing mutual understanding and offering pertinent ideas on the strengthening of cooperation between both regions.

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Federal Foreign Office

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PRESENTATION

The EU-LAC Foundation is delighted to present the publication "Opportunities for bi-regional cooperation to advance in an inclusive, quality-based and sustainable transformation of the education sector" that features the three winning essays of the III EU-LAC Essay Contest on the Bi-Regional Partnership.

The open call for essays was launched in August 2022 with the aim of encouraging particularly young authors to think of ways to strengthen collaboration between Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and the European Union (EU) to jointly address the challenge of advancing in a sustainable transformation of the education sector for the benefit of our societies, ensuring equal access and quality of education, and converting educational institutions into change agents of the social, ecologic and digital transformations of our times. For the purposes of the call, 'education' was understood in an encompassing sense – including primary education, secondary education, technical/vocational training, higher education, and life-long learning.

The topic selected for the third edition of the contest is closely linked to the common priorities of both regions, whose Foreign Ministers decided, in a Meeting in Buenos Aires in October 2022, to resume the bi-regional dialogue based on a forward-looking, substantive and positive agenda that seeks to ensure an inclusive, equitable and sustainable post-pandemic economic recovery.

Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on educative systems in the LAC and the EU regions. The virus implied severe disruptions in education trajectories across all education and training stages alike, implying lower learning outcomes and a greater drop-out rates. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds have been disproportionally affected by the impacts of the pandemic and their chances to upward social mobility and to succeed in highly dynamic social, economic and environmental contexts were hampered.

At the same time, education systems are not only exposed to the challenge of recovering from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also of finding ways to generate long-term structural transformations for inclusive and future-proof learning and teaching, taking into account the rapid technological transformation, profound changes in the world of work, consequences of climate change and the need to accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Education is not only a human right on its own, it also constitutes the basis for the realisation of many other rights. By creating a more level playing field among people of diverse backgrounds and ages, by fostering the skills required to access labour markets and to address pressing challenges of our times, education can reduce some of the main

sources for inequalities that charaterise our societies and thus be a major factor for social cohesion, socio-economic growth and sustainable development.

The authors of the three winning essays have reflected upon and formulated important ideas of how the EU and LAC regions could step up their cooperation to sustainably transform the education sectors. **Jennifer Faber** who won the first prize of the III Essay Contest, makes the case for adopting a knowledge diplomacy approach to converting the Common Higher Education Area from a 'rather imaginary' into a 'real phenomenon' as well as to addressing structural inequalities by means of concerted actions to fully implement the Agenda 2030. **Ricardo Alfaro and Stan Bruurs**, winner of the second prize, develop in their essay a genuine idea of creating a digital platform geared toward knowledge circulation among academic staff in both regions, focusing on three areas - pedagogy and management, languages, and mobility. The essay of **Karen Milena Parra Guerra** who won the third prize of the Essay Contest, takes stock of the contributions made by critical and transformational voices from 'Abya Yala', with key lessons for the education sectors to engage with knowledge and millenary practices in relation to the care of Mother Earth.

The EU-LAC Foundation would like to thank all authors who submitted essays under this Contest, as well as **Prof. Dr. Alla Placinska**, Head of the Centre for Ibero- and Latin American Studies, University of Latvia and **Prof. Dr. Delia Maria Crovi Druetta**, Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Universidad Autónoma de México (UNAM), for having played a key role as outstanding and independent members of evaluation committee.

The approaches of each essay offer important analysis and ideas for the current debate on this priority issue of the bi-regional partnership and will hopefully inspire more young people to participate in some upcoming contest.

Enjoy your reading!

Adrián Bonilla   Anna Barrera

Executive Director   **Senior Programme Coordinator**

JENNIFER FABER

1 KNOWLEDGE DIPLOMACY: MOVING TOWARDS A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR EU-LAC COOPERATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As new realities and challenges emerge in the international environment and the urge to find common solutions increases, new opportunities arise for the contribution that international higher education can make to international relations, diplomacy, and the knowledge society. Against the background of the European Union's renewed rapprochement with Latin America and the Caribbean, this essay explores the opportunities and challenges for interregional cooperation in the sphere of higher education. Specifically, it is proposed to revitalize EU-LAC relations from their roots adopting a knowledge diplomacy approach. First, this enables both regions to transform the Common Higher Education Area from a rather imaginary into a real phenomenon. Second, and most importantly, it allows the LAC region to move forward in tackling its structural challenges, while the EU finds a partner in accelerating the implementation of the Agenda 2030. Through this, both regions might be able to reassert the geopolitical relevance of their relationship and reshape the post-Covid world amidst the backdrop of a changing international panorama and shifting world order.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates that education is a fundamental human right. At all levels, it drives economic growth and sustainable development while contributing to the levelling of social inequalities, the reduction of poverty, and the strengthening of democratic citizenship, transforming education into an indispensable asset for the exercise of other human rights. However, the current global scenario illustrates that this fundamental right is heavily endangered. "We are on the brink of a catastrophic education emergency" (UNICEF, 2021), states UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore. The COVID-19 crisis has wreaked the greatest disruption on education systems in history,

leading to widespread closures of institutions all over the world (United Nations, 2020). It has challenged existing organisational structures and societal roles in unprecedented ways, while simultaneously planting the seeds for transformational changes that could profoundly impact the future of education.

Meanwhile, education systems are being reshaped not only by COVID-19 but also challenged by a multitude of global threats, which jeopardise the well-being of our planet and society. Climate change, environmental degradation, and the technological transformation are accelerating and intensifying, pushing us to the quest for effective solutions. How nations and regions respond to these challenges will largely determine their fate and ultimately that of their citizens. Notwithstanding the fact that all organisations and institutions must respond to these emergencies as quickly as possible, the role of universities is central to the endeavour, since "as socially-embedded institutions [they are] vital to the economic development of cities and regions" and further "appear well-positioned to motivate transformations most effectively at scale" (Hurth & Stewart, 2022: 2). Being considered the gateway to employment, higher education assumes the crucial role of endowing citizens with the skills required for accessing the labour market and adapting to its shifting demands. In that sense, higher education is "the joint creator of knowledge and innovation, turning these, as knowledge linked to social practices, into tools of intellectual independence, social transformation and the construction of fairer, more equitable and supportive political structures" (Alvarado, 2020: 2). Consequently, higher education institutions have a crucial role in functioning as the architects of the future world economic order and future international society.

Recalling the words of the Chilean sociologist Eugenio Tironi (2005), to give an answer to the question "What kind of education do we need?", we need to first respond to "What kind of society do we want?". Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) are united by a pronounced level of cultural and academic ties and a shared understanding of how the international society should look like. Both regions are strongly linked by their identities, shared values, and commitment to sustainable development, which renders them natural partners in the field of higher education. While the EU has tended to look rather eastward in recent decades, focusing on Asian partners, as well as its EU neighbourhood and accession countries in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, China has been expanding its influence in the LAC region, also by boosting its academic and cultural ties as a means of soft power. Given the recent resurgence of the EU's attention to LAC, this essay seeks to address the future of inter-regional cooperation in the field of higher education in a global context characterised by the setback of the UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.

On 27 October 2022, HR/VP Josep Borrell called for 'smarter' cooperation at the 3rd EU-CELAC ministerial meeting in Buenos Aires to avoid dependencies and build together strategic autonomy on both sides of the Atlantic (European Union External Action, 2022). To explore the potential role and importance of higher education in collaborative efforts

between both regions, this essay asks: What is the role of international higher education in international relations? What are the realities, trends, and challenges of higher education in the LAC region? What has been done in the realm of higher education cooperation and how might both regions best collaborate in the future to revitalize bi-regional cooperation?

Specifically, the essay proposes to move diplomatic relations towards knowledge diplomacy, which offers a vantage point through which to view the future of transnational knowledge generation at the intersection of international higher education and international relations. The main argument is that bolstering interregional cooperation in higher education can revive EU-LAC relations from their roots, on the one hand, by enabling the LAC region to move forward in addressing structural challenges given the region's urgent need for increasing productivity and building a more equitable society, while allowing the EU to accelerate the implementation of the Agenda 2030.

The essay is organised as follows: the first chapter illustrates the role of international higher education in international relations, introducing the concept of knowledge diplomacy. The second chapter briefly portrays the realities, trends and challenges in higher education in LAC, while the third chapter investigates the trajectory and status quo of EU-LAC cooperation in the field of higher education. Finally, the essay applies the conceptual framework of knowledge diplomacy to EU-LAC relations with the objective of laying out policy recommendations for the joint advancement in a sustainable and structural transformation of the regions' higher education sectors as a means to address common global challenges.

2.   ON THE CHANGING DYNAMICS IN INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, AND DIPLOMACY

Globalization has arguably been the most pivotal trend and fundamental reality of the 21st century. Its accompanying processes and profound changes in the economic, political, social, and technological spheres have prompted a multitude of changes in practically all spheres of human life, and higher education has not forsaken them either (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2019). In that sense, higher education's internationalization[1] is frequently labelled as a 'response to globalisation' (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Particularly from 1990 on, the ending of the Cold War, and the increasing regionalization and globalization of our economies as well as societies, triggered the emergence of a new context for higher education (Knight & de Wit, 1995). Whereas traditionally nation states

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[1]   Internationalization in this context can be defined as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education at the institutional and national levels" (Knight, 2008, p. 21).

have been the decisive actors in steering higher education policy, "in recent decades the world's regions and organizations are seen to be increasingly involved in this process" (Chou & Ravinet, 2015: [1]).

Whereas the international dimension of higher education has been active for centuries through academic mobility and the exchange of knowledge, the changing international environment prompted educational programmes, providers, research projects, and policy to now cross borders as well. Today, international higher education involves a plethora of diverse actors, which engage actively in bilateral and multilateral issues, ranging from public over private to quasi-governmental and non-governmental actors, including higher education institutions and policymakers, as well as foundations, research and development organisations, educational programme sponsors, or international networks. In line with these developments, the internationalisation of higher education developed from a marginal activity into an inherent element of international relations, and cooperation in higher education has been emerging more and more as an essential part of international relations (Knight, 2018).

Similarly, in the realm of diplomacy and notably since the end of the Cold War, we have witnessed profound changes, including the transition of diplomacy from a state-oriented approach that centred on the role of foreign ministries and diplomats to a multi-actor approach. This has paved the way for modern diplomacy, where a much wider array of actors, including civil society organisations, MNEs, transnational experts, and professional groups, are moving along the diplomatic playing field (Knight, 2018). This transition from classical to contemporary diplomacy is hallmarked not only by the increasing arrival of new non-state actors on the diplomatic playing field, but the concomitant emergence of new strategies, agendas, and a heightened focus on global issues such as climate change, pandemics, human rights, food security, migration (Cooper, Heine & Thakur, 2013). This is what the term 'new diplomacy' embodies, signalling "that we have entered a new era of international cooperation and that the boundaries of traditional diplomacy – concentrated on national security and economic and commercial matters – are being extended to a much broader concern for global sustainability" (Kjellén, 2008: 16).

In this vein, there result new rationales, opportunities, and risks attached to the contribution that international higher education can make to international relations, diplomacy, and the knowledge society as a whole. As the world's prosperity increasingly relies on its knowledge assets, higher education systems, which provide high-quality education, research, and the capacity for innovation, as well as cultural, academic and civic experiences, are more and more perceived as important geopolitical factors (Lung, Moldovan & Nistor Lung, 2012).

Traditionally, the contribution that international higher education makes to international relations has been analysed from the perspective of cultural diplomacy (Gienow-Hecht & Donfried, 2010; Goff, 2013) or public diplomacy (Byrne & Hall, 2011) or at a later stage,

through approaches such as science diplomacy (Ruffini, 2017) or education diplomacy (Piros & Koops, 2020). In addition, the paradigm shift from cooperation to competition and the fierce push for commercialisation, reputation, and branding which international higher education has experienced over the past decades, have led increasing number of scholars to invoke the notion of soft power[2] (Nye, 2005) when addressing international higher education.

In contrast to this, Knight takes on an alternative approach questioning why international higher education is framed in a power paradigm, when "values of self-interest, competition or dominance [are not] going to address issues of worldwide epidemics, terrorism, failed states, the bottom billion in poverty, environmental degradation and climate change effectively" (Knight, 2018: 7). In that sense, one could argue that the commercialisation of higher education represents the "most common and outspoken threat to a sustainable internationalisation" (Fredman, 2020: 3). Albeit commercial rationales have gained prominence over the past decades, internationalization now needs to respond to the threats and challenges of our time. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the urgent threat of climate change reinforce the need for a radical rethinking of the internationalization of higher education from a market-driven competitive orientation toward a social endeavour (de Wit & Deca, 2020).

Viewing international higher education through a distinct lens, Knight proposes an alternative approach, called knowledge diplomacy. This evolving term refers to an emerging approach of "understanding the role of international higher education, research, and innovation in strengthening relations among countries and addressing common global challenges" (Knight, 2020, p.38). Rather than being viewed as a one-way process, knowledge diplomacy should be grasped as a two-way reciprocal process whereby international higher education, research and innovation (IHERI) shape international relations, and conversely, international relations facilitate knowledge generation and its contribution to societal development.

While aforementioned theme-based approaches to diplomacy, such as education diplomacy, tend to concentrate on the core of the issue, knowledge diplomacy is not 'an end unto itself', nor is it purely about 'the production of knowledge'. Rather it might be one way forward to address the complex, global challenges of our time and should be understood as a 'means to an end' (Knight, 2018, p.8). Knowledge diplomacy builds on the fundamental functions of higher education, namely teaching and learning, research, knowledge production, innovation, and service to society and may perform a facilitating role in the advancement of the Agenda 2030, as expert scientific knowledge is central to a sustainable future and consensual knowledge sets the parameters within which decisions can be made despite complexities and uncertainties (Hernandez, 2021).

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2   This concept was developed in the early nineties by Joseph Nye to describe the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce, and use economic, cultural, and political force as means of persuasion.

Further, the SDGs adopted by the United Nations constitute the foundation for its rationale. In particular, SDG 4, the standalone goal on education - ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, and SDG 17 - strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.

But at present, humanity is far from meeting SDG 4. Instead, we are faced with a global education crisis that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequences of the Russian war in Ukraine. As a result, the existing shortcomings of education systems, including higher education systems, and their structural deficiencies have widened, exacerbating inequalities and hitting the already marginalised groups the most severely. It is at this point, being confronted with a geopolitical situation, marked by wars and conflicts, the crisis of globalisation, the resulting fragility of multilateral systems and increasing geopolitical competition, as well as the increase in autocratic regimes, where IHERI cooperation has become more important than ever before, and knowledge diplomacy could present a potential direction forward serving as a bridge linking IHERI and IR.

3. HIGHER EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: REGIONAL REALITIES, TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

The number of students in higher education worldwide has rapidly grown over the last 40 years. This growth is likely to sustain over the next years, with over 400 million students expected by 2030, headed by Asia and LAC (Comisión Europea, 2013). Currently, different regions and countries find themselves situated at very different stages of HE development and as a result of this struggle with their own specific challenges.

In the case of LAC, it is to endorse that all countries have made considerable progress in the field of higher education over the past decades. The enrolment in higher education in the region has expanded dramatically, exhibiting a growth in the average gross enrolment rate from 21% to 43% between 2000 and 2013, reaching 51% in 2019 (UNESCO, 2019). Today there are more than 27 million students in the region, attending more than 10,000 institutions, which offer more than 60,000 programs (Banco Mundial, 2017; UNESCO, 2019). However, the gross enrolment rate varies significantly throughout the region, ranging from 95% in Argentina, over 43% in Mexico to 20% in Honduras (Banco Mundial, 2020).

Despite this remarkable progress in terms of massification, higher education development remains a challenge for the continent – which is probably best reflected by the dissatisfaction and anger of thousands of LAC students heading to the streets, demanding reforms of their countries' flawed education systems. Fundamental challenges in higher education persist unsolved, especially those related to accessibility, quality, relevance, and equity. Access to

higher education remains very unequal in the region, with the lowest 50% of the income distribution accounting for only 25% of all higher education students (Ferreyra et al., 2017). In terms of quality, LAC, alongside Africa, continues to be the region with the fewest top universities and low-quality standards are further exacerbated by a poor link between degree programmes and the productive system (OECD, 2015). When the talk is about equity, we are observing a higher education panorama, which still reflects a "multi-faceted reality of racial, cultural, financial and educational disparities" (Didriksson, 2017: 477).

Challenges for further reforms are plenty and include relatively low public funding in many LAC countries, the lack of long-term consistency in national policies due to political instability, the mere complexity of the constellation of public and private universities in the region, and unfavourable attitudes towards the academic mandate of universities (Altbach & Salmi, 2021). Drawing on the example of Brazil, we can observe that the Bolsonaro government has followed adversary policies and has made severe budget cuts to Brazil's public universities over the past years, which have been jeopardising the proper functioning of the higher education system (France 24, 2022).

LAC is at a crossroads in higher education: the region lags far behind others and current models are incapable of delivering the capacity for productivity growth and sustainable development (Ferreyra, Avitabile, & Paz, 2017). Currently, Europe and the LAC region have approximately 45 million individuals enrolled in higher education institutions combined, which poses an enormous potential for interregional cooperation. Could the EU be a partner for the LAC region in paving the right way?

4.   HIGHER EDUCATION COOPERATION AT THE ROOTS OF EU-LAC INTERREGIONALISM

As Baeza and Lazarou (2016: 50) state, "educational cooperation is at the roots of inter-regionalism" as it "does not stumble on the same political sensitivities as other policy areas". This has also proven true for cooperation in higher education between the EU and LAC. Cooperation in this area enjoys a long-standing tradition between both regions. As a starting point concerning group-to-group dialogue, one could think of the first EU-LAC Summit of Heads of State and Government, which institutionalised EU-LAC relations in 1999. Already at the very first EU-LAC summit, education was mentioned as one of the priority areas for action between the strategic partners, placing it at the heart of the associative process. Particularly, the strengthening of cooperation between higher education institutions has already been identified (next to basic education and vocational training) as 'a special challenge' in the very beginning. In particular, article 63 of the Rio Declaration (1999) states that the EU and LAC agree to:

> *"Consider the strengthening of educational co-operation as a special challenge, with particular emphasis on basic education, vocational training and co-operation between higher education institutions, including universities, and distance education, and take into account the particular needs of our societies. In this context we recall the successful co-operation programmes already in existence."*

Since then, EU and (CE)LAC officials expressed a strong commitment to the idea of cooperation in higher education at every biennial summit that has taken place, transforming it into a well-established idea and policy objective within EU-LAC relations. The second EU-LAC Summit in 2002 in Madrid and the corresponding ambitious 2002-2004 Action Plan even envisaged the building of an EU-LAC Common Area of Higher Education. The Plan defined two main objectives: (i) evaluation of quality, and (ii) mobility, and proposed several initiatives, being developed based on voluntary engagement by interested countries.

In 2011, the creation of CELAC marked a decisive momentum, elevating the dialogue between the regions to a formally recognised group-to-group dialogue. Two years later, the interregional dialogue was revitalised and led to the First EU-CELAC Academic Summit, which took place in Chile in 2013 and brought together a wide range of universities, research centres, university authorities, and academic networks from both regions (specifically, around 400 representatives of universities and academic institutions participated). This mechanism has sought to work with governments and businesses to promote the creation of a common higher education space by creating a virtuous circle between universities towards accreditation and knowledge sharing (Fundación EU-LAC, 2014). The Santiago Declaration on University Cooperation in Higher Education, Science

and Technology and Innovation was the outcome of this Summit and established the creation of an "EU-LAC Permanent Academic Forum" to ensure continuity and follow-up.[3]

At the Second EU-CELAC Summit in Brussels in 2015, the new Chapter 9 "Higher Education" was included in the regions' Action Plan, complementing and seeking convergence with Chapter 1 on "Science, research, innovation and technology" and Chapter 5 "education and employment to promote social inclusion and cohesion". This new chapter pinpointed that the joint activities and research projects in the higher education sector should be promoted "taking into account, among others, the CELAC-EU Academic Summits and the Summit of Presidents of Councils of Rectors of EU-CELAC countries, in close interaction with the EU-CELAC Joint Initiative for Research and Innovation (JIRI)"[4]. Following this summit, two Academic and Knowledge Summits were held in El Salvador in 2017 and in Spain in 2020.

Twenty three years after the Rio Summit, we can look back at several initiatives such as Erasmus+ (2014–2020) including Erasmus Mundus, capacity development under the ALFA programme including the Alfa PUENTES project, or mobility under the Alban programme, the main objective of which was none other than to strengthen cooperation based on common foundations. Through common work such programmes strongly fostered the modernisation and internationalisation of higher education itself and reforms in diverse areas, such as quality assurance, accreditation, degree harmonisation, and curricula. But despite the strong political attention paid to higher education by the two regions and thoroughly tangible achievements, all efforts to promote the realisation of the EU-CELAC Common Higher Education Area have led to "modest and sometimes even contradictory results" (Dondi, 2018) resulting in cooperation which "may have some unseized opportunities" (Crowfoot, 2020). To date, the EU-CELAC Common Higher Education Area remains more of an imaginary than a real phenomenon.

The reasons that have hampered the achievement of the policy objective are manifold and familiar, comprising LAC's laborious regional integration processes, the EU's shift from interregionalism to bilateralism, and the discontinuity of political dialogue (Dondi, 2018). Given more and more pressing global issues, a renewed approach to EU-LAC cooperation in higher education seems timely to involve a truly substantial portion of the higher education community of both regions and to make the Common Area of Higher Education a reality.

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[3]   In 2015 the Second EU-LAC Academic Summit took place in Brussels and 2018 the third one in Córdoba.

5. TOWARDS A LONG-TERM EU-LAC AGENDA ON HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH AND INNOVATION COOPERATION

Viewing international higher education through the lens of knowledge diplomacy, five dimensions are of particular importance in the pursuit of a coherent policy approach and strategic agenda related to EU-LAC cooperation in higher education: connecting the levels of higher education, research, and innovation (HERI), diversity of actors and partners, recognition of diverse needs and collective use of resources, reciprocity, as well as the building and strengthening of relations between and among countries.[4]

5.1. CONNECTING HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, AND INNOVATION

The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the vital importance of collaboration in research and innovation to find solutions to society's most critical needs. Expanding the international dimension of EU-LAC cooperation beyond higher education to research and innovation and linking the three policy areas through an integrative, coherent approach seems not only timely but necessary since it facilitates the adoption of a genuine knowledge strategy discovering synergies between policies, programs, projects, and related activities (Gabriel, 2020). Putting an increased focus on the knowledge triangle, as well as exploring synergies and interconnections between the Common Higher Education Area and the Common Research Area is of utmost importance.

The 2019 European Commission's Joint Communication to the European Parliament and Council on EU-LAC relations calls for the building on existing and fruitful programmes such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe for the years 2021–2027. Although this is certainly important, it is imperative to go beyond this and network these stand-alone activities to a wider range of activities in sight of more contemporary developments in IHERI. This includes amongst others, creating international joint universities, multi-university and interdisciplinary research networks, knowledge hubs, and centres of excellence, with the aim of expanding the role that the EU and LAC play in the creation of global knowledge, intellectual progress, and innovation. Most academic collaboration efforts to date have operated at the project or programme level, thus ties frequently were not maintained once the funding has ended. Cooperation efforts therefore need to be stepped up and focus on the implementation of real policy instruments with a larger operation scale to produce transformational impact with a long-term vision.

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[4]   On the basis of the conceptual framework designed by Jane Knight (2020).

5.2.   DIVERSITY OF ACTORS AND PARTNERS

A salient feature of knowledge diplomacy concerns the diversity of international higher education actors engaging with partners from other sectors. While universities are certainly major players in the process due to their unique positioning at the crossroads of HERI, there is a wide range of other actors involved, including centres of excellence, research institutions or networks, foundations, think tanks, professional associations, NGOs, private sector companies and government agencies. In this regard, the process of open dialogue intensified in the framework of the EU-CELAC Academic and Knowledge Summits, should be further pursued, to create bottom-up collaboration spaces and to use them as clustering instruments (Torrent, 2020). This bottom-up approach is fundamental to ensure the continued engagement of the academic community.

According to the specific nature of the initiative at hand, these actors need to collaborate with other sectors, such as local authorities, the private sector, and civil society groups. The crucial role local authorities assume in this process is well expressed by the fact that 60% of the 169 SDG targets cannot be achieved without their involvement (Comisión Europea, 2019a). Further, the involvement of the civil societies in both regions is vital, since "a political top-down approach is not sufficient for developing successful cooperation" (Baeza and Lazarou, 2016:59). With respect to the private sector, the EU might draw on its experience in transferring ideas and technologies from academia into start-ups and the industry, as well as in promoting smart specialisation and innovation expertise at a regional level (Comisión Europea, 2019a).

5.3.   RECOGNITION OF DIVERSE NEEDS AND COLLECTIVE USE OF RESOURCES

Since a cookie-cutter approach to the EU-LAC partnership does not do justice to the many different geographical, economic, political, and social realities LAC lives, it should be fully acknowledged that the EU's partner countries have different and idiosyncratic policy priorities, needs, and resources. This lends special importance to the concept of relevance in collaborative efforts, as higher education needs to be responsive to the real needs of the people (Bonilla, 2020). Harmonisation activities will have to be carried out according to the region's capacities and priorities.

In this context, it is imperative to "transform the current development paradigm into one that will take us down the road of inclusive, sustainable development" (Alvarado, 2020: 1) and thus, establish a horizontal cooperative relationship. To achieve this, the World Bank's vision of education, which views developed countries as producers and exporters of higher education and developing countries as consumers, which should focus their efforts on the financing of basic education, must be overcome. While not denying the importance of basic education, it should not be the sole concern given higher education's eminent development

role in the 21st century, as this would jeopardize LAC's sovereignty in the knowledge society, aggravate already present dependencies and hamper LAC's quest for a sustainable growth model fuelled by endogenous motors (Gazzola, 2021).

5.4   RECIPROCITY

Knowledge generation is no longer a merely singular process and rational scientific practice that is neutral in terms of value or power, but fundamentally social and collective (Acharya, Deciancio & Tussie, 2022). The diverse needs and resources of the actors involved will naturally result in different benefits and risks. However, the principles of reciprocity and mutuality of benefits should guide the cooperation process, and "the EU should differentiate itself through its valued-based policy and promote a logic of complementarity and mutual benefit" (Comisión Europea, 2019b:13).

Against this background, it is worth recalling that the most pressing issues for Latin Americans and Caribbeans include social problems related to extreme poverty, social inequality, and climate change – areas in which the EU is ascribed a leadership role (Nolte, 2018). Following Sanahuja, the EU represents the only actor on the international stage which offers LAC a partner for the advancement on the key concerns of its societies, such as social inclusion, gender equality, employment, the protection of democracy and human rights, environmental sustainability and education and is therefore uniquely positioned to induce meaningful transformation (FIIAPP, 2020). Whilst relations with China may well be economically attractive, most countries in the LAC region favour reforming their education systems according to European rather than Chinese standards and pursuing inclusion and sustainability policies that are more closely aligned to European rather than Chinese standards (Nolte, 2018). This presents a vitally important opportunity to scale-up transformations in the regions' higher education sectors to revive EU-LAC relations from their roots. Successful internationalisation of higher education must necessarily address the social dimension, including problems of accessibility, equity, quality, and capacity development.

5.5   BUILDING AND STRENGTHENING RELATIONS BETWEEN AND AMONG COUNTRIES

There is a sliding scale in terms of the breadth and depth of contributions that IHERI can leverage to IR but strengthening relations between and among countries and in this way contributing to solving the pressing global challenges of our time will be the most important one. This implies truly understanding HE as a means to an end. In this regard, "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" (Crowfoot, 2022). Supporting the implementation of the Agenda 2030 must

be a core component of a new framework for EU-LAC cooperation in higher education. Through smart cooperation and mutual learning in the field of IHERI, the regions could lead the way towards more sustainable production/consumption, renewable energy, resource efficiency, circular economy, and promotion of sustainable and smart cities (Comisión Europea, 2019b).

First and foremost, the probably most important and decisive task the EU and LAC are facing is to re-establish high-level policy dialogue and to prevent discontinuity by ensuring follow- up. The most recent 8th EU-CELAC Summit has taken place in June 2015, and the last EU- CELAC ministerial meeting in October (which has been the first one in over 4 years). In this regard, an EU-CELAC Summit under the Spanish Presidency of the European Council in the second half of 2023 will provide an opportunity to express commitment to strengthen cooperation. In addition, the creation of permanent bi-regional higher education policy dialogue platform to share best practices and foster regional dialogue could prove ground-breaking and foster association with willing regional groupings (may it be cross- regional organisations such as CELAC or sub-regional efforts like Mercosur, the Pacific Alliance or ALBA) or eager individual countries. Beyond this, Mariya Gabriel as Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth (2019–2024), and her positive stance towards intensified cooperation with the LAC region, provide important opportunities for a revitalization of EU-LAC cooperation in the field of higher education and a renewed agenda.

Finally, the elaboration of the Matrix of Objectives and Strategic Lines for the Construction of the EU-CELAC Common Area of Higher Education5, which has been promoted by the EU-LAC Foundation, represents an important reference document on concrete actions required to strengthen the higher education pillar of the bi-regional partnership.

6.   FINAL THOUGHTS

Against the backdrop of the intensifying threat of climate change and the SDGs, a fundamental rethinking of the internationalisation of higher education must take place, moving away from its competitive ethics toward social, collaborative, and values-driven orientation. Given higher education's eminent socio-economic development role, it is not only a goal in itself, but also a means to achieve the other 16 SDGs, and thus a critical policy driver for advancing the Agenda 2030. The current momentum, marked by the concomitant increased focus on education that the pandemic has triggered, must be seen as an opportunity for truly understanding the strategic role of HE and re-imagining how universities can co-create more sustainable, democratic and just societies and thus, could potentially lead the way to reshape the post-Covid world.

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[5]   See: https://eulacfoundation.org/en/education

Whereas cooperation in higher education has been at the roots of EU-LAC Interregionalism and since then an important feature of the interregional agenda, it is now imperative to unseize the untapped potential cooperation exhibits in practice. Therefore, higher education should be geared towards a top priority in EU-LAC relations with the aim of re-orienting them towards a sustainable future. In this regard, the pandemic could bring a new impetus to revitalise EU-LAC relations from their roots. First, this would enable both regions to transform the Common Higher Education Area from a rather imaginary into a real phenomenon. Second, and most importantly, it might allow the LAC region to move forward in tackling its structural challenges given the urgency of increasing productivity and building a more equitable society, while the EU finds a partner in accelerating the implementation of the Agenda 2030. Through this, both partners might be able to reaffirm the geopolitical relevance of their relationship, jointly pursuing the aim of preserving the vigour of democratic ideals amidst the backdrop of a changing international panorama and shifting world order.

In this regard, knowledge diplomacy might form the basis for an environment for healthy knowledge exchange. The main objective of collaborative efforts in higher education should not be the mere increase of student mobility and scholar exchange as stand-alone activities but networking these activities to a larger set of activities with the long-term aim of strengthening the role that the EU and LAC play in global knowledge generation, intellectual advancements, and innovation. This would allow for a more "purpose-driven" inter-regionalism, which is necessary because, despite all the uncertainty, one thing is certain: the challenges of our time are pressing and cannot be addressed from a purely national perspective. They transcend borders and finding real solutions implies a collective process of knowledge generation, which is inherently social. To transform the Common Higher Education Area into reality, a new level of ambition and reciprocity in EU-LAC relations and coordinated, sustained efforts to chart a new course for higher education cooperation will be required, which might have the potential to create new ways of cooperation between dedicated individuals and community groups from all sectors – governments, policy-makers, universities and other higher education institutions, civil society and the private sector – and thus serve to build strategic autonomy on both sides of the Atlantic.

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RICARDO ALFARO & STAN BRUURS

2. EMPOWERING ACADEMIC STAFF TO FURTHER SDG4: LAUNCHING A DIGITAL PLATFORM FOR QUALITY EDUCATION IN THE EU AND LAC REGIONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Quality education is vital to prepare the human capital for global challenges such as poverty, climate change, and social inequality. However, whereas the academic staff is a key enabler in achieving quality education, their pivotal role in higher education institutions (HEI) is often marginalised. Therefore, this essay contributes to the policy discussion on education partnerships between the EU and LAC regions by adding a practical hands-on online tool for the academic staff, namely a Digital Platform. It would identify three critical themes regarding HEI and academic staff members which are currently underdeveloped in light of SDG4, namely pedagogy and management, languages, and mobility. By integrating existing frameworks, this Platform would upgrade the pedagogical and linguistic skills of academic staff members and would pursue inclusive infrastructures at HEI. Next, it would clarify mobility opportunities which eases knowledge circulation. In doing so, the Platform would provide guidelines, good practices, and awareness-raising modules resonating with SDG4. Consequently, it would strengthen the bi-regional partnership and provides the necessary stimulus for an EU-LAC Common Area of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation. Ultimately, the holistic approach taken in the Platform would enhance the competencies of the academic staff, which shall lead to inclusive, sustainable, and quality education for all learners in the EU and LAC regions.

1. STATE OF THE ART: QUALITY EDUCATION IN THE EU AND LAC REGIONS

With a past of close cooperation born in historical and cultural proximity, the European Union – Latin American and Caribbean States (EU-LAC) ties have run strong even in an increasingly diverse global context. Parallel lines of thought enhanced economic similitudes between the EU and LAC regions and culminated in a congruent international political posture (Dominguez 2015). Likewise, akin languages and religions in EU-LAC

enforced this bond more notably. With the advent of the EU-LAC bi-regional partnership in 1999 at the Summit in Rio de Janeiro, a long-term intercontinental cooperation set the course towards a strategic academic consolidation (István 2020). From then onwards, significant steps have been taken both within and across the regions related to education, such as Erasmus mobilities, the Bologna Process in the EU, the Tuning Latin America Project in LAC, the EU-LAC Common Area of Higher Education Common Area of Higher Education, and the ULICES[6] and Alfa Puentes projects. Whereas a European (Higher) Education Area is realised in the EU, only tentative steps have been taken in LAC towards such regional institutionalised cooperation (Barlete 2020). Nonetheless, the CELAC Summits and concomitant action plans state that education is a regional priority. In 2011, the Permanent Academic Forum LAC–EU came into existence, progressing towards the design of a Common Space for Higher Education (Dodi 2017). Reflecting on the current dynamics, ministers of education of LAC showed certain leeway towards regional solidarity to achieve SDG4 through the Buenos Aires Convention (UNESCO 2018).

As part of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) tackling global challenges, SDG4 ensures inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all.[7] Such quality education can only be achieved with the education for sustainable development (ESD) narrative, hinting at acquiring knowledge and skills to address these global challenges. This is deeply intertwined with SDG Target 4.7, which considers students as global citizens bound to build sustainable futures. Indeed, education transformed from a local and national concern to a global interest due to globalisation, industrialisation, and digitalisation (Wong et al. 2020). The importance of quality education transcends national borders, as stark learning differences across neighbouring countries may lead to productivity impediments affecting the whole region (World Bank 2021). These trends, including the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbated the shortcomings of current educational policies. Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are confronted with high drop-out rates and disengagement of students as well as prolonged study periods (Ferreyra et al. 2017). Although the number of enrolments has skyrocketed over the years, students do not always receive quality education due to scarce highly-skilled teachers. Since HEI are not determined to reinvigorate academic staff training, a vicious circle remains in place where the next generation of academic staff members acquires poor capabilities of today's teachers, which in turn prevents them from teaching qualitatively later (Schulte et al. 2020). Clearly, structural deficiencies at HEI are commonplace, including pedagogical and managerial inadequacies, language deficiencies, and obstacles regarding staff mobility. Hence, advancing quality education requires a comprehensive approach, with a focus on all participants: governments, HEI, staff members, and students. Consequently, the academic staff must rethink their pedagogical and managerial approaches and be aware of

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[6]   ULISES: University Linking Initiatives and Synergies in Europe and South America.
[7]   United Nations, *The 17 Goals,* https://sdgs.un.org/goals.

the possible deficiencies in their methods, such as a lack of digital literacy (Pérez et al. 2018).

To take forwards the conundrum of quality education most forcefully, this essay proposes an EU-LAC Digital Platform strengthening the bi-regional partnership through a common framework towards quality education. This Platform would align with the shared objective of achieving SDG4 in bridging global targets and national and local perspectives while building upon existing frameworks and collaborative endeavours. It would pursue two interconnected aims, namely to provide an attractive and qualitative teaching and learning landscape on the one hand, along with strengthening the educational pillar of the bi-regional partnership towards a Common Area of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation, on the other hand. Multiple academic summits have prompted such common area after all. Bearing in mind the considerations regarding quality education in EU-LAC, this essay identifies three key elements to be tackled: (1) pedagogy and management, (2) languages, and (3) mobility. Due to their universality and interdependencies, a joint approach by EU-LAC poses an adequate and practical response. Afterwards, the feasibility and potential of this mid to long-term project are evaluated.

2. EU-LAC DIGITAL PLATFORM

2.1 STRUCTURE AND MAIN DRIVERS

To meet the global predicaments, higher education must transform fundamentally (Vasavi 2020). A comprehensive approach is desirable to build a HEI environment where students are stimulated to reach their full potential. Immense steps forwards could be taken through an EU-LAC Digital Platform (the Platform), an online tool aimed at academic staff members as critical enablers of quality education and having a crucial impact on students' learning outcomes. For example, it has been estimated that a high-performing teacher increases students' learning results by the equivalent of more than two years of schooling (Saavedra Chanduvi et al. 2020). Additionally, such teachers motivate students, which results in decreasing drop-out rates, and ameliorate their long-term outcomes, such as higher salaries in future job prospects (Popova, Evans, and Arancibia 2016). The Platform would focus on the existing workforce, as it is challenging to attract qualified academic staff members to particular HEI (Elacqua et al. 2020). In doing so, it could meet the concerns of the current teachers lacking professional development, as shown by the TALIS survey from the OECD. Therefore, the Platform would rest on three axes of action: (1) pedagogy and management, (2) languages, and (3) mobility. It is proposed that the first two pillars consist of self-learning training modules, while the third pillar would focus on knowledge dissemination and networking opportunities. Consequently, this falls within the ambit of the lifelong learning continuum for the academic staff as captured by SDG4.

Furthermore, the Platform would serve as a one-stop-shop for the professional development of the academic staff as it includes all relevant information, training, and referral links necessary to accelerate qualitative and future-proof teaching and learning. The interactive style of the Platform would ensure it is not over-theoretical and guarantees the engagement of the actors involved. Such an all-embracing ambition requires the Platform to be developed by experts in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders at the macro, meso, and micro levels, such as national and local authorities and policymakers, HEI, the academic staff, and students. Besides, companies play a role in shaping education because they are cognisant of the required skills in the global labour market and are confronted with a lack of qualified workers in the new world of work (Berger and Frey 2016; Saura 2020). A broad dialogue and consensus in light of an integrated top-down and bottom-up approach are imperative to have everyone on board in the rollout and implementation of the Platform. In turn, this ensures the orchestration of mutual understanding while simultaneously taking into account national and regional differences. This points out that the Platform would be more than just a one-size-fits-all programme. Altogether, this results in well-defined objectives, principles, and values shared by the EU-LAC, which guide the Platform, namely a commitment to defend human rights, an intolerance for discrimination, respect for gender equality and the SDGs overall (Ghymers 2018). These common denominators shall act as a normative standard in quality education in the EU and LAC regions.

Primordially, however, the digital literacy of the academic staff must be elevated, as stressed by UNESCO in its ICT Competency Framework for Teachers (ECLAC and UNESCO 2020). Therefore, the Platform must first familiarise the academic staff with digital technology through a tutorial on the Platform as well as digital training programmes. Once the staff has acquired and fine-tuned their digital competencies, they could transmit these skills to their students and could use the Platform to the fullest. Also, technology in education positively influences learning outcomes as it supports teachers' performance (World Bank 2021). For example, online teaching was ubiquitous during the COVID-19 pandemic and remains relevant for, amongst others, distance learning purposes (Sandoval 2020).

Moreover, the Platform would serve as a bi-regional programme for the professional formation of the academic staff, which eventually results in transformations at the institutional and individual levels (Dodi 2017). The Platform would not touch upon the existing national educational objectives, content, and formation, but acts as a complementary and voluntary addition. The fact that teachers do not show a high need for complementary training in their content knowledge enforces this approach (OECD 2019). Besides, an interactive and creative hands-on digital platform would provide a more efficient outcome than one-off physical workshops. A cohesive approach to achieve SDG4, such as proposed with the Platform, is thus necessary and preferred.

2.2   THREE PILLARS

2.2.1   PEDAGOGY AND MANAGEMENT

The first substantial pillar of the Platform would cover pedagogical and managerial strategies that prove helpful in achieving SDG4. Predominantly, it would consist of interactive and self-learning modules, including custom build guidelines, instructions, and good practices. This contributes to furthering students' knowledge and increasing the supply of qualified teachers as prompted by Target 4.c of SDG4. The main objective is to raise awareness amongst the academic staff about the wide variety of possible pedagogical and managerial strategies, the importance of SDGs, and how education can support sustainable development. Incorporating these elements in staff training results in the acquisition of sustainability competencies of the academic staff to convey to students (UNESCO 2017). By educating the academic staff, structural transformations can occur at the HEI level, for example, through a curriculum considering global challenges, such as poverty, inequality, and climate change.

Primary, well-designed pedagogical approaches enhance student learning (Saavedra Chanduvi et al. 2020). However, the high degree of homogeneity in pedagogic approaches leads to inadequate ways of addressing students' diversified needs. Therefore, differentiation in pedagogical approaches is desirable to transmit knowledge based on the target group. A large share of teachers reports a significant need for professional development regarding multicultural or multilingual settings as well as teaching students with special needs (OECD 2019). For instance, teaching methods differ between blind and deaf students, and between teaching physically and online. In fact, the pedagogical aspects of teaching and learning are absent or not thoroughly considered in the pre-service training of teachers (Popova, Evans, and Arancibia 2016). Consequently, this pillar would build upon cultivating a responsive ability to teach. When academic staff members are made aware of the meaning and consequences of disadvantaged and vulnerable students, they can actively provide equal opportunities, for example, for disabled students, students with a migration background, or those living in rural or remote areas.

In light of the above, the Platform would steer the academic staff towards an appropriate teaching and learning path through a concise survey about their strengths, weaknesses, target groups, and objectives. Implementing surveys in education has shown great success in monitoring SDG4 and its direct impact on society (Cruz Perusia 2017). Such a method of skills identification designs individual pedagogical strategies adjusted to particular situations. The SELFIEforTEACHERS[8] system already implements a similar self-reflection tool. Moreover, the Platform would entail modules with reference to inclusion, where

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[8]   European Commission, *European Education Area. Quality Education and Training for All. SELFIE for TEACHERS,* https://education.ec.europa.eu/selfie-for-teachers.

teachers are explained how to ensure inclusive teaching methods concerning, amongst others, disabled students and engage all learners in the education process. The Platform would also entail guidelines on how to set up adult learning trajectories regarding career changes and reskilling within the lifelong learning framework of SDG4, because this requires different pedagogical methods than teaching young students (ICAE 2020). This is especially important regarding their autonomy and work-life balance (World Bank 2019). On top of that, modules would cover classroom management, encouragement of students, and how to recognise potential drop-outs and minimise that risk. Also, methods to use technology efficiently and creatively for (online) teaching purposes should be incorporated. A general module would dive deeper into themes such as violence and abuse, mental health, bullying, and vulnerable students, including women, LGBTQIA2S+, indigenous and disabled students, and students with specific ethnic or socio-economic backgrounds. Hence, academic staff members are wary of stigmatising terms and stereotypes and are encouraged to avoid using these.

Eventually, teachers should switch from merely teaching and delivering content towards interactive and learner-centered approaches to facilitate learning, with open-ended assessment and feedback opportunities improving critical thinking skills (UNESCO 2017). It is crucial to perceive students as autonomous learners taking ownership of their own learning (Matos, Bautista-Cerro, and Rodríguez 2018). Thus, the Platform would confront the academic staff with transformative, active, and collaborative pedagogical strategies adapted to, amongst others, cultural, linguistic, gender, and accessibility differences. In doing so, all forms of exclusion, discrimination, and marginalisation are addressed as well as disparities and inequalities.

In parallel with pedagogical approaches, also managerial aspects of HEI are of utmost importance for quality education. Therefore, it is essential to consider the whole working and learning environment of staff and students. Even the best pedagogical approach proves futile when students do not have a sense of belonging or feel unsafe at their HEI (Saavedra Chanduvi et al. 2020).

Currently, the academic staff experiences poor career prospects, inefficient management, and job dissatisfaction (Janger, Campbell, and Strauss 2019). The ambiguity surrounding recruitment procedures does not foster excellence, which results in inadequate teachers who are often hard to replace. Conversely, selection must be based on merits, competencies, and engagement, enhancing the socially perceived status of these occupations in society. A meritocratic and transparent recruitment procedure supports the academic staff's professionalism and results in positive attitudes towards education. Management policies shall therefore take a gender balance into account, countering the underrepresentation of female staff members in HEI in EU and LAC regions, for example, in managerial roles (IESALC 2021). HEI could use short-term contracts or probation periods to verify the engagement and quality of the academic staff on top of in-service training to uplift and maintain such quality. Following the recruitment, promotion

prospects and career progression must also be attractive. In this regard, fair and decent work conditions are indispensable to reckon their value and engagement. To do so, the remuneration package could be commensurate with the merits and seniority, boosting its competitiveness. Therefore, the Platform would provide human resource guidelines, codes and charters leading towards an attractive teaching and research environment, where trade-offs and adverse effects of the transition towards qualitative staff are minimised. For example, the academic autonomy of the academic staff must be guaranteed to allow them to come up with novel and innovative ideas and knowledge (UNESCO 2021).

Complementary, the infrastructure of HEI should stimulate and facilitate student learning. Therefore, the academic staff must be provided with the proper materials for effective (online) teaching, such as digital technology, which is often lacking (ECLAC and UNESCO 2020; Escueta et al. 2020). The same applies to devices and tools in different languages and formats, including audiobooks, braille, and large print, which would result in multimodal teaching and learning settings adapted to the needs of everyone (Alasuutari et al. 2020). The management board must be aware of existing and possible deficiencies, such as ill-equipped infrastructure hampering inclusiveness and diversity and perpetuating educational discrimination. For example, wheelchair users need accessible basic sanitation and hygiene facilities. Accordingly, HEI must be transformed into an inclusive and sustainable infrastructure that avoids sustaining stereotypes and exclusions yet fights segregation. Therefore, it is proposed that the Platform establishes gender-sensitive, eco-conscious, inclusive, and equitable policies to be implemented in HEI and reflected in the curriculum and lifelong learning objectives. Consequently, administrative and infrastructural barriers at HEI would be removed, enabling learning for all. This would ensure that all learners participate and benefit from education equally in a respectful manner. Additionally, this would lead to optimised teaching in adequate class sizes and rooms equipped with digital infrastructure enabling collaboration and fostering dialogue in the desired contextual environment concerning temperature, lighting, and hygiene. Eventually, this would contribute to achieving Target 4.8 of SDG4 to build and upgrade inclusive and safe schools. An inspiring teaching and learning environment stimulates critical thinking and provides room for the expression of innovative ideas (Vargas-Tamez 2019). Hence, HEI value diversity which is seen as enriching. Finally, this pillar also adds to Targets 4.4 and 4.5 by increasing the skillset of people for financial success and eliminating discrimination in education.

2.2.2 LANGUAGES

The second pillar of the Platform would facilitate communication between the academic staff across borders, which is a prerequisite for mobility exchanges, as addressed in the third pillar. Currently, the academic staff is often restricted in their teaching and researching prospects by their limited proficiency in certain languages. Therefore, the Platform would contain language courses through a self-study trajectory, which proves necessary for the academic staff to speak and understand a decent level of specific languages. In that regard, it would focus on deploying an international *lingua franca*, namely the English language, as it is the most spoken and understood language worldwide. Nonetheless, all EU-LAC languages should be listed in order to strengthen inter- and intra-regional cohesion. Eventually, this would provide better opportunities for the academic staff regarding teaching and research endeavours abroad, including applications for external grants. It would also strengthen their position in academia by being able to publish in other languages, therefore, opening perspectives and removing linguistic barriers for cross-border collaboration and improving the visibility of HEI they are affiliated with and themselves. Thus, this second pillar has the potential to enhance the academic credentials necessary to thrive in a competitive environment.

As the language proficiency of the academic staff improves, curricula could shift from monolingualism towards plurilingualism. In light of inclusive education, it should in all circumstances be avoided that students are excluded because of the mere fact they are being taught in a language they do not properly understand. Plurilingualism boosts learning outcomes and is important in terms of the respect for diversity and efficiency of teaching and learning. Consequently, the academic staff would be able to teach in national, foreign and indigenous languages. This is important for the internationalisation of the curricula, as well as the faculty in general (Gacel-Ávila and Marmolejo 2016). Also, the benefits for students are manifold as this would create deep foundations to be proficient in multiple languages boosting their career chances within the country and abroad. Furthermore, it has been shown that students learn better when being taught in a language they speak, use and understand (Saavedra Chanduvi et al. 2020). In such cases, the surrounding of the student, for instance the parents, proves to be more involved, which increases the motivation and engagement of students and strengthens the home learning environment. Afterwards, students would be able to engage in global dialogue and interact with other cultures, which will often be inevitable at some point in their careers. Learning languages, and plurilingual education more broadly, is inextricably linked with supporting cultural identities (UNESCO 2021). Linguistic diversity is not merely a communication tool but also explicates unique approaches towards the world, which must be cherished.

This linguistic pillar can be realised by implementing existing frameworks in the Platform, such as the Erasmus+ Online Language Support Tool. Another method could be for the EU-LAC to enter into agreements with online platforms providing such language classes

and making these available for HEI. Eventually, this would enable the academic staff to teach different languages at their HEI. Nevertheless, the possible political considerations of teaching in languages other than the national language must be taken into account to avoid political backlash.

2.2.3 MOBILITY

To achieve academic excellence, it is imperative to engage in dialogues with diversified interlocutors in international settings (Selleslaghs 2017). Therefore, the last pillar of the Platform would concern the furthering of mobility opportunities for the academic staff. Here, mobility is understood as the physical, virtual, or hybrid movement of individuals across borders to study, research, teach or work. The Erasmus+ and Erasmus Mundus frameworks, as the archetype of higher education mobility, provide multiple advantages, such as personal and professional development forging new mindsets and leading to improved knowledge, better employability, and understanding of cultural differences (European Commission 2021a; Czerska-Shaw and Krzaklewska 2022). In 2019/2020, only 10,7% of the participants in these programmes were staff members spending a learning, teaching, or training period abroad (European Commission 2021b). In this respect, academic staff mobility is underdeveloped and must be encouraged, as stated in the Santiago Declaration (European Commission 2019).

Whereas mobility opportunities are rising in light of the internationalisation of faculties, in particular visiting positions and fellowships, unclarity prevails (European Parliament 2016). Multiple hurdles taking the form of linguistic, administrative, legal, familial, and financial burdens are still in place and must be minimised and, if possible, abolished. These obstacles namely complicate the navigation through mobility opportunities, which hampers cross-border mobility and obstructs mutually enriching exchanges of knowledge and practices. On the contrary, mobility of the academic staff would create inter-university exchanges facilitating knowledge circulation and would improve their skillset and employability. It can establish sustainable partnerships among HEI and diminish a monocultural approach in certain educational strategies (Damus 2020). In doing so, the academic staff is exposed to different teaching and pedagogical techniques and educational systems while acquiring international experience.

However, the existing differences in quality education might lead to unequal receptors of staff members, reinforcing the ongoing quality differences. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to equally include all HEI in the mobility trajectory regardless of their location, ranking, or level of internationalisation. Consequently, every academic staff member should have the opportunity to go abroad for a certain period, irrespective of the HEI's financial or cultural resources, thus surpassing the privileged standpoints of certain HEI and staff members. Besides, mobilities must be seen as valuable and officially recognised through learning, training, and teaching agreements. Eventually, to offer everyone the opportunity to be mobile, a virtual mobility scheme enables academic staff members

experiencing difficulties in being physically mobile to still benefit from an international setting – in line with Erasmus+ Virtual Exchanges. Clearly, a streamlined mobility scheme between EU-LAC is desirable for the academic staff. Currently, the mobility of researchers between the EU and LAC is already a focal point of the Common Research Area (European Commission 2021c).

To enhance mobility prospects, the Platform would bundle the open positions in HEI in EU-LAC and disseminate open calls in a centralised place, including a referral link towards the original calls and the application procedures. These calls could use a standardised application scheme provided by the Platform to ease administrative burdens. This would make the mobility opportunities visible to a broader public. Since funding is often a prerequisite of mobility, the Platform would also entail links towards funding opportunities, in particular Erasmus+, Horizon 2020, and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. Resonating with Target 4.9 of SDG4, such funding should be opened to all EU and LAC nationals, as was done with the Erasmus+ programme to LAC via inter-institutional agreements with European HEI (European Commission 2015). However, the Erasmus+ mobility currently only provides a grant for 5 to 60 days for staff members (European Commission 2017). Nevertheless, to create an immersive environment in a foreign HEI, an extension of this period is desirable to the whole duration of a short mobility track. A symbiosis must be reached where the academic staff from the EU and LAC regions are eligible to be mobile and receive financial support for teaching or training at HEI located in these regions, fostering global dialogue and mutual respect. Additionally, a chat function incorporated into the Platform would familiarise the academic staff with one another's HEI, which would prove particularly interesting for those active in the same subject field. For example, this would allow them to exchange good practices and to lay a profound foundation and connection to start a mobility trajectory between HEI involved as well as the start of joint programmes, interest groups, *et cetera*.

Finally, to explain the genuine one-stop-shop character of this Platform, it could entail all relevant links to other EU and LAC websites and information services regarding cross-border mobility and job opportunities, such as EURAXESS, the European Labour Authority (ELA), National Contact Points (Agencies and Offices) and ALCUE NET (LAC and EU Network on Research and Innovation). This would ensure that the information is freely accessible, transparent, and regularly updated. For example, the ELA provides information about employment conditions and social security coordination in the EU with links to the national Member States. Since the applicable legislation might change due to mobilities, it is essential to clarify these aspects. A similar system must be established for LAC and incorporated into the Platform. Subsequently, the existing EURAXESS platform should be extended to LAC countries to kick off graduates' careers in both the EU and LAC. Currently, EURAXESS is also active in the LAC countries, facilitating this necessary transition (LAC NCP Network 2022).

2.3   FEASIBILITY AND SIMILAR PROJECTS

Whereas the Platform shows tremendous potential for quality education, some considerations concerning its feasibility are vital. Major steps have already been taken since the Platform would build upon existing frameworks and techniques. However, slight adaptations and implementations are still required. Generally, face-to-face education has been proven more effective than online and digital tools, as these do not, for example, convey non-cognitive skills (Benites and Enriqueta 2021). Nevertheless, the Platform could be an online addition to the academic staff's existing physical professional formation. This would enable them to access and consult the Platform everywhere, most likely at the premises of their HEI, in a library, or at home. Moreover, the online form would allow the information to be widespread at a relatively low cost, resembling EdTech and InTecEdu initiatives which offer study materials online in multiple languages and integrated technology and education. In a similar vein, the Platform should be made available in all EU-LAC languages, which could represent an arduous task. Another pitfall is that the set-up of the Platform could prove expensive. This poses challenges when taking into account the gradually decreasing public spending on education in LAC from 5,3% of the GDP in 2009 to 4,4% in 2020 (World Bank 2022). Also at the EU level, a downward trend can be identified regarding education expenditure, with 5,5% in 2009 to 5% of the GDP in 2020 (Eurostat 2022). After the set-up, however, the modules could easily be used for a certain period and updated accordingly. Besides these financial constraints, it would be a time-consuming project with mid to long-term outcomes. Nonetheless, quality education requires a continuous effort not limited to short-term objectives. The challenge lies within addressing the multifaceted nature of quality education, touching upon (inter)national elements such as the internationalisation and funding impediments, as well as infrastructural and pedagogical methods at the individual level. This plurality requires a holistic approach towards quality education.

Afterwards, the implementation and rollout in HEI, and the use by academic staff members, shall be voluntary and must therefore be incentivised. Take-up at the individual level would guarantee large-scale cooperation and would make the implementation more viable. Initially, a pilot project of this Digital Platform shall be launched to overhaul teething troubles. After its rollout, the Platform must be monitored, updated, and evaluated. To incentivise HEI, awards are granted to these HEI showing their commitment and engagement in quality education. Next, the academic staff would be more inclined to participate in such professional development activities when receiving some form of compensation, irrespective of whether these take a monetary form (OECD 2019; Gómez 2022). For example, certificates are issued to those successfully completing specific modules. Overall, administrative requirements related to the Platform must be kept to a minimum for HEI and the academic staff.

While the abovementioned considerations certainly add complexity, the Platform proposed in this essay is practical and workable. For instance, inspiration was taken from

the previously established 'Central Asia Education Platform' between the EU and five Central Asian countries (Dondi 2018). This regional project aimed to streamline the educational systems of the Central Asian countries to align better with the needs of a globalised world by exchanging good practices and other relevant information. Another similar initiative at the EU level is the Erasmus+ Teacher Academies, enabling the pooling of experts as well as training opportunities for professors.[9] It strives to create motivated and highly qualified staff members of HEI through knowledge sharing and mobility facilitation. However, the Academy is highly dependent on separate projects requiring funding. Conversely, the Platform proposed here is helpful for academic staff members in all HEI of EU-LAC and takes a permanent, self-standing form. Thus, it builds upon yet goes beyond already existing projects and frameworks. Moreover, the Platform would be a desirable step forward in the EU-LAC bi-regional cooperation. For example, it would align well with the recent ECALFOR project (Evaluation of Teacher Training in LAC and Europe. Quality Guarantee for Educational Degrees) related to capacity building in HEI. This project aims to create a transnational and harmonised model of teacher training and the exchange of pedagogical practices. Besides, EU-CELAC Action Plans promote joint ownership and mutual capacity building (European Parliament 2017). Finally, the Platform would contribute to the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as quality education (SDG4) serves as a leverage point in achieving other SDGs. For instance, it has a positive correlation with good health and social justice, as well as poverty and inequality eradication (Boeren 2019).

3   CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The presented analysis corroborates the conclusion that international and inter-institutional cooperation significantly ameliorates the future of millions of students in the EU and LAC. Therefore, this essay has explored the role of an EU-LAC Digital Platform through which the road towards achieving quality education would gain considerable momentum. By acknowledging the academic communities as valuable cornerstones of one's society who train future generations of leaders and policymakers, a new space for cooperation opens up in the educational field within the EU-LAC bi-regional partnership. The scope of the Platform would encompass pedagogical and managerial approaches focused on inclusion, diversity, and respect, as well as the development of linguistic skills. Next, the mobility pillar would strive to create clarity in the maze of mobility opportunities and the inherent financial and legal considerations to facilitate knowledge circulation. Clearly, quality education requires adequate teaching and learning methods that meet the needs of all learners taught by competent and motivated teachers in a stimulating and inclusive environment. The Platform should be designed as a one-stop-shop through a bottom-up approach in consultation with the academic staff, which eases administrative

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9   European Commission, Erasmus+ EU Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport, https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-2/teacher-academies.

hurdles to use this online tool. Both the advantages and drawbacks of launching the Platform are uncovered, with the potential to open up a range of opportunities to improve the quality of education. Eventually, the Platform would construct an attractive teaching and research area in the EU and LAC regions that facilitates better bi-regional cooperation by providing a space for dialogue and skills development.

Simultaneously, it is important to note that the Platform is not a silver bullet towards achieving SDG4, as quality education requires a holistic approach and is embedded in multiple external factors such as socio-demographic and political contexts. Nonetheless, the Platform would entail an enormous potential for future collaborations between EU-LAC regarding education, for example, by including the MAPEO Database[10] and the EU-LAC Digital Library[11]. Besides, it can serve as a broader information dissemination system as well as a (comparative) data collector through surveys of the academic staff. Consequently, the Platform pinpoints existing bottlenecks and good practices in the HEI landscape that steer policymakers' decision-making processes. Thus, the Platform would provide an all-rounded strategy for the academic staff to maximise the learning outcomes of students. Ultimately, it would deepen the bi-regional partnership and provide the necessary impetus towards a Common Area of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation between the EU-LAC characterised by quality education and responsive HEI.

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10   EU-LAC Foundation. https://intranet.eulacfoundation.org/en/search/mapeo.
11   EU-LAC Foundation. https://intranet.eulacfoundation.org/en/eu-lac-digital-library.

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KAREN MILENA PARRA GUERRA

3. EDUCATIONAL PROPOSALS FROM ABYA YALA FOR A TRANSFORMATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay highlights important aspects to advance in the transformation of education, especially environmental education. It shares educational and social proposals that emerged in Abya Yala, with a critical and transformative sense, and starting from this base it allows to talk about an education that involves knowledge and millenary practices in relation to the care of mother earth. It also highlights the need to allow the expansion of bi-regional alliances and cooperation for the transformation of the education sector, which adopts knowledge from the two regions (European Union - Latin America and the Caribbean) to expand knowledge, ensure equal access to education, learning from ancestral peoples and benefiting historically vulnerable populations. Along the same lines, the recognition of contexts that are not very visible, the validity of diverse experiences, accepting ancestral knowledge and dialoguing with critical scientific knowledge, allows the construction of an inclusive environmental education, with access to the regions of the European Union - Latin America and the Caribbean.

INTRODUCTION

I would like to begin this essay by pointing out that I write from a position of subalternity, that is, my academic place and knowledge traverse with my place of birth (Latin America – Colombia) and socioeconomic situation (of poor peasant family and violated by centuries of political and social violence), I write from the south that has built its own political and educational proposals from its history of colonisation and resistance, my knowledge has been built based on the reflection of my history, my life and my environment, this allows me to have a critical position on the issues that I am going to deal with in this text.

This essay is built from the proposal of Epistemic Thinking, introduced by Hugo Zemelman, that is, it is based on political, cultural and economic realities that traverse the subjects and from there one can "build a relationship of knowledge, which is the angle from which I begin to raise the problems that can be theorised." (Zemelman 2005: 70).

The above is necessary to say that epistemic thinking is a situated knowledge that allows us to think about the importance of environmental education that recognises ancestral knowledge and the careful ways of living with nature for the countries of the regions of the European Union (EU), Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), this will be my central theme, however, I will add aspects such as the quality of education, the policies and programmes that exist in these two regions around education and climate change, which I will take into account and make the text more enriching.

1.   WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TALK ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE?

At present we have begun to suffer the consequences of an economic order which has accelerated climate change throughout the planet; the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in its report "Climate Change and Land" ensures that:

> "Since the pre-industrial period, air temperature at the earth's surface has risen almost twice as high as the global average. Climate change, including increases in the frequency and intensity of extreme events, has had a negative impact on food security and terrestrial ecosystems and has contributed to desertification and land degradation in many regions." (IPCC 2020: 14)

It is further added that, in the period "from 1850-1900 to 2006-2015, the average air temperature at the earth's surface has increased by 1.53 °C (most likely in a range of 1.38 °C to 1.68 °C)" (IPCC 2020: 14). This increase in temperature has resulted in "heat waves in most terrestrial regions. The frequency and intensity of droughts have increased in some regions (including the Mediterranean, western Asia, many parts of South America, much of Africa, and northeast Asia.)" (IPCC 2020: 14). At the very moment I am writing this essay, Europe and China are facing an extreme heat wave, which has caused several rivers to dry up in different areas of the planet. The report adds that "The frequency and intensity of dust storms have increased in recent decades due to changes in land use and land cover and climate-related factors in many dryland areas, resulting in increased negative impacts on human health" (IPCC 2020: 14).

The arguments presented lead us to rethink the challenges and proposals of the education sector in the teaching of environmental education, it is important to adopt ways where care for other forms of life or natural inert beings prevail, and the delicate balance of their relationships, essential in the configuration of the landscape and the diversity that make up Mother Earth, Pachamama or Our Common Home: own denominations of native peoples of Abya Yala.[12]

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[12]   I wish to clarify the importance of the historical implications behind the nouns we use today. Abya Yala comes from the language of the Kuna people that inhabit the territory of Panama, it means "living land", "fertile land"

One of the actions to stop or counteract pollution and climate change is in the power of education, therefore, in the following section I will emphasise the gaps we find in education and the transformations that must be made.

2. TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR IN LAC AND EU COUNTRIES FOR ACCESS AND QUALITY IN EDUCATION

It is pertinent to recognise the points of "The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. An opportunity for Latin America and the Caribbean", in education issues the United Nations propose objectives so that access to education is "equal at all levels of education and vocational training for vulnerable people, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations" (UN 2018: 28), in addition to eliminating gender disparities, this means that women and men in rural and urban areas are guaranteed the right to education.

This objective has been truncated by the economic, political and social difficulties in the region. The governments of Latin America and the Caribbean have had a historical debt with different communities so that access to education at all levels is guaranteed to all, economic crises have intensified the problems and have been a cause for access to be poor, this has made governments and international organisations such as the OECD, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, among others, propose educational reforms in some LAC countries, considering a specific model of education from which all educational systems are measured, as the OECD says in its report entitled "The OECD's Work on Education and Skills":

> "... The OECD provides an overview of the state of education in more than 40 countries. This annual compendium of statistics covers the structure, financing, and performance of education systems, identifies people who participate in the system and receive education, and analyses the school environment." (OECD 2019: 7)

However, the experience has been demotivating for the ancestral, country-side, and popular communities of the countries where these bodies have interfered -as is the case in Colombia-, these international organisations have installed a dominant model of education and ignored the different Latin American contexts. By imposing a type of education that reproduces educational logics that serve capitalism, what they have achieved is the:

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or "mature land", many peoples and intellectuals, in resistance to the imposition of the conquerors, have adopted this name when referring to America. Therefore, from now on I will begin to refer to the American continent as Abya Yala.

"... installation of a dominant model that, combined with the dependence on foreign resources and the dramatic situation of foreign debt, have led Latin American countries to the growing and systemic loss of economic autonomy and political sovereignty, with all the consequences in the social field." (Soler, Martínez and Peña 2018: 29)

In addition, it has been a factor for the loss of autonomy in educational models, that is, here there are alternative educational and research proposals that have originated from a particular Latin American thought; they start from a history of colonisation and have been the result of centuries of resistance against the cancellation of knowledge and wisdom that eurocentric, civilisational and modernising thinking has achieved. To begin with, we could name Simón Rodríguez, who was the educator of the liberator Simón Bolívar, who, in the Republican era, questioned the educational model that had been imposed in Europe and proposed "an educational project that makes us Americans and not Europeans and a pedagogy that, in his words, "is for life" and allows us to be builders of this project" (Mejía 2020: 168).

Simón Rodríguez is one of many Latin American thinkers who have proposed their own approaches to education that respond to the context of the region, such as the Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Fals Borda 1999), the studies on Popular Education (PE) (Torres 2011), the community education and ethno-education. These educational proposals recognise and designate the importance of the own voice of the sectors[13] that have historically been excluded from Western academia and that, from traditional pedagogical paradigms, have not been recognised for their voice, history and experience in the construction of knowledge.

Here it must be said that, before the Europeans named "indigenous" the civilisations that inhabited the continent of Abya Yala, there were already great civilisations; in the territory we know today as Central America were the Mayans and Aztecs; in much of South America there were the Incas, Chibchas and Muiscas. Each of them had built advanced knowledge in some sciences. In the historical moment of colonisation and the process of evangelisation by the Catholic Church this knowledge was demonised; later with the imposition of the European schools, where priests and nuns were in charge, that cancelled them in an attempt to eliminate that knowledge considered inferior. In view of the discussion of valid and invalid knowledge Mejía emphasizes that:

"In classical science, verification and substantiation systems have criteria to guarantee the certification of knowledge: objectivity, quantification, universality, and its method. According to this, other knowledges are considered as of a lower level, epistemologically unfounded, so it is said that they would be the result of

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[13] Indigenous peoples of Abya Yala - indigenous communities, Afro-descendant communities, palenqueras, raizales, peasants, women and LGBTI sector.

beliefs, pre-scientific period, pre-modernity, pseudoscience, since they are not susceptible to be generated in systems of objectification and rigour in coherence with the criteria of classical science." (Mejia 2020: 62)

In this dynamic of invalidating knowledge, much of the ancestral knowledge was lost. However, today some peoples who have survived the extinction and invisibility of their knowledge, the dispossession of their rights and lands, still retain their knowledge and worldviews. As expressed in the song Latin America by Calle 13, referring to resistance to extinction, LAC is "A people without legs, but who walks."[14]

In this order of ideas, it is pertinent to name the fields of action and political debates (PAR, PE, community education and ethno-education) that have been developed in LAC to recognise knowledge and experiences that enrich research and education. These educational proposals emerge from popular, peasant and indigenous movements. The academic training of the people who are a part of organisational processes have stemmed from orality, resistance, and autonomy; they question modern paradigms and open space for the voices that inhabit the territories of LAC and claim ancestral values to be heard.

By including their own experiences and knowledge, equal access to education is ensured for historically vulnerable populations. I think it is important to highlight that this does not mean that these educational proposals are antagonistic or opposed to Western or traditional education, but that they provide tools so that ancestral knowledge is not cancelled and opens the field so that educational practices consider the other ways of discovering, learning and relating to the world.

Considering the above, the proposals for educational advances must take into account these other ways of inhabiting the world, the specific contexts of the global south, the relationship with their environment and their understanding of life. This is an invitation to reflect on new forms of teaching and learning that emerge from geographical sites, knowledge and worldview that are little recognised.

This own wisdom that has gained importance in Latin America and the Caribbean, has been made visible from community practices and social, popular and educational meetings where ancestral thinking and its ways of building knowledge are theorised, they render an account of the importance of listening and reading authors who write from the south and are traversed by a history that has made them invisible, silenced and marginalised them. This academic approach allows other regions to align with Latin American critical thought.

The initiatives and mechanisms of bi-regional cooperation have the power to strengthen the educational proposals that are formed in LAC, this bi-regional dialogue between the

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[14] Rene Pérez, Eduardo Cabra and Rafael Ignacio Arcaute. 2011. "Latinoamérica": https://youtu.be/DkFJE8ZdeG8 . Accessed on 7 September 2022.

countries of the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean opens the possibility of being able to approach the thought of the South to interpret it and dialogue with it. It could be a sustainable advance in the education sector, since the confluence of the theories of the critical movements of Latin America and education in the countries of the European Union have the potential for a deeper dialogue for the construction of knowledge and the development of a critical education, where certain knowledge is not imposed, but is built jointly from the dialogue of knowledge, differences and similarities in favour of a more just and equitable education.

Furthermore, advancing together allows the development of learning based on values from these two continents that serve throughout life and does not remain only at the level of classroom practices, but crosses the borders of the school and the institutions of formal education. This would also allow a good relationship of respect for different expressions and cooperation based on diversity. These reformulations are based on the recognition of other conceptual places and other ways of investigating that are mediated by a particular culture.

Next, I would like to delve into the issue of environmental education based on the theories that have been built in Latin America and the Caribbean. These theories recognise the contributions of ancestral knowledge and contrast it with the current ecological, political, and social situation.

3.   PROPOSALS TO BUILD AN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION FROM CARE

> *In our worldviews, we are beings born from the earth, water, and corn.*
> *We the Lenca people are the ancestral custodians of the rivers, also protected by the spirits of the girls who teach us that to give life in multiple ways for the defence of the rivers, is to give life for the good of the humanity and this planet.*
>
> *Berta Cáceres[15]*

It is important to clarify that the statements that are made in this essay in relation to the ways of life of ancestral communities have been built from listening, sharing and

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[15]   Berta Cáceres was an indigenous Honduran environmentalist and feminist leader. After actively opposing the construction of the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam on the Gualcarque River due to the damage that this work could cause to the environment, she was assassinated for defending her territory where the Lenca people live. According to the Honduran Sentencing Court the hydroelectric company had ties to the intellectual author of her murder. Her murder has resonated with social, peasant, indigenous and popular organisations in Latin America and the Caribbean, demonstrating the violation of fundamental rights of activists and peoples who oppose multinationals. Berta Cáceres's full speech at the Goldman Environmental Prize can be seen at: https://youtu.be/AR1kwx8boms. Accessed 17 February 2023

coexistence with various communities. Since the beginning of this essay, the purpose has been to bring one's own voice and knowledge that has historically been shared through conversation and listening to the word of older people. This reflection and writing is born from one's own experience with nature and participation in social organisations; from inhabiting, knowing and defending Muiscas territories; from the approach to the Muisca council of Zhuba; from the experience with the land, the moors, the wetlands, the lagoons and mountains; from embodying the pain of seeing how the national and local governments of Colombia cause harm to the wetlands and moors; in this essay I attempt to safekeep the conversations with my peasant family to bring the teachings of my grandmother and the words I have preserved from my mother.

I indicated at the very beginning of this essay why it was important to work and strengthen environmental education; here I would like to continue that discussion and develop it further. Currently, we are going through natural disasters caused by an economic system that disproportionately exploits the natural resources of the earth and generates an increase in temperature due to CO_2 emissions and high atmospheric levels due to the increase in the three main greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide). This is directly related to the large industries that base their production on fossil fuels (OMM 2021). This is just an outline that allows us to visualise the need to talk about caring for the earth, our common home.

As addressed in the previous section, it is important to recognise the Western scientific contributions and ancestral knowledge. I recall this point, since ancestral thought and the ways to relate to the earth are different from the one that now predominate, they are not based on exploitation, but on conservation and respect. Also, in the face of the consequences of global warming, scientists have warned of the importance of changing the human activities that have driven and accelerated anthropogenic climate change. The report "Climate Endgame: Exploring catastrophic climate change scenarios" points out not only the costs at the ecological level, but also at the social level:

> *"Extreme warming and consequent damage can significantly increase the projected social cost of carbon. Understanding the vulnerability and responses of human societies can inform policymaking and decision-making to prevent systemic crises. Key variable indicators can provide early warning signals." (Luke Kemp et al. 2022: 3)*

The report adds that the lack of serious ownership of potential catastrophes of anthropogenic climate change could trigger international conflicts, exacerbate, and spread future global pandemics, threaten food security and water.

Similarly, ancestral peoples have expressed their concern about this unsustainable model and, from their worldviews, relate to nature differently. We can begin by pointing out that the way in which they name the earth is in relation to the mother who provides life (mother earth – Pachamama) also from the analogy that we all share and have responsibility to take

care of the planet (common home), these modes of understanding invite us to live peacefully and carefully with mother earth.

In this sense, integrating other forms of relationship with the world into education is sustainable for the future of the planet and is an essential basis for the transformation of society; in relation to this Leonardo Boff mentions that:

> *"This care of the ecological niche will only be effective if there is a collective process of education and if an "exchange of knowledge" is carried out. The popular knowledge contained in the traditions of the elders, in the legends and in the stories of the Indians, blacks, mestizos and immigrants, of the first who lived there, must be complemented and contrasted with scientific critical knowledge. This knowledge discovers dimensions of local reality and is the bearer of truth and a profound meaning that must be deciphered and that everyone must incorporate. The result of all this is a deep dynamic harmony of the ecosystem, where living and inert beings, cultural and social institutions, all, in short, find their place, interact, welcome, complement each other and feel at home." (Boff 2002: 78)*

Recognising the care practices that have been subalternised is essential to develop lessons that invite us to live with nature in a different way, and, thus, unlearning the ways in which the modern system has been living with Mother Earth. It is essential to approach those forms where care and respect for the living prevail, it means that admitting and making visible the epistemic thoughts (Zemelman 2005), which inhabit the south and the jungle, can offer a new perspective for the future, which gives more importance to life and the balanced relationship with ecosystems over economic development and accelerated and absurd consumerism.

Although, at present consumption and economic activities have more interest on the part of society, environmental education allows us to have a more contemplative approach, where we can explore new meanings of life and critically observe the form of production of wealth (while the majority of the world's population live with the minimum or enough to have a life without luxuries but that allows them to survive in the face of hunger, these riches can only be enjoyed by a few, but the price of ecological devastation must be paid by all). The above resonates with the words of Boaventura de Sousa, capitalism has a cruel landscape and is "the scandalous concentration of wealth / extreme social inequality and the destruction of life on the planet / the imminent ecological catastrophe" (Sousa 2020: 37).

For this reason, an intersectional reading that includes an analysis of class, race, and gender is timely, it allows us a broader interpretation of society. At the same time, it is convenient to mention economic, educational and social aspects. Therefore, environmental education must keep in mind alternative educational proposals and social or community organisations that have integrated the human rights of the violated persons, so that they have a voice and are recognised as subjects with acting capacity. In the same way, it should

recognise the shortcomings of the hoarding economic model and insist on the rights of nature and their importance in the future for the maintenance of life.

The current crisis is traversed by neglect, indifference, individualism, the exaltation of private property and the capacity for consumption; it underestimates the capacity for solidarity and mutual care (Boff 2002). Therefore, education must emphasise and understand care as a cross-cutting foundation for teaching in all fields, but mainly in environmental education. With respect to this concept of care, Boff points out that "taking care of things implies having intimacy with them, feeling them inside, welcoming them, respecting them, giving them peace and rest. To care is to be in tune with them, to listen to their rhythm and to be in harmony with them" (Boff 2002: 78).

This can be an initiative to embrace the points of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development on promoting and protecting sustainable use in ecosystems: "Take urgent and significant action to reduce the degradation of natural habitats, halt biodiversity loss and, by 2020, protect and prevent the extinction of threatened species" and "enhance global support to efforts to combat poaching and trafficking of protected species, including by increasing the capacity of local communities to pursue sustainable livelihood opportunities" (UN 2018: 28). These two goals can have a direct link to education, as raising awareness among the majority of the population could be useful in counteracting the effects of climate change.

Appropriating ways of interacting with the world from the practices of care allows to have intimacy with nature and to relate consciously with the planet, to provide importance to the value it represents to maintain life, to recognise that it not only represents a utilitarian value to allow the life of human beings, as well as that everything that surrounds us has its own value. Planet Earth, in addition to the human being, gives life to many beings (animals, plants, microorganisms, etc.). The ancestral peoples know that the rivers, the mountains, the moon, the sun, everything that is part of nature has a spirit and gives balance to create life. These practices of care have kept them silent for centuries and their resistance to the destruction of mother earth has sustained their way of seeing nature as a being that is alive, deserves respect and care. In the face of these ways of relating to Mother Earth and preserving knowledge, the U'wa community highlights that:

> "For each ritual they have their ceremonies, their special songs, they invoke the God of water, the wind, nature itself.
>
> That is not written, we never write what we sing, that is learned orally, if the grandfather, the grandmother, or the mother is a singer that is learned down the line. From a very young age you refer to the songs, to the rituals that our

authorities perform and you learn by listening." (Community U'wa 2016; minute 33:05)[16]

To conclude this section, I wish to highlight the imminent concern for the ways in which we relate to Planet Earth and the little care it has received; now more than ever it deserves special care, not only human life is threatened but also the life of other species that allow balance. It is therefore imperative that education policies embrace contributions to the care of local LAC communities. Environmental care must be part of programmes and educational initiatives of bi-regional cooperation, it is imminent now if we want to prolong life on Planet Earth.

4.   FINAL NOTES

The local educational proposals of Latin America and the Caribbean mark changes and build new routes for these new times, provide alternatives to the hoarding and devastating system towards nature. "The processes of resistance have also led to influencing public policies, beginning to build not only a transformative action but also new emancipatory approaches." (Mejia 2020; 103). To generate structural changes in current education models, these approaches must be made visible with a critical sense, so it is important to create new forms of cooperation that transcend borders and have a dialogue on the differences in favour of a more sustainable and inclusive education.

Building bi-regional alliances that have constant dialogue is an exercise to advance in the transformations that the education sector needs, especially environmental education. TO include the experiences of violated, ancestral, peasant and popular communities from the practices of respect will enrich and provide equal access to education.

The importance of recognising the shared values and worldviews of the global south, especially Latin America and the Caribbean, must be present in the construction of public policies. The disputes that ethno-education, popular and community education have had must be taken into account to reconfigure the new knowledge of this era; in the same way, the efforts that critical sectors of LAC and EU have faced must be present in alliances with multilateral organisations.

Embracing the worldviews of indigenous peoples and local communities makes it possible to reconsider the logics of knowledge, that is, giving value to ancestral knowledge allows other ways of educating and doing science. Giving way to a metamorphosis in the

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[16]   To understand more about community worldviews U'wa, you can see: Indigenous Documentary U'wa Colombia | Guardians of Mother Earth. https://youtu.be/4yPkISU8k28. Access 17 February 2023.

construction of knowledge that takes into account the diverse social contexts can be enriching for new debates on transformative education and science with a critical sense.

In this way, through an inclusive and egalitarian education that involves new ways of educating, that involves the experiences of the subjects and care as a fundamental part to exist with our environment, so that we recognise the value of everything that surrounds us, it is favoured the responsibility of the care of our common home. The above could be considered as the cultivation of seeds for a new world. It would imply – despite the differences and diversities – a challenge for a more equitable and just society, an education that does not impose certain knowledge and ways of being in front of the world, rather, an education that listens to the voices that have historically been silenced and proposes that they are more accessible and egalitarian.

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