

'EU-LAC Knowledge Forum'

- Concept Note -

Organisation: EU-LAC International Foundation

Partners: Uruguayan International Cooperation Agency (AUCI), Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) – Uruguay

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Executive summary

The CELAC-EU Summit of Heads of State and Government, scheduled for 17-18 July 2023, will provide an opportunity to generate a high-level strategic dialogue on the challenges and opportunities for bi-regional cooperation on (higher) education and science, technology and innovation in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and the states of the European Union (EU). In the face of the pandemic-induced disruption in the classrooms of virtually all educational institutions, the digital and technological transformation, and the need to provide solutions to global challenges based on scientific evidence, it is of vital interest to agree on common strategies aimed at promoting access to quality education and enhancing cooperation in the field of science, technology and innovation.

Consequently, and in the framework of its mission to facilitate the exchange between governmental authorities and civil societies of the two regions (EU and LAC), the EU-LAC Foundation proposes to convene a **Knowledge Forum** as a space for deliberation that will bring together representatives of the student, academic and scientific communities, experts from international organisations specialised in the subject, and governmental representatives. Its purpose is to generate inputs to feed the agenda of the high authorities of the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean related to the Summit of Heads of State and Government in the field of access to knowledge, higher education, and science, technology, and innovation.

Introduction

The **EU-LAC Foundation** is an international intergovernmental body constituted by the states of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), of the European Union (EU) and the EU through its institutions. Its mandate is to work towards closer collaboration with its 61 members, to promote the bi-regional partnership and dialogue and to generate relevant inputs for intergovernmental processes. An essential part of this mission is to build bridges so as to increase mutual knowledge and promote dialogue on issues that are high on the agenda of the strategic partnership between the two regions. The Foundation also aims to achieve and offer new networking opportunities and to launch innovative initiatives at the bi-regional level. In this line, the EU-LAC Foundation seeks to foster international cooperation involving both institutional entities and the respective civil societies to jointly respond to current political, social, and economic challenges.

At a meeting held on the 27th of October 2022 in Buenos Aires, under the theme "Renewing the bi-regional partnership to strengthen peace and sustainable development", the Foreign Ministers of the European Union and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) stressed the importance of renewing the existing links between Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and the European Union (EU), based on "a prospective, substantive and positive agenda", focused on:

- inclusive, equitable and sustainable post-pandemic economic recovery;
- innovation, the fight against climate change, disaster risk management and the digital agenda;
- multilateralism, security and governance cooperation, and the promotion and protection of human rights.

In their speeches, Ministers also highlighted the role of scientific innovation in addressing these challenges and global transformations and its contribution to achieving sustainable development.¹

Based on a Bi-regional Road Map 2022-2023², it was agreed to organise a series of high-level meetings on shared thematic priorities, leading to an EU-CELAC Summit of Heads of State and Government in Brussels in the second half of 2023, during the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU, which would entail the relaunching of political dialogue at the highest level.

In their press release, EU and CELAC representatives stressed that this meeting and the renewed commitment would imply a turning point and the beginning of an in-depth review of relations between the two regions. From the perspective of the scientific and academic communities, this review seems eminently necessary, considering that the last formal bi-regional agreements - which include cooperation in the field of knowledge (education and training; higher education; science, technology, and innovation) - had been established almost eight years ago, at the last EU-CELAC Summit of Heads of State and Government held in Brussels on 10-11 June 2015. It is worth recalling that, in the **EU-CELAC "Action Plan 2015"**³, three out of the ten chapters aimed at developing and strengthening joint initiatives and instruments in the field of knowledge:

The chapter 1 "Science, research, innovation and technology" identifies as its main objective "to develop an 'EU-CELAC Knowledge Area'" by the following means:

- improving cooperation in research and innovation;
- strengthening scientific and technological capacities and infrastructures;
- enabling sustainable research, innovation, and knowledge sharing, taking into account the contribution of ancestral and traditional knowledge;
- boosting the use of new and existing technologies and the technology development and transfer underpinning sustainable socio-economic development; and

¹ See: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/59827/celac-eu-fmm-joint-communicue.pdf>

² See: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/59837/celac-ue-roadmap-2022-2023-final.pdf>

³ See: <https://intranet.eulacfoundation.org/en/system/files/EU-CELAC%20action%20plan.pdf>

- v) *fostering cooperation between both regions as regards the digital economy and the reduction of the digital divide for improving competitiveness while making social inclusion a cross-cutting issue."*

With **Chapter 5 “Education and employment to promote social inclusion and cohesion”** the Heads of State and Government set themselves objectives such as:

“promote education, life-long learning and training (including technical and vocational education and training TVET) with a view to develop, in both regions, skills for employment, promote decent and dignified job creation”, including “job opportunities, in particular for women and young people, as well as for other vulnerable groups and” thus contributing to increased social inclusion and cohesion.

Last, but not least, it was accorded, with **Chapter 9 “Higher education”**:

“to give a new impetus to EU-CELAC cooperation in higher education and to support inclusive development of higher education sector, including equitable access and quality, by facilitating the sharing of knowledge and technology transfers through institutional strengthening, capacity building actions and mobility of students, researchers, experts, and academic and administrative staff. In addition, it will promote higher education and life-long learning and inclusive education, taking into account the needs of young population and persons with disabilities, according to the specificities, priorities, development policies and academic systems in each country”.

The reading of these objectives illustrates the need to assess the extent to which the proposed lines of action have been promoted, strengthened, and resourced, based on bi-regional, regional, and national policies, programmes, and instruments. To mention some of the lines of action highlighted in the body of those chapters, one could indicate, for example, the **'EU-LAC Joint Initiative for Research and Innovation'**; exchanges between higher education institutions, research networks and other private and public sector institutions; the **promotion of quality and equal access to education, lifelong learning, vocational education and training**, as well as greater regional integration in this area; the promotion of mobility and exchanges of students, teachers and staff of higher education institutions; plans to reduce school drop-out rates and the strengthening of links between basic, vocational and higher education; **the development of a future Higher Education Area**, based on various aspects such as bilateral agreements for the **recognition of degrees and curricula and joint programmes** at master and doctoral levels between the two regions. It was also proposed to generate scientific higher education programmes and meetings to increase joint scientific and research initiatives and to support projects that **promote gender equality in science and research**. To this end, the important **role of bi-regional dialogue between universities and other higher education institutions** was recognised, especially within the framework of initiatives such as the **'Academic Summits'** and the **'Summit of Council of Rectors'**, in coordination with central institutions such as the ministries in charge of higher education and their respective networks.

On the other hand, an assessment of the progress and challenges in bi-regional cooperation, in the field of knowledge should also consider the changes that have occurred at the global international level over the past years. To mention just a few

relevant aspects that affected the two regions as a whole, with repercussions on education, higher education and training, the following could be mentioned:

A few months after the EU-CELAC Summit in Brussels in September 2015, the Heads of State and Government of 193 member countries of the United Nations adopted **the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, with Goal 4 (Quality Education) and very successful targets in terms of universal access to equitable and quality education, as well as Goal 17 which entails the creation of multi-stakeholder partnerships, policy coherence, capacity building and mobilisation of more resources to achieve the SDGs as a whole. Here it seems important to note that most educational and university spaces in our regions have understood their co-responsibility in the implementation of the SDGs, both within their institutions and in their environments. At the same time, it is necessary to underline the gender inequalities that remain a feature of some educational, research and technical training spaces, and at the level of the management of these institutions.

The **Paris Agreement**, adopted by 196 countries at COP21 in December 2015, which aims to limit global warming by 1.5 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels, was formulated in response to the increasingly severe effects of climate change at the global level, and in an extreme form in some regions with greater exposure to excessive heat, floods, etc., causing significant environmental, social, and economic losses. Here, it is worth noting that decision-making on the measures to be adopted to face this global challenge depends, to a large extent, on scientific evidence, analyses, scenarios, and recommendations.

The recent classification - based on metrics such as GDP per capita - of most LAC countries as lower-middle or upper-middle income countries, contrasted by the continuing high levels of poverty and inequality in the region, gave impetus to a fruitful dialogue on **"development in transition"** between institutions from both regions such as the European Commission, ECLAC, the OECD, etc., and stimulated reflections on innovative tools for development cooperation, some of which rely on multi-stakeholder and inter-regional partnerships, and also science diplomacy, all united by the interest of strengthening countries' capacities and articulating mechanisms at the science-policy interface to find solutions to shared development challenges and leave no one behind.

The **Covid-19 pandemic** has evoked an unprecedented health crisis and highlighted the dependence of our countries on the efficient and supportive production, provision and distribution of essential goods and services - such as vaccines - at the global level. In terms of deaths and infections linked to the coronavirus, LAC has been one of the most affected regions; at the same time, the region faced the worst contraction of gross domestic product since 1946.⁴ Despite policies, mechanisms and aid programmes at international, bi-regional, regional, and national levels, the pandemic exacerbated structural inequalities in our societies and exposed weaknesses in health and social protection systems and the education and labour sectors. In education, significant periods of learning loss were observed at all levels of education and training, and those who did not return to school risk losing employment opportunities and income throughout their lives. A sustainable and

⁴ See: <https://news.un.org/es/story/2021/03/1489112> and <https://www.cepal.org/es/publicaciones/46501-balance-preliminar-economias-america-latina-caribe-2020>

equitable recovery therefore requires re-enrolment and retention programmes, catch-up learning, prioritisation of key skills to close knowledge gaps, and transition from secondary to technical and tertiary education.

The pandemic also accelerated **digital and technological transformation**, not only in educational institutions, but in various areas that affect people's lives. Technological advances have brought with them a host of useful opportunities and tools, including in terms of open access to information, knowledge transfer and scientific collaboration. At the same time, technological advances tend to be several steps ahead of our understanding of their impact, and therefore also of their regulation, to prevent, for example, violations of rights of individuals. The challenge of creating decent, human-centred teaching, learning, and working spaces is growing as automation, algorithms, or Artificial Intelligence reshape our relationships. In this regard, the recently approved **UNESCO Recommendations on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence and on Open Science** can be seen as forward-looking multilateral normative instruments. It is also important to alert to the need to expand policies and programmes to address digital divides and develop connectivity infrastructures from which all members of our societies can benefit, regardless of their geographical location, income level, etc.

The reflections on the future of education generated at **UNESCO's World Higher Education Conference** (May 2022) and the **United Nations Transforming Education Summit** (September 2022) shed new light on the need to make the **universal right to quality education for all children, youth, and adults a reality**. Similarly, these reflections indicate that enhancing opportunities and programmes for acquiring **key competencies** throughout life, and **cooperation in science, technology, and innovation**, are indispensable tools to address global challenges, build peace and achieve the SDGs.

Faced with some of these more recent scenarios and challenges, **the EU and LAC have recently established a variety of actions and programmes that will strengthen and modify their forms of interrelation**. Within the field of knowledge, it is worth highlighting the opportunities for joint research that the **BELLA project**⁵ aims to generate with a new submarine fibre optic cable; the establishment in the LAC region of headquarters for the use of satellite images from the **Copernicus programme**⁶; and the connections that can be generated with the **Horizon Europe Programme**⁷, among others.

In addition, the **EU-LAC Digital Alliance** which will pave the way forward in the innovation and digitisation sector in the next decade, was launched on March 14th, 2023⁸. The Alliance's aim is to foster the development of secure, resilient and human-centric digital infrastructures on the basis of a values-based framework, ensuring a democratic and transparent enabling environment and putting a strong emphasis on privacy and digital rights. It is the first intercontinental digital partnership agreed between both regions under

⁵ See: <https://bella-programme.eu/index.php/en/>

⁶ See: <https://www.copernicus.eu/en>

⁷ See: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en

⁸ See: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_1598

the **Global Gateway investment strategy**⁹, the EU's initiative to foster sustainable connections with partner countries.

The formulation of the bi-regional agenda, the implementation of initiatives, programmes, and policies, as well as the high-level meetings, have been closely and critically accompanied by various actors working in the educational, academic, and scientific fields in both regions. It is these actors - networks, associations, organisations, university authorities - who have represented and articulated the voices of students, educational, academic, scientific, and technical training institutions, expressing their experiences from the diverse realities and formulating proposals to be taken into consideration by policy makers. At the same time, through their exchanges, projects and initiatives, these actors on both sides of the Atlantic have formed the social fabric of bi-regional relations in which common aspirations and interests in (higher) education and science materialise.

General Objective

Considering the mandate of the EU-LAC Foundation to facilitate the active participation of the societies of the 60 countries that constitute the EU-CELAC Bi-regional Partnership, and recognising the fundamental role of civil society actors, it is proposed to carry out the present Knowledge Forum, with the aim of generating inputs for the adoption of common lines of governmental public policies, as well as the conduct of academic actors to improve the link between the societies of both regions in the fields of Higher Education, exchange of scientific knowledge and access in a framework sustained by logics of social cohesion and inspired by the SDGs.

Specific Objective

More specifically, this Knowledge Forum is convened with the following objectives in mind:

- Promote an exchange on progress and achievements in policies, mechanisms, and programmes to foster cooperation between the two regions in the areas of (higher) education, science, technology, and innovation;
- Facilitate joint analysis of bottlenecks and current challenges in advancing (higher) education, science, technology, and innovation issues;
- Stimulate the formulation of concrete proposals to be taken into consideration by decision-makers in both regions, and by the authorities of educational, scientific, and higher education institutions, particularly with a view to supporting information for the EU-CELAC Summit of Heads of State and Government in July 2023;
- Provide a space to articulate sub-regional, regional, and bi-regional scientific initiatives and cooperation and thus enhance their potential impact.

Methodology

The Knowledge Forum will be implemented in a hybrid format - face-to-face and virtual - in cooperation with AECID's Training Centre in Montevideo, Uruguay.

⁹ See: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en

The structure of the Forum will include an opening session, keynote speeches by experts to inspire and guide the collective deliberations, and workshop-style work in three thematic groups, in which invited guests will openly articulate on their ideas and experiences and share their inputs for the dialogue. The results of the group work will be presented and articulated in a plenary session, and the Forum will end with a closing session. The topics to be addressed in the three working groups will be as follows:

Working Group 1: Cooperation in science, technology, and innovation

- Research infrastructures
- Enabling environments for innovation
- Technology transfer
- Open Science / Open Access Policies
- Role of research institutions to generate the technical and scientific knowledge and expertise needed to implement EU' Global Gateway investment agenda

Working Group 2: Towards a Common Area of Higher Education

- Mobility of students, academics, and administrative staff
- Recognition of degrees and curricula
- Accreditation of higher education institutions and programmes
- Development of joint programmes (undergraduate, postgraduate, doctoral...)
- Internationalisation of university systems (management, curricula, teaching, research, etc.).

Working Group 3: Closing Gaps in Access, Equity, Quality and Skills

- Equal access to (higher) education
- Investing in people - youth, women, migrants, adults, people with disabilities (to foster social cohesion and employability)
- Closing geographic gaps in education and science (rural areas / urban centres)
- Transformation of teaching and learning to address contemporary and future challenges (digitalisation, creative and critical thinking, soft skills...).

The thematic groups will work in parallel over the course of a day and a half and will be divided internally between a group of people who physically attend the Forum in Montevideo, and another group that attends the event virtually. Each working group will have moderators who will facilitate the dialogue based on interactive dynamics and guiding questions. Each group will be supported by rapporteurs who will synthesise the dialogue and the results of the deliberations and present them in a plenary session.

The group work will take place in three sessions, and in each session, participants will openly discuss their focused topic against the background of the following guiding questions:

- (1) **Stocktaking and good practices:** *What have been the major advances in cooperation between the two regions in the specific thematic area? What policies,*

*programmes, initiatives, and practices have generated relevant results, and why?
What are the key lessons learned?*

- (2) **Current challenges:** *What are currently the greatest challenges and bottlenecks to deepening cooperation in this area? What are they due to? And what would be the key factors to overcome these obstacles and generate lines of cooperation with greater impact?*
- (3) **Common interests and recommendations:** *What suggestions and recommendations should be considered by policy makers in both regions to address the challenges identified? What existing policies, programmes and initiatives should be strengthened, and what other instruments could be developed in the short and medium term to achieve greater convergence of efforts and a more efficient use of the resources invested? How could the initiatives and good practices generated in our regions be better articulated?*

Participation in the Forum

To achieve the aims of this forum, representatives of initiatives, networks, associations, students, educational, academic, university and scientific organisations from both regions will be invited, following a mixed approach:

- extension of invitations to experts and representatives of organisations and networks with a recognised track record in the field;
- selection of representatives of organisations and networks who expressed their interest in participating through an open call widely disseminated in both regions.

It is estimated that a limited group of approx. 30-35 people may be invited to participate in person at the Forum in Montevideo.

A larger group of approx. 65-70 people will be able to attend the Forum virtually, through a virtual platform.

In addition, networks, organisations and experts in the subject matter will be able to submit their input to the dialogue through an online expert survey, to be taken into account in the drafting of the final document.

This Forum aims to involve in the dialogue representatives of student and alumni initiatives, as well as networks, associations, organisations, and foundations working in education, academia, universities, and science in the countries of the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean.

The evaluation of expressions of interest for in-person participation in the Knowledge Forum will be carried out by an internal evaluation committee of the EU-LAC Foundation, taking into consideration the following criteria, among others:

- expertise and competence in the thematic area;
- geographical representativeness of both regions;
- gender;
- age (young people and seniors).



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Expected results

- Open and constructive exchange promoted between representatives of the educational, academic, and scientific communities of LAC and the EU on the progress, challenges, and opportunities of cooperation in (higher) education, science, technology, and innovation;
- Articulation between sub-regional, regional, and bi-regional initiatives focused on educational, academic, and scientific cooperation;
- Elaboration of a document synthesising the deliberations and proposals to be considered as a contribution to the bi-regional agenda and, particularly, the EU-CELAC Summit of Heads of State and Government in July 2023.

Languages

Two languages will be used at the Forum - Spanish and English; simultaneous interpretation will be provided - if necessary - to facilitate the dialogue.



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