



“Higher education: a global process as a bi-regional key”

Adrián Bonilla

Executive Director Designate of the EU-LAC Foundation

The intention of this text is to set out some central themes for an informed discussion leading to the production of policies aimed at reinforcing the capacity and efficiency of inter-regional cooperation in Higher Education, especially in the difficult circumstances surrounding the provision of resources as a result of the Pandemic currently facing the world.

The first factor to take into consideration in the area of Higher Education involves seeing this activity as a global process. The development of society across the world over the last thirty years has been characterised by the multiplication of inter-connections which has at the same time made it possible to construct a technology enabling scientific and academic communities to access knowledge on a global scale. Never before has humanity known such possibilities for exchanging information, discussing scientific trials, and collectively producing new knowledge.

This global process for producing knowledge and technology has however also revealed the existence of certain asymmetries and divides seen not only in the domestic sphere, especially in societies with fewer economic resources, but also at world-wide level. The globalization of knowledge has seen the simultaneous emergence of a vast number of networks, but also of policies, frameworks, norms, restrictions and limitations aimed at regulating its dissemination. Seen from this perspective, the global process of knowledge generation is, like any other social process, an area of creativity but also of diversity of approaches and ways of envisaging how it is institutionalised. In this sense Higher Education is indeed an institutional pro-

cess regulating access to knowledge and its distribution and production. This is a social, political and economic reality.

Generating contemporary scientific knowledge is a collaborative practice. The image of the scientist or inventor working alone in their laboratory, which illustrated the way knowledge production was thought of in the Modern Age, and encompassed the idea of the individual at the centre of the creative process, gradually faded in the second half of the twentieth century. In contemporary societies the idea of scientific development being an individual process is inconceivable, as it springs from a dynamic of collective management that is profoundly social. This idea, now conventional wisdom, can help us understand that the localisation in space of knowledge production is also challenged by the fact that scientific communities are now essentially transnational in the process of knowledge production.

There is no debate in Life Sciences, for example, that is not known about by communities in both North and South, in both the Eastern and the Western world. The idea of “national” science is increasingly tenuous. The discovery of genetic resources by scientists in the Andean countries has an immediate impact on Europe, the United States, China and Australia. There is no scientific discovery today that is not based on literature read and reproduced globally. Differences, asymmetries and varying levels of development in different national societies are essentially to do with the national resources available to their scientific communities and not their capacity to access concepts and methods.



Higher Education is probably the most important conventional resource available to all societies for the distribution of scientific knowledge. Just as the production of this knowledge is global, so also is the management of Higher Education. This premise is the basic foundation for international cooperation at the beginning of the third decade of the century. Seeing Higher Education as a shared reality, a transnational process, a social and public asset which, although it may be geo-referenced, is constructed simultaneously all over the world, opens up the possibility of defining cooperative potential, broadening the agenda to matters that go beyond the transference of resources.

It is, however, important to identify priorities that support the needs and interests of societies. Higher Education cannot become detached from the needs of real people in those societies. The requirements of middle-income countries are not the same, in reality, as those of societies with different needs; hence it is inevitable that consideration be given to the concept of relevance: the capacity of Higher Education and its processes to meet the needs of people. Relevance helps identify diversity, but is also provides a complex approach to the concept of quality.

One of the consequences of global processes of knowledge production and the regimentation of Higher Education has been the generation of standards of evaluation that are indiscriminately applied to all processes, regardless of the needs of their societies. This is particularly obvious in the construction of indicators and global rankings. Although these instruments may be useful, they inevitably provide only a partial picture. A Latin American or Caribbean university, with scarce resources, has to process issues of knowledge management, but also of inclusion, and it has to respond to the societies that enable it to exist through their contributions. The concept of quality now includes issues of teaching, the qualifications of the teaching staff, the impact of their publications, of course, but also the provision of access and the production of technologies to tackle the challenges of populations who still need their basic needs to be met. This inevitably forms part of the process for constructing agendas for cooperation. The first challenge might be to think of appropriate ways to establish complex quality standards, appropriate both for social requirements and at the same time global.

Bi-regional cooperation requires taking time to reflect on various other matters, so that the historical interchange between the nations of both continents can be more efficient. Some of the challenges posed by this discussion may focus on two major areas of action, by way of example, which is not to exclude others, many of which have been worked on in this bi-regional cooperation.

In the first place, we should think of how to promote, broaden and construct bi-regional collective spaces for knowledge production. Life Sciences, Applied and abstract Sciences, Social Sciences, for example, are meeting places that already exist. Identifying and enhancing these are one possibility that can be used with resources generated in societies on both sides of the Ocean.

Secondly, we must imagine how to construct alternative spaces so that other stakeholders, in addition to governments, can articulate their requirements in the areas of Higher Education and Research. These might include small and medium enterprises, communities, and local government. We could, for example, think of how to generate banks of educational and research programmes that could be of interest to programmes already being implemented but which would require innovation from universities and research centres.

Finally, we should add the need to think of how to balance the asymmetries produced not only by differences in access to resources but also by the logic of applying global regimentation to very heterogeneous realities.

Cooperative agendas and issues in Higher Education and scientific Research are by definition always under discussion. These ideas are part of this process that is fortunately always being debated, but the purpose is to seek agendas that enable interchanges to be localised better.