



“New Approaches to EU-LAC Cooperation in Higher Education: EU-LAC Focus’ and OBREAL-Global Observatory’s contributions”.

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EULAC Focus, a Horizon 2020 project funded by the European Union⁶, submitted its Action Plan for EU-LAC relations at the end of 2019. It includes a set of proposed strategies, qualified as “ambitiously modest” in order to emphasize its two main parameters: accepting all the restrictions and constraints that exist (so: “modest”) but intending to really contribute to the strengthening and improvement of EU – LAC relations by leading to “actions” and not simply to “words” (so: “ambitious”).

I’ll summarize four of them that concern specifically the area of Higher Education (HE):

Addressing through their sub-regional associations of Universities the very difficult problem faced by most states in the Caribbean and Central America in order to participate in EU (and other international) programmes: The limited availability of technical expertise and the limited capacity of government administrative structures.

The required capacity building could have much more impact and become more effective by using, as sub-regional partners, associations of Universities that are well rooted in the reality of the sub-regions and already possess a considerable capacity, instead of individual universities or campuses: For Central America, the Consejo Superior Universitario Centroamericano (CSUCA); for the Caribbean, the University of the West Indies as a whole (not its individual campuses) and Universities Caribbean, an association created by transformation of the former

UNICA (Association of Caribbean Universities and Research Institutes) that broadens the scope of Caribbean cooperation and integration in Higher Education and Research.

Clustering projects. Achieving real impact and sustainability in sectors so highly regulated, and with so many powerful entrenched corporatist interests, as HE is impossible for one specific project. Only the combination of the outcomes of a group of them makes it possible and allows prior projects to feed into later ones and achieve sustainability. Clustering of projects is an absolute must, which can be carried out through different criteria:

- Geographical, by country or sub-region.
- Thematic: In terms of specific content or in terms of policy areas.
- Across different EU policies and programmes.

Clustering cannot be left to the projects themselves, following a bottom-up approach, because, very often, consortia (and professional practices underlying them) oppose any sharing of the “ownership” of their project and of their results. It requires a promotion by DG EAC and the EACEA, perfectly possible without impinging in the autonomy of each individual project.

Creating permanent bi-regional platforms or giving continuity or reviving former ones. These platforms should play an active role in the implementation of the Clustering Strategy mentioned in the previous point. In the specific area of HE, EULAC Focus has already collaborated actively with the EU-LAC Foundation in the promotion of such

⁶ <http://eulac-focus.net/>



platforms and their use as clustering instruments: Firstly, in the promotion of the *Cumbre Académica y del Conocimiento* (October 2017 in San Salvador), which drew together two separate and competing similar initiatives; secondly, in the discussion and elaboration of the Matriz de objetivos y líneas estratégicas para la construcción del Espacio Común de Educación Superior EU-LAC, an instrument for analysis and policy design that, furthermore, is currently the only common forum of dialogue between all initiatives on EU – LAC cooperation in HE. This seems really promising.

Learning from other bi-regional contexts. In particular from the Africa-EU Partnership (and its pillar “Investing in People”, which covers Higher Education) and the EU relations with neighbouring countries, where a Network of Higher Education Reform Experts (HEREs) has been set up thanks to a very cost-efficient services contract.

OBREAL has in the past actively participated in bi-regional projects led by the European University Association (EUA). In the last few years, he has contributed to the activities of EU-LAC Focus and the EU-LAC Foundation, in particular in the 2017 Cumbre in San Salvador, as well as in the Matriz exercise. The modification of its Statutes in November 2017 broadened its geographical scope (becoming OBREAL – GLOBAL OBSERVATORY), allowing it to propose a new complementary dimension to EU – LAC relations in HE: the development of a triangular/North-South-South set of relations (as envisaged, furthermore, in the new approach to development put forward in September 2018 by the joint CEPAL/ECLAC – OECD – EC/ DG DEVCO reference document)⁷. In this direction, OBREAL – GLOBAL OBSERVATORY, which is now leading one of the EU flagship projects on HE in the framework of the Africa – EU Partnership (HAQAA-2), is promoting an Indian Chapter with a significant representation of the complex Indian HE constellation and setting a permanent office in Oman hosted by one of its members (the Middle East College) in order to bridge Africa and India. The contacts with Indian institutions and continental and regional associations of Universities in Africa, as well as with the main Latin American associations, prove that

there is a strong interest in this triangular North-South-South approach. The European Commission and the EU-LAC Foundation could take a leading role in its implementation.

⁷ <https://www.cepal.org/en/publications/44002-emerging-challenges-and-shifting-paradigms-new-perspectives-international>