

The Common Higher Education Area in the Strategic Association between Latin America, the Caribbean and the European Union

by Héctor Casanueva*

In 1999, following on from two decades of unstructured relations between the regions, relations which have been dynamic in terms of cooperation and political dialogue at different levels and in different sectors, the heads of state and government of the European Community and Latin America and the Caribbean, meeting in Rio de Janeiro in what was the First Bi-regional Summit, formally commenced what was called a 'bi-regional strategic association', based on three pillars: political dialogue, commerce and cooperation.

It was agreed that the process of association would take place through association agreements between countries and sub-regions, and would be promoted systematically via 'bi-regional summits' at the level of heads of state and government every two or three years. This objective has been realized fully, seven summits having been held since then, and the two regions have now developed a significant network of agreements. The EU is the principal investor, the main funder of cooperation and the second most important trading partner of Latin America, and there exists a fluid political dialogue at the level of governments and parliaments.

From the start, in Rio de Janeiro, central importance was placed on education, science and technology, and on university cooperation as an objective to be realized. In 2000, the education ministers focused on these ideas, and in the final declaration of the Madrid Summit of 2002, in Point 30, there is a statement concerning the creation of a European Union-Latin America and the Caribbean Common Area of Higher Education.

Each of the seven official summit meetings has reiterated the priority it accords to education in general, and to higher education in particular. In the Action Plans guidelines have been set out for promoting dialogue between academic authorities and institutions, and university associations and networks, and the progress achieved through programmes such as Alfa, Alban Erasmus and the participation of Latin American countries in the Framework Programmes for Science and Technology has been recognised, as well as the creation in 2010 of the Joint Initiative on Research and Innovation.

It was within this framework that a group of universities from both regions decided to bring to fruition the First LAC-EU Academic Summit in Santiago, January 2013, on the occasion of the First CELAC-EU Summit and the Seventh EU-LAC Summit. This would be similar to the complementary sectoral summits which had been taking place involving employers, trade unions and NGOs, and which were part of the very process of strategic association itself, with the aim of bringing together a broad spectrum of universities, research centres, university authorities, and academic networks and groupings from both regions. This was incorporated into the business of the summit of CELAC-EU heads of state by the official organisers, and became part of the prior agenda and was later incorporated also into the final Declaration of the heads of state and government (Point 29).

Initiated by Benita Ferrero-Waldner, President of EULAC, and by Alicia Bárcena of CEPAL, this agenda was discussed by the more than 200 universities and 600 academic and teaching authorities of the EU and Latin America, with 13 international organisations, during two days, focusing on the following themes: Reality and perspectives of the Strategic Association of Latin America and the Caribbean and the European Union; the development of a Euro-Latin American higher education area; cooperation in science, technology, research and innovation and the Horizon 2020 Programme; effective association between the academic world and the world of public policy; university-enterprise links for the promotion of professional training, innovation and technology transfer.

The conclusions, and especially the recommendations and proposals that emerged from the First Academic Summit were communicated in the Santiago Declaration, and were formally submitted to the Ministers for External Relations of the 60 countries participating in the official Summit, at a special event held at the end of the meetings.

The proposals were grouped into four main areas, which constitute an ambitious programme: 1. To develop the Euro-Latin American area for higher education, science and technology and innovation, creating the regulatory and financial conditions that are necessary. 2. To reinforce the integration of the higher education systems, through, among other measures, a future system of common accreditation; the coordination of systems of validation of studies, recognition of qualifications, both undergraduate and postgraduate; a 'Common LAC-EU Academic Area' certification, aimed at adding value to co-qualifications and joint Euro-Latin American qualifications at master and doctoral level, based on a criterion of excellence. 3. To promote the integration of the systems of scientific research and innovation, through cross-disciplinary bi-regional programmes; participation in Horizon 2020 and in the Joint Initiative for Research and Innovation; and 4. To

further develop collaboration between higher education institutions and their relationships with society and the productive sector.

The First Academic Summit highlighted an important omission, in terms of the absence of the academic community from the process of LAC-EU strategic association. It opened up a new path, and took a first step, which will continue with the Second Summit which is due to take place in Brussels in 2015. In preparation for that Summit, a meeting was held in May in Bucharest with more than 60 universities from the two regions, and a second meeting will take place in November in Guadalajara, Mexico. At that summit, proposals for concrete actions will be debated before being submitted to the heads of state in Brussels, since the creation of a common bi-regional area requires, on the one hand, that there be a sound base within the university institutions themselves and within their agreements and networks, but also requires the existence of treaties, norms and regulations which are dependent on the states themselves. It also requires that universities from both regions, with their networks and associations, should demonstrate their convergence and unity in order to ensure they have an influential voice within the various states. This is a long road, but as ever, it begins with the taking of one step.

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