



The Second Academic Summit: On Injecting Substance into the Bi-regional Association

*by Laurence Whitehead**

The Bi-Regional Summit process linking the EU to Latin America and the Caribbean has been in operation since 1999, but it was not until January 2013 that the first Academic Summit was held. In the ensuing two and a half years considerable energy has been devoted to strengthening and deepening the higher education component of the relationship. The EU-LAC Foundation as entity responsible for supporting the bi-regional cooperation towards the establishment of a common space in higher education, and a Permanent Academic Forum has been created to identify priorities and develop strategies in fulfillment of the Santiago Summit mandate. The culmination of these efforts will be on display at the forthcoming Bi-Regional Summit to be held in Brussels in June 2015. The state level meeting of the 61 participating members will be preceded by a second successive Academic Summit, together with a Business Sector counterpart, and equivalent events for mayors, legislators, and civil society representatives.

To justify all this expensive endeavor it is essential that the participants produce specific, practical, and deliverable outputs that can set in train cumulative sequences of productive collaboration and innovation across the two large regions. The Higher Education side of this link up has particularly promising potential, given the salience and institutional rootedness of universities on both sides of the Atlantic; the evident benefits all could derive from the right kind of accelerated convergence between them; and the intense pressure they are all under from accelerated technical change and the massification of the knowledge revolution, not only in these two regions but indeed in the world as a whole. At the same time, there are also many huge barriers to progress and some obvious pitfalls. The time and resources available to capitalize on this promising opportunity are extremely constrained, so success requires great clarity of purpose and a well thought out game plan.

As the sole participant from a UK university (Oxford) in some of the crucial preparatory stages, and as a co-chair of one of the panels at the Brussels Academic Summit (the one on links between academia and public policy) I have been privileged to witness, and even in small measure to contribute to, the between-summits deliberations. What follows are just personal reflections and suggestions, not any official statements. Ever since I represented Oxford at the Leiden Rectors meeting of 2006, it has seemed to me vital to identify a limited set of high priority themes and study areas where the two sides have most to learn from each other, and the best chance of contributing to the



broader objectives of the bi-regional dialogue. My personal suggestions have included climate change (e.g. Amazonian expertise on deforestation and in consequences is of the highest caliber, and can work productively with European counterpart scholars); medical and public health collaboration; and comparative experiences of regional integration, including physical infrastructure as well as economic and political institution building. Others thinking along similar lines have singled out a number of additional parallel themes- in language and culture; human rights; and so forth. In reality there is nor shortage of good options, but the key is to start with a small number of very well chosen initiatives that can serve as pilot studies. Once a few tangible successes have been delivered the desire to follow suit will cascade. But it is not enough to highlight excellent areas for joint work. It is equally essential to organize the bi-regional teamwork in the most effective manner, and to ensure timely and efficient completion of projects, and wide dissemination of successful outcomes. In my opinion this requires a “bottom up” as opposed to a “top down” system of enlisting participation. Obviously there would need to be a highly trusted mechanism of evaluation, but those who came forward with the best proposals (and who identified the most suitable counterparts from the other region) should be free to manage their own initiatives- and should be held responsible for their own performance. The alternative of designating teams from the apex would not generate the same positive incentives.

On a small scale the Academic Council of the EU-LAC Foundation (to which I belong) has already piloted this approach. It issues calls for projects that are of bi-regional significance and that involve networks of scholars collaborating across the continents. Some of the outcomes of this exercise will be on display in Brussels in June, together with presentations on related projects and proposals. The idea is to showcase this approach, and to bring it into contact with the other Summit Groups, so that Higher Education becomes a vanguard sector in fulfillment of the Summit’s ambitions. Other possibilities for consideration include establishing a Council for Evaluation and Accreditation, and institutionalizing a Euro-Latin American and Caribbean Space for Higher Education, Science Technology and Innovation. Such grand ambitions deserve a hearing, but if they are to become more than gestures they must generate practical and worthwhile deliverables.

***Laurence Whitehead** is Senior Research Fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford University. This paper is a contribution to the EU-LAC Foundation’s Newsletter special edition EU-CELAC Summit 2015.