



IRELAC POLICY BRIEF 2018/03

The Higher Education Paradox: a privileged starting point of EU-CELAC strategic relationship, with fragmented achievements and insufficient policy instruments¹.

Claudio Dondi
IRELAC, April 2018

A rich and articulated relationship between the EU and LAC Higher Education actors has been existing for many decades, with growing collaboration in both teaching and research activities: mobility of students and academics has been a substantial element of this collaboration for many decades, well before any EU Programme was established to support it. The report published in 2015 by the European Commission on EU-LAC Higher Education Cooperation mentions a total of 6780 mobility grants, 220 collaborating institutions, 51 projects, 75 million Euros between 2007 and 2013. These are considerable numbers per se, but not very impressive when related to the numbers of students, teachers, researchers, HEIs in the respective regions.

Since 1999, when the Bologna Process was being conceived, the policy aims to establish a “Common Area of Higher Education” including the EU, Latin America and the Caribbean was officially stated, but all attempts to support this aim have produced modest and sometimes even contradictory results. In particular, after the end of the ALFA III Programme, the rare and uncoordinated ERASMUS PLUS Capacity Building Projects in the field of Higher Education for the Region are far from being a real policy implementation instrument, due to their discontinuity, their modest operation scale and the unsystematic policy impact they produce, or policy support they receive. A paradox exists between the declared policy aim, that is reformulated and confirmed at every EU-CELAC Summit, and the unavailability of policy-oriented instruments able to engage a significant proportion of the HE community of the two regions.

Several factors play against the achievement of the policy aim: the difficult regional integration process in Latin America, but recently also in Europe; the dominance of politically supported and well-funded bilateral initiatives over bi-regional ones, the “patrimonial attitude” of many academics and

¹ Presentation to the Thematic Workshop N. 1 – Higher Education, III Academic Summit EU-CELAC in Cordoba, Argentina, April 2018

organisations involved in EU-LAC collaboration, who de-facto compete on getting public subsidies, the “project-only” logics of European Cooperation, that does not enhance enough capitalisation and continuity of the most promising initiatives, the stratification of successive waves of innovations and innovators who become self-protective and self-reproductive rather than integrators, the duplication of initiatives without a substantial upscaling of participation, the “not invented here” syndrome in its full deployment.

In order to overcome this rather confused and inconclusive situation and to extract the potential of a multitude of existing relationships, on the basis of the diagnosis shortly presented, three main action points seem to be necessary:

1. First of all, it is important not to rely solely on the initiatives of Governments, International Organisations and established networks, but to activate a real bottom-up movement. In this regard it seems useful to re-launch the model of ALCUE Units (a sort of ERASMUS Office specialised in bi-regional cooperation, proposed and tested in the frame of the VERTEBRALCUE Project in ALFA III) in all HEIs that are interested in EU-LAC intensified cooperation, and to link them in a community of practice; this bottom-up element is fundamental to guarantee large scale cooperation, continuity of engagement and capillary involvement of the academic community. In the model proposed by VERTEBRALCUE, these Units also contribute to reduce “academic individualism” and patrimonialism of relations, by establishing a coordination function in each Higher Education Institution (HEI) a professional community of practice across the two Regions and durable personal relations and involvement. It must be noted that ALCUE Units may become a centre of initiative and a new source of funding –rather than a new fixed cost- for the HEI to which they belong, and can serve other local entities (Local government, enterprises, research organisations) interested in innovation through internationalisation. This dimension of active role in territorial development is crucial for the technical cooperation between universities and firms and for creating local “triple helices” for innovation and the cultural context necessary for ensuring local socio-economic progress. Local universities are indeed the necessary partner of public sector and firms, especially SMEs, for mobilizing human capital and innovation and connecting them with globalized stakeholders for channelling inter-regional cooperation. Some illustrative examples of this dynamic exist from the VERTEBRALCUE partnership, some of which, from Mexico, Spain and Ecuador, are well represented in this Summit. Also, the important success of the Argentinean “SME Observatory”² and the idea of “Territorial Pact”
2. In order to address the multiplication of competing initiatives and to build on respective points of excellence a “smart specialisation” approach is suggested to the existing networks in order to reach a new model of cooperation. It is undeniable that many specialisation areas can be identified on the basis of previous achievements and respective missions of the existing associations and informal networks based on previous projects: from quality assurance and accreditation to joint curricula and virtual mobility, from social responsibility and HE-Enterprise collaboration to thematic networks for responsible innovation and research, from higher professional education to bi-regional social, political and cultural issues. If every Network specialised in its excellence points and would be recognised for these by public

² Alberti, G. and Donato, V, 2015

funding authorities, cooperation would become easier and the combined impact of the networks activities much more significant.

3. The creation of a “Bi-regional Policy Dialogue Platform” , based on the positive experience of the Central Asia Education Platform (CAEP), that, since 2013, is linking the EU (DG DEVCO, EEAS, DG EAC, Member States) and five countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). Although the history of the relationship between the regions and Europe and the socio-economic contexts are quite different, some inspiration can be taken.

The CAEP, with a very modest investment, has allowed to establish and maintain a political dialogue among a group of countries despite not being à-priori so oriented towards regional cooperation but able to demonstrate the creation and development of a dynamic, structured collaboration at both policy and expert level. Furthermore, it has allowed the engagement of some EU Member States, particularly interested in the Central Asia region, and to identify specific areas of collaboration with the EU (e.g. Quality Assurance and accreditation, University-Enterprise collaboration, National Qualification Frameworks, Permeability between HE and Vocational Education and Training paths, Gender Equality in HE and Research). In concrete terms the Platform includes:

- periodic ministerial level conferences (every two years) to agree policy areas for bi-regional and regional collaboration;
- regional conferences with policy makers and experts from the two regions, on policy issues identified as priorities in the education domain;
- a series of peer learning activities (workshops, webinars, national working groups) for both policy makers and experts, with significant stakeholder’s involvement and opportunities to build trust through personal connections;
- studies and stock-taking reports based on the collaboration of EU and CA experts, and on the support of CA Ministries of Education and Employment;
- information platform on all relevant projects in the domain supported by the EU, the World Bank and other international donors;
- the collaboration, at technical level, with ETF and the technical teams of the related projects.

The main advantages of this way of working – that appear to be relevant also in the context of EU-LAC partnership - can be summarised as follows:

- **Avoid discontinuity**, both in the political level dialogue and in the cycle of two- or three-year projects that stop at the end of funding;
- Establish a permanent **link between policy priorities and expert/practitioners/stakeholders collaborative activities**;
- Collect continuing information **on emerging needs and providing input to define collaboration priorities**;
- Provide an **independent dissemination, collaboration and mainstreaming platform for running and finishing projects**;
- **Link EU-supported initiatives and projects with other donors’ initiatives**, keeping an eye on EU strategic interests in the region;

- Stimulate **regional integration** in Regions that have difficulties to “materialise the process, by creating personal or informal –but highly structured- collaboration and familiarity between policy and expert groups of different countries on specific policy areas in which collaboration makes sense beyond any doubt.

The growing participation level of the five target countries, the coherence between policy priorities and technical developments, the concreteness of collaboration activities and national developments stimulated by CAEP demonstrate the effective value added and consequent potential interest of the Platform formula even in other contexts, as witnessed also by the increased ministerial support and attention by other international organisations.

IRELAC wishes to bring to the Cordoba Summit these three proposals, that, in our view, have a real potential to give new energy to the process of creating a Common Area of Higher Education, Research and Innovation between Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean.

REFERENCES:

- Alberti, G. and Donato, V. “Observatorios PyME y pactos territoriales para el desarrollo productivo: un caso empírico con algunas consideraciones conceptuales”, in Desarrollo territorial y cohesión social en América Latina / coord. por Giorgio Alberti, José Luis Villena Higuera, Martha Beatriz Peluffo Argón, 2015 (ISBN 978-84-9921-311-8, págs. 17-4)
- European Commission, “Higher Education cooperation between the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean, 2015.
- European Commission, The EU-Latin American Strategic Partnership: state of play and ways forward, 2017.
- Ghymers C. y Leiva P., Construyendo el espacio común de educación superior, ciencia, tecnología e innovación para la asociación estratégica birregional, Actas de la segunda Cumbre Académica CELAC-UE, FAP, 2015
- Ghymers C., The appealing win-win game behind the EU-CELAC bi-regional cooperation in Science, Technology and Innovation and the Academic Summits, 2018
- VALUE Project, White Paper “Towards the Common Higher Education Area for Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008.
- VERTEBRALCUE Project, Integración, un concepto clave para una agenda de modernización de la educación superior en el espacio ALCUE, 2012
- VERTEBRALCUE Project, Why and how to establish an ALCUE Unit, 2011