

The European University Association's response to the European Commission consultation on the Joint Communication:

"The European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean: A renewed partnership"

The European University Association (EUA) responds herewith to the **consultation on the Joint Communication: "[The European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean: A renewed Partnership](#)".** A roadmap from the European Commission points to the goals of the new communication in outlining some of the changes and challenges that have emerged since 2009, when the last joint communication "The European Union and Latin America: Global Players in Partnership" was issued.

Regarding the new Communication, the EU calls for "strategic and better focused association, targeting areas where the EU can deliver, which are of joint interest for both regions, and which make sense for and reflect the concerns of our citizens, consumers, and businesses."

Higher education and research are clearly among the areas that deliver. They have the potential to open dialogue and collaboration on a wide range of themes and challenges, at the levels of policies and systems, as well between institutions and organisations and through people-to-people exchanges. They address regional development, as well as democratisation and ecological challenges. They create sustainable benefits, not only for higher education systems and institutions, and their immediate constituencies and stakeholders, but also for societies at large in Latin America, the Caribbean and Europe.

This is not just the view of EUA and its members. It is confirmed through longstanding exchanges between both regions, for example by the strong demand for and the results of Erasmus+ funding for exchange with Latin America and the Caribbean. In particular, this is reflected in [the strong interest that young people show in credit mobility, which exceeds the offer by far](#). This not only about academic exchange, but clearly a strategic approach to overcome geographical distance and linguistic barriers, which still hamper exchange between the regions. Higher education and research cooperation are not only effective in this respect, but they are also efficient, and compared to initiatives in other areas, require relatively small amounts of investment. They tend to establish long-lasting relationships between institutions and people, and hence provide an important element of socio-economic development.

EUA, in collaboration with its members, as well as partners from different regions, has gathered considerable experience and knowledge in recent decades on how to best develop these relations.

The following provides some information about EUA and its collaboration with Latin America and the Caribbean, and suggestions on how higher education and research could contribute to the enhancement of relations between Europe and the region.

About EUA

The European University Association is the representative organisation of universities and national rectors' conferences in **48** countries. It is a consultative member of the Bologna Process and contributes to EU policy making on higher education, research and innovation in close collaboration with European and international partner organisations.

In contributing to the development of the European Higher Education and European Research Areas, EUA engages in dialogue and cooperation with higher education institutions and organisations around the globe. The Association has a long history of engaging with Latin American partners. From regular meetings of rectors' conferences from both regions, this has evolved over time into a more structured and targeted dialogue and cooperation. The EU-funded "[Alfa PUENTES](#)" project (Alfa Programme 2011 and 2014, 3.5 million euro) contributed to the capacity building of universities and university associations in Latin American countries. It supported system level modernisation and regional integration of higher education on issues such as quality assurance and accreditation, mobility of students and staff, and qualifications frameworks to enhance skills and learning-outcome-based approaches and to promote transparency. The Alfa PUENTES project has an important legacy, as it is still the reference and inspiration of new collaboration initiatives, some funded under the current Erasmus+ programme.

As a result of its longstanding cooperation with the higher education sector in Latin America, EUA was recognized as the key EU stakeholder and university voice in the [2017 EU-CELAC Academic and Knowledge Summit \("Cumbre Academico de Conocimiento" - CAC\)](#) in El Salvador. This event was organised with the support of major representative university associations across Latin America and the Caribbean and included the participation of various services and directorates of the European Commission as well as the EU-LAC Foundation.

The Summit resulted in a Declaration and a subsequent Action Plan, developed and endorsed by the members of the Organising Committee¹, that are the basis for EUA's ongoing work in the region, which focuses on:

- the contribution of higher education to foreign policy goals;
- furthering sustainable development;
- systemic impact and European added value of policies and instruments.

EUA's action plan constitutes a proactive contribution to the goals lined out in the present consultation on the Joint Communication.

EUA's recommendations for the enhancement of EU-LAC relations through higher education and research

1) Contribution of higher education to resilient societies, peace and security

Higher education is a major transversal component of resilient societies, peace and security. Better educated populations with higher skill levels, global awareness and greater connectivity will enable countries to diversify their economies and facilitate innovation - making the region more resilient, and

¹ Comprises: ENLACES (the organising structure of the Latin America Higher Education Area), UDUAL (Union of Universities of Latin America and the Caribbean), CSUCA (Central American University Council), UNICA (Association of Universities of the Caribbean), the Forum of EU-LAC University Rectors, EUA, and chaired by the University of El Salvador.

therefore more stable and secure. Education mobility is a proven way to enhance people-to-people contact and soft diplomacy, making conflict less likely. Moreover, education generates a better understanding of environmental and societal challenges. Greater higher education enrolment, success rates and a continued investment in higher education quality enhancement are demonstrable means to social mobility.

2) Sustainable development, global challenges and multi-regionalism

EUA notes that the new Communication “seeks to strengthen the partnership also at the global level (cooperation on Sustainable Development Goals and global challenges).” The aforementioned Cumbre Academico de Conocimiento (CAC) Declaration, emphasises the need for enhanced academic and research cooperation around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It underlines the role of innovation, research and education for the achievement of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda: strengthening research and innovation will facilitate the transition to sustainable production and communities, for example through ‘smart’ solutions powered by big data and artificial intelligence in urban planning (smart cities), agriculture, and health. Given that several Latin American cities are already making advances in this respect, the new Communication can emphasise both knowledge sharing and capacity building in this field.

In addition, investment in strong education systems in Latin America and the Caribbean will be critical to the SDGs achievement by empowering citizens through participation, social mobility, and facilitating, for example, sustainable consumption. The **CAC** Action Plan cites key areas that require continued investment and reinforcement in the academic cooperation and research fields. In this respect,

- EUA stresses that **connecting teaching to research, around sustainable development topics** that are particularly relevant to the EU-CELAC countries, should be emphasised in the new Communication. The CAC invited key stakeholders from both the research policy community and the higher education cooperation community, to share current initiatives, successes, funding schemes and opportunities, in order to enhance and optimise the impact of research on teaching and learning, particularly around the SDGs. This precedent should be continued.
- EUA fully endorses the call to support **multi- and cross-regional cooperation** in the spirit of the SDG Partnership Approach: While Latin American partners in the academic and research sectors have a long history of cooperation with Europe, there is a growing interest to work with Africa and Asia, for example, on development challenges. While programmes such as Erasmus+ technically permit cross-regional partnerships, more emphasis and priority should be placed on multi-lateral and multi-regional partnerships that bring together new and innovative higher education and research partnerships, via European external cooperation mechanisms. The forthcoming Regional Conference for Higher Education (CRES) for Latin America, to be held in Cordoba (June 2018), will emphasise greater multi-lateralism in higher education collaboration. This principle is also something that EUA has advocated in its global strategy (see: “[CODOC – Cooperation on Doctoral Education between Latin America, Southern Africa, Asia and Europe](#)”, as an example of a multi-regional EU-supported and EUA-led project for higher education and research development).
- From a policy perspective, the Communication should emphasise **a stronger Interface between science cooperation and higher education at the ministerial and senior official level**. Structured linkages should be sought between the CELAC-EU Joint Research and

Innovation Initiative (JIRI), and the Senior Official Meetings that drive it, and academic cooperation projects that target teaching and learning. This would also be a means to ensure that cooperation around the SDGs is translated from the research level to the education level.

3) Systemic impact and added EU value

EUA stresses that EU investments in the EU-CELAC higher education and research agenda should be focused on both creating systemic, structural impacts and on EU added value. In order to reap the benefits of education and innovation, strong education and research systems are needed at national and regional levels:

- **Regional integration and the unique EU perspective in the higher education sector:** After over 15 years of collaborating with Latin America, EUA advocates the unique added value in supporting regional integration, harmonisation and alignment in the higher education sector. The example of the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area, and the distinctly European/EU programmes and policy initiatives that have facilitated mobility and recognition of studies, have been a constant reference point in intra-Latin American collaboration. Good examples in sharing practice in regional integration in the higher education sector can be taken from the EUA-led Alfa-PUENTES project (mentioned above) and a follow-up Erasmus+ Capacity Building project (HICA), on establishing qualifications frameworks in Central America and fostering teaching innovation. Regional integration is a continued priority of ENLACES, the structure that unites university associations across the region and is a dialogue partner for and counterpart to EUA.
- **Need to connect diverse initiatives to enhance structural impact:** There have been a number EU-supported projects and initiatives in the academic and research sector over the past two decades that have contributed greatly to furthering EU-CELAC relations. With the current Erasmus+ programme, which is the main source of academic cooperation and mobility at present between the two regions, it would be important to look at the systemic effect of the different projects that have been financed, and to emphasise those that have had a wider structural impact and generated spin-off projects and initiatives. Erasmus+ capacity building projects, in particular, have a limited budget for Latin America (14 million annually, which translate into about 15 projects). Certain projects, however, have had a wider and lasting impact and have benefited a greater number of institutions and stakeholders, and also generated policy change at the system level. This approach can also compliment the bi-lateral investment of EU member states in this sector in Latin America. The aforementioned HICA project, for example, with a budget of only 850,000 euros (and an extremely high level of co-financing from over 25 Central American partners) has had a widely-acknowledged impact on teaching reform, teaching innovation and quality enhancement in higher education. This project can be taken as an example of a successful structural project, and a way of optimising limited EU funds for this region. Involving the German Rectors' Conference (HRK), it also facilitated synergies with EU member state investments in the region.
- In order to generate greater impact at the structural level, as well as synergies between projects, these types of actions and projects would need to be **connected through a centralised mechanism and platform**, which could be supported in the context of the EU-CELAC process. EUA is currently involved in three initiatives supported by the European Commission that serve the purpose of generating structural impact in the higher education sector in other regions: [Centralised Support for Higher Education Reform Experts \(HERE\) in](#)

[European Neighbourhood Countries](#), [Harmonisation for Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Africa \(HAQAA\)](#) and [Support for Harmonisation of Higher Education in South East Asia \(SHARE\)](#). These initiatives have provided a means to ensure EU visibility and presence and the higher education sector in these regions and help to integrate, connect and upscale the work of various EU financed projects at the programme level. As of present, no similar investment exists in Latin America that could be of such tremendous value.

- o **Working with and reinforcing representative bodies at the regional level:** The CAC is a unique initiative as it seeks to bring together the key, representative higher education stakeholders around a common message targeted towards heads of state and a shared action plan for the future. Institutions are key to this process; the new Communication should recognise the efforts to work consistently and coherently with representative institutions in the higher education sector. While EUA is recognised as the major umbrella body for universities on the European side, more work should be done to consolidate and **reinforce** ENLACES, the Latin American Higher Education Space, which unites major stakeholder organisations and networks, as a counterpoint to EUA.

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