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## **BRIDGES-LAC “GREEN PAPER”**

# ***ACCESSIBILITY OF LATIN AMERICAN STUDENTS TO EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION***

## ***ELEMENTS FOR DISCUSSION AND CONCRETE ACTION PROPOSALS***



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This “Green Paper” is based on the results of the BRIDGES-LAC Survey responded by Alban and ERASMUS MUNDUS scholars from Latin America, and scholars of the Spanish Agency of International Cooperation, on interviews to decision-makers in Latin America and the European Union in connection with accessibility problems faced by Latin American students in Europe, and on the debates conducted in different fora in which BRIDGES-LAC has participated.

The opinions in this document are the exclusive responsibility of BRIDGES-LAC.



## **BRIDGES-LAC DIAGNOSIS**

### I

The first element that must be underscored is the existing confusion between the scholarship and study programmes offered by Member States of the European Union (the “EU”) and those administered by the European Commission. Additionally, there is very little information on the changes introduced in the EU programmes. Conversely, in Latin America educational decision-makers and administrators -in particular- are well aware of the details of the old ALBAN programme and those offered by EU Member States (DAAD; Government of France; AECID; British Council, among others) but not familiar with the specific characteristics of the ERASMUS MUNDUS programme<sup>1</sup>.

This lack of understanding is very important. Despite the significant effort to position the ERASMUS MUNDUS programme as the *programme to gain access to European education*, the end of the ALBAN programme has led to the idea that there is no longer “a European scholarship programme” for Latin American students that wish to “access European higher education”.

Latin American decision-makers, universities, and governments have no clear idea of this programme. The same holds true for Latin American students who also lack information on the ERASMUS MUNDUS main characteristics.

The state-of-play described below draws upon the results of the BRIDGES-LAC survey, the opinions of decision-makers obtained in interviews made by the BRIDGES-LAC team, and the opinions gathered at international seminars:

- 1) **ALBAN and ERASMUS MUNDUS: the end of a programme addressed to Latin American students:** The ALBAN programme was widely known in Latin America, especially in academic circles, because it was exclusively addressed to Latin America and the Caribbean and was considered the most important window to European higher education<sup>2</sup>. The end of the ALBAN has left a significant void that the ERASMUS MUNDUS programme has not been able to overcome as yet.

<sup>1</sup> The survey and interviews had been carried out before the launching of the second phase of the ERASMUS MUNDUS programme – presentation made in Brussels on 16-18 March. For more information, see: [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus\\_mundus/programme/about\\_erasmus\\_mundus\\_en.php](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus_mundus/programme/about_erasmus_mundus_en.php).

<sup>2</sup> The ALBAN Programme was administered by Directorate General EuropeAid - Cooperation Office, Directorate Latina America of the European Commission. Instead, the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) is responsible for the management of all actions of ERASMUS MUNDUS Programme 2009 - 2013, under the supervision of the Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC of the European Commission) and EuropeAid - Co-operation Office (DG AIDCO of the European Commission). **Therefore, the ERASMUS MUNDUS Programme has no administrative characteristics in relation to Latin America.** Even though the European Commission has extended

- 2) **Negative perception of the ERASMUS MUNDUS programme:** The prestige of the ALBAN programme was due to the fact that it allowed students to apply to renowned postgraduate studies in Europe. This is not the case with the ERASMUS MUNDUS programme. On the contrary, the ERASMUS MUNDUS programme is:
  - a. little known and understood;
  - b. perceived as a “basic” promotion of courses not along the lines of traditional Latin American academic programmes;
  - c. seen, among the best informed players, as a low impact programme in the region;
  - d. not considered as an opportunity for the creation clear links with European institutions;
  - e. viewed as an “ephemeral” programme that hinders the generation and consolidation of scholar links with the host country.
  
- 3) **NEGATIVE Impact of the end of the ALBAN programme on the promotion of EUROPE within Latin American academic networks:** The ALBAN programme addressed Latin America and offered doctorates and master studies of all kinds (and not only the ERASMUS MUNDUS masters); and therefore was well known and promoted by academic networks irrespective of their relationship to the European networks and institutions. This does not seem to be the case of the ERASMUS MUNDUS programme.
  
- 4) **POSITIVE Impact of the ERASMUS MUNDUS in the creation of professional networks:** Notwithstanding the above, there is a small increase in the creation of professional networks by ERASMUS MUNDUS scholars when compared to those of the ALBAN scholars who tend to generate academic networks.
  
- 5) **ERASMUS MUNDUS has often damaged the area of social sciences:** The ALBAN programme attracted students mostly in the areas of social sciences (law; economics; and political sciences). In contrast, the ERASMUS MUNDUS programme attracts students mostly in the area of the experimental sciences. This is very important if you think about the functionality of international cooperation programmes in the field of education from the point of view of the foreign policy.
  
- 6) **Loss of visibility of European Community vis a vis national policies:** The perception that the ERASMUS MUNDUS programme as diffused, the end of the ALBAN programme seems to have discouraged the notion of EUROPE as a DESTINATION in favour of national scholarships.
  
- 7) **Loss of specificity of the existing mobility flow as an “ALCUE flow”:** An ALCUE flow assumes a more or less equitable participation of all countries in the three regions. Reality indicates that the largest mobility flows (from Latin America

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its ALFA Programme -that addresses Latin America-, the end of the Alban Programme reflects a shift in the attention that the Commission pays to the region as a whole. It may be argued that the new phase of the ERASMUS MUNDUS Programme entails the union of two general directorates in the management of the programme and that the existence of windows in specific countries may result in the region gaining renewed attention.

to Europe) come mainly from Mexico, Brazil, Argentina and Colombia while Spain remains the main recipient of those students in Europe.

## II

The above-mentioned seven elements should be considered within a general positive appraisal perspective of Europe as a higher education destination. This perspective, as discussed in other papers (see: [www.value-project.eu](http://www.value-project.eu)), continues to have a positive impact on the appraisal of mobility from Latin America to Europe.

In particular:

- 1) **Europe continues to be student-friendly for Latin Americans**: Even though Europe is less attractive to study than the United States, the former continues to be seen as a “friendly” destination. Adapting to the European environment proves very easy for Latin American students and no major discrimination problems have been experienced by Latin American scholars in Europe.
- 2) **European programmes continue to be rated as “good”**: Latin American and Caribbean students concur that European programmes are good.
- 3) **Positive appraisal regarding the suitability of student work plans to the host university**: The experience of Latin American scholars in Europe indicates that the host departments and centres successfully meet the academic expectations of scholars.

## III

Overall migration flows from Latin America to Europe have ranked high, while in varying degrees, in the political agendas of Member States in the last decade. The prevailing perception among decision-makers and universities in Latin America is that visa application formalities for Latin American students wishing to study in Europe are complicated. However, the experience of scholars show that even through there are problems (i.e. short time available to obtain the visa or excessive requirements), these have not had a strong impact on the mobility process.

Nevertheless, it seems clear that there is little coordination between the European Commission Delegations (as scholarship granting agencies) in Latin American countries and the European Embassies issuing the visas.

## IV

The above three points show that there is a positive approach to Latin American student mobility to Europe, in terms of possibilities and conditions. However, the current situation is subject of criticism.

In this criticism, the largest negative impact on Latin American access to European higher education appears to be the low levels and poor distribution of information:

- 1) **Scholarship access programmes and mobility are perceived as difficult to achieve**. Decision-makers and students alike qualify access to European

higher education generally as a complex and painstaking process, which is open only to a few.

- 2) **Information is available only on the Internet.** A significant complaint about access is that information on scholarship programmes and academic choice generally is available only on the Internet and should be found by students on their own. There is no enquiry office or coordination between local and European agents easing enquiries from interested parties.
- 3) **Deficient promotion of European and scholarship programmes:** The lack of adjustment and coordination between Latin American and Caribbean institutions and their European counterparts harms the promotion of European programs and fails to reach most students. In addition, there is no articulation among institutional players (government agencies, Latin American representatives in Brussels, Latin American national and European government offices and universities) to promote the ERASMUS MUNDUS programmes and to ensure a democratic distribution of information. The existing information channels as they stand today fail to ensure equitable distribution.
- 4) **Excessive confidence on the players of civil society and little involvement of the players capable of generating regulatory frameworks:** Civil society actors capable of acquiring and processing information on Latin American scholarships tend not to democratise or distribute them. Civil society players assume that access to information allows them to build networks with European counterparts which have a positive effect on their relative positioning. However, this does not have a “spilling effect” in terms of information on less privileged institutions. As a result, there is little or no information on access to programs and mobility processes in the less privileged sectors in Latin America and in those sectors with a reduced access to such institutions.
- 5) **A feeling of mutual distrust between Latin American and European government agents precludes the operation of institutional channels as a way to provide information to universities and students.** This mutual distrust is directly related to Europe’s lack of knowledge of the Latin American socio-political and cultural reality (particularly in connection with promotion policies) and to the perception by Latin Americans of European colonialism.
- 6) **Therefore, lack of good long-lasting relations between political and institutional players is an especially negative element.** The lack of both good relations and truly bi-regional instruments for the promotion of trust and synergies is key to the disarticulation of Pan-European institutions with their Latin American counterparts.

## V

The foregoing shows that access of Latin Americans to European education is basically conditioned by information networks. In fact, understanding “who gains access” does not appear to be as important as identifying “what problems” were faced by those who

FAILED TO GAIN ACCESS OR DO NOT GAIN ACCESS to the mobility process, if the aim is to buttress the creation of a bi-regional higher education space.

It can be argued that mobility processes are costly and that the traditional physical mobility should be replaced with alternative mobility ways. Without denying the validity of this argument, alternative mobility (such as virtual mobility) has failed to prove that the alternatives to physical mobility are an efficient means to set up bi-regional links. Furthermore, such alternatives are not excessively attractive to Latin Americans<sup>3</sup>. The impact of traditional mobility policies on the development of links between the two regions is still very high<sup>4</sup>.

Now then, it seems clear that, for mobility policies to have an appropriate impact, information on access processes should be widespread. In addition, the dissemination of mobility policies should not be biased by restrictive access mechanisms or mechanisms controlled only by players holding their own individual interests at heart. This objective will not be achieved magically. The achievement of this objective requires a clear and effective strategy.

INFORMATION should circulate from the granting agency to ALL LATIN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES AND THEIR STUDENTS. To this end, it is fundamental to generate the appropriate cooperation conditions at national and regional universities and the relevant government agents.

This cooperation should be articulated, in a coordinated manner, at two levels, (a) at government level, a radical improvement of synergies between the European Commission and Member States' Governments should be put in place and, simultaneously, effective cooperation mechanisms between the European Commission and Member States Governments on the one hand, and the Latin American Governments and regional/sub regional (UNASUR perhaps) integration agencies, on the other hand; and (b) at strictly university level, relations between the main universities and/or rectors in the two regions should be articulated. Implementation of these actions will be the only actual way to ensure that mobility processes (including, among other things, selection of theme areas, selection or priority geographical areas, actual impact of social cohesion and generation of bi-regional links) are developed within the appropriate legitimate frameworks and lead to the generation of a Higher Education Common Space for Latin America and the European Union.

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<sup>3</sup> See Calabrese M.V and Torrent, R “*El futuro de la política de cooperación en materia de educación superior entre la Unión Europea y América Latina*” [The future of higher education cooperation policies between the European Union and Latin America]. “FLACSO 20 years” Seminar Proceedings, Quito, Ecuador. 2007,

<sup>4</sup> See Torrent, R – Calabrese, MV “*Un programa Fulbright a la eurolatinoamericana*” [A Euro Latin American Fulbright Programme] [www.obreal.org](http://www.obreal.org)

### **SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION**

Therefore, BRIDGES-LAC considers that the following bi-regional policies must be promoted to improve the accessibility of Latin American students for the purposes of creating the ALCUE space:

- 1) Support to ERASMUS MUNDUS Alumni networks (ERASMUS MUNDUS ALUMNI ASSOCIATION FOR LATIN AMERICA EMA-LAC). The term “support” stands for the promotion of the ERASMUS MUNDUS Alumni Association as a network fostering participation spaces and the promotion of scholars upon their return to their home countries. The alumni network is created as a pole of attraction at Latin American country and regional levels not only for the promotion of programmes but also to ensure the impact of mobility. The EU Commission Delegations in Latin American countries are the “natural” space to launch this network.
- 2) Include “NON ERASMUS MUNDUS” Masters and Doctorates in the ERASMUS MUNDUS programme addressed to Latin America. This is essential to render the programme more attractive and imprint a notion of actual exchange. Failing to do this and using all resources to “joint masters” has a very negative effect on the promotion of the “Europe” abroad, notwithstanding the positive that this policy may have at domestic level. In other words, the “Mundus” perspective must be reinforced *vis à vis* the “Erasmus” standpoint.
- 3) Promote all EURO-LATIN AMERICAN double degree programmes among ERASMUS MUNDUS scholars. This type of programme is the only that secures mobility from Latin America to Europe and vice versa, and is the only one that favours the promotion of bi-regional research policies. In addition, these programmes are the only ones, in practice, that solve the recognition of degrees problems (as these problems cease to exist in these cases).
- 4) Involve Latin American national structures, Latin American government representations and EU Commission Delegations in Latin American and the Caribbean (in coordination with the Embassies of Member States) in order to promote and distribute the information on scholarship programmes with the purpose of securing the democratisation of information and the legitimacy of the promotion of programmes.
- 5) Encourage the organisation of a Euro-Latin American permanent joint assembly of rectors and universities. In this respect the EUA could be a key player in defining and –above all– following up the promotion policy of European higher education in Latin America and vice versa with the purpose of generating a true EURO-LATIN AMERICAN awareness that encompasses and enhances mobility programmes.