



**THE BRIDGES-LAC WHITE PAPER:**

**“THE *HARDWARE* AND *SOFTWARE* OF EUROPEAN – LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN RELATIONS IN THE FIELD OF HIGHER EDUCATION: THE NEED TO SUPPLEMENT THEM WITH AND INTERMEDIATE LEVEL”**

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**BRIDGES-LAC PROJECT – OBREAL / EULARO**

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## **Introduction**

*The construction* of the European Union - Latin American and Caribbean Area (“*ALCUE* Area”) in Higher Education is presenting enormous difficulties. This should not come as a surprise when one reflects upon the challenges faced when constructing the European Area of Higher Education, some of which are still present today. In this respect, BRIDGES-LAC has developed an innovative line of analysis and has generated promising conclusions by addressing these difficulties within the framework of the different dimensions of the project and, in particular, through the interventions and the debate that have taken place in its public events. The presentation of this innovative line of analysis and the above-mentioned conclusions constitute the main content of this final White Paper of the BRIDGES-LAC Project.

### **The *hardware* and *software* of political systems and international relations**

Political systems and public policies can be compared to the *hardware* and *software* of computers. Institutional-legal institutions are the *hardware* and public policies are the *software* that makes those structures operational in order to achieve the objectives sought.

We are all familiar with what happens when the hardware and software are not compatible. When this happens, the computer blocks or, at best, works by default, since, in fact, the hardware includes some software that makes it possible to run the computer almost on its own, irrespective of the user.

The comparison with political systems is an easy one and does not even require an explanation. But it is worth stressing that when we pass from national political systems to the international level, the comparison and the line of analysis that underpins it become even more relevant. In fact, in the field of international relations, institutional-legal structures (the *hardware*) are less powerful than those at the national level. Therefore, their capacity to implement policies (the *software*) is weaker and the risk of a computer blockage is rendered considerably higher (that is to say that the chances of a political deadlock increase).

The situation becomes even more complicated when the different structural systems and relations (different *hardwares*) overlap and intertwine at the international level and are not necessarily compatible, and it gets further aggravated if the expectation is that all of them are to use the same *software*. This increases the risk of experiencing blockages and deadlocks significantly.

### **Higher Education: a highly regulated sector with fairly autonomous players**

As we all know (even though we tend to forget when making ambitious statements on “Common Spaces in the field of Education”) the education sector (including that of Higher Education) is highly regulated. National authorities are very keen to maintain their regulatory powers. Therefore, the introduction of any new *software* from outside requires the existence of a very powerful *hardware*. Even the powerful and sophisticated *hardware* achieved through the European integration process had to expressly admit its failure in the field of education policies with the introduction of the new articles on education and professional training under the Treaty of Maastricht at the beginning of the 90s. Under the new articles, the harmonization of laws in the field of education remains outside the scope of Community competencies.

But the difficulties in the regulatory field are somewhat counterbalanced by the possibilities presented by the autonomous nature of universities in the area of cooperation among educational systems with different regulatory systems. Experience has shown that such direct cooperation among Universities can generate numerous and good initiatives.

### **The different fields of cooperation between Europe and Latin American**

I have just mentioned that, at the international level, the analysis of the compatibility between the *hardware* and the *software* is further complicated due to the overlapping of different institutional-legal structures (different *hardwares*). The relations usually called “Europe - Latin America” in the field of higher education are a good example of this overlapping.

Indeed, such relations include:

- Cooperation between individual universities: point of origin and point of destination of all cooperation.
- Bilateral cooperation among States.
- “Ibero-American” cooperation (within the framework of Ibero-American Summits and all the instruments created therein) that includes Spain, Portugal and Andorra on one side of the Atlantic and the Spanish and Portuguese speaking-countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on the other.
- The EU-LA cooperation, that, in its turn, must be differentiated from the EU-Caribbean cooperation, because they have different *hardware* and *software*, even though they share a common element in that the biennial Summits of Heads of State and Government are in effect "ALCUE" and encompass both Latin America and the Caribbean. This cooperation can be interpreted, defined and implemented, on the European side, in two different ways:
  - As cooperation only by the EU, within the framework of its cooperation programmes, both internal and external, but not relating to the harmonization of laws, that -as we have seen before- remains beyond the scope of the competencies of the European Union in the field of education.
  - As joint cooperation of the EU and its Member States. In fact, the EU and its Member States participate jointly in ALCUE Summits of Heads of State and Government and they jointly negotiate and sign ambitious (at least as they are presented to the public in general) Association Agreements. All of this notwithstanding that later on, more often than not, they forget the political obligations they have undertaken under the Summits and the fact that they are legally bound by the provisions of such agreements... until the new Summit takes place or the next agreement is signed.
- The Europe - LA cooperation (this type of cooperation must be differentiated from the EU - LA cooperation because the EU includes only one portion of Europe and because the Bologna Process is not “an EU process” but includes and is targeted to a more ample Europe even though it is endorsed from the EU).

The existence of multiple spaces (of *hardwares*) presents two challenges that are easily understood but not addressed at the practical, academic and political level nor dealt with by the extensive literature on the subject:

- the differentiation of what is to be implemented in each one of those spaces (“who does and should do what”), and
- the way of generating synergies among the different levels instead of creating contradictions and resistances that impair the efforts made (blocking all the *hardwares*)

Having presented the framework of the analysis, it is easy to illustrate the challenges and risks that can lead to blockages and deadlocks if not properly addressed. I will only mention some of them, namely:

- Confusing the Ibero-American and Euro-Latin American spaces, in particular expecting that bodies created within the former space and having headquarters in the Iberian Peninsula will function as representatives of Latin America in the Euro-Latin American space.
- Articulating the EU - Latin America space (or the EU - Latin America and Caribbean, the ALCUE Space) as if it were a simple addition of the bilateral cooperation spaces existing among the different States on both sides of the Atlantic and, as a result, excluding the European Union institutions (particularly the Commission) from its management bodies.
- Not acknowledging that regulatory matters can hardly be dealt with in spaces in which regulatory bodies do not play a relevant role (that is to say, the States and their Governments); for example in the cooperation space between individual universities or in the cooperation space occupied, on the European side, by EU institutions that, as I have mentioned before, have no regulatory capacity.

### **Is there a cooperation instrument that can be validly applied in all spaces and that is capable of consolidating them and generating synergies?**

There is no magic wand to solve all the problems that come along with multiple cooperation spaces. These problems can only be addressed by being intellectually clear (differentiating what must be differentiated and not looking the other way when problems exist), politically honest (prioritising citizens’ interests rather than those of bureaucracies) and creative in the design and implementation of public policies (not being carried away by routine processes or acting by default according to the *software* that has already been incorporated into the different *hardwares*).

From the BRIDGES-LAC perspective these problems can be summarised in one question (even when risking oversimplification): How to advance cooperation among all universities within the framework of different regulatory systems? And how to promote some regulatory changes that favour cooperation?

In fact, universities in Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean do cooperate among themselves. The question is how to promote cooperation when there are so many universities of a very different nature, without falling into the trap of promoting cooperation only among some

of them (that may not necessarily be the best) or only in some areas (that may not be those in which the cooperating universities attain the highest levels in terms of quality).

And how to advance cooperation between Governments that very often:

- experience great difficulties to define and implement reforms in the field of education,
- have not been able to achieve cooperation within their own regions,
- are used to thinking, at best, in terms of bilateral cooperation between two Governments even when dealing at the bi-regional level.

### **An ambitiously humble solution: the creation of an "intermediate level" of cooperation between Assemblies and Associations of Rectors/Chancellors/Presidents and Universities**

Experience shows (not only in the field of cooperation among EU and Latin American and Caribbean universities in higher education but in many others areas as well) that ambitiously humble solutions prove better than pretentious and pompous solutions that end by never solving anything. I call them “ambitiously humble solutions” because the humble terms and means applied do not contradict the ambitious strategic objectives that these solutions seek to obtain, but rather might represent the only feasible way to advance in this field.

The solution and way forward that BRIDGES-LAC work seems to advice does not exclude the other two possible alternative solutions (i.e. the direct cooperation among individual universities and the cooperation among Governments) but rather complements and strengthens them. This solution operates at an intermediate level: that of cooperation between Organisations/Associations/Assemblies of Universities and Rectors/Chancellors/Presidents.

In fact, such a cooperation at the intermediate level presents us with three clear advantages:

- The intermediate level exists almost in all cases, at the national and regional level (with its defects but also with virtues, at least in many cases).<sup>1</sup>
- It is situated at a level in which there is a single actor on the European side: the European Universities Association (EUA).
- The intermediate level can be projected both downwards (favouring cooperation among universities: an excellent example is the agreement between the Colombian ASCUN and the German HRK on recognition of degrees for academic purposes, that will soon be replicated with the French CPU) and upwards (promoting cooperation among governments and providing solutions that advance such cooperation).

From the point of view of European institutions, and from the perspective of the Commission, in particular, there is another additional advantage to the ones just mentioned. At this intermediate

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<sup>1</sup> The typical European criticism to the lack of Associations of Universities and Rectors at the regional level in Latin America is only partially true. In the first place, because there certainly are regional Latin American, and even all - American organisations (such as the *Organización Universitaria Interamericana* – OUI/IEHO). Secondly, because overestimating the degree of integration achieved by Europe is not fair either: in Europe, national assemblies and conferences continue to be very keen to “keep control” and are not willing to accept any “excessive intervention” of the regional organizations.

level, EU policies and initiatives can play an important role. Indeed, while cooperation among universities and intergovernmental dialogue can be promoted and implemented at State level, a mechanism to encourage the permanent dialogue and cooperation among assemblies and associations of universities and headmasters on both sides of the Atlantic can hardly be achieved this way.

Additionally, a strong initiative in this sense by the Commission would help to correct one of the possible defects or risks that can result from the last reform of the EU cooperation policies in the field of education with Latin America. One of this potential risks stems from the fact that, by focusing on cooperation instruments between individual universities (Erasmus Mundus Consortia in all its possible forms), the number of beneficiaries of such instruments can be significantly reduced, with the subsequent weakening of the influence that these instruments will exert as well as of its visibility. Such a reduction will be the flip side of concentrating in the building of consortia, a strategy that, while having positive effects, excludes by definition the large population of professors and, in particular, students from Universities that are not members of any consortium and that in numbers (and maybe in terms of quality as well) is far more numerous than the one within said consortia. BRIDGES-LAC coordination must acknowledge this risk not only because it was clearly reflected in the accessibility dimension of the project but because it was emphasised again and again by participants in the events that included top-notch experts and defendants of cooperation policies of the European Commission. If the Assemblies and Associations of Universities and Rectors were positioned in a prominent stance within the framework of cooperation, cooperation policies would be extended to all university systems as a whole, represented in one way or the other by such assemblies and associations.

### **A solution that can be extended to other actors such as Quality Agencies and Science and Technology Agencies or Councils**

*Mutatis mutandis*, this approach should also apply to cooperation among Quality Agencies (an area in which there is also a single actor in the European side, that is to say the ENQA: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education)<sup>2</sup> and among Science and Technology Agencies or Councils, that do not only administer scholarships but also evaluate Higher Education programmes and advance cooperation among Higher Education institutions.

### **Conclusion**

The approach developed in this White Paper has already been put forward in the Conference of Coordinators of ERASMUS MUNDUS Projects organised by the European Commission in Brussels in October 2009, where it raised some criticism but attracted also considerable interest. Since then, this proposal has gained increased acceptance in all the fora where it has been discussed and, particularly, in the last events organised by the BRIDGES-LAC Project. This is the reason why, beyond the specific outcomes of the project, we feel obliged to propose this White Paper as a contribution to the ongoing debate on how to improve European Union cooperation policies in the field of education.

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<sup>2</sup> The *Red Iberoamericana para la Acreditación de la Calidad de la Educación Superior (RIACES)* is not the Latin American equivalent of ENQA, because, as its denomination shows, it is an organization of the “Ibero-American Space”. However, it could play a very positive role in the construction of the “intermediate euro-latinoamerican level” discussed in this White Paper if RIACES members, and in particular the Spanish ANECA, continue to be aware (as they already are) of the differences between the two Spaces as well as of the need to create synergies, but not confusion, between them.