

Plan of Action Project 2002-2004
to build common ground for higher education in the European Union,
Latin America and the Caribbean

I. ANTECEDENTS

I.1. Rio de Janeiro Process

The Rio de Janeiro Declaration was adopted on the 29th June, 1999, on the occasion of the first Euro-Latin American Caribbean Summit of Heads of State and Government from countries from Latin America, the Caribbean and the European Union, with the participation of the President of the European Commission. The Declaration expressed its determination to broaden the excellent relationship between these regions, moreover it declared, that within this framework, higher education was one of the priorities needing to be tackled. The Declaration also manifested the decision' of Heads of State and Government to hold meetings at ministerial level, to follow through on these commitments, especially in the sphere of schooling and higher education.

Three articles of this Declaration embody the resolutions taken in this ambit:

1. A commitment to establishing close collaboration between Latin American and Caribbean countries, and countries of the European Union, in the educational, cultural and human spheres (article 54).
2. The determination to foment interregional exchanges between educational establishments (article 61).
3. A resolve to boost co-operation, in the sphere of education, making it a high-priority challenge, ensuring that higher education Institutions mutually co-operate, although acknowledging that they are autonomous, especially through university exchanges and the development of distance learning. (article 63).

I.2. Process of the Conference of Ministers for Education from the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean on Higher Education.

The Declaration subsequent to the Conference of Ministers for Education of the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean on higher education, adopted in Paris on the 3rd November 2000, in the presence of the European Commission and representatives from 48 countries, affirmed their intention to put the Rio Declaration into effect, within the framework of their jurisdiction.

This Declaration drew attention to the need of a framework for co-operative action, to encourage the emergence and development of "common space for higher education in the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean" (EULAC) as a key element in strengthening bilateral and multilateral relationships between States. The purpose of this common space would be to facilitate the exchange of knowledge, the transfer of technology and the circulation of students, teachers, researchers and administrative personnel, striving to forge links between training, employment and scientific knowledge in the countries involved. This common space should also be coherent with the principles and objectives set up the Ministers of Research and Technology of Latin America, the Caribbean and the European Union in their meeting in Bratislava on 21 and 22 March 2002.

Five countries are in charge of co-ordination, France and Spain represent the European Union, Brazil and Mexico represent Latin America and St. Kitts and Nevis represent the Caribbean. They undertake to monitor the setting up of the common space by maintaining close contact with the

relevant organism designated by each signatory country.

The Conference's Follow-up Committee, composed of representatives of the five co-ordinating countries that maintain contact with the representatives of the signatory countries, has taken the decision to submit the Plan of Action for the period 2002-2004 to the Heads of State and Government who are to meet in the Madrid Summit, to be held in May 2002, on occasion of the Spanish Presidency of the European Union, for their approval.

The Plan of Action 2002-2004 is composed of three parts:

1. Definition of the objectives.
2. Definition of the strategy.
3. Presentation of projects.

II. DEFINITION OF THE OBJECTIVES 2002-2004

II.1. Definition of EULAC common space for higher education

The construction of common space for higher education in the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean (EULAC) will allow to built a framework opened to a plurality of cultures, which will offer the chance to train and work in a plurilingual environment governed by an equal opportunities based policy.

The countries in these regions, firm in the belief that higher education is a public asset that falls within the sphere of state responsibility, consider that the said framework can offer an alternative to globalisation, help to overcome North/South differences and develop further collaboration, from the point of view of equality and solidarity. This belief is based on a mutual acknowledgement of the differences and similarities in these regions, in the diversity of languages and the variety of university systems. Therefore, it implies the need to work within a system of collaboration, co-operation, exchanges of good practices and reciprocity.

Lastly, this framework stresses the right for all those who are integrated into the common ground of EULAC higher education to have equal access to information regarding the opportunities that these regions offer them (programmes, regulations of each country, university studies etc). Moreover, the new technologies and distance learning constitute fundamental aspects that should be intrinsic to academic programmes.

II.2. Priorities defined by the Declaration of the EULAC Ministerial Conference on Higher Education

The Declaration of the Conference of Ministers of Education of the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean on Higher Education, held in Paris in November 2000, identified the following priorities:

1. Promote student, teacher, researcher and administrative personnel mobility.

2. Develop mechanisms to allow periods of study to be recognised and validated, while respecting the current legislation in each country.
3. Exchange successful experiences regarding the running, management and evaluation of higher education systems.
4. Enhance distance learning, and create a virtual library.
5. Encourage technical and professional training at higher levels, and stimulate links between training and employment.
6. Create European Studies Centres in Latin American and Caribbean countries, and develop Latin American and Caribbean Studies Centres in the countries of the European Union.

II.3. Issues given a priority-rating for the period 2002-2004

The Follow-up Committee for the UELAC Common Space for Higher Education supported by the other countries involved in the process that started in the Paris Conference, states that the development of student, teacher, researcher and administrative personal mobility, as well as the assessment of the quality of higher education, constitute the two main priorities that must be met by this common space. It furthermore states that co-operation to validate periods of study, distance learning, the creation of a virtual library, technical and vocational training at higher levels and the creation and development of Study Centres in these regions, are transverse issues that contribute to the fulfilment of these two priorities, and will be dealt with at the opportune moment.

The Plan of Action 2002-2004 to build a common space for Higher Education in the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean, proposed by the Follow-up Committee, is designed to meet three objectives:

1. To foster both interregional and intraregional student, teacher, researcher and administrative personnel mobility, and improve the conditions it is currently operating in.
2. To promote reciprocal knowledge of existing national assessment systems, in order to exchange successful experiences related to this sphere, that will be used to perfect procedures to assess the quality of higher education, both intraregionally and interregionally.
3. To define a series of projects linked to both top-priority issues, for the period 2002-2004.

III. DEFINITION OF THE STRATEGY 2002-2004

III.1. PRINCIPLES FOR CO-OPERATION IN THE COMMON SPACE

The guiding principles for co-operation, within the framework of common ground for EULAC Higher Education are as follows:

1. To take into consideration the initiatives and experiences of each one of the countries, and profit from synergies.

2. To encourage multilateral co-operation aimed at bolstering higher education systems.
3. To mobilise all necessary national and regional resources in order to guarantee the projects are continued, through the active participation of public and private channels, both bilateral and regional.
4. To stimulate the participation of renowned academic centres, located in the EULAC area, in higher education activities, and ensure they are organised in transnational networks, both intraregionally and interregionally.
5. To ensure that the projects under consideration in this common ground have the greatest possible social impact, and a knock-on regional effect.
6. To encourage collaboration between universities and research centres on the one hand, and the private sector on the other.
7. To stimulate co-operation in order to lower the exclusion-rate to the access to knowledge in the regions, following existing successful programmes, and to foment the development of synergies between them.

III.2. CO-OPERATION OBJECTIVES

III.2.1. Encourage conditions to foster mobility

It is important to take into account the experience, in terms of putting mobility plans into practice, that countries conforming the common space have amassed, as it will provide information enabling pilot actions aimed at overcoming obstacles and barriers to mobility to be developed. This, in turn, will mean that recognition of both qualifications and the periods of study and training will become increasingly transparent.

Mobility programmes, one of which is the ALFA European Community programme, play an important role that should be augmented. The object would be to give a new impetus to the promotion of mobility, on the one hand by using the ALFA programme and other European Community programmes more effectively, and on the other hand, through programmes arising from this plan of action, that could be agreed upon and put into effect jointly.

In general, the main obstacles to mobility identified are: the low number of grants available; entry conditions in the host country; inadequate language training in the host country (this training should be imparted in both the country of origin and the host country), as well as the difficulties involved in recognising periods of study in the country of origin.

A comparative study dealing with the higher education system of each country in the EULAC common ground and with the recognition that periods of study have in these countries, would be necessary to deal with this last issue. The conclusions of said study would enable mechanisms to be developed to ensure mutual accreditation and recognition of periods of study, in a similar way to the development of the Bologna Declaration, which is being implemented at European level.

Lastly, efforts aimed at fomenting mobility should take into account links between initial and continuous training, from the perspective of education and training throughout life.

III.2.2. Encourage the development of assessment of quality in Higher Education

One of the most widespread concerns of the different higher education establishments is assessment and accreditation, concepts that are closely connected to the guarantee of quality, the most suitable form of public financing, recognition of the periods of study, the free circulation of professionals and the start-up plans for transnational education. Assessment of institutions and higher education programmes is a new practice for the majority of the countries.

The EULAC common space can provide a reference framework to combine assessment and accreditation efforts; to stimulate the reciprocal recognition of higher education assessment and accreditation procedures; compare experiences and methodologies; reflect on the procedures and stimulate the creation of assessment devices.

The creation of EULAC Information Forum to study assessment of the quality of Higher Education and accreditation is formally proposed. Its goals will be, among others, to compile information related to assessment procedures in countries belonging to the Common Space with the aim of increasing mutual knowledge of the Higher Education Systems; moreover to facilitate the identification of specific issues, whether common or singular, with regard to assessment and accreditation systems. Specific forums should be set up within this project, between interested parties, to speed up the transfer of instruments, materials, technical assistance in assessment procedures etc. Finally, the Forum could act as a privileged area to debate and analyse existing assessment and accreditation models in countries belonging to the EULAC Common Space.

Disseminating knowledge of the different systems in existence will serve as a model für those countries that have not yet taken the decision to create assessment institutions, providing them not only with the relevant tools, but also ensuring that their design is compatible with existing systems. The countries belonging to the space should establish systems on the bases of mutual trust, relying on the work of the assessment devices. This work should take place within mutually agreed parameters, that would be periodically reviewed and recognised. It is therefore proposed that a work group should be set up, based on the Forum's information as well as on other international experiences, in order to establish the necessary bases, criteria, and norms to create these tools.

IV. PRESENTATION OF PROJECTS 2002-2004

IV.1. Mobility

1. To draw up a study on mobility programmes currently in existence in the EULAC Common Space between countries within the Space and with third countries

To carry out a comparative, analytical study of the mobility programmes currently underway, both within the regions included in the Common Space as well as programmes with third countries. This study would analyse how the present ALFA programme works, and propose possible improvements to make it more effective.

2. To hold an EULAC seminar on the system of validating periods of study

The aim of this seminar should be to study on the state of Higher Education in each one of the countries, and how these studies are presently recognised in other countries in the Common Ground. The study seeks to identify obstacles to mobility that arise from the difficulties of recognising periods of study undertaken in other countries, and to propose alternatives that may

overcome said obstacles.

3. To establish Chairs for European and Latin American/Caribbean studies to facilitate the mobility of professors

To set in motion a pilot multilateral co-operation project based on reciprocity (between a group of European, Latin American and Caribbean countries), v aimed at establishing rotative (six months) Chairs for European studies, Latin American studies and Caribbean studies in each country participating in the project, financed by the participating states.

IV.2. Assessment of quality

1. To hold an expert seminar on the assessment of quality in higher education institutions and programmes

The principal tools to get the first stage of multilateral co-operation underway, within the framework of the common ground, will be the exchange of higher education assessment procedures managers, holding seminars and workshops, and promoting reciprocal technical visits.

Many of the countries have amassed experience in this area which involves different approaches, terminology, objectives and methodologies. A starting point for co-operation would be an overall view of good practices in use, explaining not only the reference framework for the assessment models adopted in each country, but also the practical instruments.

2. Creation of an informative EULAC Forum concerned with assessing the quality of higher education and accreditation

Its aim is to compile information on assessment procedures in countries included in the Common Space, in order to increase mutual knowledge about higher education systems, and moreover to facilitate the identification of individual or common problematic, with regard to assessment and accreditation systems.

3. To design a study on accreditation and the convergence of study programmes (qualifications), within the EULAC Common Space.

To promote a study on the current accreditation systems or recently drawn up in the regions within the common ground. To achieve this, the Bologna process that is taking place in Europe will be taken into account. To help communication between both processes (Bologna and the EULAC common ground) the EULAC Common Space Follow-up Committee should participate in the preparatory meetings for Berlin 2003.

IV.3. Transverse actions

1. To create and strengthen research centres on Latin American and Caribbean studies in Europe, and European ones in Latin America and the Caribbean.

To promote the creation, and to strengthen the existence of European Studies Research Centres in Latin America and the Caribbean, and support resource sharing, chiefly human, in the Latin American and Caribbean Studies Research Centres in Europe will be one of the priority actions.

2. Foment expert meetings on technical and vocational training at higher levels.

To prepare an expert meeting to present actions relative to setting of common curricula in various professional activities, which will encourage the production of common Diplomas. Some Member States of the European Union participate already in a similar project (European project of sustainable professionalization that has already been signed by several members of the EU and other European states). A study regarding the likelihood of voluntarily extending this project to Latin American and Caribbean countries.

3. To support the creation of virtual libraries

To support country proposals to create transnational, virtual libraries whose resources may be used by the countries within the Common Space in order to disseminate knowledge.

4. To organize a training course on regional integration

To hold an expert seminar to create a high-level training course on regional integration, aimed at young graduated and professionals from the public and private sector, which furthermore integrates distance learning methodologies and practices, as well as the application of the new information and communication technologies.