

Higher Education Cooperation With Latin America

INTERNATIONALIZATION REMAINS A STRONG PRIORITY for institutions of higher education across the globe.¹ Universities continue to pursue meaningful institutional agreements with counterparts in different areas of the world to encourage student mobility, to foster faculty exchanges, or to develop collaborative research projects.

Student mobility in particular has witnessed a marked increase during the new millennium. In its *Education Indicators in Focus* issue of May 2013², the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) noted that between 2000 and 2011, the number of students enrolled outside their home countries more than doubled, to 4.5 million. Fifty-three percent of those studying abroad were from Asia, with China, India, and South Korea having the most students enrolled abroad. Twenty-three percent of all students enrolled outside of their home countries were from Europe, with Germany, France, Russia, and Italy producing the largest numbers. Africa accounted for 12 percent, with Nigeria, Morocco, and Zimbabwe, which sends the most abroad. The remaining 12 percent were from the rest of the world, with the most notable region being the Americas.

Latin America as a whole sends relatively fewer students abroad. Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela accounted for the highest number of students enrolled outside of their home countries. Approximately 90 percent of these students, however, chose to study in OECD countries, meaning that not only did fewer students study abroad overall from the region, but mobility between Latin American countries themselves remains rather limited. Furthermore, there appears to be less integration and cooperation generally between higher education institutions within Latin America.³

Latin America's Higher Education Internationalization

Nevertheless, the internationalization of Latin America's tertiary sector does enjoy considerable support within Latin American societies. Latin America's emerging middle classes favor greater student mobility, seeing ex-

change experiences and training opportunities abroad as providing much-needed skills. Higher education institutions themselves view internationalization as a means for improving academic program quality, strengthening institutional brand, and raising domestic academic rankings.

Governments of the region view internationalization as a way to develop new cultural, economic, and political linkages abroad, as well as a way to raise the quality of education in the country and, by extension, the quality of life of their citizens. Governments also view higher education internationalization as a necessary response to globalization and demands for new skills sets. In particular, advances in science and technology, and the opening up of new fields of study, call for greater cross-border collaboration, the development of new international competencies, and support for more skills-based learning.

Moreover, higher education internationalization in Latin America has been encouraged by institutions and governments in Europe and the United States. My own institution, Saint Leo University in Florida, has developed multiple projects with institutions of the region, and we have made cooperating with Latin America a high priority. Cooperation between Latin American institutions and institutional partners from the rest of the world is expected only to grow in the future. Yet what also needs to be advanced with greater vigor is more meaningful collaboration between institutions of the region itself.

Global Higher Education Reforms

There is little doubt that Latin America has been influenced by reform trends in higher education in other parts of the globe, particularly in Europe. The Bologna Process, which grew out of a summit held in 1999 at the University of Bologna, Europe's oldest university, committed



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The Bologna process also impacted Latin American higher education.

Latin American Higher Education Reforms

Indeed, several domestic reforms were introduced across Latin America in the area of degree recognition, shortly after the launch of the Bologna process. In 2000 Mexico's Ministry of Education harmonized degree recognition, while a 2003 Colombian decree sought to standardize its academic credit system. In 2004 Costa Rica adopted common nomenclature for higher education diplomas.⁵

At the regional level, moreover, the European Union-Latin America/Caribbean Higher Education Area (UEALC) was launched in 2000 in response to the Bologna Process. Since its inauguration, regular summits have been held between European and Latin American higher education leaders on higher education issues. UEALC has committed itself to improving cooperation between Latin America and Europe, as well as fostering cooperation between Latin American countries themselves in the area of higher education, with student mobility and credit recognition being key focal points.

Goals of UEALC include creating greater transparency in the recognition of transfer credits between institutions. UEALC supported the development of a common academic credit system called SICA (*Sistema de Creditos Academicos*), and a degree recognition system, CAT (*Complemento al Titulo*), similar to Europe's ECTS and diploma supplement. SICA and CAT, initiatives which emerged out of an academic summit that took place in 2004 in Argentina, were intended to create a more streamlined and transparent academic credit system.⁶ The implementation of SICA and CAT, however, remains elusive for a number of reasons outlined in the next section.

Other noteworthy cross-border reform initiatives include the launch of the Network

of Macro-Universities of Latin America and the Caribbean in 2002. The network promotes credential recognition and student exchanges among Latin America's 30 largest higher education institutions. Yet another regional initiative was Mercosur's 2003 higher education project to improve academic quality by developing a "User's Guide" for academic credit transfer across the region, a process spearheaded by the Association of Universities and Technical Colleges of Mercosur (AUTMER).⁷

Challenges to Regional Cooperation in Latin America

Nevertheless, the process to bring about greater cooperation in the realm of higher education has been slow moving. There are numerous reasons that account for this, including the lack of a strong regional integration framework, like that which exists in Europe, which prevents more sweeping reforms. There also is a frequent lack of resources available to Latin American governments to improve the quality of higher education, as well as cultural resistance to change within some countries, which result in many governments rallying around preserving the status quo.

Additionally, there are structural issues within the tertiary education sector itself. These include the dominant position enjoyed by public universities in many countries, who defend their privileged roles in their higher education systems. Added to this is the proliferation of poorly regulated private sector institutions—some of whom are of dubious quality—which hampers the implementation of widespread mutual credit recognition. Finally, there is also often a general lack of consensus over how to harmonize program structures and diploma requirements.⁸

Given the above factors, any move toward more effective credit recognition within Latin American countries remains an acute

signatories to harmonizing many features of higher education. Measures were introduced to increase student mobility, to harmonize university degree systems to consist of bachelor, master, and doctoral degree cycles, and to create a "diploma supplement" that would accompany all degrees to explain the academic and professional qualifications of each degree granted.

Additionally, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was established to standardize the system of credits for classroom learning and professional experiences. Quality assurance measures also were introduced, more attention was paid to lifelong skills training, and a process was introduced to better connect higher education with the labor market in order to improve graduate employability. In short, innovative ideas to improve transparency, transferability and flexibility were introduced to Europe's traditional educational structures. By 2010, when the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was formally launched, Europe had begun championing similar reforms in other parts of the globe. In Africa, the Bologna Process influenced the creation of the East African Community of higher education institutions. In Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) launched a quality framework and curriculum development process in 2005. The North African countries of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia began harmonizing their degree structures along Bologna lines.⁴

challenge, with the inability to make measurable progress in the implementation of SICA and CAT across the region being just one aspect of this problem. Frequently, prestigious public universities will not recognize credits obtained at well-regarded private institutions, while top private universities may not recognize each other's credits. Refusal to recognize credits may be a quality assurance matter, particularly when confronted with credits from, say, a poorly regarded private institution, yet in many cases nonrecognition of credits results from prevailing policy or due to competition between institutions. Failure to implement national or regional directives on credit recognition encourages restrictive institutional policies to persist.

The Future of Latin American Higher Education Cooperation

Enhancing cooperation to improve student mobility and credit recognition remain wor-

thy goals for the region's higher education institutions. The development of standardized credit and diploma recognition systems in Latin America along Bologna lines remain important initiatives that have, nonetheless, not enjoyed widespread implementation. Following through on these initiatives in the coming years may be an important step in advancing higher education cooperation and furthering higher education reform in the region.

At the same time, it should also be kept in mind that the Bologna model is by no means a panacea. Latin America's particular political and socioeconomic context, ongoing tensions between public and private universities, and the sheer complexity of the constellation of private sector universities in the region make it difficult to emulate fully the Bologna Process in Latin America. Harmonization efforts need to proceed in Latin America according to the region's capacities and priorities.

That being said, there needs to be a more concerted effort to increase cooperation among institutions, to promote greater student mobility within the region, and to achieve better credit recognition. Perhaps recent initiatives by organizations from outside of Latin America, notably under the auspices of UELAC, or the recent 100,000 Strong in the Americas initiative, are steps in the right direction. Such initiatives that promote mobility and develop new collaborative channels may serve to encourage more ambitious reforms down the road, by shining a stronger light on the benefits of heightened cooperation between Latin American institutions.

Latin American institutions have clearly demonstrated the will to pursue internationalization. It is now a question of how quickly and successfully Latin American governments and tertiary institutions can implement some of the essentials of the internationalization process, particularly as regards student

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mobility within the region and in the area of credit and credential recognition. **IE**

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Nic Mitchell, "European Universities Make Building International Ties a Top Priority," *Chronicle for Higher Education*, August 26, 2015.
- ² Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Education Indicators in Focus*, August 2013.
- ³ Marion Lloyd, "Across the Americas, Globalization of Higher Education Lags" *Chronicle for Higher Education* Vol. 55:35, May 8, 2009.
- ⁴ Charlotte West, "Ripple Effects: The Bologna Process, Ten Years On" *International Educator* 19:6 (Nov/Dec 2012): 25–32.
- ⁵ Jose Manuel Restrepo, "El Sistema de Creditos academicos en la perspectiva colombiana y MERCOSUR: Aproximaciones al modelo europeo" *Revista de la Educacion Superior* 34:3 (July-Sept 2005): 131–152.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Jose Joaquin Brunner, "The Bologna Process from a Latin American Perspective" *Journal of Studies in International Education* 20:10 (December 2009): 1–22.

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