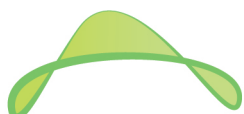


Latin America towards imminent processes of harmonization and integration into common spaces of Higher Education: A first set of considerations and analysis for reflection

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Este documento es una publicación de la Organización para la Cooperación, Investigación y Desarrollo de la Educación Superior (OCIDES).

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Texto terminado en diciembre de 2009. Kassel, Alemania.

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Introduction

As many other regions all over the world, Latin America (LA) is not unconnected with the need, indeed the urgency, to develop strategic regional alliances and pursue a similar Higher Education (HE) modernization agenda that are currently undertaking others regions and countries in the globe in order to react to the demands resulting from globalization and internationalization in HE. In more or less, this agenda implies, the need to develop new convergence initiatives that allow greater students and staff mobility, mutual trust and transparency, recognition of qualifications and degrees, and academic and research cooperation.

Under this inevitably scenario, we note that Higher Education systems (HES's) from LA have realized this urgency and have been addressing some projects aimed at developing mechanisms and also guidelines to move towards the creation of common spaces of HE in the years to come in which be able to cope, within a common platform for HE cooperation, the above mentioned critical issues of the millennium HE worldwide agenda, while promoting both their attractiveness and competitiveness within the new highly dynamic and demanding academic environment. Notably, the limited progress achieved is a clear signal that this ambitious goal is a complex and challenging one, due to the fact that the region faces several obstacles and also is lacking in features to cope successfully with it.

The European experience - with its very often questionable Bologna Process that has achieved a new milestone in the history of HE reforms in the world- excels today as the initiative that has reached more progress in this ambitious endeavor. The same provide an enriched learning experience for those other regions such as LA, which are willing to give more impetus to their current efforts of harmonization and regional integration in HE.

Based on the above, this term paper aims at making a call to reflection about the topic through a first set of considerations and analysis of this imminent harmonization of the Latin American HES's and their subsequent incorporation into common spaces of HE. To do so, we will address the issue since its global context until finally landing in the reality of

the region and its most ambitious projects in this regard.

The title of this paper alludes to the idea of imminent because we want to stress first, the key role that should play the topic within the HE agenda of the region after the recent urgent and emphatic call made by the participants of the Regional Conference on HE 2008 to all the members of educational communities, bodies and actors involved in policy and strategic decisions in HE within the region, to take the commitment and not delay the academic integration of the region in order to create the future of America (“Declaration of the Regional Conference,” 2008). Second, the multiple declarations and agreements that have been signed in this respect which have repeated over and over again this same commitment to be assumed, and last but not least, the harsh reality of globalization and internationalization in HE that we are all facing and from which we can not escape.

The structure of this paper provides firstly, a glimpse of the role that globalization and internationalization in HE have played in forcing regions to seek challenging and inevitable mechanisms of convergence and integration of their HES’s. The second section in turn, gives an overview of the most advanced and ongoing effort in initiating harmonization and integration of regional HES’s in the world: The Bologna Process, a reference framework for similar efforts elsewhere in the globe. The third section in turn, raises the realities facing LA in terms of its HE context and historic and modern institutional patterns towards a process of harmonization and integration into common spaces of HE. And finally, the fourth section will explore in brief the genesis, content, development, results and/or expectations of the two most ambitious regional scale initiatives in harmonization and integration in HE which involve LA at this moment: The European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean (EULAC) Area for HE, and the Latin America and Caribbean Area for HE (ENLACES).

The information presented throughout this paper was collected in the first instance from various academic papers and documents available in electronic version from journals, virtual libraries and some other sources from organizations related to HE. We also resorted to some chapters of books written by authors that have done research on the topics discussed here. Special attention was paid also a some declarations and official documents related to the processes of harmonization and academic integration explored.

1. Undertaking harmonization and academic integration processes: The forces of globalization and internationalization of Higher Education

Higher Education institutions (HEI's) all over the world are facing new demands, trends and challenges related to the forces globalization and internationalization in Higher Education (HE). Altbach et al. (2009) describe them as a key reality in this new century XXI that has already profoundly influenced our Higher Education systems (HES's), leading the same to arrive to a step for urgent international discussions, cooperation and agreements. Yavaprabhas (2008) in turn, is more specific when stating that these key realities have potentially contributed to the development and transformation of the HES's, re-shaping their nature somewhat and forcing their different actors and bodies to development multiple agendas to deal with them.

Certainly, the new millennium allows us to witness one of the most visible manifestations of these forces in the area of HE: Student mobility. According to Altbach et al. (2009), up to present, there are -at the very least- 2.5 million students -countless scholars, degrees and universities- moving around the globe, and this number will rise to 7 million by 2020.

In spite of this optimistic estimation made by these authors, however, Yavaprabhas (2008) argues that, nowadays, while most of the HEI's around the globe encourage student mobility within the new global HE environment we are facing, it is a fact that in most of the countries and regions still remain several obstacles deterring or not facilitating this and other aims. Unfortunately, it is also pointed out by the author that there is also a lack of an agreed set of infrastructure in HE. In the course of this last consideration, he provides some examples: "the incompatible academic cycles, the quality assurance procedures (or the lack thereof), the recognition of qualifications provisions and also domestic regulations" (p. 3). Within this scenario, he considers the harmonization¹ and academic integration of HES's through concerted regional efforts, as the best tool to cope with these structural problems.

In trying to analyze some of the implications of harmonization and regional integration into a common spaces of HE, Yavaprabhas (2008) remarks that one should not forget that these are a processes that recognize diversity of HES's and cultures and that the same do not mean, however, the promotion of uniformity or standardization of HES's; rather, they must strive for the development of mechanisms and general guidelines about degree and qualification comparability and recognition, quality assurance, credit

transfers, and so on.

Altogether, it is difficult to elucidate deeply all the implications of this sensitive and comprehensive topic. Ironically, remarks as “globalization carries with it the idea of a process of creating a single world on the planetary scale” (Zarur, 2008, p. 180) or “globalization lead to an erosion of the national regulatory and policy frameworks in which universities are embedded” (Van Damme, 2001, p. 2) take us to really wonder about the future of the identity of each one of the region’s HES’s towards the current and futures processes of harmonization and integration in HE within the actual global context. It could be argued that these are already irreversible phenomenon, a fact of life that cannot be wished away, but the true is that the topic merits further research. Indeed, we note that nowadays different actors and bodies specialized in the field are debating and re-thinking about them, due to their several open questions.

2. Europe as a reference of harmonization and academic integration processes

2.1. The Bologna Process: The basis of the European experience

Lazzari (2008) in her unpublished master's thesis points out that in June 1999 happened one of the most outstanding developments of the international dimension of Higher Education (HE) in Europe, since it meant the reconfiguration of the Higher Process that seeks to establish a correspondence or compatibility between different qualifications and degrees conferred by HEI’s in different countries (Beneitone et al., 2007, p.311).

Education systems (HES’s) in that region. The literature reviewed through this and other sources notes that this event occurred in Italy, city of Bologna, when ministers in charge of HE from 29 European countries formalized a voluntary and historical agreement in order to start the establishment of a compatible framework for its HES’s. This agreement was named the Bologna Declaration (BD), and the entire process with its reforms involve is often referred to as: “The Bologna Process” (BP). Up to present, this BP encompasses 46 European countries in a strong partnership of public authorities, Higher Education institutions (HEI’s), staff and students, and other important stakeholders, which together are striving to harmonize all the participating European HES’s in order to achieve their regional integration into a common “European Higher Education Area” (EHEA) by

2010. (Benelux Bologna Secretariat, n.d.; Lazzari, 2008).

As stated by Malo (2005), the simple fact that Europe -one of the most prosperous regions of the world- had decided to embark on this BP is, clearly, enough reason for calling worldwide attention. Undoubtedly, this commitment refers to a challenge not only for the HEI's of that region, but also for several national and international actors and bodies related to policies in HE in Europe (Ravaioli, 2009). According to Reyes (n.d.), in the European experience we find the basis for a new world model of HE. What is more, the author led to the conclusion that Europe with its BP has a special attractiveness for the academic world when considering student and staff mobility, common space, quality assurance and regional cooperation. By taking into account these four key features pointed out by this author, we might assume that Europe is striving to become the most attractive, competitive, efficient and dynamic region of the world in terms of HE. Obviously, we have to bear in mind, though, that this assumption means a very ambitious goal for this region, due to the sensitiveness and complexity of such a reform process.

Today, ten years after the historical agreement signing in the city of Bologna, and about one year to complete the initial agenda, it could be arguable the progress reached. In this respect, some researchers and followers of the BP have pointed out that it has reflected enormous and substantial progress (see Altbach et al., 2009; Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2009). However, despite this progress reached, the ministers responsible for HE in the 46 participating countries of the BP accepted in the last Ministerial Conference held in Belgium in April 2009 that not all the objectives have been completely achieved by all the country members. What is more, the ministers appealed that the full and proper implementation of these objectives will require more time and commitment, even beyond the deadline of 2010. ("Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers," 2009).

Clearly, this revelation has led to the assumption that by 2010 the outcomes of this BP will be more modest than originally hoped. Unfortunately, this disclosure does not come as a surprise for some researchers in the field. Teichler (2007), years ago, had already predicted that is unlikely to implement all the objectives in a short period of time, referring obviously to the 2010 deadline. What is more, he argued at that time, that the core decisions of the BP might even require deeper analysis and reflection. These previous

arguments, though, seem to be underscored on the fact that the implementation of the reforms in each participating country arose new challenges not foreseen (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2009).

Nonetheless, despite all obstacles and constraints emerged in the challenging task of implementing the BP with its reforms, it is interesting to note the strong commitment of a region for continuing shaping its ideal of HE. This statement, of course, is based on the fact that there are clear evidences indicating that the actors of this BP are getting ready to assume a new vision and strategies for advancing the reforms post 2010. For instance, the European University Association (2008) has already suggested a new vision based on the consolidation of actual achievements, in monitoring unfinished goals in order to guarantee their success, in fostering communication and in the optimization of existing reforms. Further, in the context of reformulating the vision and setting up new strategies for the future of this BP, it should be noted that an extraordinary Bologna Ministerial Anniversary Conference will be held in Budapest and Vienna on March 2010 -at the time originally planned for launching the EHEA- to review and assess the progress made towards the achievements of this independent intergovernmental initiative (Benelux Bologna Secretariat, n.d.).

2.2. Bologna as a reference for Higher Education reforms worldwide

According to Yavaprabhas (2008), outside Europe, the processes of harmonization and integration in the area of HE are still in an embryonic stage of development. As a consequence, states Altbach et al. (2009), the European experience has become a reference for similar efforts elsewhere in the globe. This statement, of course, was supported by the Working Group on the External Dimension of the Bologna Process (2006) which in its first report has confirmed that, indeed, there are now numerous echoes of Bologna from other parts of the world. In the opinion of this working group, Bologna has had this external impact because it has been coping with a similar HE modernization agenda being pursued by these others regions and countries.

In thinking about this external impact, a question comes immediately to our mind: Should really the Bologna agenda with its particular reforms be applied or extended to these other regions and countries? Mohamedbhai (2005), former President of the International Association of Universities wondered in 2005 the same. Without giving an accurate response, he just stated that until that date (2005) there had been limited organized debate on this issue. The Working Group on the External Dimension of the Bologna Process (2006) in turn, recognized that Professor Mohamedbhai raised a provocative question, and any attempt to answer the same would demand seriousness and detachment of any Eurocentrism. Further, this working group pointed out that the dilemma is what should be applied or extended: The “Bologna reforms” or the “Bologna idea”? In this respect, the group stated that the first option, the “Bologna reforms”, understood the same as recipes, could be a very questionable choice. Conversely, considering the “Bologna idea”, understood the same as the philosophy behind this BP process, could be quite the opposite.

According to Tiana (2009), the most important consideration is not the reforms themselves, but the ideals that have driven them and the answers that have been given to them. Tiana has the view that although it is too early to predict what might be the outcome of this European experience in the medium and long terms, the same could be considered an interesting mirror and an enriched learning experience for other countries or regions in the process of developing or wishing to undertake similar initiatives, allowing making progress more easily and avoiding the mistakes of Europe.

Anyway, learning from the European experience will not be a difficult task.

Nowadays, there is a lot of documentation (analysis, academic papers, etc) about the BP and its implications. Apart from that, the main actors of this BP have already accepted their commitment for enhancing the understanding of this reform process by sharing their experiences with these other regions and countries of the world interested in the topic ("Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers," 2005).

3. Latin American reality towards a process of building common spaces of Higher Education

According to IESALC (2009), the idea of building a common spaces of Higher Education (HE) in Latin America (LA), as is been planned in Europe, is not new. It has been repeatedly expressed by different actors in the region in various stages of discussion and meetings, however, these efforts are still timid and limited because of several obstacles such as the lack of a supranational organization capable to mobilize and ensure the adhesion of countries to regional programs, the lack of resources, the lack of coordinated and collaborative links between the Higher Education institutions (HEI's), the prevailing gaps between the Higher Education systems (HES's) of the region, the resistances to change - which appears to be very strong and in urgent need of attention-, and last but not least, the lack of commitment of the countries to implement the proposals.

Ironically, as Zazur (2008) pointed out, there is more progress in declarations than in carrying out concrete actions to insert the activities, projects and programs proposed into the regular implementation of policies and practices of the countries, demonstrating also the inexistence of coordination mechanisms between the committees, HEI's, and government authorities. Under this scenario, the above named author raised several questions to reflection regarding the current status and disposition of the region to undertake a process such this, the actions that still have to be taken in order to really foster the initiatives in the region, the entities that could truly contribute to join a

maximum of trust with a minimum of the conflicting interests that are so frequent in this kind of processes, and the way to overcome the statutory and bureaucratic concerns that always appear in these initiatives. We must say that there is no simple answer to any of these questions, and any attempt to do so must address and understand a broad range of other realities that are also part of the Latin American HE context and the region's historic and modern institutional patterns.

In illustrating the variety of issues about the Latin American HE context, we will bring some approaches from researches that have found and agreed that we are dealing with several HES's that are deep in asymmetries and qualitative and quantitative differences and deficiencies, which, certainly, makes it difficult to carry out joint efforts in the terms of a HE integration. Brunner (2009), for instance, states that HE in the region is been subject to intense centrifugal tendencies, organizational diversification, competitive pressures and little capacity to cooperate; circumstances that are increasing the level of divergence, rather than taking it down. On the other hand, he argues, there is a lack of comparative institutional typologies, absence of agreed comparative criteria, and a rigid curriculum without a credit transfer system that would enable the computing of studies already achieved, validate acquired skills and define individual learning paths in order to promote student mobility. What is more, underscores the author, in the Latin American HE model, we find that governments are relatively impotent faced with HEI's whose autonomy has become almost absolute during the 20th century, not allowing them a decisively intervention in the coordination of their HES's. Beneitone et al. (2007) in turn, found that within the region, the progress in quality assurance and accreditation is still weak and not uniform. In addition, HEI's are supervised in different ways, and there is disparity in the grade scale used, even within a single institution. Apart from that, Zazur (2008) pointed out that there is no standardized use of terminology, and the qualifications acquired and the contents of diplomas have lack of legibility and transparency. Further, regarding the different supranational projects, organizations and networks that have been created, Malo (2005) stresses that most of them are based only in national interests and visions, some regional, but never in a continental level. Finally, states Dido (2006), there is no mutual trust between the systems.

In the course of all the above structural, organizational, and functional issues that clearly require careful consideration, Brunner (2009) predicts that the task of building a HE common space in LA, as is happening in Europe, beyond the enthusiasm and hopes of some Latin American's government officials, university administrators, and academics, would be difficult, discouraging or even an unlikely goal. This prediction, however drastic and discouraged as it is, does not come as a surprise, if we look also at the history of hopes and frustrations of any process of integration in the region. In supporting this argument, we resort to a new element for analysis: The Latin American historic and modern institutional patterns.

A first summary of considerations from Brunner (2009), thus, suggests that in LA it is easy to find little, if not zero, common ground (neither political, nor economic, nor monetary and less so a common knowledge space) to which appeal, whereupon the speeches of integration, apart from being devoid of content, objectives, goals, and instruments to bring them to fruition, as well says the author, are found floating freely in the air. What is more, Brunner claims that LA remains as a block of countries grouped together by geography, history, and languages but separated by all the others remaining factors.

Reyes (n.d) in turn, underscores the fact that the different integration efforts that have been carried out in the region have been characterized by their implementation according to the interests of national and international groups, and for their high level of rhetoric and called for a LA unity. Moreover, Lazzari (2008) in her research work identified two new elements: The political instability in the region, which usually has slowed down the various attempts in realizing a stronger cooperation in many fields, and the conflicts of power and interests that have prevailed in the current configuration of the region in three sub-regional structures of political arrangements: The Integration System for Central America (SICA), the Andean Community (CAN), and the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR). Further, Malo (2005) emphasized, paradoxically, that not even the shared ideals of the region, such as the dream raised by the Liberator Simon Bolivar to see a united LA, have had the scope and strength enough to give the region a sense of direction, organization and response.

4. Ongoing initiatives for building areas for Higher Education in Latin America

4.1. European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean (EULAC) Area for Higher Education

This project, even if not the first attempt of integration in terms of Higher Education (HE) in the Latin American region, was the first echo of Bologna that reached Latin America (LA). The idea of developing a strategic partnership for the strengthening of bilateral and multilateral cooperation and interaction in Higher Education (HE) within these three regions stems from the First Summit of Heads of State and Government of LA, the Caribbean and the European Union (EU), held in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 1999 -immediately after the signing of the Bologna Declaration. A year later, the idea was formalized and presented as a EULAC Area for Higher Education in the first EULAC Ministerial Conference on HE held in Paris in November 2000. In the declaration prepared for this meeting, the action framework of this project was established, including, among others, the encouragement towards better comparability of degrees, student and staff mobility, and the establishment of a compatible credit systems in order to facilitate recognition and validation. In addition, a Follow-up Committee was established with representatives of the three regions in order to co-ordinate and develop the project proposal and agenda. ("The European Union - Latin America - Caribbean Ministerial Conference on Higher Education," 2000).

The first plan of action of this project for the period 2002-2004 was submitted and approved at the Second Summit of Heads of State and Government of Madrid (2002), defining its objectives, strategies and specific projects. In this regard, the EULAC Area for HE was defined as an area open to a plurality of cultures that, rather than being just a mechanism for coping with globalization, would help to overcome the differences in the region and develop further collaboration, cooperation, exchanges of good practices and reciprocity, with equality and solidarity, recognizing at all times the differences and similarities, as well as the diversity of languages and the variety of Higher Education systems (HES's). On the other hand, it is stated that the student and staff mobility and the assessment of the quality of HE constitute the two main priorities for the project within the aforementioned period. To achieve these, the plan set out several strategies, including: To take into consideration the initiatives and experiences of each one of the countries and regions involved, the mobilization of all necessary national and regional resources, the

encouragement of collaboration between universities, research centers and the private sector, the stimulation of reciprocal recognition of HE assessment and accreditation procedures, and the creation of assessment devices. ("Plan of Action Project 2002-2004," 2002)

The need to provide continuity of this regional project led the EULAC heads of state and government, gathered at their Third Summit in Guadalajara, Mexico in May 2004, to agree a new extension of the first plan of action until 2008. In this context, this second plan of action 2005-2008, including its strategies, the strategic document "Horizon 2015", the principles of cooperation in the EULAC Area for HE, and the new projects to be executed, were submitted and approved in the second EULAC Ministerial Conference on HE held in Mexico in April 2005. Among the new strategies proposed stood out: the mutual awareness, involvement by all members, the identification and reduction of barriers, and the identification of funding sources and mechanisms. ("Estrategias hacia la construcción del espacio común ALCUE," 2005). In talking about the time horizon of 2015, this action plan established that by 2015 the EULAC Area for HE should be launched, having the following characteristics: An important development of mechanisms and networks of cooperation and exchange, comparability mechanisms, effective mobility programs, clear funding sources, etc. ("Horizonte hacia la construcción del Espacio Común ALCUE," 2005).

Since the formalization of this project in November 2000, the countries member of the EULAC partnership, sixty (60) to date, have met periodically throughout the past years to work in its consolidation by 2015. During this time, it is noted that LA and the EU - thought the European Commission- have been developing several collaborative initiatives related to the promotion of the project. Brunner (2009) highlights three of them as the most important: The 6x4 (six professions around four axes) project², the ALFA-Tuning-Latin America project³, and Proflex⁴ (Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society) -the LA version of the European Reflex project-. At the same time, points out also the author, a group of academic organizations, associations, and networks have been constituted to sustain and feed the development of the EULAC initiative.

However, in spite of the above accomplishments, Zarur (2008) states that the inclusion of the objectives outlined in the EULAC plans of action has not been reflected yet

in the public policies of the majority of the 19 Latin American countries members of the partnership, except, perhaps, for those that comprise the Follow-up Committee. In this respect., Dido (2006) also acknowledges that the project is suffering from absence of strong political commitment amongst Latin American participating countries because it is noted the limited progress in the promotion of public policies to make it a reality.

Unfortunately, this argument does not come as a surprise if we take into consideration the already described difficulties facing LA both in terms of its HES's as in its politico-economical situation towards a regional integration, contrary to what is happening in the EU, which is already a well-structured and institutionalized block with an advanced experience in HE harmonization and academic integration. For Lazzari (2008) the evident disparities among the EULAC countries, particularly in LA, may be seen as the biggest challenge for the accomplishment of the project.

The VALUE project working team, a group conceived to make this HE integration project a reality, has stressed that, so far, the creation of the EULAC Area for HE has been a "cold process" with insufficient level of awareness and participation, widespread prejudice, lack of clarity on reciprocity and mutual benefits, and lack of synergies among the existing networks. In its statements, we note that the group did not blame any particular of the participating regions. Nonetheless, in spite of the several weaknesses the group pointed out, the results of a survey conducted in 2007 have shown that the project is a desirable and addressable aim. The majority of the over 300 HE experts consulted in both regions, says the report, expressed their support to the aim and confidence on its feasibility by 2015 (Project VALUE, n.d.). Contrary to this optimistic result of the survey, Lazzari (2008) is not convinced of this feasibility by 2015. In the analysis carried out, she concludes that the project has still a long trajectory to follow until its establishment. She resumes her reasons in four points: First, she argues that the project is lead basically by the governmental representatives that compose the Follow-up Committee, without enough involvement of other stakeholders. Second, she notes more involvement of the EU and LA than from the Caribbean. Third, she found very little consistency in the EULAC agenda, thus it is noticed that over time, the objectives drawn in the second Ministerial meeting in 2005 link to a very little extent to the aims proposed in the original agreement from 2000. Finally, she argues that the Follow-up Committee is restricting the involvement of external initiatives, even

though these other initiatives pursue similar goals of bringing the three regions together.

Notwithstanding the substantial controversies we could find regarding the feasibility of the EULAC Area for HE by 2015, what is clear however, is that the VALUE working group is right in suggesting that it is necessary to accelerate and optimize the process of integration by involving not only the Follow-up Committee, but also all other interested actors, providing an accurate picture of what is already happening, and defining an articulated roadmap for action with specific objectives at short and medium term, as well as outcomes that could be achieved by 2015. What is more, the working group emphasizes that this strategy should move forward without first waiting for the integration of LA. According to its arguments, both processes should progress in parallel and learn from each other. (Project VALUE, n.d.).

By referring to the risk of not taking advantage of this initiative and stopping sharing the project's vision as a consequence of the all difficulties and obstacles that were already mentioned, Malo (2005) emphasizes that if this happens the EU will definitely have wasted the chance to use this opportunity to develop the largest area for HE of the world, and LA the valuable opportunity to modernize and reflect on its HES's, achieving greater integration of its academic community and maintaining the strength of the cultural ties with the nations of the EU.

4.2 Latin America and Caribbean Area for Higher Education (ENLACES)

ENLACES is the latest regional strategy of cooperation and integration in Higher Education (HE) in Latin America (LA) and the Caribbean. The proposal of this initiative stems from the Regional Conference on HE (CRES) held in the city of Cartagena de Indias, Colombia in June 2008, where the participants concluded that the project was essential, necessary and could not be delayed, so they requested to UNESCO International Institute for HE in LA and the Caribbean (IESALC-UNESCO) to present a roadmap of the initiative and head it in its first phase (see Declaration of the Regional Conference on Higher Education of Latin America and the Caribbean -CRES 2008, 2008). Months later, ENLACES was endorsed and finally sealed by key policy-makers from organizations, university networks and Councils of Chancellors of both regions with the signature of three important declarations: The Declaration of Panama⁵ in November 2008, the Declaration

of Santo Domingo⁶ in March 2009, and the Declaration of Lima⁷ in June 2009. More recently, it has been recognized and supported by rectors of public universities and legislators from the participating regions through the Declaration of the Bicentennial of Quito⁸ in October 2009 and the Declaration of Buenos Aires⁹ in November 2009, respectively.

In looking back to the proposal for creating ENLACES, we could argue that this new initiative is aiming a duplicate agenda to that of the previous described project and others sub-regional ones no covered in this term paper, because it address the same principles of promotion of mobility and academic exchange in the region, the incorporation of a system of credits and common criteria for the curricular harmonization in order to set standards and generate inter-institutional confidence and convergence, etc. (see Espacio Latinoamericano y del Caribe de Educación Superior, 2009a). In the course of these considerations, it is difficult to clarify to what extent this duplicity could

⁵ http://www.oui-iohe.org/eles/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/the-declaration-of-panama-ingles_-rev4-_3_.pdf

⁶ <http://www.oui-iohe.org/eles/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/the-declaration-of-santo-domingo.pdf>

⁷ http://www.iesalc.unesco.org.ve/dmdocuments/declaracion_lima_2009_EN.pdf

⁸ <http://www.iesalc.unesco.org.ve/dmdocuments/cumbre.pdf>

⁹ http://www.iesalc.unesco.org.ve/dmdocuments/declaracion_buenos_aires.pdf

benefit the region or bring conflicts. However, a close glance to the expressed commitment of ENLACES shows that it by itself is not intended to replace any of these other collaborative initiatives that have been currently undertaken in a regional and sub- regional scale, but rather the partnership of actors, programs, projects and alliances that it encompasses is seeking to strengthen all the actual collaborative initiatives and create new ones, while promoting a common agenda for developing HE in the region, and a platform to be used as an effective instrument for permanent dialogue to orchestrate concrete actions that seek to remedy those already underscored deficiencies and gaps in terms of regional cooperation and academic integration (IESALC, 2009)

From what is available, this regional initiative seems to be still in process of construction and development. However, since its promulgation in CRES 2008, the partnership has been working on a number of basic outlines, recommendations, proposals, considerations and key agreements that have been articulated from the few meetings held, which, undoubtedly, define a first course of this project. A first summary of these, points out that, first, the harmonization process in ENLACES should not be treated as synonymous of homogenization. Second, the evaluation and accreditation mechanisms must be strengthened in order to raise the level of trust among the universities of the region. Third, the existence of prior experiences in Europe and in the region must be recognized in order to learn from them and determine best practices. Fourth, a common proposal for university legislation within the region must be created. Fifth, the actual educational model within the region must be changed. Sixth, the strategy for jointing the curriculum should respect diversity and social relevance of the academic programs offered by each university and country within the region. Finally, it must be recognized that the viability of the project will be only possible with a coordinated effort from governments, networks, institutions and academics (Espacio Latinoamericano y del Caribe de Educación Superior, 2009b).

Among the two most significant advances we note about the project highlights: First, the designation of the Follow-Up Committee in the meeting of Lima in June 2009, with the participation of eight members from university network representatives and regional leadership councils. Last, the definition of following five working axis and areas

in order to encourage its implementation: Institutional development (governments, legal norms, and political support), academic cooperation (accreditation and evaluation, recognition of titles, curriculum convergence, academic mobility, and distance education), communication and information (ENLACES online), production and management of knowledge (regional observatories, studies and publications, open educational resources, map of HE, and virtual site for HE initiatives), and tools and support services (see IESALC, 2009).

To achieve the proposed aims, IESALC (2009) stresses that ENLACES must generate inter-institutional trust, overcoming, apart from the already list of challenges discussed in section 3, its identification as just another simple regional academic integration project because of the all skepticism that could be raised as a result of the transcendence that we know have been suffering previous efforts. We certainly note that within the Follow-Up Committee there is an optimistic vision of the project, and it is believed that the proposed objectives will be achieved in a short term (IESALC, 2009).

Conclusions

Harmonization and regional integration of Higher Education systems in Latin America (LA) are imminent and should gain momentum. The region needs to shape its future in order to be able to compete in the new global knowledge-based society.

The European experience, which has made significant progress, confirms that the task is indeed complex and require significant time, adequate resources, political commitment and deeper analysis and reflection to work successfully. Undoubtedly, it contains many lessons for LA, however, we can not guarantee that it will give the most accurate answer being awaited by the region to overcome its multiple weaknesses and deficiencies underscored in this term paper, due to the abysmal contextual differences and significant disadvantages that separate the same from the old continent.

In so far, harmonization and regional academic integration in LA have been identified as a priority within the region's HE modernization agenda, unfortunately, their implementations have not yet begun in any meaningful way because their rhetoric seems to be more common than its concrete actions. We certainly note that there are a number

of strategies and targets that have been already identified and brought to the table to promote these processes in the region. All that remains now is to take and put them to fulfill their fruit. Of course, at first glance one could argue that to achieve this will be critical to provide the region with resources. However, our point of view in this respect is that the resources, although necessities, are not the most important thing the region needs to fulfill its endeavor. They can be reached through funding provided by international agencies, such as the European Commission which has shown significant interest in supporting the processes. But more than that, the region needs two aspects we consider key and that, certainly, can not be provided at all by external entities, but must spring from the same region. These are, first, leadership and commitment to steer the process of coordination of efforts, and last not least, the full recognition that this is a collective task and that dialogue, cooperation and sympathy from all the academic community, governments, leadership networks and councils, cooperation agencies and key-policy makers involved in the promotion of HE are fundamental to achieving this objective. The contribution of this term paper is intended to stimulate a reflection on this topic.

In this research work we only addressed two of the current harmonization and academic integration in LA. However, we must recognize the existence of other sub- regional initiatives, such as, the ones been carried out by the MERCOSUR and Central America. All these initiatives share a similar agenda, so we must be aware that they have significant potential for duplication of efforts which could create conflicting routes towards harmonization. In this respect, it will be necessary effective coordination to eliminate their unnecessary duplication of efforts and to enable them to fulfill their true potential.

ENLACES, although is not still in full flight, bets to be that meeting point that the region needs to advance in its process of building a common platform of regional cooperation and academic integration which, undoubtedly, can drive the internal dimension seeking the sub-regions and the external been seeking with the European Union. This proposal must strike a careful balance between these two dimensions and not create unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved within identified timeframes.

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