

The current state of collaboration between the EU, Latin America & the Caribbean in the fields of internationalisation of higher education & student mobility



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The current state of collaboration between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean in the fields of internationalisation of higher education and student mobility

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Abbreviations

- Asociación Panamericana de Instituciones de Crédito Educativo: Ápice
- Community of Latin American and Caribbean States: CELAC
- Coronavirus disease 2019: Covid-19
- Erasmus+ National Focal Points: ENFP
- Erasmus Mundus: EMJMD / EM
- Erasmus Student Network: ESN
- European Commission's Directorate General on Education, Youth, Sport and Culture: DG EAC
- European External Action Service: EEAS
- European Higher Education Area: EHEA
- European Union: EU
- Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly: EuroLat
- Foro Académico Permanente América Latina y el Caribe - Union Europea: FAP ALC-UE
- International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean: IESALC
- Latin American Academic Exchange Programme: PILA
- Organisation of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture: OEI

- Red Iberoamericana para el Aseguramiento de la Calidad en la Educación Superior: RIACES
- Social Inclusion and Engagement in Mobility: SIEM
- Unión de Universidades de América Latina y el Caribe/Universities of Latin America and the Caribbean: UDUALC
- United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean: UN ECLAC
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation: UNESCO

1. Introduction: ESN's contribution to the dialogue on the bi-regional collaboration between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean

The [Erasmus Student Network](#) (ESN) is the largest organisation representing and supporting student mobility in the European Union and beyond. ESN works on every aspect and stage of the mobility experience, from the promotion of mobility opportunities to the integration of mobile learners after their experiences abroad by creating vibrant alumni communities that give back to their societies. ESN is more than an alumni engagement and advocacy organisation. ESN's key activities across its 45 countries and more than 500 local student associations are in fact dedicated to the support of current, future and prospective mobile learners. **Every year, ESN's local volunteers support more than 350,000 students on mobility,** working closely with all the institutions and stakeholders involved in international exchanges.

Moreover, through its research and policy activities, **ESN has become a key actor in Europe and abroad in the discussion of internationalisation of higher education and student mobility.** In particular, ESN has a dedicated office focused on Global Mobility, with Liaison Officers for each world region (i.e., the Americas, Asia, Africa and the Middle East, the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries), working closely with local actors on the ground to promote the Erasmus+ programme and student mobility abroad. In this endeavour, ESN collaborates with the European Commission's Directorate General on Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC), the European External Action Service (EEAS), its EU Delegations, and the Erasmus+ National Focal Points (ENFP).

ESN believes in international opportunities for all and views student mobility as a tool to create bridges across world regions. This is particularly true for strengthening the ties between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean. This policy paper therefore aims to provide ESN's view on the current state of collaboration between the European Union and Latin American and Caribbean countries in the fields of internationalisation of higher education and student mobility. It will first present the strategic partnership between the two regions; it will then deep dive into the current challenges and opportunities in the domain of internationalisation of higher education and student mobility; subsequently, it will suggest recommendations on the topic; finally, it will conclude with the role that ESN and international

exchanges can play to foster dialogue between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean, with concrete examples of advocacy initiatives from ESN's volunteers.

ESN is in fact convinced that collaboration between European and CELAC countries (either via mobility or alliances in higher education), allows both regions to mutually gain from the circulation of knowledge. The sharing of knowledge ensures to jointly tackle common societal challenges, which have no borders, such as climate and health crises or the attainment of sustainable development goals (29). The strengthened ties therefore have the potential to create a positive impact, "*enriching society through international students*", as depicted by ESN's mission statement.

2. The European Union and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States: a strategic partnership

2023 was a year marked by the revitalisation of the cooperation between the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the European Union (EU) member countries through the third Summit of Heads of State and Government held on 17-18 July 2023 in Brussels. The Summit took place after an 8-year break from the previous one, organised in 2015. (8)

The European Union is in fact increasingly viewing Latin America as a strategic partner, with similar interests, values (e.g., peace, freedom, democracy, human rights) and numerous areas of collaboration. The fundamental pillars of this bi-regional partnership are education, skills development, knowledge creation and transfer, to foster the insertion of young people into the labour market and equip them with the necessary competencies to thrive in today's modern world. (8) Internationalisation of higher education and student mobility are therefore a strategic area of collaboration.

Encouraging mobility and people-to-people connection is in fact in line with the New Agenda for Relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean, adopted in 2023 before the EU-CELAC meeting. The importance of fostering people-to-people dialogue and joint initiatives on research and innovation were also reiterated in the Declaration of the EU-CELAC

Summit 2023. (17) This approach is aligned with the Youth Action Plan in EU external action for 2022-2027 that attempts to engage, empower and connect young people globally via, for example, youth advisory structures within EU Delegations. (7)

The New Agenda for Relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean proposes a stronger and modernised partnership, building more sustainable, fair and interconnected societies through Global Gateway investments. These, in particular, **support human development, including youth empowerment, enhancing innovation, education and skills**. The Joint Communication also calls for increased cooperation in research and innovation, making full use of opportunities under the Horizon Europe Programme.

Within this context, young people are at the centre of the bi-regional partnership. Engagement with youth in Latin America and the Caribbean will in fact increase through initiatives such as country-level Youth Sounding Boards for EU International Partnerships and **intensified collaboration on education and research via exchange programmes, including Erasmus+**. (5)

It is important to highlight that **obstacles towards enhanced mobility in the region still exist today**. These include fragmentation and non-standardisation of diplomas, degrees and studies, subsequent difficulties in the recognition process, delays with the issuance of visas, as well as an overall discrepancy in the level of higher education. For example, according to the survey launched by the EU-LAC Foundation in 2022, **37% of respondents from CELAC countries identify access to free, quality, public education as a challenge, and about 31% believe that education in the region is not inclusive**. Moreover, 41% of respondents claim that there is a lack of accessible spaces and resources to influence policy-makers, making participation incidence and engagement challenging. (2)

However, the region also shows vast potential, as demonstrated by the data: **the number of students in higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean has increased from 23.7 to 27.4 million in just five years (2012-2017)** and continues to grow. Moreover, the region is a favoured mobility destination among Europeans, and vice versa, as Europe is frequently chosen as a destination for Latin American and Caribbean students (particularly Portugal and Spain). Interregional ties are therefore strong. (4)

Moreover, the collaboration between the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean in the fields of internationalisation of higher education and student mobility has been

institutionalised over the past years. **The EU-LAC Foundation, for example, strives to strengthen the strategic regional connections, by including at the same table both youth associations and students, as well as decision and policy-makers.** Youth, education and mobility are priority topics of discussion, and in recent years they have been complemented by subjects such as inclusion, digitalisation and the green transition. (3)

The Erasmus+ programme, in particular, has the potential to allow students from Latin America and the Caribbean to study abroad, as these experiences increase the acquisition of transversal and interpersonal skills, which ultimately enhance the possibility of successfully entering the job market (an existing challenge in the region, that is characterised by a youth unemployment rate of 20%). (6)

On this aspect, 23.5% of respondents from the EU-LAC 2023 survey identified the **support to mobility as a good practice to improve youth participation at the bi-regional level, in order to generate ties between European and CELAC countries, exchange ideas and experiences.** (2)

To conclude this first section, the collaboration between the European Union and Latin America in the fields of internationalisation of higher education and student mobility is **gaining momentum** and ESN can be an active part of the process, acting as the voice of the Erasmus Generation and creating bridges across the two regions.

3. Current state of play: challenges and new opportunities in the fields of internationalisation of higher education and student mobility

There are over 1,880 academic networks, academic institutions, mobility schemes and cooperation projects actively working in the framework of EU-LAC relations, highlighting the already existing synergies between the two regions, as depicted in the image below. Among these, the main thematic focus areas of the key actors in the EU-LAC academic cooperation framework are higher education (including science, research and innovation) and mobility. (29)

This highlights the **importance of higher education and mobility to strengthen the ties between the two regions.**

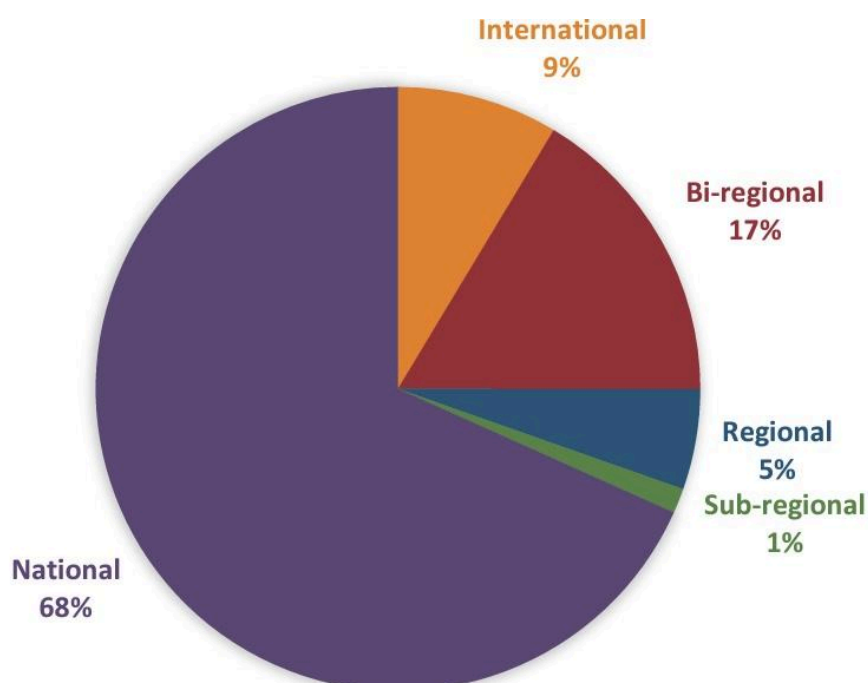


Figure 1: Level of geographic operation of institutions active in the EU-LAC framework

The variety of programmes between the two regions poses both challenges as well as opportunities, which will be further assessed in the sub-chapters below. In particular, recognition of qualifications is not yet an automatic process, and there is a generalised lack of material and immaterial resources. This hinders the interconnectedness and synergies between the exchange programmes, thus limiting the potential impact of cooperation between the two regions in the fields of internationalisation of higher education and student mobility. On the other hand, the informal mobility networks already established between Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean are fostering bi-regional collaboration on the ground via a bottom-up approach. These exchanges are creating value via knowledge transfer, skills enhancement and career prospects, generating a virtuous cycle.

3.1 Challenges

3.1.1 Automatic recognition of qualifications

ESN believes in the value of “*unity in diversity*”, meaning that national variation of curricula should be seen as an enriching rather than hampering element towards student mobility.

In Europe, for example, whilst the recent mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme reported on “*the positive impact of mobility on learners’ confidence, independence, social capital and transition to employment*”, automatic recognition of qualifications is still a distant reality. (12)

Please find below an illustrative depiction of the automatic recognition of Bachelors’ and Masters’ degrees of European higher education institutions. Please also find below a diagram showcasing the percentage of full recognition of Erasmus+ learning periods abroad per European country. (13)

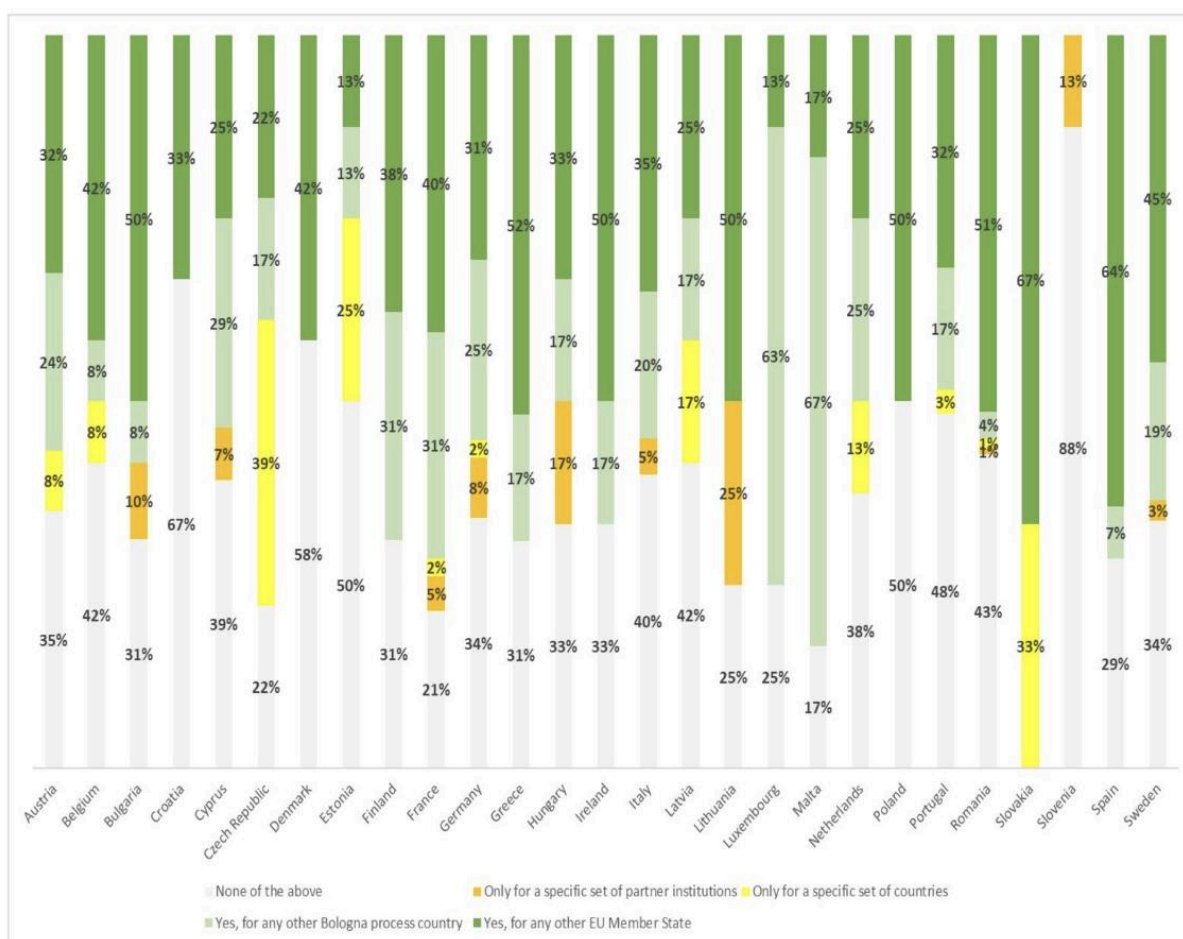


Figure 2: Automatic recognition of Bachelors’ and Masters’ degrees of European higher education institutions

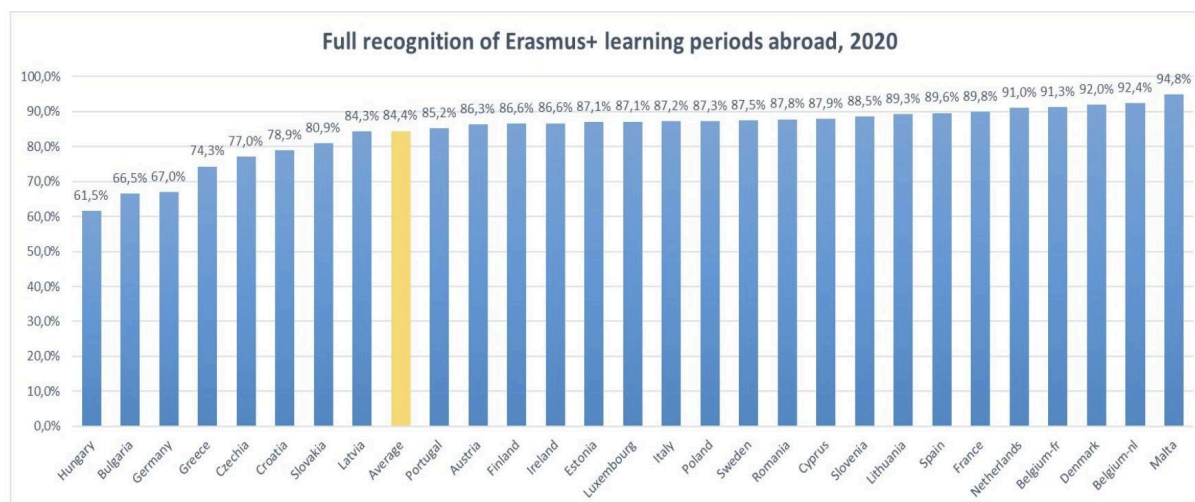


Figure 3: Percentage of full recognition of Erasmus+ learning periods abroad per European country

As illustrated in the graphs above, disparity in recognition still exists in Europe. A similar conclusion can be made for **Latin America and the Caribbean, where lack of trust, transparency, uniformity and comparability, as well as lengthy, time-consuming and inconsistent recognition procedures, make mobility across countries arduous.** In Latin America and the Caribbean, in particular, there isn't a unified credit system such as the European ECTS model of credit recognition. (33)

On the other hand, Associations such as the Red Iberoamericana para el Aseguramiento de la Calidad en la Educación Superior (RIACES), the Sistema Iberoamericano para el Aseguramiento de la Calidad en la Educación Superior (SIACES) and the Marco de Cualificaciones para la Educación Superior Centroamericana (MCESCA) are positive examples of initiatives to enhance quality education in the region. This is done with the **creation of common standards and harmonisation of indicators, as well as the promotion of evaluation and monitoring systems to foster trust amongst higher education institutions.** Such trust is crucial in achieving the recognition of diplomas and qualifications acquired abroad and thus facilitate student mobility. (14)

Moreover, as mentioned in the introductory section of this policy paper, the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) promoted in 2019 a new regional Convention for the Recognition of Studies, Degrees and Diplomas in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, with the aim to harmonise national recognition criteria and procedures to provide transparency and streamline

bureaucratic procedures. (8) However, the regional Convention has been ratified by a limited number of CELAC countries, meaning that the path to harmonisation is not yet completed. (33)

3.1.2 Lack of material and immaterial resources

The lack of financial resources is identified as one of the main challenges regarding **cooperation between the two regions in the fields of internationalisation of higher education and student mobility**. For example, daily rates for students or researchers on abroad trips are usually calculated as too low in the case of EU-funded projects, whilst universities are regarded as not dedicating enough money to academic networks. Funding opportunities are then not well-known by students, researchers and institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean. (29)

In terms of immaterial resources, it has been highlighted that CELAC countries, particularly the smaller ones, **possess limited knowledge needed to jointly work on international projects, as administrative capacities are not always well developed** (particularly required to manage the extensive bureaucratic workload stemming from international mobility projects), **and language skills sometimes pose barrier issues**. This challenge is exacerbated by different time zones and the need to accommodate a variety of working hours and conflicting priorities. Vice versa, **European counterparts usually lack an understanding of the specific structures, systems and procedures in the sector of higher education within the CELAC region**, often imposing their own framework, even if EU experiences are not easily transferable to Latin America and the Caribbean due to national and regional peculiarities (for example, the greater role and autonomy held by teachers and students' unions, closer connections to the civil society, etc.). (29)

3.2 Opportunities

3.2.1 Mobility as a tool for bi-regional collaboration

All the initiatives in relation to quality assurance systems, harmonisation of degrees, and recognition of studies aim to lay the foundations for facilitating mobility. Promoting the flow of people and knowledge across the two regions contributes to establishing educational and research cooperation networks. (8)

The table below showcases the country of origin and destination of students pursuing mobility to either CELAC or EU countries, according to a UNESCO analysis. Based on 2023 data, CELAC

students mainly target France, Germany and Spain, whilst European students prefer Brazil, Chile and Colombia as mobility destinations. Moreover, the flows from Latin America and the Caribbean to Europe compared to the flow from Europe to CELAC countries are much higher. The choice of destination depends on a variety of factors, stemming from migrant communities, language ties, education systems, university reputation, scholarship opportunities, etc. (8)

Where CELAC students go	Where do the students who go to CELAC countries come from?	Where do the students who go to EU countries come from?	Where EU students go
34) USA (30) France (29) Canada (28) Germany (24) Spain (23) UK (19) Brazil (18) Argentina (14) Cuba (14) Chile (12) Trinidad and Tobago (11) Italy (9) Australia (6) Panama (5) Honduras (5) Ecuador (4) St. Lucia (4) Guatemala (4) El Salvador (4) Colombia (3) Turkey (3) Morocco (3) Costa Rica (2) Serbia (2) Russia (2) Ireland (2) UAE (2) South Korea (2) Belgium (2) Saudi Arabia (1) Ukraine (1) Thailand (1) Switzerland (1) Portugal (1) New Zealand (1) Malaysia (1) Jordan (1) India (1) Georgia (1) Austria	(10) Colombia (9) USA (9) Venezuela (8) Peru (6) Mexico (5) Bolivia (5) Ecuador (5) Spain (5) Nicaragua (4) Argentina (4) El Salvador (4) Guatemala (4) Jamaica (4) Panama (3) Brazil (3) Chile (3) Cuba (3) Haiti (3) Honduras (2) Angola (2) Antigua and Barbuda (2) Canada (2) Grenada (2) Italy (2) Nigeria (2) Paraguay (2) Dominican R. (2) St. Vincent and the Grenadines (1) Bahamas (1) Barbados (1) Chad (1) Congo (1) Costa Rica (1) Dominica (1) Ghana (1) Guinea-Bissau (1) Guyana (1) India (1) Japan (1) Namibia (1) Palestine (1) St. Lucia (1) South Africa (1) Uruguay	(20) Germany (18) India (16) China (15) Italy (13) Russia (11) Ukraine (9) France (8) Turkey (8) Iran (7) Spain (6) Pakistan (6) Greece (5) Bangladesh (5) Nigeria (5) Sweden (5) UK. (4) Hungary (4) Morocco (4) USA. (3) Belarus (3) Bosnia/Herzegovina (3) Slovakia (3) Finland (3) Kazakhstan. (3) Norway (3) Poland (3) Romania, (2) Albania (2) Austria (2) Azerbaijan (2) Bulgaria (2) Cameroon (2) Cyprus (2) Israel (2) Jordan (2) North Macedonia (2) Nepal (2) Syria (2) Tunisia (2) Vietnam (1) Angola (1) Saudi Arabia (1) Algeria (1) Belgium (1) Brazil (1) Cabo Verde (1) Canada (1) Chile	(27) UK (26) Germany (24) USA (22) France ((20) Denmark (15) Switzerland (15) Austria (13) Italy (13) Spain (10) Australia (7) Sweden (6) Hungary (5) Turkey (5) Romania (5) Poland (4) Russia (4) Latvia (4) Canada (3) Czech R. (3) Portugal (3) Norway (3) Finland (3) Slovak Republic (3) UAE (3) Canada (3) Bulgaria (3) Belgium (2) Ukraine (2) Estonia (1) Moldova (1) Luxembourg (1) Liechtenstein (1) Japan (1) Ireland (1) Greece (1) Slovenia (1) Ecuador (1) Croatia (1) Cyprus (1) Brazil (1) Bosnia/Herzegovina (1) Argentina

		(1) Colombia (1) Congo (1) Ivory Coast (1) Croatia (1) Ecuador (1) Slovenia (1) Georgia (1) Gibraltar (1) Guinea-Bissau (1) Lebanon (1) Libya (1) Malaysia (1) Mexico (1) Moldova (1) Montenegro (1) Mozambique (1) The Netherlands (1) Peru (1) Portugal (1) Czech R. (1) S. Tome and Principe (1) Senegal (1) Serbia (1) Sri Lanka (1) Switzerland (1) Uzbekistan (1) Venezuela	
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Figure 4: Countries of origin and destination of exchange students from EU-CELAC countries

Various programmes of mobility exist between the two regions. One of the most successful is the Erasmus+ programme, divided into international credit mobility, Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters' degrees, Erasmus+ Capacity Building projects, Jean Monnet actions and Capacity building for education and vocational training.

- International credit mobility:** between 2015 and 2020, there have been 1,635 bilateral partnership projects that have allowed the mobility of 9,058 students, researchers and staff distributed as follows: 5,463 mobilities from Latin America to the EU and 3,595 from the EU to Latin America. Moreover, there have been 288 selected projects with participation from the Caribbean, allowing the mobility of 1,667 students and staff (1,007 mobilities from the Caribbean to the EU and 660 from the EU to the Caribbean). The CELAC countries more often involved in international credit mobility are Brazil, Chile, Argentina and Colombia for Latin America, and Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Jamaica for the Caribbean. (8, 15)
- Erasmus Mundus joint Masters' degrees:** between 2014 and 2020, 2,334 scholarships for Erasmus Mundus Masters' degrees have been granted (nearly 20% out of the overall

scholarships offered for all countries in the world), with students from Brazil, Mexico, Colombia and Argentina being the top receivers. In terms of CELAC higher education institutions participating in Erasmus Mundus Masters' degrees, between 2014 and 2020 281 were selected, with universities from Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Argentina topping the rankings. (8)

- **Erasmus+ Capacity Building projects:** between 2014 and 2019, 14% of the budget was allocated to projects in the region, with 76 projects in Latin American and 9 projects in Caribbean countries, particularly on topics related to the improvement of the management and operation of higher education institutions, as well as curriculum development. The CELAC countries mostly involved in these kinds of projects included Colombia, Argentina, Brazil, Peru and Mexico. (8, 15)
- **Jean Monnet actions:** only 29 projects from Latin American countries were developed to promote studies on EU integration processes, managed by institutions from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador and Mexico. (8, 15)
- **Capacity building for education and vocational training:** since 2022, this programme has attracted 7 projects from Latin America, of which 1 from the Caribbean region. (8)

Overall, the exchanges between the two regions are strong, highlighting the close links in place. Please find below a summary of exchange flows between the EU, Latin America and the Caribbean, based on the latest data from the European Commission, 2014-2022. (15)

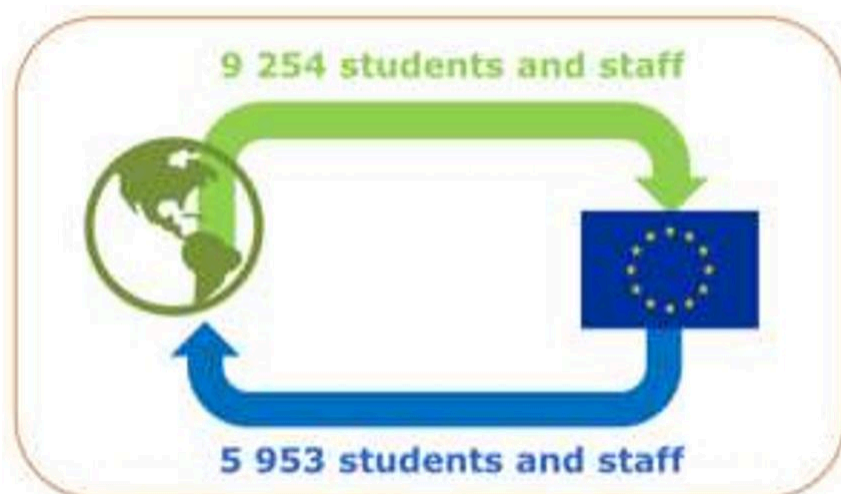


Figure 5: Exchange flows between the EU, Latin America and the Caribbean

Beyond the mobility of students, there is also a relatively strong flow of researchers between the two regions, contributing to the sharing of knowledge and strengthening of ties between European and CELAC countries. This is exemplified by the number of co-publications between EU-LAC authors: based on an analysis performed by the EULAC Focus, between 2005 and 2017 there has been a total of 176,507 EU-LAC co-published documents, particularly in the fields of physics, astronomy and chemistry. In this context, the top collaboration partners have been France, Germany, Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom and Portugal from Europe, whilst Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Mexico from Latin America and the Caribbean. (29)

3.2.2 Mobility as a tool for skills enhancement and career prospects for students in the EU, Latin America and the Caribbean

Youth mobility between the two regions not only fosters bi-regional collaboration, but it also enhances the insertion of young people into the labour market and equips them with skills to face the challenges of our times. (8) For example, based on the European Commission's data, unemployment rates among participants in the Erasmus programme, five years after graduation, are 23% lower. (21) Moreover, employers increasingly seek individuals with a blend of transversal skills (i.e., cultural intelligence, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, creativity, multilingual capacity, and adaptability), combined with interdisciplinary expertise. (22) A mobility experience can equip young people with such skills, boosting employment in both regions.

Based on the findings from the last two editions of the Graduate Impact Survey, **Erasmus Mundus participants showcased enhanced intercultural competencies** (78% of respondents - please refer to the table below for a full overview of the skills affected by an Erasmus Mundus experience), **improved career prospects (69%), personal growth (66%) and deeper subject-matter expertise (59%)**. Moreover, within the first six months of completing their Erasmus Mundus Master's programme, 40% of graduates had a job. Among the interviewed cohort, half of the respondents claimed that they would not have their job without the skills and competencies acquired thanks to an Erasmus Mundus Master. (30)

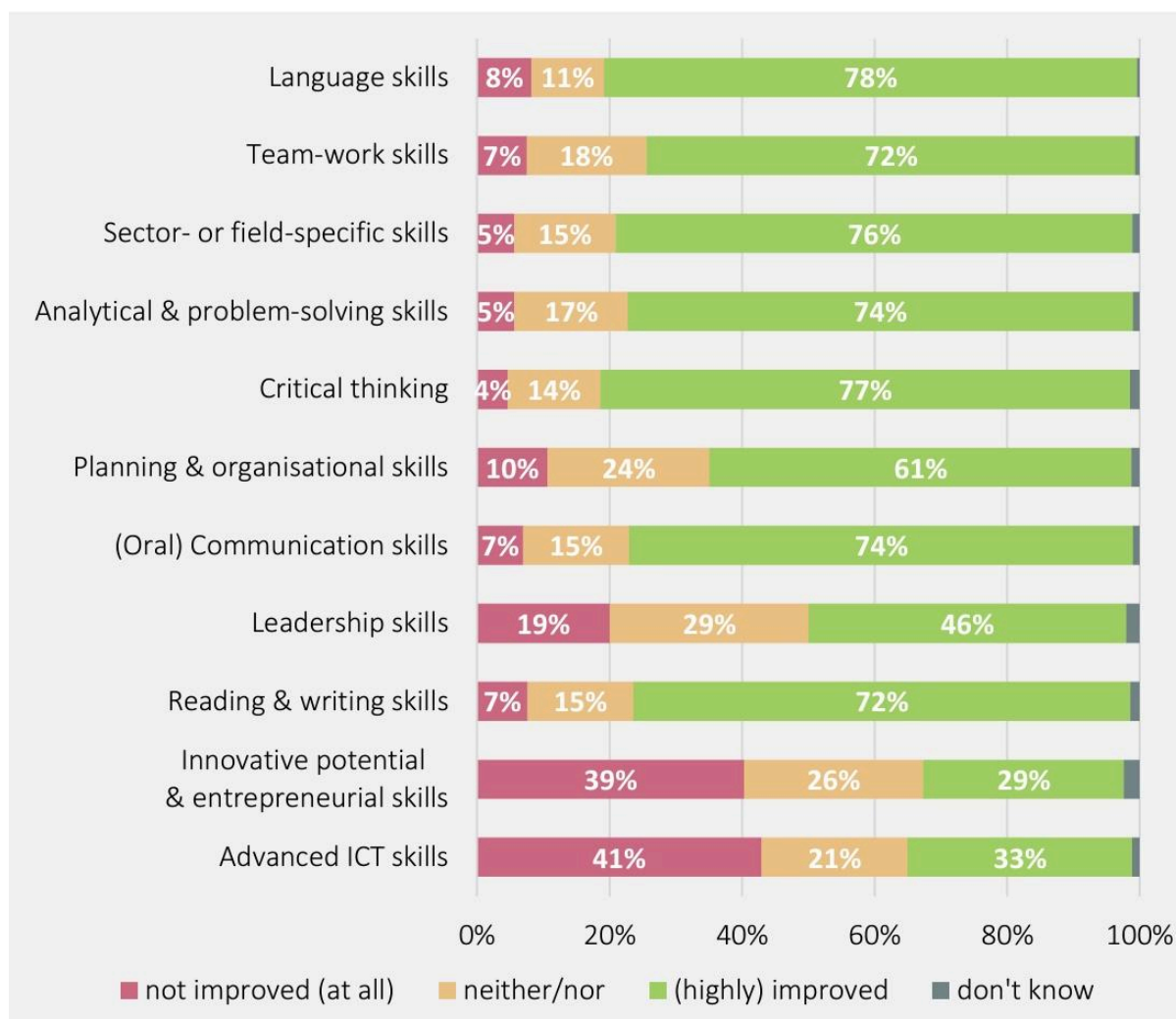


Figure 6: Impact of an Erasmus Mundus experience on employment-relevant skills

3.2.3 Advances in the construction of the EU-CELAC Higher Education Area

Whilst the term “education” was mentioned just once by the Heads of State or Government of the European Union and Community of Latin American and Caribbean States in the Declaration of the EU-CELAC Summit 2023, (17) and left a sense of disappointment by overlooking the academic perspective, (19) there are still multiple organisations that have been arduously working for the achievement of an EU-CELAC Higher Education Area. The FAP ALC-UE, for example, has the objective of creating a common space between the two regions of Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, keeping alive the process that started in 1999 during the EU-CELAC meeting in Rio de Janeiro. (9)

Although there are no clear and standardised bi-regional agreements on mobility, there have been effective mobility practices emanating from universities and institutions from both regions via a bottom-up approach. (33) In this regard, **a common Higher Education area, with a common policy framework, would facilitate the mobility of people, as well as the production and exchange of knowledge and research between countries**, increasing internationalisation and promoting regional integration.

4. Recommendations

The following set of recommendations builds on the analysis of the current state of collaboration between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean in the fields of internationalisation of higher education and student mobility, as well as the experience of the Erasmus Student Network in supporting mobile learners for more than three decades. All recommendations are based on an analysis of the sources referenced in this paper.

1) Internationalisation of academic curricula

The collaboration between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean in the fields of internationalisation of higher education and student mobility requires a step forward from universities of both regions in the attempt of **truly internationalising the academic curricula, with more efforts towards common projects of research and mobility**. This can be achieved, for example, via Erasmus+ projects of capacity building in higher education, capacity building in the field of vocational education and training, international credit mobility programmes, joint Erasmus Mundus Masters' Degrees, or the Latin American Academic Exchange Programme - PILA, and the Regional Academic Mobility Programme between MERCOSUR Member States.

2) Recognition of courses taken abroad, as well as qualifications and diplomas achieved in other universities

Student mobility stands at the heart of the integration process between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean. ESN advocates for more mobility across the two regions. In order to achieve this ambition, **higher education institutions should work towards the recognition**

of courses taken abroad, as well as qualifications, skills and diplomas achieved in other universities.

In the EU, for example, the 2018 Council Recommendation on promoting automatic recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, highlights the importance of setting up national qualifications frameworks in line with the European Qualifications Framework. These include:

- [Europass](#) - a free online multilingual tool offered by the EU to showcase skills, qualifications and experience in a standardised manner across Europe;
- European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, or [ETCS](#) - European tool allowing credits taken at one higher education institution to be counted towards a qualification studied for at another;
- European Classification of Skills and Occupation, or [ESCO](#) - European dictionary offering a common language for skills to support mobility across Europe.

The 2018 Council Recommendation also advocates for aligning higher education systems with Bologna process structures (e.g., three-cycle framework), and establishing external quality assurance and monitoring practices carried out by independent agencies. It sheds light, in particular, on the importance of adopting transparency tools, such as up-to-date course catalogues (with descriptions of all degree programmes and grade distribution), available in a digital format and in a widely used language, and transparent criteria for recognition that are applied consistently by universities. (12) Latin American and Caribbean higher education institutions could therefore attempt to follow a similar approach, taking into account their regional specificities.

3) Investing in mobility between regions

Students on mobility foster ties between regions from the first day of their exchange abroad: they are in fact obliged to immerse themselves in a new culture, education system and national traditions. Not including them in the decision-making process of a common higher education space between the EU, Latin America and the Caribbean would therefore mean denying the voice and representation of one of the most important actors in the process of integration. Erasmus Student Network, with the work of its 15,000 local volunteers, attempts to integrate

mobility students in the fabric of their hosting community, with the hope that once back home, they can share the values of internationalisation and “*students helping students*”.

Member States from both regions can take a step further by making sure that a **higher percentage of students have the opportunity to go on exchange, with sufficient socioeconomic support and investment**. This can be achieved by setting in place scholarships for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as innovative public-private credit schemes for education. In Latin America, for example, Ápice is the regional organisation advocating for the creation, promotion, coordination, administration and dissemination of educational credit programmes, scholarships and financial aid for students from Central and South America. In Europe, instead, Erasmus Mundus Master’s scholarships have financed 17% of successful EM applicants from Latin America and the Caribbean between 2004 and 2024, with Brazil (1,544) and Mexico (1,357) being respectively the second and fourth largest countries in terms of scholarships recipients. (26)

However, based on the data from the 2024 Erasmus Mundus Graduate Impact Survey, 31% of respondents from CELAC countries claimed that they had to rely on additional financial sources (beyond the Erasmus Mundus scholarship) to sustain the costs of the degree abroad. (30) For international credit mobility, according to the SIEM research report (2022), 82% of mobile respondents reported needing to advance the initial costs for a mobility period; 67% of mobile respondents then reported a monthly cost of living while on mobility of over €501 a month, with more than a quarter of respondents receiving a monthly scholarship lower than €301. (32)

Whilst EM scholarships could be enhanced, specifically for smaller nations in the region, and potentially opened also to bachelor’s students, alternative sources of funding should also be considered to make sure that students see a mobility experience as an opportunity rather than a financial burden.

4) Reducing the barriers to mobility, including visa issues

If mobility is a tool to enhance the relationship between the two regions, **barriers to participation in mobility schemes should be reduced. This includes simplifying the visa process for students accepted into an exchange programme**. Application procedures can in fact be demanding, and increase complexity depending on the host country or nationality of the

student. Approximately 17% of respondents in the ESNsurvey - XIV edition (2022) claimed that the visa application process was too complicated or strict. (31)

For example, Brazil issues student visas only if the applicant can submit proof of sufficient funds or financial support during his/her stay, medical examination results, certificate of criminal record, birth certificate, copy of passport and acceptance letter from the host university; Chile also requires a list of countries visited in the past five years and a proof of a return travel ticket. Moreover, the request must be launched six months before travelling, making the process quite long and burdensome. Finally, visa fees can range from 30 US\$ for studying in Mexico, to 150 US\$, for study mobility in Argentina, thus generating financial pressures on students. (25)

It is therefore the **responsibility of all the participating organisations to ensure that the authorisations required (short or long-term stay visas or residence permits) for students are in order** before the planned mobility takes place.

5) Fostering transnational education ties via university alliances

As the key challenges of our time become increasingly global, **transnational education is no longer a 'nice-to-have' option but becomes a necessity** for equipping future generations with the competences and skills needed to thrive in an ever more interconnected world. Moreover, according to the U-Multirank's Higher Education Cooperation Index, universities that work together and across borders perform better than those that are less focused on cooperation (e.g., via interdisciplinary approaches, innovative learning and research). (23) In this regard, **ESN positively advocates for the more than 60 European Universities alliances**: a flagship initiative involving around 500 higher education institutions allowing students to obtain a joint degree by combining studies in several European countries. (22)

University alliances are transnational by definition, so the two regions could aim at fostering such ties in view of a strengthened collaboration. To achieve this ambition, cutting red tape is critical. In the 2018 Eurobarometer survey, in fact, 92% of universities identified the elimination of legal and administrative obstacles to international institutional partnerships as a key issue to boost transnational cooperation. (22) **Joint degrees could be a way to simplify processes and cut red tape, ensuring that allied universities in the EU, Latin America and the Caribbean can efficiently work together.**

A positive example of joint degree opportunities between the two regions already exists, namely **Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters**. These are high-level integrated transnational study programmes at the master's level delivered by an international consortium of higher education institutions (HEIs) from different countries worldwide. For Latin America (region 10 according to the EU's external action instruments), the following countries are considered eligible: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela. For the Caribbean (region 11), instead, the following countries can take part in the programme: Antigua & Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent & Grenadines, Suriname and Trinidad & Tobago. (24)

The peculiarity of these joint degrees is that the participating higher education institutions agree to design a fully integrated curriculum, adhering to the standards for quality assurance. Based on feedback from higher education institutions participating in the EM Master's programmes, **Erasmus Mundus creates a positive impact by advancing international cooperation (reported by 74% of all respondents), learning and teaching interdisciplinary methods (65%), internationalisation of curricula (81%) and improvements in administrative processes (59%).** (26)

Moreover, such initiatives receive funding under the umbrella of Erasmus+. For the 2021-2027 financial period, for example, the allocated budget is approximately 1 billion EUR. Among the non-associated countries from Latin America and the Caribbean, Brazil has been the most active, with around 216 EM master's programmes from 2004 to 2024. (26) ESN encourages other countries in the region to take the lead and form these kinds of consortia.

CELAC countries already have similar initiatives, namely the Montevideo Group University Association, promoting mobility between Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay; or UDUALC, the network of Universities of Latin America and the Caribbean, with over 200 participating higher education institutions. These regional networks can be extremely valuable. UDUALC, in particular, has the potential to serve as an opposing party of EHEA universities. (8)

6) Building a Common Higher Education Area

As Europe has undergone the **creation of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) via the Bologna process, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States could attempt to follow a similar path** (even if EU experiences are not easily transferable to LAC countries due to national and regional peculiarities (29)). The EHEA allows in fact to facilitate student and staff mobility, make higher education more inclusive and accessible and education in Europe more attractive and competitive worldwide. In order to do so, CELAC States should agree beforehand on a set of common principles such as international mobility of students and staff, autonomous higher education institutions, and student participation in the governance of higher education, amongst others. (11)

Only after having established such a space can the two regions start working on a Common European - Latin American and Caribbean space for higher education, science, technology and innovation. Currently, the preference between CELAC countries has been for bilateral agreements, which makes it difficult for the region to unify voices and consolidate itself as an exporter of knowledge. (33)

In this regard, ESN views favourably the initiatives brought forward by the FAP-ALCUE to push Heads of State and Government of both regions to sign an Agreement of academic integration between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean with a common regulatory framework, which would align and harmonise bi-regional, regional and national efforts. (10, 29) Positive examples already exist in the region, such as the Expanded Latin American Common Academic Area: an initiative of the “Montevideo Group University Association”, promoting mobility between Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay; or the UDUALC network, as described in the previous section.

In the framework of a common higher education area, mobility students contribute to the creation of bi-regional ties daily.

7) Putting mobility students and alumni at the centre of bi-regional ties

Students are the backbone of the collaboration between the EU, Latin America and the Caribbean in the context of internationalisation of higher education and mobility. Yet, before going on mobility they are often confronted with contradicting, non-transparent and incomplete sources of information, negatively affecting the participation rate in and appreciation of exchange programmes. For example, 58% of respondents to the 2024 Erasmus

Mundus Graduate Impact Survey from Latin America and the Caribbean believe that the programme is rather unknown among students in their home country. (30) Moreover, during their permanence abroad, they face issues of integration in the local fabric of their hosting university and country. Finally, once back home the know-how acquired abroad is not sufficiently taken into consideration by authorities.

For the first two points, the European Commission launched the [Erasmus+ App](#) with the support of ESN. ESN also launched the [Erasmus Generation Portal](#). Both are online digital tools that put the mobility experience at the fingertips of young people. They are intended to simplify the mobility process and make it more accessible, from departure until return. They include, for example, a trusted source for retrieving information on Erasmus+ opportunities, as well as testimonials from alumni and tips on the hosting country/city. Finally, they encompass all the events organised by ESN's local sections. (27)



Higher education institutions from both regions can therefore take advantage of such solutions and **promote them amongst their students for an enhanced mobility experience.**

I want to go to

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Finally, investing in the **inclusion of youth (particularly exchange alumni) in the cooperation framework between the EU, Latin America and the Caribbean is imperative for a successful bi-regional collaboration**. After the period of mobility, member States should leverage the students' skills and know-how learnt abroad, by making sure that they have a seat in the decision-making processes of cooperation between the two regions. In this context, ESN views favourably the initiative to hold EU-LAC youth days before EU-CELAC summits in order to bring youth instances and priorities to the table of Heads of State and Government from the EU, Latin America and the Caribbean. What would be even more effective would be to **have a spot reserved for youth (for example, for student and civil society youth organisations representing the voices of young people from both regions) directly at the table of EU-CELAC summits**.

5. Conclusion: ESN as a bridge between regions

Through its Global Mobility Liaison Office and network of local sections, ESN actively contributes to shaping the future of relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean. Its Liaison Officers, together with the Board of Directors and local volunteers, are fully dedicated to the promotion of ties between the two regions in the fields of internationalisation of higher education and student mobility. They do so by advocating for the Erasmus+ programme and student exchanges in strategic fora, interacting with the local communities of associations and organisations present on the ground and providing daily

support to international students from Latin America and the Caribbean pursuing a mobility period in Europe, through the value of “*students helping students*”. Please find below a few examples of such initiatives.

5.1 Congreso Internacional de Crédito Educativo, ÁPICE, Mexico - Guanajuato

From the 6th to the 8th of September 2023 in Guanajuato - Mexico, ESN's Liaison Officer for the Americas Martina Bo participated in the [33rd international conference on Student Loans and Study Abroad programme](#).

The conference was organised by [Ápice](#) (Asociación Panamericana de Instituciones de Crédito Educativo). Ápice is a panamerican non-profit association, founded in 1969 and bringing together credit and student loan entities (both public and private) from Latin America since then. Its objective is to create, promote, coordinate, and administer educational credit programmes / scholarships and other financing assistance tools for students in Latin America. Among its activities, Ápice organises international events and drafts several publications in the domain of financing equitable access to higher education (e.g., [publication](#) on financing higher education after the Covid-19 pandemic: strategies adopted by universities and institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean).

During the three-day conference, participants deep-dived into the following topics: training for young people, frameworks to finance higher education, and access to international opportunities for work and study abroad. Please find a detailed agenda of the event (in Spanish) [here](#).

The event brought together representatives from multilateral organisations such as the World Bank and UNESCO, universities, ministries of education, and the private sector from across North and Latin America.



ESN was involved as a guest speaker during the third module on international academic and labour experiences for young people. Martina presented the **existing Erasmus+ opportunities to study, work, and teach in Europe**, highlighting the role of ESN and its main tools and projects (e.g., supporting students in their mobility period abroad, [Erasmus Generation portal](#), [ESNs survey with data on incoming and outgoing students](#), [SIEM project to make mobility abroad more inclusive](#), etc).



5.2 Multi-Actor Dialogue Forum, EU-LAC Foundation, Costa Rica - San José 🇸🇨

On the 4th of October 2023, ESN's President Rita Dias participated in the Multi-Actor Dialogue Forum on **Just Green Transition, Inclusive Digital Transformation and Social Cohesion**, organised by the [EU-LAC Foundation](#) and the National University of Costa Rica. The event gathered around 170 leaders from civil society organisations, academics, business and labour representatives, development banks, international organisations, and governments to discuss the outcomes of the EU-CELAC 2023 Summit and discuss strategies and proposals for its implementation.

The EU-LAC Foundation was created in May 2010 by the VI Summit of Heads of State and Government as an international organisation, with headquarters in Hamburg - Germany. The Foundation has 61 members: 33 States of Latin America and the Caribbean, the 27 members of the European Union, and the European Union itself. The objective of the Foundation is to **transform the strategic partnership between the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean into an invigorated and visible reality** that has the active participation of the respective societies. (18)



The Multi-Actor Forum not only provided an opportunity for stakeholders (particularly civil society organisations such as ESN) to discuss the outcomes of the EU-CELAC 2023 Summit, but also served as a space where they could express their needs and present proposals to guide the implementation of the commitments made. This space highlighted the potential for close collaboration between Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean, driven by the shared interests and global challenges that both regions face. (19)



This isn't the first instance in which ESN is represented at a strategic event organised by the EU-LAC Foundation. In April 2023, for example, ESN participated in the [EU-LAC Knowledge Forum](#) in Montevideo - Uruguay with ESN's former President Juan Rayón.

5.3 Cumbre Académica, FAP ALC-UE, Spain - Alcalá de Henares

From the 6th to the 8th of July in Alcalá de Henares - Spain, ESN's Global Mobility Coordinator Sara Tagliabracci participated in the [V Cumbre Académica FAP ALC-UE](#).

The conference was organised by the [Foro Académico Permanente América Latina y el Caribe - Unión Europea](#) (FAP ALC-UE). This organisation was born as an initiative of the academic community and civil society of both regions in Santiago de Chile in January 2013 during the First ALC-UE Academic Summit and the First CELAC-EU Summit. More than 600 academics, deans, and rectors of institutions from both regions participated in its foundation, as well as representatives of the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC), Organisation of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI), Unión de Universidades de América Latina y el Caribe (UDUALC), United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly (EuroLat), and other entities, under the sponsorship of the EU-LAC Foundation.

The **FAP ALC-UE** has as main objective that of creating a common space amongst the two regions of Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation. (9) Please take a look at the most recent publication (in Spanish) referring to Euro-Latin American Academic Integration, where a statement from ESN is also included at pages 49-50, [here](#).

ESN was invited as a guest speaker in the opening conference and also moderated the [panel](#): “Students’ Vision of the EU-LAC Common Area of Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation”. This summit was a crucial platform for dialogue, collaboration, and knowledge exchange between academic and political leaders from both regions. The growing interest in internationalisation brings in fact a unique opportunity to advocate for inclusive opportunities for all students and for a more student-centred approach to internationalisation, where students become acquainted with collaborating with their peers across borders and become engaged global citizens.



ESN supported the decision to deliver a new agenda to strengthen the EU's partnership with **Latin America and the Caribbean**, in particular in the points regarding the promotion of democracy and human rights, and the objective of building a vibrant people-to-people partnership with the creation of a common Euro-Latin American and Caribbean Space for Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation.



5.4 Daily support to international students from Latin America and the Caribbean

Our more than 15,000 local volunteers scattered across Europe interact on a daily basis with international students from Latin America and the Caribbean, via local initiatives. These include, for example, the **buddy programme** (a system by which international students are accompanied by local students / ESN's volunteers, who support them in navigating their mobility period), and the **welcome days** (full weeks of activities and trips for international students to make them discover the local culture of their hosting city, organised together with the receiving university).

Our local volunteers, particularly from ESN Spain 🇪🇸 to ESN Portugal 🇵🇹 are also involved in **liaising with the Embassies of Latin American countries in Europe to foster stronger relationships between the two regions in the fields of higher education and mobility**. ESN Portugal, for example, has been collaborating with the Education Team from the Embassy of Brazil in Lisbon, and is now currently drafting a survival guide for students from Portuguese-speaking countries.

The heat map below depicts the **number of ESNcard holders** (once a student affiliates itself with ESN, he/she receives an ESNcard and becomes a **fully fledged member of a local ESN section**) **from the Americas, per nationality, between 2014 and 2024, for a total of 50,322 ESNcard holders**. These individuals find themselves in Europe for a variety of reasons: they are either pursuing an Erasmus+ or another mobility / volunteering programme abroad, such as a study exchange, Joint Masters, European Solidarity Corps, or traineeship, are international full degree students, or have decided to join ESN as volunteers, buddies or alumni.

ESNcard holders from the Americas, per nationality, 2014-2024

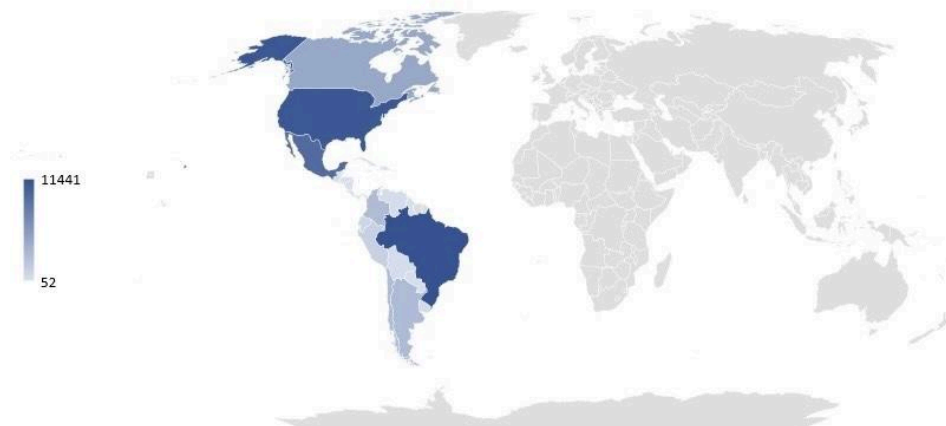


Figure 7: ESNcard holders from the Americas, per nationality, 2014-2024

ESN is therefore capable of supporting students from North to South America, positively influencing their mobility experience in Europe. The nationalities mostly captured are those from the United States of America, Brazil, Mexico and Canada, followed by Argentina and Colombia. For a more granular view on the number of ESNcard holders per nationality, please refer to the sources section. (20)

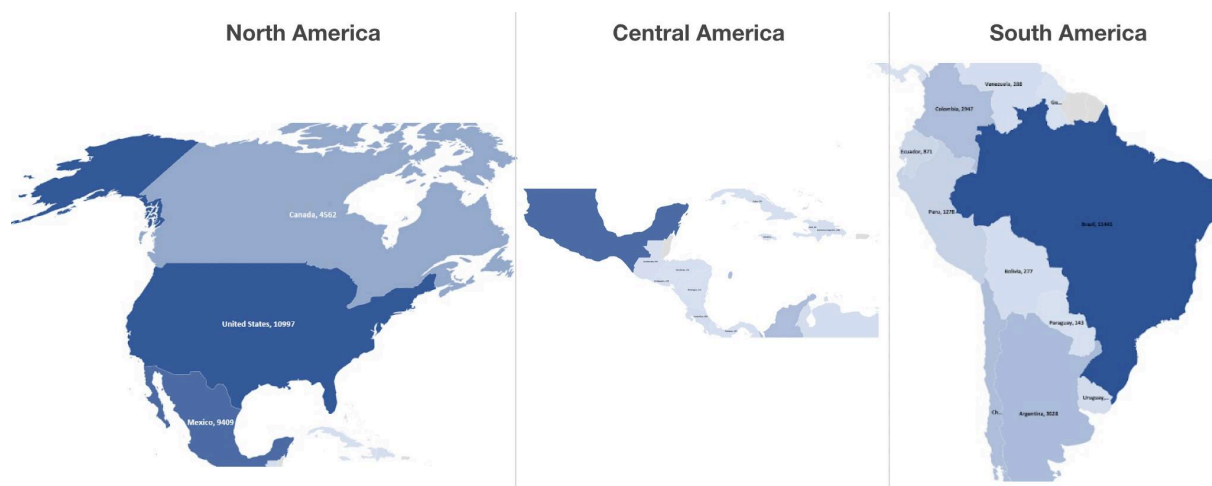


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5.5 Final remarks

To conclude, the process of collaboration and integration between the EU, Latin America and the Caribbean takes time and requires efforts of governments, academics and civil society from both regions. As Robert Schuman stated in his 1950 Declaration: *“Europe will not be made all at once, but with concrete small steps”*. (16) This framework of small but significant achievements can be applied also to the Euro-Latin American and Caribbean cooperation to create de facto solidarity across the Atlantic ocean.

In this context, ESN firmly believes in the vision where learning, studying and doing research are not hampered by borders; where spending time in another State to study, learn, or work is the standard; where in addition to one's mother tongue, speaking two other languages is the norm; where people feel citizens of the world and view **international students as a means to enrich society**. **ESN will continue to work as the global network of the Erasmus Generation**, committed to improving international education and providing self-development opportunities to young people, fostering intercultural understanding and creating positive change in society.

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