Executive Summary

The Alfa PUENTES project aimed at strengthening the Latin American (LA) Higher Education Area, transferring knowledge on EU-LA cooperation in higher education (HE) and improving mechanisms for modernisation, reform and harmonisation of HE systems at regional level. It also sought to support convergence between the Latin American sub-regions involved in the initiative, namely the Andean Community, MERCOSUR and Central America, with contributions from European university associations and networks.

The project was co-funded by the European Commission and was driven by university associations: 14 from Latin American and eight from Europe, led by the European University Association (EUA).

Within the framework of PUENTES, the MERCOSUR sub-region and its partners – the Association of Rectors of Argentina (CIN), Brazil (CRUB), Paraguay (National University of Asunción – UNA, representing the Rectors of Paraguay) and Uruguay (University of the Republic – UdelaR), coordinated by the academic network Montevideo Group of Universities (AUGM) – made an important contribution to studying and enhancing academic mobility for the purposes of internationalisation and regional integration. Academic mobility is presently a key topic in Latin America, as is the recognition of studies and qualifications across borders. Such topics have been taken up politically in MERCOSUR, and the project partners of this region felt it important to take stock of current programmes, initiatives and priorities, particularly for advancing mobility within the region. The aim was to contribute to public policymaking by tabling a number of observations and “orientations” for the university associations and networks, governments and other stakeholders in the region, which would inform their collaboration going forward.

After carrying out several studies, analyses, exchanges and debates at university level and also in consultation with ministries of education at national and regional level, the document “MERCOSUR and Academic Mobility: State of play, proposals and guidelines from the Alfa PUENTES project” was prepared, agreed and published by the partners of the project.

Structure

The document begins with some theoretical considerations about internationalisation. Several underlying assumptions and principles are stated, which should guide the universities of the region in both their regional and global internationalisation efforts:

- Internationalisation is presently indispensable for university development and is characterized by growing international collaboration at all levels across Latin America. It may, however, have different articulations depending on the development agenda of the country and region at hand.
- Education and training, while increasingly global, should also promote a unique Latin American perspective, with a view to regional integration and the construction of Latin American regional and sub-regional citizenship.
- Internationalisation is intrinsic to achieving high quality higher education. It should be accessible to all and not just the few, and be perceived as a universal right.

The document then describes the methodology and the activities carried out by the sub-regional partners in four chapters:
- The regional and conceptual framework for integration processes, particularly in MERCOSUR; a review of concepts and definitions of student and staff mobility.
- Programmes and mobility projects from and for the MERCOSUR region; their structure and objectives.
- Trends in student and staff mobility in MERCOSUR based on the research that the sub-regional partners carried out under PUENTES.
- MERCOSUR and academic mobility: Proposed guidelines for the future of intra-regional mobility.

Some observations

Academic mobility both from and to MERCOSUR countries has increased steadily in the last ten years, in line with the general growing interest in internationalisation. This has been to some extent been driven by regional and bi-lateral programmes for undergraduate and graduate students, researchers and professors, however the impact of ‘free movers’ into and out of the region should not be underestimated. The project partners conducted two institutional surveys on undergraduate/graduate student mobility and staff mobility of a sample of universities from the four MERCOSUR countries – Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil. Mobility data collection was clearly identified as a challenge. Information on mobility at higher education institutions is rarely systematised and difficult to obtain beyond that which is linked to major mobility programmes. Staff mobility and free-mover mobility remained to some extent absent in the data collected by the project, for example.

Despite the fact that the full picture of mobility from, to and between MERCOSUR countries could not be fully traced, an important snapshot was given. In general, Brazil and Paraguay have been stronger “sending” countries and Argentina and Uruguay stronger “receiving” countries. However, one must keep in mind the disparities between these countries, both in size of higher education systems, economic development and even language. Mobility exchanges have been to a large extent dominated by Europe and North America, though it was demonstrated that there is also a growing amount of mobility of various types within the MERCOSUR region.

Relevant information was obtained about the impact of existing regional programmes: “MARCA”, for example, a self-funded exchange programme of the universities in the AUGM network, and “ESCALA”, a programme supported by the MERCOSUR political authorities which finances students on distinct professional study programmes that have been accredited by the MERCOSUR region (namely, the ArcoSUR regional accreditation process). The ministry of education of Brazil also funds dedicated MERCOSUR mobility programmes/scholarships for student, staff and researchers, albeit limited compared to large-scale programmes like...
“Science without Borders” which aims to send 100,000 Brazilian students abroad to almost exclusively non-Latin American destinations.

When data from these regional programmes are examined it can be seen that Brazil and Paraguay have been stronger “sending” countries and Argentina and Uruguay stronger “receiving” countries. However, one must keep in mind the sub-regional disparities both in size of higher education systems and economic development. The research also brought forward interesting perceptions on the motivations of students to participate in such programmes, the profile of these students and the considerations regarding recognitions of studies.

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**Guidelines for the future of academic mobility in MERCOSUR**

The guidelines for academic mobility in the MERCOSUR, intended to inform governments, university associations and networks and the universities of the region themselves, consist of the following:

1. **The rationale for internationalisation and mobility of Latin American universities** (and MERCOSUR universities) should consider the Latin American regional dimension: While academic mobility in general aims to enhance the quality of education and its global relevance, in MERCOSUR, it should likewise consider training and developing regional citizens with a regional Latin American/MERCOSUR identity that reflects the common culture, history and economics.

2. **The role of states, universities and university associations**: Public policy in internationalisation and mobility: University associations have a key role to play in advocating for mobility of students and staff and in constructing the Latin American higher education space in this respect. Associations should also emphasise the need to widen access to mobility opportunities, and the role that state policy and resources can and should play in this.

3. **Democracy, inclusion, equity, universality**: Given the role that mobility can and should have in generating Latin-American identity, it is important to guarantee equity and inclusion both of different types of students and of different types of institutions: Internationalisation and mobility should not only be for select student groups and a limited number of universities, it is needed for all types of students and universities and should be considered an indispensable component of higher education. Universities should be enabled to manage and promote mobility accordingly, and develop collaborative projects in line with their diverse educational needs and foci.

4. **Mobility and regional integration**: Beyond political and economic agreements, regional integration processes in Latin America should accord a stronger focus on higher education collaboration, and in that respect on academic mobility. Higher Education Institutions should be seen as catalysts for advancing the regional integration agendas and should assume this in their missions.

5. **Internationalisation, mobility and the impact on research**: Mobility and internationalisation are critical to developing capacity and quality in research. National science and technology strategies should consider the Latin American dimension in research and the role that mobility policies can play in creating this.

6. **Mobility and quality enhancement: Strategic priorities**: Mobility is essential in delivering quality higher education in Latin America and should be aligned with four major strategic
priorities: 1) Regional development based on solidarity, social justice and peace, 2) the creation of cooperative higher education networks and communities of practice, both for research and innovation and for teaching, 3) increasing access to mobility of different student groups, and 4) the creation of regional research networks aimed at solving regionally specific challenges.

7. **Evaluation and impact of mobility:** Constantly assessing and evaluating the impact of mobility is essential in order to improve and expand it. This should include studying the state of play of the recognition of degrees and credits, labour market insertion of mobile students and their employability, and the overall impact on the teaching, learning and research in the universities that are sending and receiving students and staff. Universities should embed their mobility policies and practices in strategies that take into account resource allocation and monitoring. Mobility programmes funded by government should consider not just impact assessment but also sustainability.

8. **Trust and transparency** between institutions and between professors is also critical for advancing mobility. In this regard, investing in staff mobility should be a priority. This type of mobility can build relationships between institutions and subsequently create a better and more sustainable environment for student exchange.

9. **Recognition of studies and flexibility of curricula** are fundamental elements of enabling mobility. Presently, automatic recognition of studies does not exist between Latin American countries and recognition decisions are mostly taken by the university themselves. Tools must continue to be developed and improved to facilitate recognition. Universities should professionalise their recognition practices and render them more consistent. The central offices for internationalisation can be important actors in this process.

10. **Financing mobility:** While governments clearly have an important role to play in financing mobility, so do universities in their internal allocation of funds. This entails not just funding mobility in itself, but adequately resourcing for the entire internationalisation process (support services, staff, respective administrative offices, promotion and information campaigns, etc.).

11. **Management of mobility:** Managing mobility is integral to managing internationalisation within institutions. Leadership has an important role to play in professionalising this process and outlining strategies and incentives.

12. **Monitoring the development of academic mobility and internationalisation in MERCOSUR HE:** Data collection and synthesis will continue to need investment and improvement in MERCOSUR if informed decisions on mobility are to be taken. Regional level inter-university coordination would be essential to collect, manage and promote this data. Cooperation between the university and government sectors on data management and data exploitation must also be ensured.