OBREAL GLOBAL's Proposal for the joint conclusions of the Inter-regional Higher Education Meeting[1] convened on June 11th 2020 by ASCUN, AAU, AUGM and OBREAL GLOBAL.

"How to move forward?"

Global dialogue in the area of Higher Education is not a new phenomenon[2]. While ASCUN, AAU, AUGM and OBREAL GLOBAL recognise past and current global dialogue fora for university associations and international organisations, they propose to enrich this area of cooperation with an innovative approach, whose main defining features are the following:

1. To focus in particular *inter-regional relations*, taking into account that

- "Regions" can have different meanings in different continents. [3]
- Regions can overlap[4].
- From a European perspective, Inter-regional dialogue has mostly been centered around the bi-regional dialogue between the EU and other regions in the world[5]. This has had advantages and must continue. However, this framework of dialogue is insufficient to face challenges that are truly global. Furthermore, this sort of bi-regional dialogue risks limiting both the role of the EU and its partners as global/multilateral actors.
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2. To convene, in a flexible manner, actors of varying natures, committed to common objectives, with a perhaps limited history of working together.

- These actors should have a certain degree of representativeness and legitimacy in their respective regions, and must be particularly interested in inter-regional, South-South-North[6] relations and be willing to contribute to the common activities.
- Regions and countries are very different and cannot be treated equally when it comes to determining which actors should engage in global dialogue and global platforms for HE. India and China, for example, are more populated than many regions in the world and have extremely complex Higher

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[1] AAU (Africa), AUGM (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay), ASCUN (Colombia) and OBREAL GLOBAL, which have a pre-existing cooperation relationship and a common interest in taking S-S-N cooperation to the next level in higher education, convened a virtual meeting entitled "Digitalization in a post-Covid world: Multi-regional approaches to transforming learning, internationalization and inclusion" on 11 June, 2020. The meeting was attended by 14 university associations from different regions as well as the European Commission DG EAC and the EU-LAC Foundation, and observed by higher education entities in India. The topic of the meeting was used as a starting point to launch a more concerted S-S-N cooperation process around unifying issues. This meeting ended with the important question posed by AAU, 'How to move forward?".

[2] For example, the International Association of Universities was created in 1950 as a platform for university associations and universities. See the first Annual Report available on Internet with a summary history: https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/annual_report2005_en.pdf.

[3] For example, while in Africa it is common to distinguish between the "continent" and the "regions" (five regions are distinguished as part of the African Union), in Latin America one often refers to the "region" (Latin America –LA-, or in some contexts, Latin America and the Caribbean - LAC) and the "subregions" (Central America, South America, the Caribbean, the Pacific Alliance, etc).

[4] For example, the Arab world/region embraces the countries on the African Mediterranean rib, and, consequently, overlaps with the African "continent".

[5] EU-LAC, EU-Africa, EU-ASEAN…. This is also the case with most other initiatives in which the EU does not participate.

[6] The expression "South-South-North" is used here and not the more usual "North-South-South" in order to emphasize the important driving role of the South, and the interest in cooperating on more equal footing.

Education systems. And Europe and the European Union are also different, in particular concerning Higher Education and regional cooperation/integration processes.[7]

- o In many cases, associations of universities (national, sub-regional/regional, or regional/continental) will constitute the best actor.
- o But in other cases, it will be more fruitful to convene individual Higher Education institutions (HEIs) or even other actors (specialized committees of economic associations, or quality agencies or associations of them, or governmental agencies, or associations for international HE cooperation…).

What is essential is that the actors share a common vision, commitment and operationality.

3. To define a broad, but focused, policy framework. The policy framework must be broad in order to be able to embrace different policy options and the articulation between them, but it must also be clearly focused in order to avoid irrelevance and falling into all-encompassing and useless declarations. Three axes for it are, hence, suggested:[8]

- That offered by the new approach to development and development cooperation jointly put forward in September 2018 by CEPAL/ECLAC, the OECD and the European Commission (DG DEVCO),[9] according to which development is a never ending process; all countries face development problems to a higher or lesser degree, and, consequently, all can learn from each other.
- That of focusing in particular on what has been called (for the purposes of this meeting) "South-South-North" cooperation, giving a leading / co-leading role to actors from the South.
- That of accepting the need for a broad and deep reform of HE structures, policies and institutions.

4. To articulate policy dialogue with concrete projects. This is essential. Experience shows that dialogue without concrete projects risks distancing participants from the leadership or the secretariat who manages the dialogue, and often results in overly broad policy statements that go unfulfilled. In turn, concrete projects without a permanent platform of dialogue risk not achieving impact and sustainability. These concrete projects can and should have different scopes and funding (national, regional and sub-regional, inter-regional, multilateral); but a clear starting point can certainly be that offered by EU-funded projects (Erasmus + and others). In fact, some have already been used for this purpose.[10]

5. To create a loose, but effective, coordinating structure with a few working groups (WGs), which can drive both research and project development on the basis of the need to combine inter-regional dialogue with concrete projects (Annex I contains a proposal for the initial groups).[11]

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[7] The Bologna process embraces, for example, many European countries that are not members of the European Union (EU). From other perspectives, some of them would even be considered as "Asian" (see the very illustrative map in http://www.ehea.info/page-full_members). The European University Association (EUA) embraces also all European countries (and some non-European) and not only those that are Member States of the EU.

[8] In the specific context of the COVID crisis, the 11th of June meeting also pointed to the need to use the changes and innovative developments brought about by the crisis as a springboard to the future and not as unwelcomed adaptations to be forgotten in order to return to the past.

[9] https://www.cepal.org/en/publications/44002-emerging-challenges-and-shifting-paradigms-new-perspectives -international

[10] This approach builds on the results of the only EU-funded Horizon 2020 project that explicitly addresses bi-regional EU – LAC relations in the area of Research (and HE): the EULAC Focus project – March 2016/November 2019 - (see: https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/693781/es) . Most of its conclusions can be applied to all inter-regional frameworks.

[11] The number, composition and content of the different WGs can change at the demand of participants in the initiative.