

Erasmus+ Reinforced: Boosting EU-LAC Cooperation in Education and Youth

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Background

Over the past decade, EU-Latin America relations have witnessed renewed political momentum, including the revival of EU-CELAC summits and the launch of the EU-LAC Global Gateway investment agenda. Yet, in parallel, interregional cooperation in education and youth mobility has eroded. The Erasmus+ programme, one of the EU's most powerful tools for cultural diplomacy and people-to-people contact, has significantly reduced opportunities for Latin America under the 2021-2027 programming period.

Latin America participates in Erasmus+ solely as a *Partner Region*, with access limi-

ted to specific decentralized instruments and through EU external action funding mechanisms such as the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). This shift has had major repercussions on youth exchanges, higher education cooperation, and civil society ties.

This policy brief, jointly produced by Equipo Europa and GEYC, seeks to critically examine this transformation, map its consequences, and formulate forward-looking recommendations for reclaiming the Erasmus+ project in the upcoming negotiations and programming period.

1/ CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

1.1/ Introduction and political context

After nearly a decade without high-level engagement, EU-Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) relations received a significant impetus with the EU-CELAC Summit in Brussels (17-18 July 2023), where the European Commission launched the Global Gateway Investment Agenda, committing over €45 billion in European investment to the region¹. The agenda envisions support across sectors such as infrastructure, green transition, digital transformation, healthcare, and education. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen described the renewed EU-LAC partnership as more important than ever, strengthening democratic values, multilateralism, and inclusive development. At the EU-LAC Forum, Commissioner Jutta Urpilainen emphasized that youth and civil society

should be central pillars of this partnership, built on equality, dialogue, and shared values². This political revival builds on earlier milestones such as the 1999 Rio Declaration, when EU and LAC leaders explicitly identified higher education as a strategic priority and set the goal of creating a common higher education area with joint efforts on accreditation, credit transfer, mobility, and diploma recognition. Since then, the Erasmus programme, transformed into Erasmus+ in 2014, has served as the EU's flagship instrument for promoting international academic mobility and intercultural dialogue, extending opportunities for cooperation beyond Europe to regions like Latin America.

Yet, despite the political momentum and the expansion of Erasmus+, cooperation in education and youth mobility with LAC has weakened in the current 2021-2027 programming period. While the programme's budget nearly doubled to more than €24 billion, LAC countries participate only as Partner Regions, meaning that their access is restricted to limited instruments and external action funding such as NDICI-Global Europe³. In practice, only around €196 million—barely 1% of the total budget—has been allocated to the Americas, curtailing mobility opportunities despite the programme's global ambitions. The imbalance is evident: between 2015 and 2020, over 9,000 mobilities took place in bilateral Erasmus+ projects, but structural barriers continue to hinder wider participation⁴. Among these, fragmented and non-standardized degree systems, slow and costly visa processes, limited recognition of qualifications, financial constraints, and language requirements remain persistent obstacles. Survey evidence shows that 37% of CELAC respondents identify access to free, quality education as a major challenge, underscoring how limited Erasmus+ engagement exacerbates pre-existing inequalities⁵. This mismatch between political rhetoric and educational practice has become a critical bottleneck for building the balanced, inclusive, and sustainable academic cooperation that both regions have repeatedly declared as strategic since Rio 1999.

1.2/ Legacy and Strategic Value of Erasmus+ in EU-LAC Relations

Erasmus+ has developed from a mobility initiative within Europe into a long-term instrument of people-to-people diplomacy and transatlantic cooperation. For the European

1 Von der Leyen, U. (2023, July 18). Statement at the joint press conference with President Michel, Prime Minister Gonsalves and President Fernández following the EU-CELAC Summit. European Commission: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_3927

2 Directorate-General for International Partnerships. (2023, July 18). Global Gateway - EU, Latin America and Caribbean Forum: strengthening the dialogue with youth, civil society and local authorities in both regions. European Commission: https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/global-gateway-eu-latin-america-and-caribbean-forum-strengthening-dialogue-youth-civil-society-and-2023-07-18_en

3 European Commission. (2023). Erasmus+ Programme Guide: Part A - General information about the Erasmus+ Programme. European Commission. <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide>

4 ESN (Erasmus Student Network). (2023). The current state of collaboration between the EU and Latin America. https://esn.org/sites/default/files/news/the_current_state_of_collaboration_between_the_eu_latin_america.pdf

5 ibid

Union, the programme is simultaneously a vehicle for educational excellence and a tool of external action, contributing to the EU's broader goals of democratic engagement, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable development in partner regions such as LAC. Higher education was explicitly recognized as a strategic dimension of EU-LAC relations as early as the 1999 Rio Declaration, which led to the launch of the EU-CELAC Common Higher Education Area in 2000⁶. Erasmus+ has since operationalized this commitment by building durable academic networks, fostering innovation ecosystems, and anchoring LAC institutions within global education frameworks. In this sense, the programme performs a dual function: advancing individual learning opportunities while

acting as a strategic diplomatic channel that reinforces the EU's presence in the Americas⁷.

Erasmus+ not only promotes academic mobility, but has also become a strategic pillar of the EU's global soft power. Its international dimension functions as a tool of public diplomacy—fostering long-lasting contacts among academics, students, and professionals—that contributes to the diffusion of EU policies beyond its borders. In particular, this cooperation aligns with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including Goal 4 (Quality Education) as well as others related to environmental protection, food security, and energy efficiency (education.ec.europa.eu).

Since 2014, countries across the world, including LAC, have gained access to Erasmus+, enabling the internationalisation and modernisation of education systems through more transparent curricula, recognition mechanisms (such as Europass), and collaborative governance. Specifically in the LAC region, Erasmus+ has funded projects under Erasmus Mundus (2007-2013) and its successor fra-

mework (2014-2020), boosting both mobility and institutional cooperation. These initiatives have been vital in strengthening academic networks, enhancing career prospects, and consolidating the purpose of building a "Common Higher Education Area EU-LAC".

The institutional dimension has also been central. The momentum generated by the 1999 EU-LAC Summit in Rio de Janeiro, which proposed a strategic partnership based on democracy, the rule of law, and political stability, provided the political framework for higher education to become a strategic component of bi-regional relations. In 2002, further progress came with the proposal of an "EU-LAC Knowledge and Higher Education Area," leading to initiatives such as Alfa, Alban, and Capacity Building in Higher Education projects within Erasmus+. These initiatives fostered institutional internationalisation while promoting reforms in quality assurance, recognition, and curriculum development.

Participation spanned across International Credit Mobility (ICM), Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees (EMJM), Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE), and Jean Monnet Actions. Latin American students ranked among the top recipients of EMJM scholarships, while CBHE projects modernized curricula, improved governance, and reinforced quality assurance systems across universities⁸. Jean Monnet Chairs embedded European integration studies in Latin American institutions, expanding both research and policy dialogues⁹. The impact of these modalities extended well beyond project cycles: alumni networks sustained professional collaboration across borders, while institutional partnerships created double degrees, co-supervised theses, and cross-border curricula that consolidated a shared academic space.

6 Barlete, A. L. (2020). The policy trajectory of the EU-Latin America and Caribbean inter-regional project in higher education (1999-2018). *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2019.1693908>

7 Vassiliou, A. (2014). Erasmus+ goes global. EU-LAC Foundation Newsletter, September 2014. <https://eulacfoundation.org/en/system/files/CommissionerVassiliou.pdf>

8 European Commission. (2019). EU-CELAC Academic Cooperation through Erasmus+: Opportunities for Latin America and the Caribbean. Publications Office of the European Union. https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/erasmusplus2/files/lat-am-carib_four-pager-2018.pdf

9 Leiva, P. (2013). Hacia un espacio eurolatinoamericano para la Educación Superior, Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación. Universidad Central de Chile / Institut des Amériques / EU-LAC Foundation. <https://eulacfoundation.org/es/system/files/ICumbreAcademicaALC-UE.pdf>

The relevance of Erasmus+ in LAC is further demonstrated by its quantitative and qualitative outcomes. Commission evaluations show that the region received around 5% of Erasmus+ funds during the 2014-2020 cycle, a share higher than that of other global partner regions¹⁰. As mentioned previously, between 2015 and 2020, more than 9,000 mobilities connected Latin American and European institutions, with Latin America sending 5,463 students and staff to the EU and receiving 3,595 in return, while the

Caribbean accounted for an additional 1,667 mobilities. Beyond mobility statistics, Erasmus+ contributed to systemic transformations: by promoting instruments such as the Learning Agreement and the Diploma Supplement, it encouraged the recognition of credits, facilitated joint programmes, and aligned LAC universities more closely with the European Higher Education Area¹¹. These mechanisms reduced institutional asymmetries, standardized academic procedures, and promoted trust across universities, thereby laying the foundation for a more interoperable transatlantic higher education space.

Overall, the legacy of Erasmus+ in EU-LAC relations lies in its combination of educational excellence with strategic diplomacy. Its alumni have become bridges of cooperation, while institutional partnerships have seeded new ecosystems of research and innovation. The programme's design and outcomes demonstrate that mobility is not an isolated educational opportunity but a mechanism for producing human capital, supporting democratic engagement, and fostering sustainable development across continents¹². By embedding European practices in LAC universities and cultivating transatlantic knowledge communities, Erasmus+ has consolidated itself as a core instrument of EU external action, shaping the conditions for a future-oriented cooperation. Erasmus+ has also served as a catalyst for building mutual trust between

higher education systems. Through the establishment of joint degrees, recognition of credits, and the adoption of shared quality assurance frameworks, the programme has promoted the gradual convergence of academic standards across Europe and Latin America. This process has not only facilitated mobility but has also created a stronger basis for institutional alignment, making transatlantic collaboration both academically rigorous and mutually beneficial.

Another dimension that deserves attention is the programme's contribution to equality and inclusion. By offering scholarships, targeting underrepresented groups, and placing a strong emphasis on accessibility, Erasmus+ has ensured that opportunities extend beyond traditional academic elites. In the Latin American and Caribbean context, this has meant that students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds have been able to take part in international education. In turn, their participation broadens the spectrum of voices engaged in global academic and policy debates, reinforcing democratic legitimacy and contributing to social cohesion. The programme has also strengthened research and innovation capacity by connecting mobility with collaborative projects under Horizon Europe and other EU research frameworks. These linkages have opened up new avenues for Latin American institutions to access funding, training, and networks that enhance their competitiveness on the global stage. The result is the emergence of innovation ecosystems capable of addressing pressing global challenges such as digital transformation, sustainable development, and climate adaptation, while simultaneously responding to regional priorities.

Looking forward, the strategic role of Erasmus+ in EU-LAC relations is likely to become even more significant as both regions confront complex transnational challenges. Issues such as renewable energy, digital governance, and human mobility demand not only political

10 European Commission. (2019). EU-CELAC Academic Cooperation through Erasmus+: Opportunities for Latin America and the Caribbean. Publications Office of the European Union. https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/erasmusplus2/files/lat-am-carib_four-pager-2018.pdf

11 Souto-Otero, M., Huisman, J., Beerkens, M., de Wit, H., & Vujic, S. (2013). Barriers to international student mobility: Evidence from the Erasmus program. *Educational Researcher*, 42(2), 70-77. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12466696>

12 Potts, D. (2015). Understanding the early career benefits of learning abroad programs. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 19(5), 441-459. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315315579241>

agreements but also academic cooperation at scale. By embedding collaboration at the level of individuals and institutions, Erasmus+ provides the human capital and intellectual infrastructure required for sustainable long-term engagement. Beyond the immediate academic outcomes, the programme nurtures a generation of globally connected professionals who embody values of intercultural dialogue, scientific collaboration, and democratic participation. This human dimension is perhaps its most enduring contribution: an expanding community of alumni and institutions that sustain

the EU-LAC partnership through shared knowledge, mutual trust, and forward-looking cooperation.

1.3/ **Diagnosis of the Retreat: How the 2021–2027 Framework Undermines Cooperation**

Between 2014–2020, Erasmus+ involved LAC as an eligible partner for capacity building projects in the field of youth (including youth exchanges and mobilities of youth workers) and university cooperation. Mobility numbers grew, with balanced opportunities in both directions. Since 2021, however, LAC no longer has this status, cooperation being possible just through the EU's External Actions budget.

This change has many effects, including mobilities now depend on regional funding of the EU foreign policy, not education goals; grants are managed mainly by EU institutions, not shared equally; and reciprocity is reduced. These rules add more paperwork, create imbalances, and shift activity toward the bigger LAC systems, weakening the long-term partnership that Erasmus+ used to promote¹³.

The European Commission's own reports confirm this shift. They note that the international

side of Erasmus+ is now funded by about 2.2 billion EUR from external action tools. This links the cooperation with LAC to EU foreign policy rather than education policy¹⁴.

The Erasmus+ Programme Guide makes a sharp distinction between "Programme Countries" and "third countries not associated with the Programme". For these latter countries, including LAC, only some Erasmus+ actions are open, and mobility in higher education is funded through the EU's external action budget (such as NDICI-Global Europe).

In practice, this means that universities in LAC cannot apply directly for International Credit Mobility (KA171). Only universities in Programme Countries can apply to their National Agencies, sign and manage the grants, and decide how exchanges are organized. They can even reduce or exclude LAC partners if budgets are tight or if they want to achieve "geographical balance."

As a result, Latin American universities have less influence over priorities and depend on European partners to access opportunities and ensure continuity¹⁵.

In the 2021–2027 period, Erasmus+ cooperation with Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is funded through the EU's external action instruments, mainly NDICI-Global Europe. The Erasmus+ Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) sets the size of these budgets and the main actions they support, such as Capacity Building in Higher Education, KA171, Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters, and Jean Monnet activities. A key rule in this framework is that Brazil and Mexico together may receive no more than 30% of total funds in certain actions. While this gives predictability, it also shows that cooperation with LAC is managed as part of external action priorities, not as an equal education space within Erasmus+ itself¹⁶.

13 European Commission, Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2025 (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the EU, 2025), 31–34, 49, 58–6,

14 European Commission, DG EAC Annual Activity Report 2023 (Brussels: European Commission, 2023), 4, 14. https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/aef4807a-465c-405b-a646-3b43d6194d20_en?filename=EAC_AAR_2023_final.pdf

15 European Commission, Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2025, 31–33, 49; European Commission, ICM Handbook for Partner Countries (Brussels: European Commission, July 2024), 5–6, 8, 10–11.

16 European Commission, Erasmus+ External Multiannual Indicative Programme for the Americas 2021–2027 (Brussels: DG INTPA, 2021–2027), 8, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ae1b61bc-1638-49bd-a2d6-2f9d5bbf609f_en

The Americas & Caribbean Regional MIP reinforces this approach by placing education and youth within wider goals like human development and social cohesion, to be linked with Team Europe Initiatives and other external instruments. However, it does not present Erasmus+ as the only strategic pillar with clear commitments or regional governance. Instead, Erasmus+ is framed through a development point of view that emphasizes aid eligibility, thematic priorities, and alignment with EU foreign policy.

As a result, the model encourages project-based cooperation but weakens the principle of reciprocity and equal institutional partnership that previously defined EU-LAC collaboration in education¹⁷.

Several features of Erasmus+ make participation harder for actors in LAC. LAC universities, NGOs, and youth organisations must depend on their European partners to submit and manage applications, which reduces their control and makes cooperation less stable.

A second barrier is the heavy administrative burden. Partner organisations are required to align with European quality standards through inter-institutional or inter-organisational agreements, secure Organisation IDs, manage complex documentation such as Learning Agreements or activity plans, and deal with visa and residence procedures that often take weeks or months. A third barrier is budget setting: when funds are tight, National Agencies may reduce or exclude flows with certain countries, or place them on reserve lists. These challenges add up and tend to hit smaller or less experienced actors—whether universities, NGOs, or youth groups—the hardest¹⁸.

Beyond these procedural difficulties, external-action rules also restrict reciprocity. For most LAC countries, which are eligible for official development assistance (ODA), mobility is largely one-way: students and young people can mainly come into the EU at the short, bachelor, or master level, while opportunities for Europeans to go to LAC are usually limited to doctoral candidates, staff, or specialised projects. This reduces the scope of two-way youth exchanges and weakens the principle of mutuality that is vital both for universities and for NGOs engaged in people-to-people cooperation¹⁹.

Finally, the support infrastructure for Erasmus+ in LAC is thinner than in other regions. Unlike areas with fully resourced National Erasmus+ Offices (NEOs), LAC often relies only on National Focal Points, which can provide orientation but have limited authority and budgets. This weaker institutional support affects both the higher education sector and civil society organisations active in youth work, making it harder to build sustainable partnerships²⁰.

Participation in Erasmus+ across LAC is uneven. The EU-CELAC Erasmus+ factsheet shows that between 2014 and 2022, a total of 3,461 Erasmus Mundus scholarships went to students from the region, but most were concentrated in a few large countries. Brazil (966), Mexico (741), and Colombia (514) received far more scholarships than Central American and Caribbean countries, where numbers often stayed in the dozens or even lower. A similar pattern appears in Capacity Building in Higher Education and in youth mobility and NGO-led projects: South American middle-income countries host most partnerships, while Central America and the Caribbean remain marginal. This reflects the way external funding

17 European Commission, Americas & Caribbean Regional Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021–2027 (Brussels: DG INTPA, 2022), 4, 6, 10, 28–29, 56; European Commission, Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2025, 49, 59–60, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-01/mip-2021-c2021-9356-americas-caribbean-an-nex_en.pdf, https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-11/erasmus-programme-guide-2025_en.pdf

18 European Commission, ICM Handbook for Partner Countries, 5–6, 8, 10–11; European Commission, ICM Handbook (General) (Brussels: European Commission, Nov 2023), 14, 22, 27–29, https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-07/handbook-erasmus-icm-partner-countries_jul2024-v1_en.pdf, https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-11/handbook-erasmus-icm-nov2023-v3_en_0.pdf

19 European Commission, Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2025, 59–60, https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-11/erasmus-programme-guide-2025_en.pdf

20 European Commission, Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2025, 59–60; European Commission, ICM Handbook (General), 31–32, https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-11/erasmus-programme-guide-2025_en.pdf, https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-11/handbook-erasmus-icm-nov2023-v3_en_0.pdf

acts and National Agency decisions tend to favor bigger, better-connected systems with more experience in managing EU programmes, whether universities, youth organisations, or civil society actors²¹.

Policy design also enlarges this imbalance. The Programme Guide shows the share of regional funds that Brazil and Mexico together can receive under KA171 at 30%. This limit is meant to avoid over-concentration, but it also highlights the strong pull of large systems that otherwise capture much of the funding. At the same time, the regional envelopes for Latin America and the Caribbean are relatively small compared to the global Erasmus+ mobility budget. This makes competition more intense and leaves fewer opportunities for smaller countries and grassroots organisations, unless specific corrective measures are introduced²².

The Erasmus+ External Multiannual Indicative Programme for the Americas confirms this constraint. Between 2021–2027, the total resources for KA171/ICM in the Americas are limited, and Latin America only receives a share of that once regional balances are applied. Without clear allocations for Central America and the Caribbean, Erasmus+ cooperation risks enlarging the gap not only between over-represented countries and the rest of the region, but also between well-established institutions and smaller NGOs or youth organisations that struggle to gain access²³.

Politically, the EU's *"New Agenda"* for relations with LAC calls for a *"stronger and modernised strategic partnership,"* framed by the Global Gateway. Yet, while the Global Gateway mobilises resources for green and digital transitions, **it does not integrate**

Erasmus+ as a vehicle for building the skilled workforce and youth leadership needed to implement those transitions. This gap weakens the coherence of the EU's approach. In a similar way, the Americas & Caribbean Regional MIP notes that *"other EU tools and flagship programmes, such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Copernicus and Galileo will also be integrated as part of the EU's response,"* but it does not define EU-CELAC co-governance, mobility targets, or a joint follow-up track specific to Erasmus+²⁴.

After the 2023 EU-CELAC Summit, the archive consolidates political documents and announces a relaunch of the bi-regional partnership. However, it provides no operational commitments that integrate Erasmus+ into the summit's roadmaps, youth dialogues, or governance mechanisms. In practice, this means that while the summit underlines youth as *"future partners"* of EU-CELAC relations, the dedicated EU instrument for youth mobility and NGO cooperation—Erasmus+—is not institutionally linked to those dialogues. These risks threaten youth organisations and civil society actors in both regions, who remain dependent on calls and individual projects rather than enjoying an embedded role in bi-regional policy frameworks.

In administrative terms, Erasmus+ international actions are managed via DG EAC and National Agencies, while the external financing is aligned with NDICI priorities overseen by DG INTPA—two parallel channels with weak bi-regional coordination. The result is that universities, NGOs, and youth organisations may access Erasmus+ funds, but their projects are rarely connected to EU-CELAC governance, nor are they systematically fed back into political summits. Despite the rhetoric about youth and people-to-people ties,

21 European Commission, EU-CELAC Erasmus+ Factsheet 2023 (Brussels: European Commission, 2023a), 2–3, https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-07/factsheet-erasmusplus-celac-2023_en.pdf

22 European Commission, Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2025, 59; European Commission, ICM Handbook (General), 6–7, https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-11/handbook-erasmus-icm_nov2023-v3_en_0.pdf

23 European Commission, Erasmus+ External Multiannual Indicative Programme for the Americas 2021–2027, 8, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ae1b61bc-1638-49bd-a2d6-2f9d5bbf609f_en

24 European Commission, A New Agenda for EU-LAC Relations (Brussels: European Commission, 2023c); European Commission, Americas & Caribbean Regional Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021–2027, 10, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3045, EU-LAC Foundation, III EU-CELAC Summit 2023 Repository (Hamburg: EU-LAC Foundation, 2023); European Commission, DG EAC Annual Activity Report 2023, 4, 19, 35, <https://eulacfoundation.org/en/iii-eu-celac-summit-2023>, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/aef4807a-465c-405b-a646-3b43d6194d20_en?filename=EAC_AAR_2023_final.pdf https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-01/mip-2021-c2021-9356-americas-caribbean-an_nex_en.pdf

this disconnection limits the strategic potential of Erasmus+ to act as a structured bridge between higher education, youth work, and the broader bi-regional agenda²⁵.

Bringing these threads together, the 2021–2027 Erasmus+ rules—regional envelopes, National Agency discretion, ODA-linked limits, and weak political linkage—end up narrowing both scale and balance in EU-LAC cooperation. The Programme Guide makes clear that funds are split by region, guided by EU foreign policy priorities, and for most ODA-eligible countries, student mobility is mainly incoming, with outgoing mostly at doctoral level. This is not just technical detail - it directly limits the two-way youth and institutional exchange that Erasmus+ is supposed to encourage²⁶.

Even where numbers are significant—for example, 15,207 exchanges with LAC between 2014–2022—the new setup makes it harder for smaller universities, youth organisations, and NGOs in Central America and the Caribbean to access similar opportunities without extra support.

The Case for Reinvestment:

Why Erasmus+ Matters Now More Than Ever.

The Erasmus+ programme stands at a decisive moment in EU-LAC relations. Despite the political revitalisation marked by the 2023 EU-CELAC Summit and the Global Gateway agenda, educational and youth cooperation has weakened, as Latin America participates only as a “partner region” in Erasmus+ 2021–2027. This structural downgrade limits direct access to programme actions and ties participation to external funding instruments such as NDICI-Global Europe²⁷. In this context, reinvesting in Erasmus+ is not merely about expanding student exchanges; it is an imperative for consolidating people-to-people diplo-

macy, democratic resilience, and cooperative responses to shared challenges.

People-to-people diplomacy as strategic infrastructure

Erasmus+ has proven that mobility is a durable form of diplomacy. Alumni associations, such as the Erasmus Mundus Alumni Network, continue to connect professionals across borders years after their participation, showing that mobility generates lasting ties rather than one-off exchanges. Scholars argue that these “knowledge bridges” create trust, mutual recognition, and durable infrastructures of cooperation²⁸. In an international context marked by geopolitical fragmentation and rising populism, such networks function as stabilisers, embedding trust at the societal level and fostering structured channels for cooperation that transcend political cycles.

These alumni networks also play a multiplier role by channeling the skills and experiences acquired through Erasmus+ back into local contexts. Many returnees take up leadership positions in academia, government, civil society, and the private sector, where they actively promote international cooperation and embed European practices in their professional environments. In this sense, the programme generates not only individual human capital but also collective social capital, amplifying its diplomatic impact through the careers and networks of its participants.

At the institutional level, Erasmus+ has encouraged universities to internationalise their governance and pedagogical models. Joint curricula, collaborative research centres, and long-term partnerships between European and LAC universities operate as enduring infrastructures of cooperation. Indeed, institutional frameworks often survive beyond the life cycle of individual projects, ensuring continuity in academic relations even when political agendas shift. Such resilience is parti-

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26 European Commission, EU-CELAC Erasmus+ Factsheet 2023, 1; European Commission, ICM Handbook (General), 6–7, 31–32., https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-11/erasmus-programme-guide-2025_en.pdf

27 European Commission. (2021). Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2022. Publications Office of the European Union.

28 Birle, P., Göbel, B., & Boyer, M. (2020). Mobility, diversity, inequality, sustainability: Cross-cutting issues of cultural, scientific and social relations between the European Union and Latin America / the Caribbean. EU-LAC Foundation. https://eulacfoundation.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Publication_Mobility_2020.pdf

cularly valuable in times of geopolitical volatility, as it provides a stable backbone for transatlantic engagement. Moreover, Erasmus+ contributes to what some scholars describe as “strategic empathy” in international relations. By exposing students and academics to diverse perspectives, cultural traditions, and social realities, the programme fosters intercultural competencies that are essential for constructive dialogue. These soft skills, though less visible than research outputs or policy agreements, are indispensable for sustaining cooperation in an era where mistrust and polarisation increasingly shape global politics.²⁹

Educational cooperation as a democratic stabiliser

Educational cooperation under Erasmus+ serves as a democratic stabilizer by promoting shared norms, quality assurance frameworks, and the adoption of transparent governance mechanisms such as the Diploma Supplement and learning agreements³⁰. These tools not only facilitate mobility but also embed EU educational and democratic standards within LAC higher education institutions, enhancing institutional symmetries and normative alignment. Beyond fostering academic exchange, Erasmus+ strengthens the institutional capacities of partner universities by encouraging best practices in curriculum design, assessment, and accreditation processes, thereby creating a more predictable and accountable higher education environment.

The program also cultivates a generation of students and faculty who are familiar with participatory governance, academic integrity, and cross-cultural collaboration, contributing to the broader consolidation of democra-

tic practices in society. In addition, by linking educational reforms to mobility opportunities, Erasmus+ incentivizes systemic improvements and promotes regional integration, helping to build networks of excellence and shared understanding that underpin both social cohesion and economic competitiveness across Europe and Latin America.

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Youth cooperation as a driver of sustainable and digital transitions

The urgency of reinvestment is reinforced by the centrality of youth in driving green and digital transitions. Latin America’s demographic profile, with 42% of its population under 25, creates enormous potential for innovation and collaboration³³. Flagship projects such as IMIM (Integrated Marine and Inland Management), EUROAQUAE (water management and sustainability), and SUS-TER (sustainable territorial development) link European and Latin American universities in research addressing climate change, resource management, and territorial inequalities. Jean Monnet Chairs, hosted in universities across Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico, anchor European integration studies and expand policy research

29 European Commission. (2023). Erasmus+ Programme Guide. Publications Office of the European Union: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide>

30 European Commission. (2023). Factsheet on Erasmus+ for Latin America and the Caribbean. https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-07/factsheet-erasmusplus-celac-2023_en.pdf

31 European Parliament. (2022). Education and youth: Fact Sheets on the European Union. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/140/education>

32 European University Association. (2021). Prospects for enhancing EU-LAC higher education and research cooperation: <https://www.eua.eu/our-work/expert-voices/prospects-for-enhancing-eu-lac-higher-education-and-research-cooperation.html>

33 Birle, P., Göbel, B., & Boyer, M. (2020). Mobility, diversity, inequality, sustainability: Cross-cutting issues of cultural, scientific and social relations between the European Union and Latin America / the Caribbean. EU-LAC Foundation. https://eulacfoundation.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Publication_Mobility_2020.pdf

capacities³⁴. These projects create not only joint degrees and co-supervised theses but also innovation clusters that connect academia, local authorities, and civil society.

Equally significant is Erasmus+'s role in promoting green skills and environmental literacy. Many funded projects incorporate climate adaptation, renewable energy, circular economy practices, and sustainable urban planning into curricula. By embedding these themes into mobility programmes and joint research, Erasmus+ ensures that young professionals in both Europe and LAC are prepared to address ecological crises with scientifically grounded and socially inclusive solutions. The emphasis on sustainability not only strengthens local capacities but also contributes to building a generation of leaders who view environmental responsibility as integral to governance and economic competitiveness.³⁵

The multiplier effect of youth engagement is also evident in community-level innovation. Erasmus+ projects often create linkages between students, municipalities, and local NGOs, generating pilot initiatives that address pressing challenges such as waste management, digital literacy in rural areas, and gender inclusion in STEM fields. These initiatives demonstrate how youth-driven cooperation transcends academic boundaries to produce tangible social impact, aligning higher education with broader development agendas.³⁶

Finally, youth cooperation under Erasmus+ contributes to the resilience of EU-LAC relations by institutionalising intergenerational dialogue. Alumni networks and youth-led policy forums ensure that voices from both regions continue to inform policy debates on sustainability and digital governance. This continuity not only nurtures shared problem-solving but also strengthens the legitimacy of bi-regional cooperation by placing young people at its centre. In doing so, Eras-

mus+ consolidates itself as both a generator of human capital and a long-term investment in democratic resilience, sustainability, and digital innovation across the transatlantic partnership.

2/ RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the Purpose of consolidating the EU-LAC cooperation in the fields of youth and higher education, we consider the following recommendations for a renewed commitment to educational cooperation:

1. Simplifying procedures and strengthening support

A first priority is to reduce the barriers that prevent Latin American and Caribbean institutions from fully taking part in Erasmus+. Currently, applications often rely heavily on European organisations, while extensive paperwork, visa issues, and limited regional support discourage smaller actors. If NFPs (national focal points) provided clearer guidance on eligibility rules, opportunities could be shared more fairly, reaching vulnerable youth and students. Combined with strengthened support structures—such as additional NFP staff for the youth sector and adequate resources for advising applicants—this clarity would facilitate cooperation and help build long-term partnerships between organisations in both regions.

2. Ensuring balance and inclusiveness

The uneven distribution of Erasmus+ opportunities within the LAC region undermines the programme's potential to act as a driver of regional cohesion. Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia have captured the majority of scholarships and partnerships, while Central America and the Caribbean remain marginal. Dedicated envelopes, corrective measures, and tar-

34 Leiva, P. (2013). Hacia un espacio eurolatinoamericano para la Educación Superior, Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación. Universidad Central de Chile / Institut des Amériques / EU-LAC Foundation.

35 INVITE Erasmus. (2024). Overview of existing and emerging technologies: Full analysis. https://invite-erasmus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Overview-of-existing-and-emerging-technologies_Full-Analysis.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

36 European Commission. (2022). Joint communication: Youth action plan in EU external action 2022-2027. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Joint%20Communication%20-%20Youth%20Action%20Plan%20in%20EU%20external%20action%202022%20%E2%80%932027.pdf>

geted capacity-building support are necessary to ensure that the benefits of cooperation extend across the entire region, including smaller universities, civil society organisations, and youth groups with fewer resources. Furthermore, we believe that **the LAC region should be eligible under Capacity building in the field of youth** for the remaining two years 2026 and 2027.

Considering the major differences between the North America region and the Latin America and the Caribbeans, we believe that merging it into one strategic region for the programming period 2028-2035 could be reconsidered in order to allow a tailored approach both in the youth and higher education sectors.

3. Aligning Erasmus+ with political priorities

Despite repeated commitments to place youth and education at the centre of EU-LAC relations, Erasmus+ has not been systematically integrated into the Global Gateway or the EU-CELAC agenda. This disconnect weakens the programme's strategic value. Establishing clear mobility targets, governance mechanisms, and follow-up structures within the framework of bi-regional summits would make Erasmus+ an operational pillar of the partnership, ensuring that investments in infrastructure and digital transition are matched by investments in human capital and youth cooperation.

To this extent, the Forum on the Future of the EU hosted by Equipo Europa in November 2025 in Madrid aims at getting a better understanding of the common needs and interests of students and young people with the ultimate goal of deepening EU-LATAM partnerships.

Furthermore, the Youth partnership between the EU and the Council of Europe could also involve LAC beneficiaries up to 20% of the total, whenever the topics of cooperation are addressing global challenges (such as cybersecurity, digital citizenship education, green transition etc.)

4. Reinforcing youth participation and future-oriented skills

Finally, the future of Erasmus+ depends on its capacity to empower young people as active partners in shaping EU-LAC relations. Beyond academic mobility, the programme should place stronger emphasis on youth mobility, internships, placements, and professional mobility in priority areas such as the green and digital transitions. At the same time, institutionalised youth consultations within programme governance would guarantee that policies reflect the perspectives of those directly affected. By embedding both skills development and democratic participation, Erasmus+ can consolidate its role as a strategic investment in a resilient and inclusive transatlantic partnership. To this extent, cooperation with UN agencies such as UNICEF and ILO could be essential in mainstreaming a global perspective while consolidating the EU-LAC cooperation in the fields of youth and higher education.

To give continuity and weight to youth voices in the EU-LAC partnership, a **permanent EU-LAC Youth Council should be established**, modelled on the AU-EU Youth Council. This body would bring together youth representatives from both regions on a regular basis, provide structured input into EU-CELAC summits, and ensure that educational and mobility priorities reflect the perspectives of young people. Unlike one-off forums or consultations, such a council would serve as a standing mechanism for dialogue, co-design, and monitoring, thereby embedding youth participation at the core of bi-regional cooperation. Its creation would symbolise a genuine commitment to intergenerational governance and would strengthen Erasmus+ as a platform that not only funds mobility but also builds democratic legitimacy and shared ownership of the EU-LAC agenda.

3/ BIBLIOGRAPHY

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NOTAS

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