

Turning Mirrors into Windows: International Education and the Transatlantic Partnership

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Introduction

Thank you. It is a pleasure for me to be here with you in San Juan today – it's my first visit to Puerto Rico, so thank you for the opportunity – and to share with you some thoughts about international education and the prospects for cooperation between your institutions and the European Union. I am also honored to be sharing the stage with His Excellency, Jorge Dezcallar de Mazarredo, the Ambassador of Spain to the United States.

In Europe, much like in the U.S., our economic and social model largely depends on the knowledge and skills of our citizens. Giving young people the basis for the best possible start in life is essential to responding to the challenges of globalization and rapid technological change.

This responsibility is one that we share with the United States, as well as with other international partners. In a knowledge-based world, higher education institutions around the globe are facing similar challenges, and there is a mutual benefit to facilitating mobility, fostering collaboration and capacity building among institutions, and developing opportunities for true regional and bilateral cooperation.

The Benefits of International Exchange

I recently came across a wonderful quote from Sydney J. Harris, a twentieth-century journalist who was born in London but spent most of his life in Chicago – a truly transatlantic figure. For more than 40 years, he wrote a regular column called "Strictly Personal," which was syndicated throughout North America.

Harris wrote, "The whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows." To me, that means that education is a process of learning to look beyond yourself, and to see the rest of the world more clearly. This is particularly true for those who have benefited from the opportunities offered by international education partnerships. I have never met anyone who, after studying or teaching abroad, did not feel that windows and doors to the world had opened wide to them – that they had seen far beyond what they had previously perceived to be the horizon.

It is for that reason that international education is a powerful tool in fighting prejudice and advancing mutual understanding among nations. It can unite institutions, and international dialogue, partnership, mutual learning and competition can enhance the quality of education systems. And studies confirm that international programs help students acquire the skills they need to face the challenges of a global, knowledge-based economy. It has a remarkable impact on the educational record and on the cross-cultural competency of participating students, improving their cultural knowledge and language proficiency, increasing their adaptability, introducing a more flexible mindset and enhancing personal confidence to operate on the international scene.

I can vouch for this on a personal level. Although I am Italian, I studied law in Innsbruck, Austria.

Supporting the Transatlantic Relationship through Academic Cooperation and Exchange

In today's global competition for talent, enhanced quality and excellence of education and training are increasingly important. In addition, promoting academic mobility and partnership programs between countries and regions, and ensuring that students and academics worldwide exchange knowledge, experience, and ideas, are vital to keeping international relationships strong. For that reason, the EU provides numerous avenues and resources to support international academic cooperation.

Atlantis

Since 1995, the EU has had a formal higher education and vocational training cooperation agreement with the United States. The Atlantis program, jointly funded by the European Commission and the U.S. Department of Education, encourages European and American universities to create long-term partnerships, establish joint study programs, and exchange students across the Atlantic. Partner

institutions pool their best resources, compare and update their curricula, and improve the transparency and portability of credits and qualifications. Atlantis also supports programs that foster student mobility and exchange, as well as transatlantic collaboration in the area of education policy.

Over the past five years, the European Commission and the U.S. Department of Education have launched 95 bilateral projects, including 41 transatlantic degrees, involving more than 300 European and U.S. partner institutions. These projects – which include not only the transatlantic degree programs, but also comparative studies and analyses; language and content integration; e-learning and open education; and infrastructure and resources development – will mobilize nearly 3,500 students and more than 1,500 faculty and staff members.

For example, in 2010, the University of Texas at El Paso – a Hispanic Serving Institution – and the Czech Technical University were selected to launch a dual graduate degree in transportation and logistics systems; together with the Slovac University of Zilina, they will receive almost \$ 1 million in Atlantis funding over a four-year project period. And San Diego State University – a HACU Associate Member – is working with the UK's Aston University to develop a mobility and cross-cultural training program to help students become more employable as global managers.

Looking to the future, the EU and the US have identified several priority areas for Atlantis funding, including greater access to international education and higher completion rates for underserved student populations, enhanced global competence of students., a wider institutional diversity in the applicant pools, university-industry cooperation, recognition of degrees and qualifications, the implications of higher education reforms for cooperation and mobility, and credit accumulation and transfer systems.

Schuman-Fulbright Program

The cooperation agreement also funds the Schuman-Fulbright Program, which provides financial support to highly qualified professionals to undertake studies or training on the opposite side of the Atlantic, in areas of specific relevance to the EU-U.S. relations.

While the Fulbright program has been in existence since 1946 and currently operates in more than 140 countries around the world, the Fulbright-Schuman Program is unique. It is the only multilateral Fulbright program that allows any citizen of the EU to apply to go to the United States, and any U.S. citizens to apply to conduct his or her project in any two Member States of the EU. Traditional bilateral Fulbright programs are open to candidates in all disciplines, whereas the Fulbright-Schuman is strictly limited to projects focusing on EU affairs or EU-U.S. relations.

Erasmus Mundus

In addition to the Atlantis program funded in cooperation with the United States, the European Union offers the Erasmus Mundus program, which was originally inspired by an earlier, very successful initiative supporting cooperation and mobility among European higher education institutions. Launched in 2004, Erasmus Mundus helps fund the development of joint masters courses and doctoral programs, mobility partnerships that bring together higher education institutions from European and non-European countries, and projects that focus on the international dimension of higher education as it relates to a particular region or academic discipline.

Erasmus Mundus graduate and doctoral programs are each offered by a consortium of at least three European universities located in three different countries; students study at two of them and obtain a double or joint degree upon graduation. Erasmus Mundus programs may also include non-EU universities, and 27 Erasmus Mundus degrees have U.S. universities as partners. In fact, the United States is better connected to the Erasmus Mundus network than any other non-EU country.

Erasmus Mundus also offers students from non-EU countries the opportunity to study in the EU by providing two-year, €21,000 graduate and research scholarships to students participating in one of the 116 Erasmus Mundus masters courses. So far, more than 300 American students and 293 U.S. academics have been selected for scholarships in the masters courses, while the first selection of doctoral candidates in 2010 resulted in seven U.S. participants.

Jean Monnet

Finally, the EU's Jean Monnet program supports university-level teaching and research on European integration. Currently present in 68 countries on five continents, the program has stimulated academic excellence in European integration studies, raised awareness of European integration, and increased the international visibility of the EU.

The highest number of Jean Monnet teaching projects outside Europe can be found in the United States, where there are 30 Jean Monnet projects funded at 21 U.S. universities, including one Jean Monnet Center of Excellence at the University of Florida.

EU-Latin America Exchanges

I should note that Erasmus Mundus and Jean Monnet programs are also open to our partner countries in Latin America. In addition, the EU's ALFA program fosters cooperation among higher education institutions in the EU and Latin America and helps to improve the quality, relevance, and accessibility of higher education in Latin America.

I would like to encourage all of you to take ample advantage of these opportunities to create closer ties between the institutions and people across the Atlantic because this cooperation is a win-win situation not only for those involved, but for both our societies as a whole.

The Bologna Process

While the EU offers many resources to support international education, to fully reap the benefits of academic mobility, it is vital to develop global standards in areas like degree recognition and quality assurance. As a result the EU has become increasingly influential in the development of international educational standards in higher education. Our success in creating tools such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) as well as the European Higher Education Area has generated increasing interest among global partners.

As many of you will know, in 1999, the EU's Bologna Declaration initiated a process that has led to far-reaching reforms in higher education across Europe. In particular, the Bologna Process plays a major role in increasing academic mobility by standardizing higher education into three cycles – bachelors,

masters, and PhD – facilitating the mutual recognition of academic qualifications, and setting guidelines for quality assurance. Today, the Bologna Process has created a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) of 47 countries that is internationally competitive and attractive to students and staff from Europe and around the world. It is an unprecedented example of regional, cross-border cooperation in higher education.

And such cross-border cooperation will only increase in the coming years – globalization guarantees that. So in March 2010, a second Bologna Policy Forum was held in Vienna (Austria) between ministers of Bologna countries and their colleagues from 24 other nations – including the U.S., Argentina, Brazil, Columbia and Mexico – to facilitate a global higher education dialogue.

In the future, such policy dialogues will be key to reforming and modernizing post-secondary education to ensure that our respective systems can deliver the knowledge base required to keep our economies and our societies strong. The transatlantic relationship offers an enormous opportunity to conduct open dialogues on issues of common interest including not only quality assurance, qualification frameworks, and degree recognition, but also promotion of life-long learning, participation and completion practices in higher education, and university-industry cooperation.

To complement internal policy reflections, in 2009 the EU and the U.S. launched the first-ever regularly scheduled policy dialogue – the EU-U.S. Education Policy Forum – on higher education reforms and university-business cooperation. A second policy forum was held in 2010 and focused on schools, teacher development, and skills for the future. These dialogues have yielded so far concrete follow-up actions such as a joint EU-US Tuning project, two joint EU-US studies on higher education credit systems and labour market skills needs. The 2011 policy forum will focus on the 21st-century student and qualifications frameworks.

Conclusion

In closing, I'd like to take another look at that quote – the one about education turning mirrors into windows. By working together – through academic mobility and partnership programs; by encouraging our students to study abroad, for a year, for a semester, or even just for a few weeks; by sharing our

expertise – we can help our students acquire the skills they need in a globalized economy. We can enhance the quality of education systems. And we can contribute to mutual understanding and dialogue among our nations.

That's a lot of open windows.

Thank you.