

Brexit threatens UK-Latin America cooperation in higher education, but both sides can help to ensure it continues



*Current and past bilateral initiatives show that the UK's exit from the European Union is not only a threat, but also as an opportunity, writes **Valesca Lima** (Dublin City University).*

European integration has contributed to worldwide development both by driving trade with the European single market and through funding research cooperation. But the United Kingdom's decision to leave the EU raises important economic and political challenges. The impact of Brexit on trade and cooperation will depend on the form that it takes, with a soft Brexit potentially maintaining UK access to markets and freedom of movement for European nationals, whereas a hard Brexit would see reduced market access and controls on migration to the UK. But because of the EU's many extra-regional programmes, the effects also extend far beyond the EU's borders, including to Latin America.

Key here is the EU's [Regional Programme for Latin America](#) (2014-2020), which covers areas like security, good governance, and environmental or educational programmes. Of the nearly €1 billion available through this programme, €163 million is dedicated to exchange and cooperation in higher education.

Though this important EU development aid is expected to continue post-Brexit, it will no longer cover UK universities and researchers, making it more challenging to promote higher education exchanges and cooperation between UK and Latin America.

For now, the European Commission and European Parliament have confirmed that during negotiations under Article 50, EU treaties and law continue to apply to the UK, but once withdrawal is complete, Latin American and UK universities will have to forge new agreements to replace mobility programs like Erasmus Plus.

Higher-education exchanges and cooperation currently support mobility staff and students, as well as high-quality research projects jointly implemented by EU and non-EU universities.

In South America, Erasmus Plus has concentrated on Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico and Chile, enabling creation of strong networks between the UK and Latin America. But although the UK government has reaffirmed its commitment to honouring current agreements, it has been unable to clarify its plans post-Brexit.

[Universities UK](#), the advocacy organisation for British universities, asserts that the sector is aware of the relationship between cultural openness and innovation, but at the same time they report increasing barriers to recruitment of talented students and staff, which could undermine research excellence and the overall quality of courses.

The organisation is currently lobbying for the British government to guarantee future opportunities for international cooperation, potentially via the implementation of short-term agreements and a simplified immigration regime for international students and staff.



Jo Johnson MP, Minister for Universities, Science, Research & Innovation signs an agreement with Colombian Ambassador Néstor Osorio Londoño (© LSE)

In general terms, the UK government has promised that funding lost from EU research and innovation programmes will be replaced by domestic funding. In order to ensure continued relevance in this new landscape, both sides of UK-Latin America educational initiatives will need to build on existing examples of what can be achieved bilaterally.

Chile, for example, has connected national researchers with the international community via its [National Commission for Scientific and Technical Research](#) (CONICYT), which has forged links with the UK's Newton programme to generate research networks between the two countries. In 2014, for example, 28 projects were financed with a value of more than \$2.3 billion pesos (£4 million) in 2014.

From 2012-2014 over 600 Brazilian students and researchers – undergraduates through to PhD students – reached the UK through the [Science Without Borders](#) programme, though it has since fallen victim to local economic problems and was drastically reduced from 2016 onwards under new president Michel Temer.

Such initiatives nonetheless provide evidence that the UK's exit from the EU need not be seen only as a threat, but also as an opportunity. But Latin America's governments and research agencies will need to conduct a comprehensive review of the current regulatory landscape to identify how and with which UK agencies such programmes could be revised, improved, and expanded.

Since Brexit negotiations are ongoing, it remains difficult to predict what British priorities for research cooperation will ultimately be, however. But Latin America must prepare for the worst-case scenario (hard Brexit) and consider how the international approach of UK universities could change in such a scenario.

In the case of Erasmus, a medium or hard Brexit could see the UK participate along the lines of current "partner countries", meaning only limited mobility, less funding, and a swathe of new conditions. Access would be reduced for UK and Latin American students alike.

Yet, it is vital that the UK government maintain its research cooperation with Latin America. Not only does research cooperation with developing countries support capacity-building in higher education, it also promotes new knowledge creation and enhances political relations. The challenge for politicians and academics is to make this case and formulate alternative mechanisms for future exchange programmes which can take UK-Latin America higher-education cooperation to a new level irrespective of how Brexit turns out.

This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of LSE Brexit or the London School of Economics. It first appeared on the [LSE Latin America blog](#).

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