

Partners in higher education: People-driven integration

PARTNERS IN TRADE

Independent of whether one is in favour of or against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the figures on free trade in North America indisputably point to a process of increasing economic integration among the three countries of the region. Trade among the three countries went from \$286 billion in 1993 to \$846 billion in 2006. For both Mexico and Canada, the United States is their first partner in international trade; Canada is the United States' first partner and Mexico its third. These are the cold facts of economic integration in North America.

The problem is that, in contrast to the European experience of integration, in North America the economic process is not occurring hand in hand with the political will of the governments to create institutions. Therefore, despite the very serious common challenges faced by the three countries—such as immigration, security, and drug trafficking—we do not see in North America the definition of a regional public policy agenda.

POLICY GAPS

An excellent example of these regional policy gaps is the issue of cooperation in higher education. The figures are again crystal clear. The United States is, by far, the country attracting the most foreign students in the world. In 2006, there were over 580,000 foreign students enrolled in American universities. This practically doubles the figure of international students going to England, which is the second attracting country in the world.

What is the regional origin of the international students going to American universities? Most of

BY ARTURO BORJA TAMAYO

Arturo Borja Tamayo is the executive director of the US–Mexico Commission for Educational and Cultural Exchange (COMEXUS).

[W]e do not see in North America the definition of a regional public policy agenda.

them come from Asia (59 percent), Europe (15 percent), and Latin America (12 percent). Only 5 percent are from North America. India, China, and South Korea were the countries sending the highest number of students to the United States in 2006: 83,833, 67,723, and 62,392, respectively. (See Table 1.)

The same year, there were 28,280 Canadian students going to the United States and only 13,826 from Mexico. On the other hand, most American students going abroad go to European countries. In 2005, 32,109 American students went to England, and 26,078 to Italy. In contrast, only 10,022 went to Mexico, and less than 2,000 American students went to Canada.

What have the North American governments done in the past to increase regional student mobility? Not much really. In the light of NAFTA, they created the North American Student Mobility Program in 1995, but the results have been mixed—the program was suspended in some years. The Mobility Program has promoted the creation of the North American University Consortia for student exchange. By 2008, 106 Consortia had received funding from the three governments, and approximately 600 universities had participated in the program. (The success of these Consortia in reaching their goals in student mobility has varied, but there is no space in this article to analyze the causes of such variation.)

The governments have also supported the Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration (CONAHEC), a North American organization based at the University of Arizona with the challenging mission of

TABLE 1 American students enrolled abroad by host country

Year	Host country	Number of students	As % of all American students abroad
2005	England	32,109	14.4
2005	Italy	26,078	11.7
2005	Spain	21,881	9.8
2005	Mexico	10,022	4.5
2005	Canada	Under 2,000	Under 1

TABLE 2 Foreign students in the USA

Year	Host country	Number of students	As % of all foreign students in the USA
2005	India	83,833	14.4
2005	China	67,723	11.6
2005	South Korea	62,392	10.7
2005	Taiwan	29,094	5.0
2005	Canada	28,280	4.9
2005	Mexico	13,826	2.4

Source: Open Doors, Institute of International Education, New York.

Partners in higher education continued from page 53

developing institutional networks and student mobility among regional higher education institutions. Despite these praiseworthy efforts, the numbers reveal there has not been a change in the flows of international student exchanges with American universities, which continue to favour Asia and Europe.

NORTH AMERICA'S BRAIN DRAIN: THE OPTIONS

Furthermore, there is also a serious problem of "brain drain" in the region. The United States, the richest of the three countries, offers a very strong research infrastructure and university system, attracting numerous Canadian and Mexican scientists. Canada also has an active policy to attract foreign scientists, as well as qualified individuals, in a more general sense. More and more Mexicans are taking advantage of such policies. The problem is complex. The debate nowadays is whether the international flows of "brain mobility" bring long-term benefits to the countries of origin of these qualified migrants. India, China, and South Korea are often pointed to as examples of positive impact. In Canada and Mexico, however, such an impact is not as obvious as it is for the Asian countries. In Mexico's case, because of the serious problem of economic underdevelopment and poverty, it is quite clear that there is a constant need for highly educated graduates and scientists.

Hence, to the question of what the North American agenda in higher education and science should be, I would respond by posing the following questions: What do we want for the future of the region? Do we want economic integration combined with higher education dislocation? Which of these scenarios is best for the societies and governments of the three countries, as well as for the future of the region?

We should look at the European Union when seeking responses to these questions. It has been the regional institutions created by the European governments that assumed the leadership role

Only a strong conviction shared by Washington, Ottawa, and Mexico City about the utmost relevance of regional cooperation in higher education will make this scheme work.

required to induce substantive change in international education. As we know well, the Bologna Process adopted by the EU in 1999 defined a plan for a gradual convergence of the educational systems of the member countries. Furthermore, through specific programs such as Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci, or Socrates, the EU has actively promoted the movement of students within Europe and between Europe and the rest of the world. Higher education has already been internationalized in Europe, and this fact will represent an important comparative advantage for Europe in the future competition with other economic regions such as North America.

MAKE HIGHER EDUCATION A POLICY PRIORITY

What is my policy prescription for the new American administration and the governments of Canada and Mexico? The first and most important recom-

mendation is that regional higher education has to become a priority in the regional policy agenda, at the same level as immigration, security, and trade. First-rank cabinet ministers—the secretaries of education and foreign affairs or someone in the president's or prime minister's office—should be directly involved in the definition of a regional plan and policies for cooperation in higher education.

A regional permanent Commission on Higher Education Cooperation should be created and financed by the three governments. This is not an expensive and bureaucratically heavy initiative. All that is required is an office with minimum staff, an executive director appointed by the three governments, and a board composed of government and non-government (university presidents, scholars, scientists) representatives from the three countries. Such representatives should be truly committed to higher education cooperation in North America.

But the crucial factor for such a commission to be effective is that the executives of the three countries fully support its mission. Only a strong conviction shared by Washington, Ottawa, and Mexico City about the utmost relevance of regional cooperation in higher education will make this scheme work.

Finally, it would be a strategic mistake to link regional initiatives in this issue area to the future of NAFTA. As stated at the beginning, with or without NAFTA, the regional process of economic integration will keep advancing at full speed. Cooperation in higher education, in such a scenario, will always be a win-win result for the three countries. 🍁

For more information on *Canada Watch* and the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, visit

www.yorku.ca/robarts

YORK
UNIVERSITÉ
UNIVERSITY **U50**

redefine THE POSSIBLE.