Exploration of bilateral cooperation: Landscape of the Swiss scientific collaboration with Latin America
EPFL | 09 Sep 2014

ROUND TABLE DISCUSSIONS: MAIN OUTCOME

Discussion of Group 1: Chile, Colombia, Mexico

1. General interest and potential

What are your views regarding the potential of the countries revealed by the study? Can you confirm the level of interest within the community of Swiss researchers for collaborating with these countries? What are the views from Latin America regarding this?

- In parallel to the bilateral approach with specific countries, the promotion of scientific collaboration with Switzerland should be addressed from a regional perspective (Latin America).

- Promotion of academic cooperation and exchanges is an important starting point that needs to be reinforced. Swiss universities are little known in most countries of the region; a strong advertising campaign is needed. Countries have funds to send their students to Switzerland, but since Swiss universities are not well known, scholarship students decide to go elsewhere. Increased academic exchanges and student circulation will pay off in rising scientific cooperation in the mid- and long-term.

- Diverse past, ongoing and potential collaboration initiatives and actions with Latin America were not shown in the study. Many of these exchanges are informal but constantly nourished by researchers’ exchanges, and they are important because of their potential to generate strong cooperation outputs in the mid- to long-term.

2. Mechanisms of scientific cooperation and funding instruments

Under which main mechanisms do Swiss-Latin American bilateral cooperation and partnerships function? What are your experiences regarding such forms of cooperation? What are the main opportunities and challenges of scientific and academic cooperation?

- While exchanges at the scientist-scientist level are based on personal interest and creativity, they are nevertheless fragile and difficult to maintain over time. Therefore, formal institutional support in the form of specific mechanisms of scientific collaboration is needed to boost cooperation and exchanges and to ensure their existence over a longer period of time. While personal interest and motivation are key catalysts of scientific cooperation, this should be matched with top-down supportive structures.
The existing mechanisms of scientific cooperation that were mentioned include scientific networks, joint research projects, scientific diaspora associations, fellow and students' exchanges, center of competences in concrete areas of interest, and mobility grants.

3. Impact, lessons learnt and recommendations

What are your concrete expectations and recommendations regarding the next steps of the exploration process?

- The Pacific Alliance (Chile, Colombia, México, Peru) should be exploited as a useful tool for Switzerland (which is a member of the Advisory Board) to promote cooperation from a regional perspective, and to make Swiss academic and research institutions more visible in Latin America.

- Although bottom-up research exchanges need top-down supportive mechanisms to achieve factual research collaboration, political decisions often undermine real collaboration needs and interests. Researchers are thus obliged to adapt to the established institutional frameworks which limit their freedom of research. A change of approach is required that takes this risk into consideration.

- Collaborations on a personal basis are fragile and their existence and endurance over time, as well as their impact, can be maximized through the implementation of long-term research projects. Furthermore, the transition from individual and small collaborations with little funds available to a real mid-big research project with a long-term perspective is extremely difficult. There are no funding mechanisms available which promote intermediate sized research collaborations with Latin America. Funding mechanisms supporting mid to big joint research projects are thus necessary.

- Scientific cooperation (regional or bilateral) needs to involve multiple stakeholders such as public institutions and the private sector, and to include the social actors who are the beneficiaries of the research. This will enable a higher possibility of generating beneficial impacts in the particular contexts in which research is taking place. Both translational and transnational research should be promoted through the mission of scientific bilateral cooperation with Latin American countries and with tailored support mechanisms.

- Both Swiss and Latin American institutions need to be proactive and find niches in terms of topics that are relevant for both sides.

- The results of the mapping study should be made available to the public. This could complement existing information of national scientific communities abroad (scientific diasporas). Both would give an overview of the type of skills available, existing scientific networks and further connections, and would help to federate the available resources, to capitalize on them, to establish new contacts and to find partners for potential projects in specific areas.
Discussion of Group 2: all other Latin American countries

1. General interest and potential

What are your views regarding the potential of the countries revealed by the study? Can you confirm the level of interest within the community of Swiss researchers for collaborating with these countries? What are the views from Latin America regarding this?

- Swiss institutions should be better portrayed in Latin American countries; very little communication effort is undertaken with this in mind and the visibility of Swiss institutions is thus limited.

- The low number of Swiss-based students studying in Latin America shown by the mapping study is surprising. It would be important to verify if this is due to the methodology used, or if the figure is simply very low. Reflection is needed to address and to reduce this trend. A tracking study would be useful to provide documented insight into mobility trends, the behaviour and the impact of these “free movers”.

- Several Latin American countries have experienced significant evolution in recent years in various ways. Firstly, important annual economic growth has resulted in an increase in means allocated to science and research. Secondly, research subjects deemed of interest have evolved, showing that priority is increasingly given to the intensification of research in technologies for development. Thirdly, various associations of Latin American researchers abroad have been established\(^1\), and the home countries have recognised the potential gains they can obtain from collaborating with them. It would be important to verify if the mapping study on research collaborations fully reflects this recent evolution.

2. Mechanisms of scientific cooperation and funding instruments

Under which main mechanisms do Swiss-Latin American bilateral cooperation and partnerships function? What are your experiences regarding such forms of cooperation? How do you assess the effectiveness of the funding instruments available so far? Which new funding instruments could be created?

- In Switzerland, the funds for joint research projects were managed by the Leading Houses until 2012, now they are managed by the SNSF. In terms of a concrete scope for research, strong interest is expressed in favour of not narrowing down the future bilateral collaborations in terms of research focus areas, of keeping an open approach, and also of including social sciences and humanities.

- Establishing bilateral research collaborations takes time. It is difficult to move from personal exchanges on a researcher-researcher basis to the establishment of a joint research project with a mid- to long-term perspective. Funding to enable a smooth transition from one to the other is currently missing\(^2\).

\(^1\) For example: Asociación Colombiana de Investigadores en Suiza (ACIS) and Reflexión Perú
\(^2\) The Seed Money grants have been designed to bridge this gap.
• Students’ scholarships are a much appreciated mechanism. While the 3-year scholarship support for PhD students is considered acceptable, the one year maximum funding for post-docs is considered short and insufficient.

• It is suggested that the Latin American students and researchers’ associations in Switzerland be federated, in order to improve the visibility of existing networks, competences and further resources and to better leverage them.

3. Impact, lessons learnt and recommendations

*What are your concrete expectations and recommendations regarding the next steps of the exploration process?*

• Participants view the role of EPFL Leading House as being that of a facilitator, namely by opening doors, creating contacts, bringing potential partners together; exploring partner countries and innovative funding instruments; informing the scientific community about the funding system, opportunities and potential for research partners; and encouraging academic cooperation.

• These discussions should be viewed in light of innovative perspectives which have arisen in the current landscape, in which new collaboration mechanisms (such as MOOCS) and a variety of actors (scientific diasporas, private sector, etc.) need to be included.

• As opposed to Switzerland, Latin American countries tend to be more centralized and apply a top-down policy. The priorities and axes of scientific and academic cooperation are defined at the top, and that is also where the money often is. However, a bottom-up approach is necessary because individual researchers and students are the best catalysts for bilateral cooperation, and their own interest, creativity and freedom of research should be supported institutionally. Bilateral cooperation should be built upon existing individual and institutional partnerships and not defined externally (from the top).

• While academic and research institutions actively build their own networks, links with alumni and partnerships through dynamic decentralized initiatives, governments’ decision-making processes and intergovernmental agreements tend to be very slow. The management of bilateral scientific cooperation programmes must take this into account and endeavour to overcome this hurdle.

• The Switzerland-Latin America bilateral cooperation needs to have a regional focus and should not be based on individual countries, because many priority issues are of a cross-border nature. The current efforts towards regional integration processes in Latin America reflect this idea. Regional partners for cooperation in research and science and technology would be an added-value to the existing bilateral cooperation. Examples of such regional entities include: Comunidad Andina and Alianza del Pacifico.