



Network of Universities
from the Capitals of Europe



Universidad
de Alcalá



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Bridging Continents

University Leadership for Transformative Euro-Latin American Collaboration

*Conference Report from
UNICA Rectors' Seminar 2026*

June 2026



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Introduction

Universities are increasingly called upon to **act as bridges between regions, cultures, and societies**. In today's interconnected yet fragmented world - marked by geopolitical tensions, environmental crises, technological disruption, and widening social inequalities - **cooperation beyond geographical and political boundaries has become an imperative for higher education**. Universities are expected not only to generate knowledge but also to contribute to societal resilience, democratic stability, and inclusive development.

Latin America and Europe share a long history of cultural exchange, intellectual dialogue, and political cooperation. This relationship has been reaffirmed in recent years through renewed high-level political engagement, notably at the [EU-CELAC Summit held in Brussels in July 2023](#), which **relaunched the bi-regional partnership and highlighted cooperation** in areas such as multilateralism, climate action, digital transformation, and social cohesion. The partnership was further strengthened during the [4th EU-CELAC Summit in Santa Marta, Colombia, in November 2025](#), where Heads of State and Government adopted a **Joint Declaration outlining shared commitments on renewable energy, inclusive digitalisation, climate adaptation, biotechnology, food security, migration, and the defence of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law**.

These political developments underscore the **strategic importance of the Europe-Latin America partnership and highlight the central role that universities can play** in advancing research and innovation, supporting evidence-based policymaking, fostering people-to-people connections, and contributing to sustainable development. **Latin America, with its rich academic traditions, demographic dynamism, and expanding research ecosystems, represents an indispensable partner for Europe**. At the same time, European universities offer valuable opportunities for joint knowledge production, academic mobility, and capacity building within frameworks that promote inclusive and equitable cooperation.

Despite this strong foundation, **collaboration between the two regions continues to face structural challenges**, including asymmetries in research capacity and resources, fragmented policy environments, language barriers, and uneven access to mobility and funding opportunities.

The UNICA Rectors' Seminar 2026 brought together university leaders, academics, policymakers and experts from Europe and Latin America to **explore how higher education institutions can strengthen cooperation between the two regions and contribute to addressing shared global challenges**. Over the course of four thematic sessions, participants examined the conditions for building sustainable academic partnerships, reflected on the civic role of universities through research and knowledge transfer, discussed innovative pedagogical approaches in the era of artificial intelligence, and considered how higher education can reinforce democracy, human rights and the rule of law through education.

The discussions emphasised that **meaningful cooperation requires long-term institutional commitment, reciprocal partnerships, and shared responsibility**. Throughout the Seminar, participants reaffirmed the role of universities as strategic connectors between Europe and Latin America, capable of fostering dialogue, generating knowledge for the public good, and advancing forms of academic cooperation that are impactful, sustainable, and responsive to the evolving needs of both regions.

Key messages

1 **Cooperation must be institutional, not personal**
Sustainable Europe–Latin America partnerships depend on embedded institutional strategies, not individual academic relationships or isolated projects.

2 **Universities are civic infrastructures, not just knowledge producers**
Higher education institutions increasingly function as spaces of democratic practice, social cohesion, and public engagement, not only teaching and research organizations.

3 **Inequality is the central structural constraint across all domains**
Academic cooperation, digital transformation, and democratic resilience are all shaped - and limited - by persistent asymmetries in funding, capacity, and access.

4

AI should be understood as a systemic transformation of higher education rather than as a standalone technological tool

Artificial intelligence reshapes pedagogy, governance, ethics, and geopolitics simultaneously, requiring institutional sovereignty, not just classroom-level adaptation.

5

Democracy and human rights must be embedded across institutions and curriculums

They cannot remain specialized topics; they must be integrated into governance, teaching, research, and university-society engagement.

6

The future of Europe-Latin America cooperation is reciprocal co-creation

The goal is no longer knowledge transfer from one region to another, but the joint production of knowledge, policy solutions, and educational models within a shared space.



Welcome address by the Rector of the University of Alcalá



Carmelo García Pérez
Rector of the University of Alcalá

Welcoming participants to the historic University of Alcalá, **Rector Carmelo García Pérez** situated the Seminar within the University's long-standing commitment to international dialogue and cooperation. He underlined that the University, founded in 1499, has historically combined education, culture, public service and international engagement, making it a fitting venue for a discussion on strengthening cooperation between Europe and Latin America.

The Rector argued that the relationship between the two regions is rooted in shared history, language and cultural ties, but stressed that **its future depends less on historical affinity than on partnerships built upon mutual respect, reciprocity and sustained institutional commitment**. Universities, he observed, are uniquely positioned to nurture these relationships because they educate future generations, generate research, support innovation and create spaces for evidence-based dialogue.

Drawing on the experience of the University of Alcalá, he highlighted the institution's extensive cooperation with Latin American universities through student mobility, joint research, postgraduate education and long-standing partnerships with organisations such as the [Organization of Ibero-American States \(OEI\)](#). **The success of these partnerships, he noted, does not lie in the number of agreements signed but in the communities of students, researchers and institutions that continue to collaborate over time.**

The Rector also connected the Seminar's four thematic sessions to the broader challenges confronting higher education.

Artificial intelligence, he argued, offers unprecedented opportunities for teaching and research while simultaneously raising fundamental questions regarding ethics, academic integrity and equitable access to knowledge. Likewise, knowledge transfer should not be understood solely in terms of innovation and economic impact, but also through universities' responsibility to generate solutions to societal problems.

He further emphasised the democratic mission of higher education, arguing that universities play an essential role in cultivating critical thinking, informed citizenship and respect for democratic values. **In a period characterised by increasing geopolitical uncertainty and societal fragmentation, international academic cooperation is not an optional activity but a strategic necessity. No university or country, he concluded, can address today's global challenges alone.**

Closing his remarks, the Rector expressed the hope that the Seminar would strengthen existing partnerships, generate new collaborations and contribute to a deeper and more resilient relationship between Europe and Latin America. **Ultimately, he argued, the value of the meeting should be measured not by the discussions held during the event itself, but by the long-term partnerships and joint initiatives that emerge from it.**

Universities' crucial role in fostering deeper cooperation between Europe and Latin America



Josep M. Garrell
President,
European University Association (EUA)

Opening the Seminar, **Josep M. Garrell** invited participants to reflect not on individual programmes or political declarations, but on the long-term role that universities play in shaping relations between Europe and Latin America. **Future generations, he argued, will not judge today's cooperation by the number of summit conclusions or funding instruments created, but by whether universities succeeded in educating people capable of cooperating across borders, sustaining democratic values and addressing global challenges together.**

His keynote positioned **universities not simply as beneficiaries of international cooperation but as strategic geopolitical actors** capable of strengthening trust, democracy and multilateralism in an increasingly fragmented world. While governments negotiate agreements and political priorities shift over time, universities maintain long-term relationships built through education, research and human exchange. In this sense, they represent one of the few institutions capable of simultaneously advancing knowledge, democratic resilience and international cooperation.

Garrell placed this argument within the rapidly changing global context. Whereas international cooperation two decades ago was largely characterised by expanding globalisation and growing scientific openness, today's environment is increasingly shaped by geopolitical competition, political polarisation, disinformation and declining trust in institutions. **Universities therefore find themselves defending not only academic excellence but also academic freedom, evidence-based decision-making and international collaboration itself.** Their long-term perspective enables them to address challenges that extend well beyond electoral cycles, including climate change, digital transformation and artificial intelligence.

A recurring theme throughout the keynote was that **trust constitutes the invisible infrastructure of international cooperation**. Scientific collaboration, student mobility and institutional partnerships generate relationships that often outlast political change, diplomatic tensions and funding cycles. **Garrell** described this as a form of academic or science diplomacy, arguing that universities continuously create channels of dialogue through researchers, students and academic communities even when political relations become more difficult. Mobility programmes, joint research and international networks therefore produce far more than educational outcomes; they create durable human relationships that sustain cooperation over time.

To illustrate this point, he reflected extensively on the transformative impact of the Erasmus+ programme. He argued that its greatest achievement has not been the number of participants but the normalisation of mobility itself. **By making international study an expected component of higher education rather than an exceptional opportunity, Erasmus fundamentally changed the way generations of Europeans understand cooperation, diversity and shared identity.** Its long-term contribution lies in strengthening intercultural competences, mutual understanding and social cohesion rather than merely facilitating exchanges.

At the same time, he acknowledged that Europe and Latin America have not yet achieved a comparable level of reciprocal mobility. Student flows remain uneven, with substantially more Latin American students travelling to Europe than vice versa. For **Garrell, the next stage of bi-regional cooperation should therefore aim not simply to increase mobility, but to create a genuinely shared academic space characterised by reciprocity rather than dependency.**

The keynote speaker also drew important lessons from the Bologna Process, stressing that it did not seek to standardise European higher education but to make diverse systems compatible through shared frameworks for quality assurance, qualification recognition and credit transfer. **Its central lesson is that integration is not about uniformity but about building trust between institutions while respecting diversity.** Although the process remains incomplete, it demonstrates that long-term institutional cooperation is possible even across highly diverse higher education systems - a lesson with clear relevance for Europe-Latin America relations.

Turning to research policy, **Garrell** highlighted Horizon Europe as an example of international scientific cooperation based on openness rather than competition. He argued that Europe's research framework has become a global platform because it combines scientific excellence with collaborative principles. Participation offers not only funding but also access to international networks, advanced research infrastructures and long-term institutional partnerships. **Science, he argued, should remain one of the principal instruments through which Europe exercises global leadership based on openness, cooperation and shared knowledge rather than geopolitical competition.**

He linked these ambitions to the European Union's Global Gateway strategy, arguing that its objectives - including the green transition, digital transformation, health resilience and human development - cannot succeed without strong universities. **Higher education should therefore be understood not as one policy sector among many others but as the enabling condition upon which all other strategic investments ultimately depend.** Universities should consequently position themselves not merely as recipients of funding but as strategic partners in implementing broader policy agendas.

Throughout the keynote, **Garrell** repeatedly returned to the importance of multilateralism. International university networks, joint degrees, collaborative doctoral programmes and scientific consortia represent practical expressions of multilateral cooperation that operate independently of political cycles. **Universities demonstrate every day that international cooperation is not simply a political aspiration but an operational reality.**

The final section of the keynote focused on democracy and academic freedom. Garrell argued that universities do not exist to support governments nor to oppose them; rather, **their fundamental mission is to pursue truth through evidence, dialogue and critical inquiry.** In an era of growing political polarisation and declining trust in expertise, universities have a particular responsibility to defend intellectual pluralism, create spaces for respectful disagreement and equip citizens with the capacity to distinguish evidence from opinion.

Concluding his address, he proposed moving beyond isolated cooperation projects towards a more ambitious long-term vision of a **Europe-Latin America Knowledge Area**. Such a framework would integrate mobility, research, innovation, quality assurance and democratic values into a coherent strategic partnership between the two regions. It would expand reciprocal mobility, strengthen scientific collaboration, improve recognition mechanisms and reinforce universities' contribution to sustainable development and democratic resilience.

He closed with a message that resonated throughout the Seminar: **the most important bridge between Europe and Latin America will not be built by governments alone. It will be built by universities through sustained cooperation, shared knowledge and the trust generated by generations of students, researchers and academic communities working together across continents.**



Building Sustainable Euro-Latin American Academic Partnerships

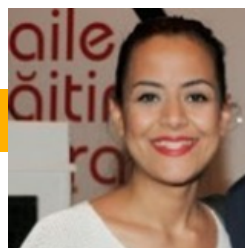
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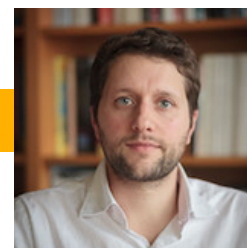
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The first session of the UNICA Rectors' Seminar 2026 explored **how universities can develop sustainable and mutually beneficial partnerships between Europe and Latin America**. Chaired by [Sorin Costreie](#), the discussion examined the institutional, cultural and policy conditions required to move beyond short-term collaborations towards long-lasting strategic partnerships. Drawing on their diverse institutional experiences, the panelists reflected on the **importance of trust, reciprocity, academic mobility and institutional commitment**, while also addressing the structural obstacles that continue to limit bi-regional cooperation.

Although approaching the topic from different institutional and regional perspectives, the speakers shared the view that **sustainable academic partnerships require more than formal agreements**; they depend on long-term institutional engagement, shared priorities, and the ability to build trust through continuous collaboration between people.

Building bridges through institutional commitment

Opening the panel, [Zeynep Kayacik](#) presented the experience of the [Centre for Latin American Studies](#) at Ankara University as an example of how specialised academic centres can act as bridges between regions and foster long-term dialogue.

She stressed that **universities have a unique responsibility to create spaces where ideas can circulate independently of political circumstances**, promoting mutual respect, shared progress and global solidarity. In this context, academic cooperation should not be regarded merely as an instrument of internationalisation, but as a means of strengthening intercultural understanding and developing lasting institutional relationships.

Established in 2009, the Centre was created with the mission of **promoting scientific cooperation between Türkiye and Latin America through research, education and institutional partnerships**, trying to respond to the growing interest for Latin America within Türkiye, supported by historical ties, increasing diplomatic engagement and a rising number of Latin American students studying in the country. Its activities encompass collaborative research projects, academic publications, conferences, cultural events, migration studies, open science initiatives, and the development of institutional resources that preserve knowledge and facilitate future cooperation.

Reflecting on nearly two decades of experience, **Kayacık** acknowledged that **cooperation between Türkiye and Latin America remains relatively recent compared with the long-established links between Latin American and European universities**. One of the principal challenges, she argued, is that institutions often sign cooperation agreements before developing a sufficient understanding of each other's priorities, expertise and academic cultures. For this reason, **defining common objectives from the outset and creating opportunities for academics to get to know each other are essential conditions for meaningful collaboration**. She also highlighted the valuable role that embassies, regional organisations and academic networks can play in supporting universities, broadening institutional contacts, and ensuring that partnerships remain active over time.

From individual initiatives to institutional ecosystems

Franz Dieter Hensel Riveros invited participants to reflect on **what truly makes an academic partnership sustainable**. While acknowledging the significant progress achieved over the past three decades in strengthening relations between Europe and Latin America, he argued that **universities should not overlook the challenges that continue to prevent cooperation from reaching its full potential**. Among these, he identified the **predominance of short-term initiatives** involving individual academics on institutional platforms, limited mutual knowledge between the two regions, persistent misconceptions about the nature of international partnerships, and unequal institutional capacities resulting from different levels of regional integration and access to resources.

Rather than perceiving these asymmetries as obstacles, he suggested that they should be recognised and addressed openly in order to **move from hierarchy-based to complementarity-based partnerships. Unequal partners, he noted, do not necessarily imply unequal relationships.** Successful cooperation requires transparency regarding expectations and responsibilities, as well as a shared understanding of the purpose of the partnership. In his view, institutions should move beyond abstract declarations of collaboration and instead develop concrete projects capable of generating tangible results and lasting trust.

Responding to the Chair's invitation to elaborate on the concepts of systemic, systematic and persistent cooperation, **Hensel Riveros** emphasised that **sustainable partnerships require continuous effort over time. Universities should create institutional ecosystems that support collaboration at multiple levels**, beginning with individual contacts between researchers but extending to institutional frameworks capable of sustaining cooperation beyond personal enthusiasm or leadership changes. **While personal relationships often initiate collaboration, durable partnerships depend on administrative support, strategic planning and long-term institutional commitment.** University leaders therefore have a responsibility to create favourable conditions for academic exchanges and to ensure that cooperation remains a strategic priority.

Among the instruments that have demonstrated the greatest potential for long-term collaboration, Hensel Riveros highlighted **academic mobility as the essential starting point.** Student and staff exchanges, he argued, create the trust and mutual understanding upon which more ambitious initiatives, such as joint degrees and research programmes, can subsequently be built. He illustrated this approach through [UNAB's Global Faculty pilot initiative](#), which **provides matched funding for professors from partner institutions to collaborate over the course of a year on jointly defined research plans with clearly identified outputs.** By moving beyond occasional visits towards structured, goal-oriented collaboration, such initiatives create the foundations for durable institutional relationships while encouraging universities to commit resources at the institutional level.

Rethinking collaboration through strategic partnerships

Drawing on his experience at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), **Frédéric Louault** reflected on the **process of developing a comprehensive institutional strategy for Latin American Studies over the past fifteen years.** He explained that the creation of new partnerships required not only identifying opportunities for cooperation but also critically **assessing the weaknesses of existing collaboration models between European and Latin American institutions.**

Among the principal shortcomings he identified **predominantly top-down approaches to international cooperation and the proliferation of partnership agreements that often prioritise quantity over quality.**

To address these challenges, ULB developed a strategy based on three complementary pillars. First, **partnerships should emerge through a bottom-up approach rooted in active research collaborations initiated by the academic community.** Second, institutions should adopt a **more reflective approach to partnership management** by limiting the number of agreements, regularly evaluating their relevance, and renewing only those that continue to generate meaningful collaboration. Third, **cooperation should be embedded within an integrated institutional structure** involving university leadership, specialised research centres and student organisations, thereby ensuring that partnerships become part of the university's broader international strategy rather than isolated initiatives.

Louault also underlined the **importance of involving external actors, particularly the Latin American diaspora in Brussels**, whose networks and expertise can enrich academic cooperation and strengthen links between universities and society. Reflecting on the role of European university alliances, he noted that they provide valuable administrative support and opportunities for scientific collaboration. However, because their thematic priorities do not always include Latin America, **complementary networks remain essential to broaden the scope of cooperation.** In this regard, he highlighted the importance of organisations such as UNICA in creating additional spaces for dialogue and collaboration between Europe and Latin America. Finally, based on his own experience as a researcher and director of a research centre, he identified **doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships as among the most effective instruments for developing long-term academic partnerships**, as they enable researchers to build enduring collaborative networks at an early stage of their careers.

Discussion and conclusions

Rather than presenting new models of cooperation, the discussion revealed a **broader shift in how universities understand international partnerships.** Across the panel, participants argued that **the principal challenge is no longer initiating collaborations but ensuring their continuity, resilience, and strategic relevance.** This requires moving beyond a project-based logic - often dependent on individual academics and short-term funding - towards institutional frameworks capable of sustaining cooperation through changes in leadership, funding cycles, and political contexts.

The speakers also challenged the assumption that effective partnerships require **symmetrical institutions**. Instead, they argued that differences in institutional size, resources, or regional contexts should be recognised as complementary assets rather than barriers, provided that partnerships are built on transparency, shared objectives, and reciprocal benefit. In this perspective, **sustainability depends less on formal agreements than on governance arrangements that create opportunities for continuous interaction and joint ownership**.

A second recurring theme was the **importance of investing in people as the foundation of institutional cooperation**. While mobility, doctoral training, and collaborative research remain essential instruments, their greatest value lies in creating durable academic communities that can subsequently support broader institutional partnerships. The discussion therefore suggested that universities should evaluate international cooperation not by the number of agreements signed, but by their capacity to generate long-term networks of collaboration and shared knowledge production.

Ultimately, the session pointed to a redefinition of internationalisation itself. Rather than treating partnerships as isolated activities within international offices, **universities are increasingly called upon to integrate Europe-Latin America cooperation into their core institutional strategies**, ensuring that collaboration becomes a permanent component of research, education, and institutional development.

Building Sustainable Euro-Latin American Academic Partnerships

Shared diagnosis

The discussion highlighted a broad consensus on the fact that Europe-Latin America academic cooperation has expanded significantly but remains structurally fragile. While numerous agreements, mobility schemes, and research collaborations exist, partnerships often remain dependent on individual academics rather than being embedded in institutional systems.

Three structural constraints were repeatedly identified:

1. Fragmentation of cooperation across isolated projects
2. Persistent asymmetries in funding, visibility, and institutional capacity
3. Limited continuity beyond individual leadership cycles

Despite these asymmetries, speakers rejected the idea that inequality necessarily implies hierarchy, instead framing it as a condition requiring intentional governance.

Policy implications

1. Embed Europe-Latin America cooperation within institutional strategies rather than treating it as a collection of international projects.
2. Redirect funding towards long-term partnership ecosystems that combine mobility, research, doctoral training, and institutional capacity building.
3. Measure the success of partnerships by their continuity and shared impact, rather than by the number of agreements signed or exchanges completed.
4. Strengthen governance mechanisms that enable equitable collaboration between institutions with different capacities and resources.
5. Invest in early-career researchers and academic mobility as the foundation for enduring interregional networks.



Session 2

Universities as Agents of Civic Change: Research and Knowledge Transfer in Europe and Latin America

Chair



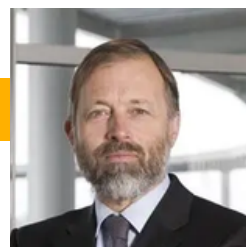
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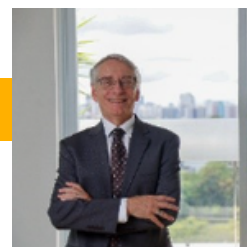
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The second session of the UNICA Rectors' Seminar 2026 explored the **evolving role of universities as agents of civic change, examining how research, knowledge transfer, and community engagement can contribute to democratic resilience and inclusive development across Europe and Latin America.**

Chaired by **Ksenija Vidmar Horvat**, the discussion was framed by the profound societal transformations confronting higher education, including geopolitical tensions, environmental crises, technological disruption, and growing social inequalities. In this context, universities are increasingly expected not only to educate students and generate knowledge, but to help societies navigate complexity by fostering democratic stability, and sustainable development.

Introducing the discussion, the Chair reflected on the **growing importance of the university's "third mission"** - its responsibility to engage proactively with society alongside its traditional missions of teaching and research. She argued that **universities are becoming civic institutions that co-create public spaces, promote democratic participation, and contribute to shaping more just and inclusive societies.** This civic role, however, cannot be pursued solely within national or local contexts. **Addressing global challenges requires universities to collaborate across regions and learn from diverse institutional experiences,** making Europe-Latin America cooperation an important laboratory for developing new models of socially engaged higher education.

Reimagining the university through the concept of “extension”

Capucine Boidin opened the session by situating European-Latin American academic cooperation within a broader reflection on the societal role of universities, **drawing particularly on the Latin American tradition of “extension”**. She expressed her wish that European universities could be inspired by this model, which she described as a genuinely transformative approach to higher education that goes beyond teaching and research to include a third mission: **active engagement with society**. Originating in the early 20th century with the Reform of Córdoba, the **concept of extension seeks to extend university knowledge, culture, and resources to populations that have historically been excluded, while also integrating societal knowledge back into academic spaces**.

She outlined four historical models of extension that illustrate its evolution and conceptual diversity. The first is the **altruistic model**, dominant in the early 20th century, in which universities extended services such as legal aid clinics, health outreach, and training programmes to marginalized populations, often aligned with nation-building projects. The second is the **dissemination model**, which focused on bringing academic knowledge closer to society but was later criticized for maintaining a unidirectional flow. The third model - inspired by the Brazilian educator and Marxist philosopher Paulo Freire - rejected the traditional, top-down "extension" approach, to propose a **dialogic communication framework** based on mutual learning and emphasizing critical awareness, emancipation, and political participation as central dimensions of knowledge creation. The fourth, emerging in the 1980s, is the **business-oriented model**, which introduced elements of market logic and diversification of university activities, but also led to conceptual fragmentation.

While acknowledging the richness of these models, **Boidin** highlighted their ambiguities and inconsistencies in implementation. She argued that **extension should be understood not as an auxiliary activity but as a core institutional principle that integrates education, research, and social engagement**.

In her view, **universities must move towards more systematic recognition of civic engagement**, ensuring that outreach activities are embedded in curricula, institutional structures, and academic evaluation systems, rather than remaining peripheral or informal practices.

Academic collaboration as civic infrastructure

Rakel Österberg approached the theme of civic engagement through the **lens of long-term institutional collaboration**, drawing on the experience of the [ACCESS network](#) linking Swedish universities with Chile. She emphasized that **university cooperation should not only generate academic outputs but also contribute to strengthening social cohesion and civic participation across regions**. In this sense, universities function as infrastructures for civic engagement, creating spaces where knowledge exchange is closely linked to societal needs.

She illustrated this perspective through the example of sustained collaboration between Sweden and Chile, which has been shaped in part by historical ties and the legacy of political exile following the 1973 Chilean coup d'état. **This historical dimension, she noted, has contributed to a strong tradition of academic and cultural exchange, reinforcing the idea that university networks can play a stabilizing role in maintaining dialogue across generations and political contexts**. The ACCESS collaboration, involving multiple Swedish universities, has developed structured mobility schemes, joint research activities, and regular academic forums that strengthen both institutional ties and student engagement.

Österberg emphasized that **meaningful civic engagement depends on participation, continuity, and equality between partners**. She stressed that collaboration must be built on shared ownership and mutual benefit, rather than symbolic or one-off initiatives. In her view, academic networks should empower future generations of researchers by creating stable opportunities for mobility, joint publications, and long-term cooperation, while also ensuring that knowledge transfer is understood as a reciprocal process rather than a one-directional flow.

Interdisciplinarity and systemic civic innovation

Christian Lerminiaux reflected on the institutional collaboration between [PSL University and the University of São Paulo \(USP\)](#) as a **model for structured intercontinental cooperation aimed at addressing global challenges**. He argued that universities must **move beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries and the conventional framing of the “third mission,”** advocating instead for a **more integrated model that connects research, innovation, and civic engagement within a single systemic framework**.

He identified several shared challenges between Europe and Latin America that require such interdisciplinary approaches, including the circular economy, health systems, and mobility schemes.

These issues, he argued, cannot be addressed within academic silos but require coordinated efforts that bring together universities, research institutions, and external stakeholders such as industry and civil society. In this context, civic engagement becomes not an additional function of the university, but a core dimension of knowledge production itself.

Lerminiaux also highlighted the importance of strengthening institutional partnerships through structured collaboration mechanisms that ensure continuity and strategic alignment. He emphasized that **PSL-USP cooperation represents an example of how intercontinental partnerships can be designed not only to facilitate research exchanges but also to contribute to long-term scientific and societal impact**. For him, the key challenge is to ensure that such collaborations are embedded in institutional strategies rather than being dependent on individual initiatives.

The university as a public institution and engine of social responsibility

Aluisio Segurado presented the experience of the University of São Paulo (USP) as a **large-scale public institution deeply rooted in Brazil's scientific, social, and economic development**. He emphasized that USP has historically functioned as an academic bridge within Latin America and beyond, with a strong institutional commitment to public service, social responsibility, and knowledge production. **As a publicly funded university, its mission is closely tied to contributing to societal development and addressing collective challenges**.

He highlighted **USP's significant role in Brazil's scientific output**, accounting for a substantial share of national research production, as well as its extensive infrastructure, including affiliated hospitals and research centres. **A central example of its civic engagement capacity was its response during the COVID-19 pandemic**, when the university rapidly mobilized scientific expertise, healthcare infrastructure, and technological capabilities to support emergency response efforts in São Paulo, a metropolitan region of over 13 million inhabitants. This included coordinating healthcare provision, supporting vaccine-related initiatives, and developing technological solutions such as ventilator production in collaboration with academic and technical teams.

Segurado also emphasized the **importance of university autonomy in enabling effective civic action, particularly in contexts where governmental responses may be limited or questionable**. He argued that universities must be capable of acting decisively in moments of crisis, mobilizing interdisciplinary expertise and institutional resources in service to [Un1] society. In his view, **civic engagement is not an abstract mission but a concrete responsibility** that requires operational capacity, institutional flexibility, and strong public commitment.

Discussion and conclusions

Rather than expanding the traditional understanding of the university's "third mission", the discussion suggested a more fundamental redefinition of the relationship between universities and society. Across the panel, civic engagement was presented not as an additional responsibility alongside teaching and research, but as a **principle that increasingly shapes how these core missions are conceived and carried out**. Research, education and societal engagement were consistently described as mutually reinforcing rather than separate institutional functions.

The discussion also revealed different pathways towards this shared objective. While the Latin American concept of extension emphasises the importance of knowledge co-creation between universities and communities, other contributions highlighted the role of long-term international networks, interdisciplinary research partnerships and public universities as mechanisms through which civic engagement can be institutionalised. **These perspectives differ in their starting points but converge in challenging unidirectional models of knowledge transfer in favour of collaborative and socially embedded forms of knowledge production.**

A second recurring theme concerned the scale at which universities exercise their civic role. Although civic engagement is often associated with local communities, participants argued that many contemporary challenges - including public health, climate change, democratic resilience and social inequalities - require universities to collaborate across institutional, disciplinary and regional boundaries. **Europe-Latin America cooperation was therefore presented not simply as an internationalisation agenda, but as a framework for mutual learning through which universities can collectively strengthen their contribution to the public good.**

Universities as Agents of Civic Change: Research and Knowledge Transfer in Europe and Latin America

Shared diagnosis

The session reframed universities as civic infrastructures embedded in society rather than autonomous knowledge producers.

Across contributions, there was agreement that traditional boundaries between university and society are becoming increasingly porous due to political instability, inequality, and social fragmentation.

A central conceptual reference was the Latin American notion of “extension”, understood as reciprocal engagement between academic knowledge and societal transformation.

Policy implications

1. Position civic engagement as a core institutional mission, integrating it across teaching, research, governance, and internationalisation rather than treating it as a standalone "third mission".
2. Replace one-way knowledge transfer models with co-creation approaches that recognise communities, public institutions, and civil society as partners in knowledge production.
3. Reward societal impact in academic careers by embedding civic engagement and community-based research into institutional evaluation and incentive systems.
4. Strengthen long-term Europe-Latin America partnerships as platforms for addressing shared societal challenges through interdisciplinary research and mutual learning.
5. Enable universities to act as civic infrastructures by safeguarding institutional autonomy while fostering closer collaboration with governments, civil society, and local communities.



Innovative Pedagogies in the AI Era: Latin America-Europe Perspectives

Chair



Luciano SASO
UNICA
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Ismael GÓMEZ
Director of Global
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POVEDA ORTEGA**
Vice President for
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Manuela APARÍCIO
Pro-Rector for
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The third session of the UNICA Rectors' Seminar 2026 examined **how artificial intelligence is reshaping teaching and learning practices in higher education across Europe and Latin America.**

Chaired by **Luciano Saso**, the discussion focused on the **pedagogical, ethical, and institutional transformations triggered by generative AI**, as well as the structural challenges universities face in ensuring equitable access, academic integrity, and meaningful educational innovation. The session highlighted the **tension between rapid technological change and the slower adaptation of institutional frameworks**, particularly in relation to assessment, staff development, and the evolving role of universities in society.

While each speaker approached the topic from a distinct institutional and regional perspective, all agreed that **AI is not only a technological shift but involves a systemic transformation of higher education.**

The discussion explored how universities can integrate AI into pedagogy in a responsible and inclusive way, while addressing digital divides, redefining learning outcomes, and strengthening institutional capacity to navigate ongoing change.

AI, inequality and the need for regional educational sovereignty

Opening the panel, **Ismael Gómez** reflected on the role of the [Organization of Ibero-American States \(OEI\)](#) in **supporting educational transformation across Latin America and Europe**, emphasizing the need to **translate technological innovation into concrete educational and social projects**. He stressed that artificial intelligence should not be understood as an abstract technological trend, but as a tool that must be **embedded in educational ecosystems shaped by local needs, cultural diversity, and social realities**. In this sense, he argued that **AI should serve communities rather than fragment them**, warning that excessive reliance on digital tools may risk increasing social isolation and weakening human interaction.

A central concern in his intervention was the **structural dependency of Latin America on external technological providers**, particularly from the United States and China. **Gómez** highlighted that **universities in the region are predominantly consumers of AI technologies rather than producers, raising important questions about technological sovereignty and long-term sustainability**. He pointed to the need for investment in regional infrastructure, including data centers and locally developed digital ecosystems, to reduce dependency and ensure greater control over data, costs, and educational priorities. For him, **this is not only a technological issue but also a geopolitical and educational one, directly linked to the autonomy of higher education systems**.

Gómez also presented concrete **examples of AI applications in education**, including virtual tutoring systems designed for contexts with limited connectivity and initiatives using solar-powered technologies to support learning in underserved regions. He also referred to projects supporting indigenous language learning, such as tools developed for Quechua, as examples of culturally grounded innovation. However, he insisted that technology alone cannot resolve educational inequality. **Communities, institutions, and collective action remain central to ensuring that AI contributes to inclusion rather than reinforcing existing disparities**.

Institutional transformation and the geopolitics of educational technology

Tomás Poveda Ortega focused his intervention on the **institutional and strategic implications of AI adoption in higher education**, drawing on his experience across university systems in Latin America and the United States. He emphasized that universities are currently undergoing a profound transition, where **AI is not only transforming teaching and learning practices but also reshaping administrative processes, student services, and institutional efficiency**.

In this context, he highlighted the **responsibility of university leaders to actively interpret and integrate emerging technologies in ways that enhance both educational quality and the overall student experience.**

A key theme in his contribution was the **growing dependency of universities on external technological ecosystems**, particularly those dominated by large US and Chinese companies. **Poveda Ortega** warned that this dependency **may expose institutions to rising costs, limited autonomy, and shifting access conditions, especially as AI tools become increasingly central to academic work.** He argued that universities must therefore consider **developing more autonomous technological capacities, including investments in regional infrastructure and local innovation ecosystems.** He also stressed the importance of collaboration between universities to avoid fragmentation and to build shared responses to common challenges.

Poveda Ortega further emphasized the **strategic importance of data in the AI era, describing them as a critical resource generated through research, teaching, and institutional activity.** He argued that universities should move beyond the role of passive users and become active participants in the production and governance of educational technologies. At the pedagogical level, he highlighted the **need to rethink assessment and employability in light of AI**, noting that traditional evaluation methods may no longer fully capture students' competencies. He suggested that skills such as critical thinking, adaptability, and problem-solving are becoming increasingly important, alongside the need to reconsider assessment formats that better reflect authentic learning processes.

Pedagogical ecosystems, ethics and institutional governance

Manuela Aparício framed her intervention around the **need to understand generative AI as part of a broader educational ecosystem rather than an isolated technological tool.** From the perspective of NOVA University Lisbon, she emphasized that **meaningful pedagogical innovation requires systemic thinking that integrates students, faculty, institutional policies, and societal expectations.** She warned against approaches that focus solely on technological adoption without addressing the underlying educational structures and human dimensions of learning.

A key concern in her contribution was the **risk of increasing student isolation in digitally mediated learning environments.** While acknowledging the widespread use of generative AI tools among students, she highlighted that their use does not automatically translate into deeper learning or engagement. On the contrary, without proper guidance, it may lead to **cognitive offloading**, reduced critical reflection, and weakened interpersonal interaction.

As a response, she emphasized the **importance of strengthening academic staff through reskilling and upskilling initiatives**, enabling educators to effectively guide students in the responsible use of AI.

Aparício also presented a **set of guiding principles for the use of generative AI in higher education**, focusing on transparency, accountability, and human oversight. She stressed that AI should support the learning process but not replace human authorship, critical analysis, or conceptual contribution. In this framework, **students remain fully responsible for the content they produce, including when AI tools are used as part of the process**. She also highlighted institutional efforts to develop internal guidelines, training programmes, and platforms such as [IAedu](#), aimed at ensuring equitable access to AI tools while maintaining ethical standards. For her, **the central challenge is to integrate AI into teaching and learning in a way that preserves academic integrity while enhancing pedagogical innovation**.

Discussion and conclusions

The discussion shifted the debate on artificial intelligence from technological adoption to institutional sovereignty. Rather than asking whether universities should use AI, the panel examined how they can retain agency over its development, governance and educational consequences. While all speakers recognised AI as an unavoidable transformation, they differed in where they located the primary challenge: [Gómez](#) emphasised geopolitical dependency and digital inequality, [Poveda Ortega](#) focused on institutional strategy and data governance, whereas [Aparício](#) highlighted pedagogical design, ethics and academic integrity.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that AI strategy cannot be reduced to classroom innovation. It requires universities to simultaneously rethink infrastructure, governance, staff capabilities and assessment if they are to preserve academic autonomy while harnessing technological opportunities. The discussion also made clear that unequal access to AI technologies risks reinforcing existing disparities between institutions and regions unless addressed through coordinated investment and collaboration.

The session ultimately argued that the future competitiveness of higher education will depend less on the speed of AI adoption than on universities' capacity to govern AI in line with their educational mission and public values. Europe-Latin America cooperation therefore represents not only an opportunity to exchange good practices, but also to develop shared approaches to ethical AI, digital capacity and institutional resilience.

Innovative Pedagogies in the AI Era: Latin America-Europe Perspectives

Shared diagnosis

Artificial intelligence was presented as a systemic transformation of higher education, with implications that extend well beyond the introduction of new tools. Speakers highlighted how AI is reshaping teaching and learning practices, influencing institutional governance and decision-making, challenging existing ethical and regulatory frameworks, and redefining the geopolitical role of universities within global knowledge systems.

The discussion stressed that the key issue is no longer AI adoption, but institutional adaptation amid growing technological dependency. This dependency risks deepening inequalities between digitally capable institutions and those with limited resources or restrictive regulatory environments.

Policy implications

1. Treat AI as a strategic institutional issue rather than a pedagogical tool, integrating it into university governance, quality assurance, and long-term planning.
2. Reduce technological dependency by strengthening regional capacity for AI development, data governance, and digital infrastructure through Europe-Latin America cooperation.
3. Replace assessment models that reward content reproduction with approaches that prioritise critical thinking, creativity, ethical judgement, and problem-solving.
4. Build institutional AI literacy by making continuous staff development and responsible AI use a core element of academic practice.
5. Ensure that AI governance is guided by academic values - including transparency, human oversight, equity, and institutional autonomy- rather than by technological capabilities alone.

Joint Responses to Global Challenges: Reinforcing Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law through Education

Chair



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The fourth session of the UNICA Rectors' Seminar 2026 focused on the role of universities in strengthening democracy, human rights and the rule of law through education. Chaired by **Laura Aragonés Molina**, the discussion explored **how higher education institutions in Europe and Latin America can respond jointly to increasing democratic backsliding, social inequality and institutional distrust**.

The session highlighted the importance of human rights education as a transversal component of university missions, capable of fostering critical thinking, civic responsibility and active citizenship across all disciplines and professional fields.

While approaching the topic from different institutional and disciplinary perspectives, the speakers converged on the view that **democratic resilience depends on education systems capable of fostering critical citizenship**, reducing inequalities, and strengthening trust in institutions through participatory and inclusive learning environments.

Democratic coexistence and human rights education as a civic foundation

Opening the panel, [Irene Aguirrezábal](#) reflected on the mandate of the [Organization of Ibero-American States](#) (OEI) to promote democratic coexistence and human rights education in a context marked by democratic erosion, polarization and growing distrust in institutions. She emphasized that **human rights education must be embedded across all disciplines, rather than treated as a specialised field**, to strengthen democratic culture in everyday life and across professional sectors.

She identified the current **global context as one characterized by increasing fragmentation of the international order, weakening multilateralism, and declining trust in legal and political institutions**. Referring to the relative optimism of the 1990s, when major human rights frameworks and institutions such as the International Criminal Court were consolidated, she argued that many of these achievements are now under strain. Today, rising geopolitical tensions, polarization, disinformation, and inequality have contributed to a growing perception - particularly among younger generations - that institutions are distant from lived realities and insufficiently responsive to social needs. **In this context, she also pointed to a broader cultural shift marked by the resurgence of hyper-masculinised political narratives and “too much testosterone in public discourse,”** suggesting that this rhetorical and symbolic climate further aggravates polarization and undermines constructive democratic dialogue.

In response, she outlined the **OEI’s approach structured around three pillars**: strengthening human rights education and democratic values across educational systems; fostering multi-sectoral dialogue between public institutions, academia, civil society and the private sector; and addressing structural inequalities as a central factor undermining democratic trust. She stressed that without **reducing inequalities and creating spaces for genuine dialogue, democratic coexistence cannot be sustained**.

Inequality, social rights and the challenge of informality

[Manuel Pedro da Cruz Baganha](#) focused his intervention on the **structural role of inequality in shaping democratic fragility, particularly in Latin America**. Drawing on the experience of the [Organización Iberoamericana de Seguridad Social](#), which works with institutions across 21 countries, he emphasized the importance of linking social protection systems with education and institutional development.

He argued that **inequality should not be seen as an external constraint on democratic values but as a central structural factor that directly affects the effectiveness of human rights systems**.

In particular, he highlighted the **persistence of labour informality - affecting approximately half of the workforce in parts of Latin America - as a key driver of exclusion**, limiting access to social rights and weakening institutional trust. In this context, he stressed that social rights must be understood as an integral part of human rights, not as a secondary dimension.

da Cruz Baganha also underlined the **importance of investing in digital literacy, intergenerational inclusion, and education systems that prepare citizens to navigate social transformation**. At the same time, he cautioned against overly abstract approaches to education, arguing that universities must remain closely connected to concrete social realities and everyday lived conditions, including those of older populations often excluded from digital and social transitions.

Democracy, imagination and the university as a space of critical formation

Vinicius Mariano de Carvalho challenged dominant interpretations of contemporary political dynamics, particularly the idea of a simple “return of realpolitik.” Instead, he proposed **a more complex reading of current global conditions**, arguing that what characterizes the present is not a rational return to realism, but a fragmented and often contradictory political landscape in which democracy, human rights, and the rule of law are continuously contested.

He emphasized the **historical role of universities as spaces of democratic formation, resistance, and intellectual imagination, particularly in Latin America during periods of authoritarian rule**. Far from being neutral institutions, universities have historically contributed to the development of alternative political imaginaries and have played a key role in defending democratic values under pressure.

At the same time, he warned against **contemporary pressures on universities, including authoritarian tendencies, attacks on academic freedom, and increasing demands for narrowly instrumental, employability-driven education**. He argued that universities must resist becoming training institutions detached from critical reflection, and instead reinforce their role in forming engaged, reflective citizens capable of questioning social and political structures.

A central emphasis of his intervention was the **importance of student participation and active listening within universities**. He stressed that **universities must not only speak about students but listen to them as active co-constructors of knowledge and institutional life**, ensuring that their voices shape curricula, governance, and academic priorities.

He also highlighted the **importance of “democracy within universities,” including participatory governance, academic freedom, and institutional openness.** For him, universities must remain spaces where democracy is practiced internally, not only studied externally, and where dialogue with other regions - particularly Latin America and Europe - can foster mutual learning and epistemological exchange.

Trust, citizenship and the transformation of democratic engagement

Castellar Granados focused on the **evolving relationship between trust, democratic institutions, and civic education.** She noted that declining institutional trust should not only be understood as a crisis, but also as an opportunity to rethink how democratic systems engage with citizens, particularly younger generations.

She emphasized the **importance of transforming educational approaches so that students are not only trained in technical competencies, but also formed as critical citizens capable of questioning, participating, and contributing to democratic life.** In this context, she highlighted the need to move from abstract discussions on trust to concrete educational practices that foster engagement, responsibility, and civic awareness.

She also stressed the **importance of collaboration between universities and civil society organizations,** arguing that democratic education cannot be confined to formal academic structures alone. Instead, it requires continuous interaction between institutions, communities, and social actors in order to remain relevant, grounded, and responsive to contemporary societal challenges.

Discussion and conclusions

The discussion underscored a **broad consensus on the fact that universities in Europe and Latin America are operating in an increasingly strained democratic environment, where rising inequality, weakened trust in institutions, and political polarisation are reshaping the conditions under which education takes place.** Against this backdrop, participants emphasised that **higher education institutions are not neutral observers but active contributors to democratic resilience,** with a responsibility to embed human rights education across all disciplines and institutional practices.

A key insight emerging from the debate was that **democratic fragility is closely tied to structural inequality.** Social exclusion, labour informality, and uneven access to rights and opportunities were repeatedly identified as underlying factors that erode institutional legitimacy and weaken civic trust. In this sense, **strengthening democracy requires more than normative commitments;** it demands concrete policy and educational responses that address the material conditions shaping citizens' lived experiences.

The session also highlighted a **shared rethinking of the university's role beyond knowledge transmission**. Universities were consistently described as spaces where democratic culture is both learned and enacted, through critical engagement, participatory governance, and interaction with society. **This perspective shifts attention from education as a purely instructional process to education as a form of civic practice, where students, academics, and external actors jointly contribute to shaping democratic life.**

Another central outcome of the discussion was the **recognition that effective human rights education depends on its integration into everyday institutional and pedagogical practice, rather than its confinement to specialised courses or thematic initiatives**. This requires stronger links between universities and civil society, as well as teaching approaches that are grounded in real social contexts and responsive to diverse generational needs.

Overall, the panel concluded that **reinforcing democracy, human rights, and the rule of law through education requires a dual transformation: addressing structural inequalities that undermine trust, and reconfiguring universities as active civic institutions**.

Sustained cooperation between Europe and Latin America was identified as essential to advancing this agenda, particularly through shared learning, institutional partnerships, and long-term commitment to inclusive and participatory forms of higher education.

Joint Responses to Global Challenges: Reinforcing Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law through Education

Shared diagnosis

The session highlighted a context of democratic strain, declining institutional trust, rising inequality, and weakening multilateral cooperation. These pressures are reshaping expectations of universities, which are increasingly viewed as stabilising actors through their contributions to civic literacy, critical thinking, and evidence-based public dialogue.

Human rights education was identified as a cross-cutting priority that should be embedded across disciplines to equip students with the ethical and civic competencies needed to navigate complex global challenges and support democratic resilience.

Policy implications

1. Embed human rights education as a compulsory, system-wide curriculum principle across all disciplines, not as an optional or peripheral component.
2. Reposition universities as active democratic institutions, ensuring that democratic values are practiced internally through governance, participation, and academic culture.
3. Integrate equality and social rights as core pillars of democratic policy design, linking education, labour conditions, and access to rights.
4. Move from project-based collaboration to structured university-society co-governance models, where civil society partnerships become institutional rather than ad hoc.
5. Recognise universities as democratic infrastructures, with a formal role in sustaining civic trust, participation, and institutional legitimacy



Conclusion and way forward

The UNICA Rectors' Seminar 2026 provided a **comprehensive and multidimensional reflection on the evolving role of higher education in strengthening Europe-Latin America relations in a global context marked by geopolitical fragmentation, technological disruption, widening inequalities, and democratic strain**. Across four thematic sessions, a consistent message emerged: universities are no longer peripheral actors in international cooperation or societal development. They are increasingly crucial institutions at the intersection of knowledge production, civic responsibility, innovation, governance, and democratic resilience.

Rather than treating these domains separately, the Seminar demonstrated that they are deeply interdependent. Academic cooperation cannot be separated from issues of inequality; digital transformation cannot be addressed without governance and sovereignty concerns; and democratic resilience cannot be sustained without educational systems that actively cultivate civic values. This systemic interconnection is the defining feature of the current moment for higher education.

1. From Expansion to Consolidation: a mature but uneven partnership

A first key conclusion is that Europe-Latin America higher education cooperation has entered a mature but structurally uneven phase. Over past decades, the relationship has evolved from episodic collaboration to a **dense network of agreements, mobility schemes, research partnerships, and policy dialogues**, reinforced by political frameworks such as EU-CELAC relations.

However, this institutional density masks persistent asymmetries. Differences in research funding capacity, access to mobility schemes, technological infrastructure, and international visibility continue to shape the terms of cooperation. **These asymmetries do not prevent collaboration, but they often determine its direction and sustainability.**

The Seminar made clear that the central challenge is no longer initiating cooperation, but ensuring its durability and equity. This requires moving beyond symbolic or opportunistic partnerships toward structured, long-term institutional engagement. In this sense, the next phase of bi-regional cooperation must be defined less by quantitative expansion and more by consolidation, coherence, and strategic alignment.

2. From projects to ecosystems: institutionalisation as the core requirement

Across all sessions, a strong consensus emerged: **sustainable academic cooperation cannot rely on individual initiative alone**. While personal networks, academic affinity, and mobility flows remain essential entry points, they are insufficient to guarantee continuity. The future of cooperation depends on the development of institutional ecosystems of collaboration.

These ecosystems require:

- **embedded governance structures within universities**
- **stable and diversified funding mechanisms**
- **long-term strategic planning beyond project cycles**
- **institutional ownership beyond individual academics or departments**

Without such structures, cooperation remains vulnerable to leadership changes, funding discontinuities, and shifting political priorities.

The Seminar therefore signals a shift in paradigm: from internationalisation as a portfolio of projects to internationalisation as an institutional condition of universities themselves.

3. Universities as civic infrastructures in a time of democratic strain

A second major conclusion concerns the **evolving civic role of universities**. Across all sessions, universities were consistently described not only as producers of knowledge, but as civic infrastructures embedded in society.

This reconceptualisation is particularly significant in a context marked by democratic backsliding, declining institutional trust, and increasing polarisation. Universities are increasingly expected to contribute directly to democratic resilience, social cohesion, and public debate.

The Latin American concept of “extension” provided a particularly important reference point, challenging linear models of knowledge transfer and instead promoting mutual, participatory, and socially embedded forms of engagement. Similarly, examples from public universities demonstrated how institutions can function as active agents in crisis response, social innovation, and public service delivery.

The implication is clear: civic engagement is no longer a peripheral “third mission.” It is becoming a constitutive dimension of what universities are and how they operate.

4. Artificial Intelligence as a systemic stress test for higher education

The Seminar also highlighted **artificial intelligence as a defining structural transformation of higher education systems**. Its impact extends far beyond pedagogy into governance, ethics, institutional autonomy, labour markets, and international competitiveness.

A central concern is the growing dependency of universities - particularly in Latin America - on external technological infrastructures dominated by a small number of global actors. This raises fundamental questions of digital sovereignty, data governance, and technological asymmetry.

At the same time, **AI is reshaping core academic practices, including assessment, learning design, and student engagement**. The challenge is not simply how to adopt AI, but how to ensure that its integration does not undermine critical thinking, academic integrity, or human interaction.

The key conclusion is that AI must be treated as a system-level governance issue, not a classroom-level tool. Universities must simultaneously address infrastructure, pedagogy, ethics, and institutional capacity. Without coordinated action, technological transformation risks amplifying existing inequalities rather than reducing them.

5. Democracy, Human Rights, and Inequality as foundational challenges

A fourth cross-cutting conclusion is that **democracy, human rights, equality and inclusion, are not separate thematic concerns, but foundational conditions shaping all aspects of higher education cooperation**.

The discussions underscored increasing democratic fragility, institutional distrust, and social fragmentation in both regions. In this context, universities are expected to act as stabilising institutions that foster critical citizenship and democratic culture.

Human rights education emerged as a transversal requirement across disciplines, not a specialised field. It must be embedded in curricula, governance structures, and institutional cultures.

At the same time, **inequality was identified as the central structural constraint linking all thematic areas-from academic cooperation to digital transformation and democratic resilience**. Without addressing inequalities in access, opportunity, and institutional capacity, neither cooperation nor innovation can be sustainable.

Way forward

The Seminar points to a clear strategic agenda for the coming years.

Strengthening Europe-Latin America cooperation requires five interlinked priorities:

1. Institutionalisation of cooperation

Move from project-based collaboration to embedded institutional ecosystems with long-term governance and funding structures.

2. Reduction of structural asymmetries

Address inequalities in funding, mobility, and technological capacity through targeted, sustained investment and shared infrastructure.

3. Integration of civic and democratic missions

Embed human rights, democratic education, and civic engagement across all disciplines and institutional practices.

4. Strategic governance of digital transformation

Treat AI and digital technologies as matters of institutional sovereignty, requiring coordinated regional capacity-building and ethical frameworks.

5. Construction of a shared knowledge space

Develop a long-term vision of Europe-Latin America cooperation as a single, integrated higher education and research ecosystem based on reciprocity.





56 UNIVERSITIES | 36 EUROPEAN CAPITALS

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