Can higher education contribute to trust building in a fragmented reality? A Latin American perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – The article aims at exploring the challenges and possibilities of cooperation of higher education in a Latin American social, political and cultural context that faces historical difficulties of integration, as well as the potential contribution of academic cooperation for global citizenship.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper presents a general overview of networks and international centers of academic cooperation of higher education in Latin America. The analysis comprises objectives, countries, stakeholders, activities, projects and scope. The study is based on literature on internationalization, regional integration and the development of higher education, as well as on empirical gathered with networks/ centers and key actors in the field. This study was carried out as a mixed qualitative method design. Firstly, a systematic review of a literature corpus of studies produced by Latin-American scholars was performed. Semi-structured interviews were then carried out with a group of scholars who are members of networks.

Findings – The findings include a review of the role of higher education in a politically fragmented reality, a panorama of major networks and international centers of academic cooperation with emphasis on internationalization of higher education, as well as their connections. The are highlighted examples of successful initiatives of cooperation and, based on interviews, there is presented a preliminary view on cooperation and trust building from professionals in higher education in Latin America.

Originality/value – In the last decades, with the growing interest and need for internationalizing higher education, many universities have organized or joined networks and international centers. The article will contribute for mutual knowledge of these spaces, their shortcomings and potentials, thus creating conditions for dialogue among them, as well as with universities in other continents.

Keywords Latin America, Cooperation, Higher education, Regional integration, Trust building

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

"Historians, anthropologists and social psychologists are making it increasingly difficult for us to ignore the social dimension of feelings" (Bailey, 2011, p. 2001) [1]. This quote sets the

tone for dealing with trust as the key concept in this essay about trust building in higher education in Latin America. In the quoted article's title, the author repeats the phrase "feeling together" (*Zusammenfühlen*) adding a question mark to the second one, suggesting that we are not dealing with a feeling or an emotion that can be taken for granted. Trust can be gained, can be lost, can turn in mistrust or can be enhanced and promoted.

We follow the conceptual approach suggested by the research Group on History of Emotions at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, led by Ute Frevert. In a Max Weber Lecture Series, Ute Frevert asks provocatively if trust has a history (Frevert, 2009). She argues that much of what happens today in the world is attributed to trust, or the lack of it, from economy where we learn that the market operates largely based on trust to politics where politicians or the whole political system is trusted or not trusted by citizens. In her view, this is not an isolated fact, since trust is a central feature of modernity; even more, she argues that trust has indeed been invented by modernity since the modern world system depends on a high degree of labor division, of complex networks of nations, regional and international institutions. In modern societies, based on contracts and agreements, trust has to a great degree replaced loyalty to a leader or authority.

Higher education and academy in general seem to share the same tendency regarding trust as can be felt in other fields. As we know, in the academic world we find a variety of divisions and compartments that reveal open or concealed mistrust, for instance between disciplines where some may not trust the type of research carried out by the other, or among theoretical tendencies within the same field of knowledge. At the same time there are efforts to build bridges as it happens within inter and transdisciplinary work or networks that reach beyond geographical and particular epistemic assumptions which may be understood as efforts of trust building. The Global Alliance for Inter- and Transdisciplinarity [2] provides an example of bridging among professionals and institutions and building trust. This brings us close to the idea exposed by Ute Frevert after looking at some definitions of trust in social sciences, i.e. that trust is "substantially linked to the experience of uncertainty, insecurity or risk" (Frevert, 2009, p. 2), bridging between knowing and not-knowing.

This article aims at exploring the challenges and possibilities of building trust among higher education institutions and academics in Latin America. We acknowledge the difficulty of addressing higher education in Latin America as a unity given the regional and national specificities. Nevertheless, there are common challenges as summarized in a recent UNESCO document: the uneven quality of K-12 education; little variety in higher education offerings; a disjointed higher education supply, with little communication among pathways; an outdated and ineffective regulation and oversight; lack of information for students; a rigid and outdated curriculum (Ferreyra, 2023). To these challenges we could add the commodification of higher education through increasing privatization. These challenges can be seen as an obstacle or as an opportunity for trust building.

We will develop our argument in three connected moments. In the first section of the text, we attempt to situate trust within the larger economic, political and cultural context. Latin America's history is not exactly built on trust and solidarity. The colonial heritage left scars that did not contribute for unity which is today felt on the difficult to implement agreements of collaboration.

The second section will be dedicated to identify networks that operate with internationalization of higher education in Latin America. The focus on internationalization is due to our particular interest as well as to the need to limit the range of the study. Furthermore, as internationalization has become very much part of the agenda of most universities in Latin America, it is our understanding that the focus provides a starting point for further studies. In the final part of the section, we highlight and experience in which the authors of this article are involved, and may function as an example of how trusting relations promote a productive environment. The Network of Researchers and Managers in Internationalization of

Higher Education in Latin America (Rede de Pesquisadores e Gestores de Internacionalização da Educação Superior da América Latina – Redalint) today carries out three major activities that connect researchers and practitioners from North to South of Latin America: Latin American Digital Database; Redalint Journal: University, Internationalization and Regional Integration; Diploma Program in Management of Latin American University Internationalization.

For developing the third section we interviewed academics who integrate networks to share their ideas on cooperation in higher education, with emphasis on their perceptions on the current situation in a context of high competition for rankings and funding, and the necessary conditions to build trust among academics and institutions. There are identified emerging elements such as common interests, overcoming gaps, exchange of good practices, geographical proximity and achievement of specific goals. Trust emerges as an essential element for the continuity of networks.

In the concluding remarks we refer to today's distrust in the political and cultural arenas that frequently leads to hate and aggression. In spite of the distrust that also affects higher education among large sectors of society, this is still a space where trust can be cultivated and flourish, hopefully integrating younger generations into a more inclusive, tolerant and solidary society.

You shall trust your neighbor. Can you?

Common sense tells us that we should trust our neighbors what, with due exceptions, tends to be true. At least at the surface level this also applies to the relationship between Latin American countries. There are no armed struggles at the borders, although historical wounds are still open. For instance, the echoes of the War of the Pacific, between 1879 and 1883, when Chile faced the joint forces of Bolivia and Peru. At the end of the war, Chile annexed areas rich in natural resources from both defeated countries, and Bolivia was left without an exit to the sea. Although there is no evidence of a new open conflict, this is still an issue that permeates the countries relations up to this date.

Latin American unity has been on the agenda since the emancipation movements from Spain and Portugal. The dream of Simón Bolívar, the leader of independence of the Andean region was to have at least Spanish-speaking countries integrated in one great fatherland.

To many, this "Spanish America" constitutes, on one hand, a mosaic of cultures and deeply intertwined histories, and on the other, a labyrinth leading to divergent paths of development. Among the many metaphors used to refer to this web that uniquely composes the multiplicity of the region, is the Wiphala. This colorful flag, made up of squares with the seven colors of the rainbow, represents the plurality of peoples and voices that have resisted the silencing of colonialism and coloniality for over five centuries. While it is a symbol of collective identification representing the trust and unity of the indigenous movement in Latin America, especially in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru, it also represents the political and epistemological movement of stitching differences together; the effort to retrieve and (re) approach cultures and histories that were cut and sewn by the imposition of conquerors and the creation of borders and boundaries. Pajuelo (2007, p. 150) defines the Wiphala as an example of the fertile movement to reclaim traditions of the ancient Andean culture, creating new meanings that extend beyond the imaginaries and representations of the indigenous worldview.

However, beneath this intricate pattern lies a history marked by socio-political divisions and the mistrust stemming from colonial violence. "The darker side of the Renaissance was the very beginning of the invention of the Americas and the ongoing subjugation of Africa and Asia. It was the darker side of the modern/colonial world, which continues to unfold today" (Mignolo, 2011, p. xx). This heavy burden of ongoing colonial subjugation and the

legacies of the Renaissance is reflected in the dichotomies that both the Wiphala metaphor and the labyrinth metaphor represent: the colorful weave shows the aspiration for a unity that stitches together symmetrical squares, with well-defined edges that keep the colors distinct and separate, highlighting the intricate ways in which colonial legacies continue to shape Latin America. It is a mark of division not just of physical territories, but in epistemic paradigms, influencing how knowledge is perceived, shared and validated.

The labyrinth, a metaphor rich in meanings, represents the multiple paths and crossroads that, at times, seem to offer no way out. Walking through this labyrinth can be uncertain, presenting itself as a complex enigma—a relevant analogy to our colonial legacies, filled with uncertainties and mistrust. However, the labyrinth also symbolizes the multiple possibilities and interrelations inherent in this process, encouraging the search for trust and hope. If we have "Ariadne's threads" in our labyrinth, in other words, if we adopt a border thinking perspective as proposed by Mignolo, we can maintain our connection with the outside, avoiding isolation and promoting a decolonization of knowledge (Streck, 2023; Mignolo, 2000).

In this context, the labyrinth and its Ariadne's threads indicate that the historical efforts for integration on the continent have been both ambitious and fruitful, albeit marked by complexities. Mignolo (2000) argues that unity is not merely a matter of symbolic construction or geographical barrier but an ontological challenge, tied to the ways in which institutions perceive each other and relate. Thus, integration is understood as a process deeply rooted in the continent's historical, political, social and cultural narratives and is built from our memories, emotions and the meanings we attribute to these experiences.

These roots date back to the colonial period and the struggles for independence from the Spanish and Portuguese colonies. To the north of Bolívar's great homeland, José Martí (1853–1895), engaged in the independence movement of Cuba, also had vision of a united "Our America" (*Nuestra América*) which he contrasted with the America of the North. There were important lessons to be learned from the neighbors of the North but any attempt of imitation would be doomed to fail. There was a great richness in this *Nuestra América* not only in terms of nature but also of culture, and there would be no reason to feel inferior to other parts of the world. "In our America there is much more meaning than one thinks" [3] (Martí, 1992, p. 35). America should feel united, in "soul and intention," freed from its suffocating past. This unity, however, should not mean a shallow consensus, as he writes in one of his most well-known texts, Nuestra America: "People must live criticizing themselves, because criticism is health; but with one breast and one mind. Go down to the unfortunate and lift them up in your arms! With the fire of the heart, thaw coagulated America!"

Martí argued that only through unity could the region safeguard its independence and resist the potential expansionist ambitions of new colonialisms, such as those practiced by the United States. What the history of these revolutionaries/intellectuals/historical figures reveals is that the challenge of integration in Latin America is neither a recent phenomenon nor a simplistic undertaking. The metaphors of the Whipala and the labyrinth show that in the paths and borders of our history, integration and trust are "two sides of the same coin," as are modernity and coloniality (Mignolo, 2000).

Understanding modernity and coloniality as two sides of the same coin means acknowledging that in promoting the ideals of modernity within its borders and fostering internal integration and trust among the countries of/in the Global North, Europe was simultaneously engaged in colonial practices of exploitation and subjugation in the geographic and epistemic South of the world. That is, the rise and consolidation of Europe as a bloc that developed from modern concepts of governance, economy and culture were intrinsically linked to colonial exploitation and, consequently, to systems that imposed inequality, exploitation and oppression.

As Quijano (2000) argues, the colonial matrix of power created divisions that, based on racial division and hierarchization, disrupted the ties of those considered as "non-white" (Blacks and Indigenous) to their history, territory and culture; sowing seeds of division that continue to manifest themselves today. How to (re)imagine and (re)create integration and the idea of "*Nuestra América*" today? What are the elements that make up the mosaic of Latin American trust and cooperation?

The "coagulated" America still represents an obstacle for critically open and trusting relations in Latin America, so much that integration has become a kind of catchword in politics and other fields. In a broader sense, there can be identified two levels of initiatives for integration. At the official level, regional agencies emerged as platforms capable of realizing this ideal. Economically, MERCOSUL (Mercado Comum do Sul or Southern Common Market) is an example of the pursuit of integration, echoing Bolívar's dream of shared prosperity. However, the bloc faces a range of challenges, particularly in harmonizing various national policies, highlighting the tension between regionalism and nationalism. CELAC (Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños or Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) and ALBA (Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América or Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America) seek political and socioeconomic integration. However, they also grapple with political alignments and the (neo)liberal advances that have been denounced by José Martí since the nineteenth century.

In the realm of education, organizations like CLADE (Campaña Latinoamericana por el Derecho a la Educación or Latin American Campaign for the Right to Education), REPEM (Red de Educación Popular entre Mujeres or Popular Education Network Among Women) and CRES (Conferencia Regional de Educación Superior en América Latina y el Caribe or Regional Conference of Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean) are fundamental. CLADE aims to ensure universal and quality education on the continent, through practices deeply related to Popular Education. REPEM's feminist approach and CRES's emphasis on regional cooperation in higher education are also examples that collectively reflect the spirit of decolonial movements for the promotion of integration and regional trust through the dissemination of knowledge.

Academia, by intertwining disciplines and joining geographies, shows that intercultural and interdisciplinary education can be a strong tool for regional trust (Ramadier, 2004). Despite these clues, the following question remains: how can nations and communities, historically fragmented by colonial structures, find unity and mutual trust, particularly in the realm of higher education?

Higher education in Latin America and international networks

Higher education in Latin America and its current characteristics stem from the economic, political, social and cultural context addressed in the first part of this article. Also, it is part of the historical process of constitution of the region as such. In this sense, the first higher education institutions in Latin America were created by the Spanish colonial power and the religious institution with the objective of forming a dependent Creole elite on the large colonial centers (Abba & Streck, 2021). Some of these institutions were created in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, among which the following stand out: University of Mexico (Mexico – 1551), University of San Marcos (Peru – 1551), University of Santo Domingo (Santo Domingo – 1553) and University of Córdoba (Argentina – 1613). In the case of Brazil, the first higher education institutions in the country were created only in the first part of the twentieth century because the Portuguese crown, unlike the Spanish crown, did not have a policy of creating educational institutions in its colonies, and did not show interest in the formation of a literate social class in national territory, but in its hegemonic center of knowledge, such as the University of Coimbra (Portugal – 1290). In this context, we can

observe that the emergence of the first universities in the region was a fragmented and heterogeneous process, denoting a characteristic that accompanied Latin America from the implementation of the colonial matrix of power in the fifteenth century to the present day: the challenge of unity in diversity.

The process of educational colonialism mutated over the centuries, but always maintained the same logic based on the domination and control of subjectivity. Authors such as Quijano (2014) and Mignolo (2010) call this process coloniality, present in different spheres such as knowledge, being, power and nature. In this sense, we find in universities antagonistic forces that fight, on the one hand, to maintain this domination at the command of capital and coloniality and, on the other, counter-hegemonic movements that dispute this domination through the creation of emancipatory alternatives (Abba, 2018). For example, in the last two decades, Latin America and the Caribbean was the region that grew the fastest in its Gross Enrollment Rate (GMR), considering that in 2000 it had 23% of GMR and in 2018 it reached 52% of GMR (UNESCO-IESALC, 2020). However, access to higher education continues to be a reality for the sector of society that has a higher income, while the population with fewer resources continues to be excluded, such as marginalized ethnic-racial minorities (Abba, Bellini, & Ostrzyzeck, 2023).

Latin America is a region where inequalities are evident. Beyond the economic aspect, where inequalities regarding income and socioeconomic level are evinced, there are also patterns of inequalities within the categories of gender, life cycle (childhood, youth and old age), territoriality (rural and urban areas), and ethnic and racial relations. These categories "[...] are frequently intertwined and enhance each other, particularly affecting certain population groups, such as indigenous and Afro-descendant women" (CEPAL, 2016, p. 10). Accordingly, the reduction of various inequalities has been and is a concern reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) promoted by the United Nations (UN).

What is the impact of this context in the field of higher education? A tentative response may be, as we have already seen, that universities continue to be poorly accessible to the majority of the population and that the market has taken advantage of the consequences of these inequalities in education (Teodoro, 2011), eventually adding to the difficulties of trust building due to competition. In Latin America, in 2020, enrollment in private universities represented 49% of the total. Some countries such as Brazil, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Peru had more than 60% of students enrolled in private institutions in 2015, following Chile and Paraguay with more than 80% (UNESCO-IESALC, 2020). A dilemma that arises in the region is that low-income students more frequently have access to private institutions, while middle- and upper-income students enter public universities. This is due to various factors, including exams as a mandatory and exclusive requirement for admission to the institution and course schedules that are incompatible with a work day. However, as Latin America is an unequal, but also a diverse region, there are exceptions such as Argentina and Cuba, where private institutions have not gained a representative space and their educational systems and do not reproduce meritocratic, selective and commercial logics (Imen, 2005).

In this labyrinth, the subjects that make up the Latin American university have been carrying out collective and international actions to counteract the movement of elitization and commercialization of the institutions of higher education. Students, for example, have been grouped continentally in various student organizations since 1918, the year of the emergence of the Córdoba Reform in which the senses of integration, union and brotherhood between the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean were present and projected (Abba & Streck, 2021). In the case of professors and researchers, there is also a tendency to form research groups and international collaboration networks, some of them well-structured and others more informal, organized around specific projects and topics of interest to all students and

members who seek to attend calls, participate in scientific events, minister seminars and publish jointly (Streck & Abba, 2018; Miranda & Tamarit, 2021).

A topic that has been arousing interest in the academic community and international organizations for more than two decades is that of the internationalization of higher education (Miranda & Tamarit, 2021). Consequently, the creation of networks in this area has also increased based on a national and regional policy of creating and strengthening international networks linked to the issue of internationalization of higher education. In this sense, two initiatives that we can mention are: (1) the calls for the formation of research networks of the Nucleus of Studies and Research in Higher Education (Núcleo de Estudios e Investigaciones en Educación Superior – NEIES) of MERCOSUR (REDES – NEIES), which so far has launched three calls: the first in 2012, the second in 2015 and the third in 2023; and (2) the calls for projects to strengthen interuniversity networks of the Secretariat of University Policies (Secretaría de Políticas Universitarias-SPU) and the Program for the Internationalization of Higher Education and International Cooperation (Programa de Internacionalización de la Educación Superior y Cooperación Internacional – PIESCI) of the Ministry of Education of Argentina.

An inventory of Latin American management and research institutional contexts for the internationalization of higher education from 2023 surveyed various spaces such as networks, groups, observatories, nuclei, UNESCO chairs, associations and regional institutes linked to the topic of internationalization, whose results are shown in the table below.

As can be seen in Table 1, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico are the countries that have the greatest number of Latin American spaces for management and research on internationalization of higher education. These figures corroborate what some authors already stated about being the first countries to financially support the creation and strengthening of international programs (Didou Aupetit, 2014), just as it was in these places where teachers and researchers began the first research on internationalization starting in the new century (Streck & Abba, 2018). Then, we have Chile with 7, followed by various countries that have between 2 and 1 space.

We would like to highlight one of these spaces as an experience of regional integration based on the construction of individual and institutional trust of its members. We refer to the Network of Researchers and Managers in Internationalization of Higher Education in Latin

Country	Quantity
Argentina	10
Bolivia	1
Brazil	19
Chile	7
Colombia	1
Cuba	1
Ecuador	1
El Salvador	1
Honduras	1
Mexico	9
Panama	1
Paraguay	1
Peru	1
Uruguay	2
Venezuela	2
Total	59

Source(s): Authors' own

Table 1.
Networking in higher education in Latin America

America (Rede de Pesquisadores e Gestores de Internacionalização da Educação Superior da América Latina- REDALINT), created in 2015 from the IX Call for Projects to Strengthen Interuniversity Networks of the Secretariat of University Policies (SPU) of the Ministry of Education of Argentina. Currently, REDALINT is made up of researchers and managers from two Argentine universities (Universidad Nacional del Sur and Universidad Nacional de Comahue), three Brazilian universities (Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos, Universidad Estadual Paulista and Universidade de Caxias do Sul) and a university in Chile (Universidad de La Frontera). Two of the main axes that brought together this group of Latin American researchers and managers were the production of knowledge and the training of human resources linked to the internationalization of higher education in the region. To address these axes, three projects were carried out that are currently in operation: (1) Latin American Digital Database; (2) REDALINT Journal: University, Internationalization and Regional Integration; and (3) Diploma Program in Management of Latin American University Internationalization.

The REDALINT Latin American Digital Database was born from concern about the scarcity of links between regional internationalization groups and networks, the little knowledge about the academic production of colleagues from Latin American countries and the difficulty in finding bibliographic material specific to the topic in databases with public and free access. Based on these obstacles, we proposed to carry out the creation of a Digital Database that would host bibliographic material (master's and doctoral theses, books, book chapters and scientific articles) on internationalization of higher education in Latin America. The objectives of the collection are: (1) to encourage the circulation of publications on the subject; (2) collect and systematize bibliographic material; (3) make this material available online, through a program that allows searches by keywords, authors, year, etc. and (4) promote open access to the production of knowledge on internationalization of higher education. Currently the collection has more than 200 publications from various Latin American countries. The Digital Database is managed by a professor from one of the Brazilian universities of Redalint, who formed a working group made up of professors and undergraduate and graduate students from the other institutions that are part of this network. The working group was organized on two fronts: knowledge production (in charge of carrying out a bibliometric analysis of the material in the collection) and organization (dedicated to updating the Database).

Redalint Journal: University, Internationalization and Regional Integration also met the concern for the production and circulation of knowledge about internationalization of higher education. The Journal is hosted in one of the Argentine universities that is member of the network. The other universities participate in the editorial and scientific committees. Redalint Journal publishes scientific articles, reports of experiences and reviews of books and events linked to the topics of university internationalization, higher education, and regional integration. Since 2021, the year the first issue was launched, the journal has been a critical space for debate, reflection and dissemination of ideas, concepts and practices on these topics. So far, four issues of the journal have been published with contributions by actors and authors from various Latin American countries.

The most recent initiative is the creation of the Diploma in Management of Latin American University Internationalization. It is an online extension course that lasts 1 year and is based at Universidad Nacional del Comahue, one of the founding institutions of REDALINT. It has the participation of teachers and researchers from two Latin American networks, in addition to the members of REDALINT: The International Network of Academic Cooperation (COMPA Network) and the Network of Researchers and Managers in the Internationalization of Higher Education Abya-Yala (RIGIES Abya-Yala). The objective of the diploma is to train managers, researchers and teachers of Latin American higher education institutions in order to expand knowledge about the specific processes that internationalization actions acquire

within their universities based on theoretical-conceptual contributions from global and regional authors. The program also proposes to exchange experiences, practices, concepts and perceptions about internationalization from a regional and comprehensive perspective. The first edition of the Diploma took place in the second semester and had more than 500 participants from Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Mexico, Peru, Ecuador, Cuba and El Salvador.

We introduced this experience as an example of how networks are related with trust building in higher education in Latin America. In the following section colleagues will share their views on the promotion and functioning of networks, and their connection with building trust among professionals and institutions.

Networks and trust building: the voice of higher education representatives

A total of three interviewees were purposefully selected and conducted as case studies to elaborate on the first and second phase of our article. Two representatives of higher education institutions in Argentina and Ecuador were interviewed, as well as the executive secretary of a meeting space where networks from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru participate. The interviewees were founding members of relevant internationalization networks in Latin America, promoters of collaborative networks in their countries, as well as members of several international networks.

The interviews sought to answer the following questions: How do collaborative networks emerge and how are they maintained in Latin America? What conditions are necessary for a well-functioning collaborative network? What is the role of trust in establishing and maintaining networks?

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and sent to the interviewees for their revision and feedback. In what follows, we identify elements emerging from the analysis of the interviews and that relate with the concept of trust building in the Latin American reality, with focus on internationalization of higher education, a field that for our region also symbolizes the "two sides of the same coin", as previously stated.

As a result, we could identify that networks emerge for a variety of reasons, including common interests, bridging gaps, exchange of good practices and geographical proximity. Moreover, trust emerges as an essential element for the continuity of the networks. The need for concrete activities and objectives are also considered significant elements to give meaning to collaborative networks, as well as fostering a collaborative spirit among the different actors.

Common profile
Similarities among the members of a network is a relevant element to consider. The existence of a common profile with coincidental characteristics can be the grounding for a group of people to come together. All interviewees referred to networks that had members with characteristics that could interrelate. As noted by one participant: "It turned out that we were all more or less of the same professional profile, male and female managers of the same biological age and with similar development in similar types of institutions" (Interviewee 1, personal communication, October 16, 2023).

Another aspect which is important and highlighted in the interviews that connects with the common profile is this need of "feeling together", of integration, of having a common space as well as to find those elements that allow us to connect and collaborate. It encourages us to look for aspects that tend to promote our integration, brotherhood and unity (Abba & Streck, 2021). These aspects are also relevant to connect to our Latin American mosaic of cultures

and historical past. This feeling is further echoed by one of the respondents, who notes the importance of diverse perspectives in fostering a sense of community: "(. . .) by bringing together different views and perspectives we realize that we are not alone" (Interviewee 3, personal communication, October 20, 2023).

Concrete activities and planning

According to the interviewees the implementation of concrete activities and planning is essential for the continuity of the proper functioning of the networks. All interviewees indicate activities carried out by their networks. They also point out the importance of having a long-term work plan with common objectives defined by the members of the working groups.

One respondent describes the inception of their network as a direct response to a global crisis: "It emerged in 2020 in the context of the pandemic to give response to the challenge that we confronted at that time" (Interviewee 2, personal communication, October 18 2023). Another highlights the collaborative nature of network formation in the educational sector: "The idea of creating an Ecuadorian network to promote the internationalization of higher education within universities stems from the need for internationalization offices to work together on projects that can be of collective benefit" (Interviewee 3, personal communication, October 20, 2023).

In this case we can go back to our labyrinth metaphor where multiple possibilities and interrelations connect in order to search for a response to a common problematic. Working jointly will provide trust and hope in the search for a joint solution.

Transition from the personal to the institutional

Although many networks arise from personal interest, they are maintained thanks to institutional support. All respondents referred to the importance of being backed up by their institutional authorities. In this sense, it is important to have the support and shared vision of the leaders of the institutions so that these types of spaces can be formalized and prosper over time.

This perception is echoed by various respondents, with one noting: "In relation to the issue of trust, I would say that it is the fundamental piece of action, or it is like the driving force behind the initiative" (Interviewee 1, personal communication, October 16, 2023). Another respondent highlights a similar viewpoint, stating: "For me, trust is the unifying element and the element that boosts the initiative" (Interviewee 3, personal communication, October 20, 2023).

Solidarity and collaboration

Networks are rooted in a process of solidarity and collaboration. Institutions and/or individuals come together in a collaborative spirit with the aim of complementing knowledge. The need to solve common challenges together is an underlying aspect of these networks.

This concept is articulated by one of the respondents: "[. . .] we work a lot on the complementarity of collaboration. . . some have more strengths in some things than in others and in that sense we join forces" (Interviewee 3, personal communication, October 20, 2023). Another respondent adds to this notion by emphasizing the importance of honesty in collaboration: "Sincerity in the sense of saying look, I can contribute with this. . . I have resources or this expertise, but I don't have this[. . .]". (Interviewee 2, personal communication, October 18, 2023).

Interviewees also highlighted that networks are considered as a space for learning, learning from others, from their practices. This is also something that motivates the

formation and existence of the various networks. As well as simply sharing with peers who face the same challenges on a daily basis. Elaborating on this, one interviewee noted: "There are networks... which seek to exchange good practices, a common motivation..." and "(.) finally they arise as if by necessity... as if by the need to meet with peers, with whom you have the possibility of sharing the same problems" (Interviewee 1, personal communication, October 16, 2023).

Generation of new knowledge
One of the element that is constantly mentioned by the interviewees is how networks make it possible to reinforce existing knowledge and create spaces for meeting as well as collaboratively work with others toward a common objective, goal and or problem. However, it is also relevant to highlight how these Latin-American networks search to advance toward the construction of new knowledge, and or identify common gaps in order to jointly respond to arising demands that need to have an answer.

In this context, one respondent explains the role of networks in reinforcing a regional perspective: "(...) the networks serve to strengthen our own perspective. For example, for this issue of internationalization, a Latin American perspective to link up with other university actors in the region who have a similar perspective and to strengthen that perspective" (Interviewee 1, personal communication, October 16, 2023).

Furthermore, the role of networks in facilitating collaborative research and policy development is underscored by another respondent: "We have forums where we share good practices (...) and a group where we are collecting data to make a general analysis of the state of internationalization and that this can positively influence the generation of public policy at the country level" (Interviewee 3, personal communication, October 20, 2023).

Trust
Trust is considered a fundamental aspect in order to maintain the work of networks over time. It is seen as an enabler and often the basis on which it is built. In Latin America networks are built, mainly, on a basis of personal trust and interest and then evolve to institutional initiatives. When working for mutual benefit and on a non-profit basis, trust is always maintained.

This critical role of trust is highlighted by the respondents, with one noting: "In relation to the issue of trust, I would say that it is the fundamental piece of action, or it is like the driving force behind the initiative" (Interviewee 1, personal communication, October 16, 2023). Another respondent echoes this sentiment, stating: "For me, trust is the unifying element and the element that boosts the initiative" (Interviewee 3 personal communication, October 20, 2023).

Latin American networks are a space for growth, development and creation. They arise from the need of different actors to respond to common demands and difficulties. They are also spaces that encourage the construction of new collective knowledge, as actors come together in a trustful way to solve challenges through the exchange of good practices. Just like the labyrinth metaphor Latin American networks are a set of multiple paths and crossroads where diverse perspectives come together and jointly plan a way using cooperation, solidarity and trust as the compass and basic principle of their partnership.

Concluding remarks
It has been a challenge to write about trust building in a national and international context where distrust is constantly transformed in hate and aggression. The challenge is even bigger when we consider that academy itself is seen with distrust by large contingents of the world

population and has hardly any voice when it comes to political conflicts and wars. In this context, education in general, and higher education in particular, can play a fundamental role as a counter movement for building trust bottom up.

In Latin America, as we have seen, networks among researchers, teachers and managers are a kind of cradle for developing trustful relations that hopefully will extend to institutions and professionals in their respective fields, and beyond. However, this cannot be taken for granted where the historical background of social exclusion not only finds its way into higher education but is largely supported by the way higher education institutions function. This paradox is illustrated in our text with the metaphor of the labyrinth and expressed through the notion of coloniality, where the objective and the subjective dimension of domination meet.

Finally, the voices of professionals that were brought to dialogue in our text signal that trust is at the origin of networks, and at the same time they provide a kind of road map for keeping trust alive in these networks through shared goals and activities. As our actions are carried out under risk and uncertainty, trust seems to be an anthropological and a historical necessity in our time. In Latin America there are particular obstacles to be overcome, but there are also opportunities to be grasped.

This being a preliminary study on the topic, there are so far more insights for further studies than conclusive findings. On the conceptual level, there is much to be learned about the historical, cultural and geopolitical dimensions of trust. Higher education is part of complex institutional webs, and at the same time has the responsibility to shed light on what enhances or blocks trust building. On the regional level, we expect to contribute to bring trust, as a social and political virtue, closer to the daily practices in higher education. The study also made us aware of the need for comparative research on trust building in higher education institutions among Latin American and Caribbean countries, and among countries in different continents. Hopefully, a shared vision of trust building in higher education can expand to trust building in other institutional settings on a national and international level.

Notes

1. The original German: "Historiker, Ethnologen und Sozialpsychologen machen es uns zunehmend Schwer, die gesellschaftliche Dimension der Gefühle ausser Acht zu lassen.

2. For more information on the "Global Alliance for Inter- and Transdisciplinarity," visit their official website at https://itd-alliance.org/

3. Original: "En nuestra América hay much más sentido de lo que se piensa".

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Further reading

UNESCO IESALC (2023). *The right to higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Briefing Note Compendium.

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