

Next steps in Cross-border eRegion Development: Universities Perspectives

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The idea of bringing together the universities of the Danube region and their neighbouring regions is not new. The Danube Rectors' Conference was established back in 1983 in Vienna by four Universities (Ulm, Vienna, Linz, Budapest). Presently, 54 higher education institutions from 13 countries are active members in this regional network. The purpose of the DRC have changed considerably from the beginning as well. First the networks' purpose was to articulate and initiate joint research projects. Today's objectives are to raise the general level of academic performance; promote mobility, reduce drop-out rates; and lower the cost of tertiary education. Special emphasis is put on multilateral cooperation in the region. An important issue is also the link between universities and economic institutions and mutual knowledge transfer.

In February of this year at the meeting in Novi Sad, the Danube Rectors' conference adopted a declaration that called for intensifying cooperation within the Danube region as well as with the bordering regions (Alpe-Adria, Black sea ...). They expressed high interest in: contributing to the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, implementing the EU Strategy by intensifying research, developing and enriching study programs, stimulating mobility, organizing continuing education and life-long learning, stimulating innovation and technology transfer in all fields of regional priority concerning the improvement of connectivity and communication systems, environmental issues and prevention against natural risks, reinforcing the potential for socio-economical development.

The idea of establishing a common platform, which would not provide only clear and useful web page but also a place, where the academia staff can communicate and share projects and ideas, was deployed in 2009. The platform currently covers documents from EU policy, events, news, research, education etc. However, to meet the objectives and especially the objective of fostering the 5th freedom – knowledge sharing – we should focus more on developing a common inter-universities platform that would foster eLearning, knowledge sharing, supporting researchers in project proposal preparing etc. In this context we have to focus on simplifying and standardizing the often too complex university rules and procedures. A few years ago EU supported the initiative of One stop shops for SMEs and it was highly successful. Today this initiative has grown into the Second generation of Single Contact, which simplifies procedures for online cross-border services that are based on existing systems and solutions. This is the model that could work well in supporting the cross-border academia cooperation.

In the context of mobility of students and academia staff, our experiences show that in practice the mobility is not on the levels that were anticipated. The numbers grow each year, but the analysis of home and host countries of participants show that in the past 9 years there were only a small number of students coming to Slovenia from the Danube region, and especially the cross-boarder regions. The number of Slovene students going to the Danube region countries is slightly higher. There are several reasons for that: again bureaucratic barriers – often two partner institutions have different – and complicated – rules and procedures, they use different technology and different level of technology, language – national legislation on the use of foreign languages in class, the study programmes are not recognizable, costs etc.

University perceives the huge opportunities for the within the region cooperation and therefore supports all the activities of bilateral and multilateral cooperation in research projects, in preparing summer schools, conferences, common study programmes etc. However, the single partnerships initiatives will not be enough to produce the expected critical mass. In order to bring the across regional cooperation about, the universities must provide the common playground in which the players can experiment.

The highest impact in achieving objectives I believe will be made through young people who are just entering the market, finishing studies, creating new business opportunities. Thus the major focus should be put in quality of education, enhancing students mobility especially within the region, including them in the business - academia projects (especially the PhD students), support them in exploring innovative business ideas. These are the true challenges that have to be confronted with no excuse and today. On a single partnership level, connecting single partnerships into larger networks of academia – students – businesses - government, as well as on a higher university, university networks and governmental level.