Concluding remarks on the DIAnet International School project

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The project cycle of the DIAnet schools on sustainable development in the Danube Region has concluded with this edition on the “Role of Cultural Heritage”, a thematic issue which was addressed with an interdisciplinary approach.

The Danube plays an important role in climate-friendly trans-European network development. Its sustainable future depends on sound knowledge about the past. European research and higher education funds do not generally foster interdisciplinary cooperation. Therefore, the humanities have not been stimulated to bring their expertise into the interdisciplinary portfolio of knowledge, which is necessary for the transition to sustainability. Danube:Future\(^1\) aims at developing interdisciplinary research and education in the Danube River Basin (DRB) simultaneously accounting for the solution of pressing environmental issues and a sustainable future of the region. If a new type of interdisciplinary methods and approaches, driven by humanities, is used, changes of biodiversity, sediment mobility, soils, climate, precipitation, discharge patterns and water quality can be studied in combination with studies of changes in governance, or in the social, economic and legal context, which will enable

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1 More details on the project on this link: [www.danubefuture.eu/project](http://www.danubefuture.eu/project)
us to develop policies for a sustainable development of the Danube River Basin. The multi-lingualism of the DRB is a major challenge for which solutions have to be developed.

The Danube, as the most international river basin in the world, offers an excellent possibility for designing interdisciplinary projects. Danube:Future is expected to play a pioneering role in European research programs, especially in Central, Southeastern and Eastern Europe. A comparative perspective with other river basins (e.g. Po, Seine, Rhone) brings knowledge and methodological skills from existing research teams into the project.

The DIAnet international schools offer a unique learning environment. Young researchers from all Danube Rectors’ Conference (DRC) and Alps Adriatic Rectors’ Conference (AARC) universities, involved in the sustainable development of the Danube River Basin with particular emphasis on the roles of natural and cultural heritage, are trained to apply for funding in competitive programs in the wide field of inter- and transdisciplinary sustainability studies.

The DIAnet International Schools envisage achieving the following results:

1) promotion of mutual understanding between the participants from the universities of the AARC and DRC networks, with the aim of strengthening cooperation between regions and neighboring states;

2) a lasting effect on research and teaching of science within the network, bringing young scholars to the international research community;

3) new routes based on interdisciplinary studies.

As we have come to the end of this three-year project, it is time for summing up.

- 94 young researchers (PhDs, early Post-doc researchers) from 26 DRC and AARC member universities and 75 teachers were involved altogether;

- 3 students attended all three School editions and 12 took part in two of them;

- 18 project proposals were delivered, all thematically relevant.

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2 The reports of each edition are available on this link: www.danubefuture.eu/reports.
As a follow-up of the Schools, several participants started cooperation actions (one project application, joint publications) and some others attended the “First Danube:Future workshop” in Klagenfurt in April 2015 contributing to the “White Paper on the research and capacity building needs of the Danube Region”3.

Taking into account the three editions, we can summarize both positive and negative aspects of the project4.

As for its strengths, the School benefited from the internationality of the participants and from their broad disciplinary background and experiences in interdisciplinary work. Offering a wide field of topics and opening the School to participants from all scientific fields and countries from the Danube Region has provided the chance to foster international and interdisciplinary cooperation. The participants’ feedback clearly demonstrated that this is an asset of the DIAnet schools. The lectures addressed important topics in sustainability, natural and cultural heritage, focused on the Danube River Basin. The different types and blending of training methods (lectures, excursions, group work, and presentations) were appropriate to stimulate discussions among the participants and within the groups. The organization of the schedule, with lectures and excursions in the first part of the school and group work in the second part, proved to be effective towards achieving the School results.

The working group sessions motivated participants to discuss sustainability problems and to develop joint projects. The use of strategic documents such as Horizon 2020 (and related calls) or the Danube River Basin Management Plan (ICPDR), as the basis for the projects was helpful for the working groups and led to draft proposals which have a chance of being developed into full proposals. Furthermore, the work of the facilitators from the universities of Alpen Adria Klagenfurt, BOKU Vienna and Novi Sad throughout all the editions helped the participants in developing project ideas. Detailed instructions for group work were provided: “Handout for group work”, “EU funds overview” and lessons on Project Cycle Management, were delivered to enable less experienced participants to get familiar with the targets.

Of course, there is still room for improvement. A few weaknesses were mentioned by participants in their responses to the questionnaires. The workload was deemed too high: the program covered 10 days from Saturday afternoon until Monday morning. The most challenging factor was the number of indoor activities. Some participants would have liked to be involved in the group formation pointing out the difficulty in working with people from such different research fields, as groups were formed beforehand by the organ-

4 Full details on the SWOT analysis are available in the reports of each edition.
izers who focused especially on forming mixed groups of participants with different levels of experience (PhD and Post-Doc students), of different nationalities and from different disciplines. Some participants also found that lectures were sometimes too general and that they provided not enough information on existing projects or best practices to be used as examples during their group work.

Why should we organize new editions of the International School? After successfully completing this project, we are convinced that this kind of training school offers chances for young researchers. First of all, Danube:Future is a joint cooperation of the DRC and the AARC, providing access to the largest institutionalized pool of young researchers and PhD-students in the biggest EU macro-region. The flagship project Danube:Future can contribute to several priority areas of EUSDR because it engages with research in intermodality, sustainable energy, culture, tourism, protecting the environment, etc. By offering experience in interdisciplinary group work, the International Schools engage with capacity building in a crucial area and at a crucial moment. By mapping the EUSDR challenges onto the Grand Challenges of Horizon 2020, schools contribute to the preparation and workability of Horizon 2020. This is a unique opportunity to learn and interact in interdisciplinary groups with high-level international skills.

In general, training in developing business ideas should be considered as a standard tool. The proposal of the incubator BUILD! in Klagenfurt (Austria) to participate in the Danube:Future international school with a "Business Model Canvas workshop" is a relevant idea to test the proposed Danube:Future approach with a limited financial risk. If successful, this could become a standard tool for the follow-up activities of the School.

The future organizers have also to take into account possible threats. For building an interdisciplinary school, several lectures covering different research fields must be part of the agenda. This may lead—in some participants’ opinions—to an excess of lectures and too long a duration of the School. However, one can trust that young researchers are motivated to participate in the schools and to use this opportunity for their future careers. This aspect should be highlighted and adequately explained before the start of the schools.

Finally, we must take into consideration the follow-up actions. The School aims at training young researchers in building interdisciplinary projects. It is clear that—usually at the start of their career—they cannot apply for European projects on their own. Therefore, their universities should support them in further enhancing their project ideas and finalizing the proposals they have developed during the School.
This is why the Core partners would like to organize further editions of the DIAnet School for the next years. Although the schedule is not yet finalized, the DIS for 2016 is being planned with future editions in mind which will hopefully provide young researchers of the Danube Region with a highly rewarding learning experience and professional opportunities.