

# Foreword

The innovative and future-oriented perspective of the DIAnet International School and the positive results achieved by the participants during the first edition certainly deserved to be collected in the form of proceedings. Hopefully, they will be a useful tool for anyone interested not only in the topics of the school, *i.e.* the Sustainable Development of the Danube River Basin, but also in the interdisciplinary methods applied, or in the process of drawing up project proposals in relation to the funding system of the European Union.

The context in which the DIAnet International School was conceived is that of close cooperation between two large international university organisations: the Alps-Adriatic Rectors' Conference (AARC) and the Danube Rectors' Conference (DRC). The AARC is certainly among the oldest transnational organisation between universities in Europe, and it worked very efficiently even and in particular at the stage before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Its recent endorsement of joint projects in cooperation with the DRC, shows the firm intention of European institutions and organisations to continue along the same line, overcoming the socio-economic borders that still divide instead of unite, and putting culture and research at the service of society and integration. The active involvement of the European Union through its funding system and its macroregional strategies is giving stimulus and direction to this desire for cooperation and cross-border activity shown by the European university system at large, and its organisational structures such as AARC and DRC in particular.

The Danube:Future project is one of those joint AARC-DRC projects that have been recently endorsed and it operates in the framework of the EU Danube Strategy. Its aim is to provide "A sustainable future for the Danube river basin as a challenge for interdisciplinary humanities", which will be achieved through three successive phases. The DIAnet International School

aims at implementing one of the actions of the Capacity-building module of the Danube:Future Project, through capacity building, network creation and the analysis of national precursor studies. The context in which the DIAnet International School and the Danube:Future Project operate is one of ambitious goals set in a cradle of deep-rooted problems and difficulties which need to be overcome in order to allow the harmonious development of the region both in socio-economic and environmental terms. The aim of a sustainable future for the Danube region in fact, cannot be achieved without an interdisciplinary perspective which takes into account the various aspects and developments at different levels which have affected and still affect the area and the peoples who share its territory and natural resources.

The Danube River Basin (DRB) is a large geographic area in the heart of Europe, shared by many countries, and consequently divided by many borders. The Danube itself as long been seen as a natural border between different countries, peoples, languages and histories, in a region that has been very dynamic all through history and not only in the recent past. The legacies of this rich and eventful history are still to be seen and felt along this remarkable European river basin, not only in socio-economic terms, but also from an environmental perspective. In order to overcome the intricate and multifaceted problems created and left by these longstanding legacies, an interdisciplinary approach is essential to understand the natural and environmental developments through a socio-economic and historical perspective. The DIAnet International School wants to offer and develop the interdisciplinary methods which are necessary to analyse the DRB situation and come to feasible solutions and proposals.

The almost twenty different countries that share the territory and natural resources of the DRB have different social, linguistic, economic and historical backgrounds, still strongly and intensely felt, also considering that the Iron Curtain ran through the DRB until as recently as 1990, dividing the Danube region and the European continent for over four decades not merely in political, but also economic, social and environmental terms. Yet we believe that the same diversity that has so long affected its potentialities can become a resource to overcome the problems and shape a sustainable future. The coordinators, teachers and participants of the DIAnet International School come in fact from different universities, regions and countries. Such a diversity is a precious asset of the School and is a key factor for the development of project proposals which are meant to be implemented in different countries of the DRB, and must therefore meet their specific needs and release their unique potentialities.

The universities have a central role to play in the process of European integration and in shaping a sustainable future for the territory of the many countries and peoples who share its resources and fate. The DRB poses to our society many questions and challenges, at various levels: social, economic, political, legal, environmental, etc. The intricacy of the situation of the region, the legacies of the past, the environmental problems and the need for a harmonious economic and social development call for an attentive and coordinated approach, which the university system can best offer, thanks to the first-rate expertise which it can provide, and the long-term and all-comprehensive perspective with which it can tackle the difficult situation with a clear vision of wellbeing and sustainability for the future generations in mind.

In particular, universities can prove to be an excellent driving force for positive change because they can provide skills and expertise from the most diverse fields of knowledge and research, which together can come up with ideas and solutions that otherwise would simply be unthinkable, and provide connectivity to such diversity. Interdisciplinarity is in fact a key factor in today's world because society at large - and sensible policy makers in particular - rightly demand that all aspects of life and wellbeing be considered when tackling single problems, and that future sustainability be seen as a priority in public management and socio-economic development. The most innovative aspect of the DIAnet International School is its interdisciplinary approach which goes as far as bringing together expertise from fields that would usually never meet - from natural sciences to the humanities, giving the latter a leading role which interdisciplinary research usually reserves to natural, applied or formal sciences.

Yet interdisciplinarity is not the only benefit that the university system can offer. Longstanding cooperation between universities of different countries can now find a favourable ground in the social and political integration that the evolution and enlargement of the European Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall have brought and are still bringing to our continent. The drive to cross-border and cross-culture exchanges, which is an innate aspect of higher education, can prove to be a major factor of positive change. However, political support and adequate financial tools are to be provided to the high learning community, in order to bring together the best expertise from various countries with their baggage of unique experiences and distinctive perspectives, allowing them to work together in innovative and creative ways to find new and better solutions to long-standing and complex problems.

The University of Trieste, thanks to its position at the North-East border of Italy, has always looked at the neighbouring countries and their universities

as its natural partners in projects and activities of study and research, and good and far-looking leaderships have managed to turn this intrinsic characteristic into a driving force towards even greater cooperation in ambitious and innovative projects. The DIAnet International School is one of those projects and since its very first edition it has proven to be a promising activity and a fruitful meeting ground for the talented young expertise coming from many motivated universities that share with us the same willingness and energy towards cross-border and macro-regional cooperation and innovative research methodologies and undertakings.

In the years I served as the vice-Rector at the University of Trieste I was deeply and personally involved in the process of approach between the AARC and the DRC, and at the same time I could follow the process of approval of the DIAnet International School with the subsequent launch of the first edition. This personal viewpoint allowed me to see and appreciate the work and contribution of many people involved at different levels. But all practical work and tangible achievements could not be reached if the ideas that first conceived the DIAnet International School had not been allowed to develop and become actions. The DIAnet International School in fact owes its very existence to the farsighted leadership of the then Rector of the University of Trieste, Professor Francesco Peroni, who with his vision and guidance shaped the preconditions which were necessary for all following events to take place.

The University of Trieste could not have implemented any such ambitious project without the substantial support of the Autonomous Region Friuli Venezia Giulia (FVG). The significant financial funding awarded by the FVG Region through the European Social Fund (ESF) has been essential to the DIAnet project and its many actions, of which the DIAnet International School is only one example. The practical and political support we have enjoyed has been just as essential: it allowed us to launch this ambitious project in a very short time, thanks to the active and personal involvement of the many people who work for the FVG Regional authority, and make it an open and encouraging institution, willing to take a pro-active role in the socio-economic and research/higher-education realities of the FVG territory and a leading role in cross-border and interregional cooperation.

It was my pleasure and honour to work along many different people and institutions to conceive the DIAnet International School and bring it to life, as it was my pleasure and honour to personally see this project take shape and to support its actual development and first implementation in the first edition of 2013. The results and implications of the DIAnet International School will be actualised and can therefore be appreciated only in the years to come, yet the

project proposals developed by the participants in this first edition and collected in these proceedings, can offer a fascinating glimpse on the potential that interdisciplinary methods can release by bringing together young and promising expertise from different countries and different fields and giving them the tools to work together for a shared and sustainable future.

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