

*Rectores Magnifici*, dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first thank to our host, the Rector Oliver Vitouch from the Alpen Adria University, for inviting us to this first Danube Future Workshop, organized with the participation of our two Rector Conferences. Please let me welcome the participants who showed interest for such cooperation on sustainable development in our Danube Region.

As the president of the Danube Rector's Conference I want to reveal that DRC is very interested and deeply involved in this collaboration. We came here with all the members of our DRC Presidency, so that we could discuss our future collaboration with the Conference of the Universities of Alpen Adriatic Region. We think that all our universities are interested in cooperation in the fields of teaching, education, and research and many of them can be involved also in the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. The contribution of the DRC has also been mentioned in the official EU documents and some of our staff have taken responsibility for coordinating with some of the Danube Strategy pillars and action plans.

We are together today to act as a consortium, because new incentives are necessary to increase the efficiency of our cooperation. Such a workshop has the potential to consolidate this initiative.

The DRC already participated in the last 3 Danube Strategy Conferences and had the chance, two years ago, during our General Assembly, to receive the presentations of 3 EU commissioners about the Horizon 2020 program, just after the official release in Brussels. Since then, we have made a lot of progress, and new projects are underway. A new cooperation between our consortia can be another challenge to increase the efficiency of our projects and the participation to the EU programs.

The Danube river basin is an area of more than 800.000 km, stretching along in 19 countries, inhabited by approximately 81 million people. In the Danube region, 3,2 million of students study in about 400 different universities. Today the DRC represents 70 universities from 15 countries (10 EU and 5 Non EU), which account for over 1,2 million students and 74.000 staff. This is a network with a huge cooperation potential, and 16 universities are members of both Conferences. In a survey done before our workshop, we identified in the Scopus Data base 558.321 scientific articles published by the DRC staff, in many areas of cooperation. We have, in our network, substantial expertise in a lot of innovative fields that are waiting to be investigated further.

Together, both networks, with a total of 90 universities, are much stronger and I think that our capacity-building initiative for a Danube Future consortium is already promising. We need to continue with the transformative learning process that can initiate the laboratory for the European transformation to a sustainable future. The Danube Future initiative has invited today the research community to identify opportunities for research building on the specific strengths of our universities. We think that such an initiative needs to be continued and we need some conclusions and a vision.

EU experts have declared recently that *"higher education will play a crucial role for the transition to a sustainable development in the Danube region but how this role will be designed is unclear"*. Together, we have to answer this question and also to protect the environment around our Danube River and protect the environment, build new cooperation bridges for connecting the regions and bring prosperity through our knowledge society, competitiveness and people skills. A lot of hard work remains around the 4 priorities pillars, which need synergy and coordination between existing policies and initiatives taking place across the Danube Region.

The Danube Future project can contribute to such a mission by enabling transnational sustainability research and education. I hope that this first workshop can act as a starting point and consolidate our vision for the future.

I wish all the participants success in their presentations and a fruitful dialog. We look forward to the final report and the White paper, and are prepared for concrete proposals and next steps.

Thank you for your patience.