

Participants:

- ZORAN VRBANAC, University of Zagreb
- URSULA SCHOBER, University of Veterinary Medicine, Vienna
- ANA LUCIA CASADO GILLET, Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation (OeAD)

Moderator:

- MICHAEL SCHEDL, CEEPUS Secretary General

Schedl opens discussion and, on behalf of CEEPUS as its Secretary General, introduces Higher Education cooperations in Southeast and Eastern Europe. He reflects on the enduring possibility of university cooperations despite wars when thinking back to the Yugoslavian war for example.

A brief introduction of the CEEPUS programme consisting of 15 member states is given. Regrettably, this does not include Ukraine; however, many of the member countries are, or were, neighbouring countries of Ukraine, also including neighbouring countries with politically tense settings. The main activity of CEEPUS includes 85 networks with over 1.600 university institutions, over 6.500 scholarship months awarded by the membership countries assigned to the institutions for teacher & student exchanges, 1.100 incoming months for Austria, over 75.000 successful grant stays. Most cooperations occur not necessarily on a university level but rather on an institutional level. There has been a strong commitment recently of members to sign a new agreement to prolong CEEPUS for another 7 years. CEEPUS IV will also open for university staff exchange within the network.

VetNEST – Extended is introduced as a veterinary network for student and staff transfers. It brings not so typical institutes like veterinary institutions into the network. Every network has a main coordinator, and the University of Zagreb, Croatia, holds the coordination for this network. **Schober** differentiates between VetNEST as a 'core network' with its own credit system and a full recognition of curricula and the 'VetNEST – Extended' network.

Schedl asks how CEEPUS helps the University of Zagreb with cooperations. **Vrbanac** shares that months are facilitated for outgoing mobilities for the institution. When considering other mobilities like Erasmus+, they try to adjust and offer e.g., 1-3 months as common short-term student mobilities, as veterinary students typically need to do clinical practice or work on laboratory work. Besides from short- and long-term mobilities, there are summer schools offered by different partners of VetNEST Extended. These summer schools are popular and are organised within a variety of fields (e.g. food hygiene, aquaculture, animal welfare, biosafety, etc.).

To what extent the two mentioned network types (i.e., core and extended) are different is addressed by the participants. **Schober** explains that Core was successful for so long because it was implemented at the top levels of the academic representatives and this is still the case today. They have annual exchanges within plenary meetings over developments, challenges, and other experiences. For full membership, full accreditation is required. However, for Extended, an institution starting the accreditation process can be accepted. **Schedl** asks whether institutions were able to bring new partners to the level under which Core operates. **Vrbanac** responds that not only curriculum requirements but also the state of the facilities, equipment, etc. – very rigorous requirements that are not easy for new faculties having emerged in the last ten years will be able to reach that level in a short

amount of time. VetNEST is able to support in that way to enable mobilities to institutions where that level is met.

On the former conflict in Yugoslavia mentioned previously, **Schedl** asks participants to explore how cooperation can be achieved, how mutual understanding and peace can be brought about given a past of conflict. In **Vrbanac's** case as a clinician, on academic and professional levels, the conflict is not so much on the forefront of his work. Collaborating professionally with peers helps build bridges together despite this past, especially when helping partners who may not have reached this level and come visit the network's institutions, participated in its programmes, and received supported from it. **Schedl** wonders if it is even possible in such difficult political settings to come together such as when students come to, for example, the summer schools. **Schober** counters from an Austrian university point of view with the provocative question: *Why should Austrian universities collaborate with institutions in Southeastern and Eastern Europe?* From her own experiences, she appreciates the collaboration with these institutions. Every new member is value-added and enriches the network, which becomes evident in joint meetings where there is great input from the various members. **Vrbanac** reflects on the fact that all universities in Austria have political or historic connections with Zagreb in one way or another. The ties shared in these countries, not only geographically but throughout the many programmes and projects that the network has, is very important. Bilateral and multilateral projects, curricular development, soft skills enhancements, and many other things have emerged, which highlight the network's profound importance.

Schedl asks whether it is often difficult to motivate Austrian students, and maybe also Austrian professors, to go abroad and to what extent institutions succeed in appealing to them. **Schober** highlights the summer schools as very popular for her institution because they are a great opportunity for students who go to not just one but two places in which learning and, beyond that, networking occurs. Her institute offers supplementary scholarships to help with costs including travel costs to lessen obstacles students may face. On the topic of sharing advice with international relations officers looking to set up a network, she says they often think of themselves as not being very involved. However, if they know of the existence of a network office at their institution, they should try to get involved, for example by creating an account to be aware of the students and different steps required to be awarded a scholarship. **Casado Gillet** adds that every country has a contact point, which are listed on the CEEPUS website. She works for CEEPUS National Office in Austria and is also involved with the programme processing in Austria. In her role, she supports the network, this includes support with mobility applications, answering queries, checking the application materials. She reminds all international offices that CEEPUS' currency is reflected in scholarship months; this year, they received 2000 months instead of 1100 months, as there were unused months due to the pandemic. If there is interest in starting a network, receive more information on how to start a network, there will be a new application for 23/24 from November until mid-January. So-called 'free movers' – these are CEEPUS scholarship applicants who want to come to the country and participate in the exchange but are not part of participating units – may come on 30th November.