

Opening conference of the MED HUB project

Report

The opening conference of the MED HUB project was held at the Euro-Mediterranean University on 30.11.2018 in Piran, Slovenia. The agenda, including the participants can be accessed at <https://emuni.si/the-region-in-classrooms/>.



43 participants from 12 countries in the region attended the opening conference. The discussions revolved around the ways, in which issues that are of relevance to the Euro-Mediterranean region, are currently being debated in the public sphere (through the media, social media, among the lay audience), and taught to students at universities. The focus was on

identifying ways, in which these issues of common interest could gain better visibility and interest, and be discussed in a way that highlights the need for the existence of a dialogue in the region.

BACK TO THE ROOTS TO SET THE PURPOSE

In the opening, the organisers – representatives of the Euro-Mediterranean University (EMUNI) – recalled the purpose of the establishment of the University. EMUNI was established in 2008 in what were positive times for the regional cohesiveness; the period was characterised by a sense of optimism regarding the Euro-Mediterranean relations and by a sense of trust that such good relations were beneficial for everyone. This was the time of ideas, such as common grids, joint archives and Mediterranean innovation centres.

The idea of a university was born, which would work for an improved integration of the region.

Not even 10 years after, in 2017, when we wrote the application, times were very different. The motivation for joint undertakings for an increasingly prosperous region has been replaced by the urge to find effective means for addressing common challenges and problems. The Mediterranean has become a site of problems; violent extremism and disorderly migration took over funding. The predominant feeling is no longer one of optimism and good spirits but of a conflict, disagreement and distrust. The politicians highlight the sources of political instability and open questions. If people buy or do not buy into the idea of a conflict, is a powerful notion that is hard to defeat in the public sphere. In such an environment, the mission of the Euro-Mediterranean University and

other institutions is challenged, the identity of its supporters and the positive impact are pushed to be reinvented.

Our focus is on how to revitalize the EuroMed area into a region of hope and how to reassert the normative agenda.

The common belief of the participants was that there is a persistent (and even growing) need for better understanding and debating the region. Almost all the tools to do so are long-term, and require substantial effort.

Almost all the tools for improving the understanding of the region and effective engagement among peoples are long-term and require substantial effort.

The project MED HUB responds to the needs of devising such long-term tools. It seeks to foster a debate between policy-makers, academics and civil society actors and the youth. It sees the potential in

1. Spreading the presence of EuroMed issues
2. Better teaching such topical issues
3. Having more people to teach and engage with them
4. Promoting policy-academia discussion

The project has a threefold aim. First, it aims to encourage introduction of aspects of the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation into the existing teaching activities of university students, or draft a curriculum that adequately captures regional challenges. Secondly, it aims to promote policy-academia discussion on current (topical) issues. Third, it aims to create an interdisciplinary network of experts on the Mediterranean, who will promote the dialogue on the EU-Mediterranean relations.

The vision of the project is that of academics bringing about a positive change through an enhanced engagement with their primary target groups (students and policy makers). Academics can influence the young people and policy makers with a sense of optimism across the Euro-Mediterranean region. The MED-HUB project (Knowledge Hub on the Euro-Mediterranean region) will explore effective ways to do so and suggest some of the concrete measures.

Teaching of university students about the significance of the region and an effective academia-policy dialogue can help spread a new sense of optimism across the Euro-Mediterranean region.

By pursuing the project's objectives, EMUNI is pursuing its very mission of contributing towards the establishment of a common Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education and Research Area, and thus to a more cohesive region. The creation of a more integrated higher education and research space in the region is both a condition for, and an effect of the political dialogue. If politicians cannot break the vicious circle, the academic sphere should try to do its part.



SETTING OFF A SERIES OF EVENTS

The opening conference of the MEDHUB, does not represent the solution. However, we see it as an important event, where dedicated individuals chart a longer process. The individuals were asked to engage with issues that go outside their core, everyday business. Even if they teach, the focus of the conference is to reflect on the broader setting and context of what and how they teach.

The opening conference has the purpose of:

- Fleshing out the key themes that could be discussed at the succeeding events.
- Starting to create an integrated community of the experts and academics in the field of Euro-Mediterranean studies.
- Formulating the format and focus of five thematic workshops organized with the aim of initiating an approach towards Euro-Mediterranean studies.

The project was designed in such a way that, following the opening conference, **5 workshops** will be held, each dedicated to a specific theme (rather than discipline) to focus on topics that are of highest relevance for the Euro-Med region. Our proposal was to debate along the following lines:

- / Human rights and democratisation in the Euro-Mediterranean region
- / Applied Science and Technology in the Euro-Mediterranean region
- / Economies in the Euro-Mediterranean region
- / Societies and culture in the Euro-Med
- / Values and Religion in the Euro-Mediterranean region

Each of these five workshops will consist of

- / an academic part, dedicated to the presentation of research papers and a discussion on the desired elements of a curriculum of the Euro-Mediterranean studies from that particular discipline
- / a policy-academia dialogue which will concentrate on a specific issue within that discipline.

Finally, we envisaged a closing conference to wrap up the joint conclusions of the workshops and finalise the curriculum recommendations.

Regarding these themes, some of the remarks at the conference were made relevant to our implementation.

There is a strong potential in discussing real and tangible issues, however, the more political the themes become, the stronger the suspicion from the individuals discussing it. The theme of “human rights” and “democratization” are topical, but too delicate to generate the desired impact. A meaningful discussion would require a lot of carefully constructed background information which may or may not be well-received at all ends. They risk defeating, rather than attracting dialogue in the region. In light of this thoughts by a group of participants, we have decided to look into another theme to replace this one.

There is a strong potential in teaching and discussing real and tangible issues, with visible impact.

Another implication of that same appeal for real and tangible issues to guide discussions was the need to have the themes of workshops reasonably precise. We have planned for that but we are aware that the key groups of stakeholders – academics, lay audience and policy-makers – may have very different understandings of what an “attractive” title is. We need to think carefully about the titles, in the context of the types of actors we are primarily seeking to appeal to.



THE REGION IN CLASSROOMS

The opening conference discussed how the region is viewed and can be approached in teaching and research. The discussions specifically involved instances of good practices, which demonstrate that research and/or teaching can help with the integration of the region. The guiding questions of the conference were:

How are Euro-Mediterranean issues taught to university students today? Are there differences between the North and the South of the Mediterranean? Are there study programmes that could be considered Euro-Mediterranean by nature? How well are issues of regional importance integrated into other study programmes, modules and themes? What are such themes that attract attention and why? How appropriate are the existing teaching methods and approaches for the production of a regional identity?

How well do we understand the Euro-Mediterranean region, its functioning and needs? Does current research produce the type of knowledge that is needed for policy actions? Do the conclusions by researchers translate into policy actions? Which issues receive particular attention of researchers, and why? What are the problems and questions that receive too little attention? Does scholarly research foster a dialogue, does it contribute to building a cooperative, rather than conflicting attitude between different parts of the Mediterranean?

How do good practices come about; how did they develop; what obstacles did they overcome in accomplishing their aim? What does the experience from the particular initiatives tell us about the way forward for teaching and researching of the Euro-Mediterranean issues? Based on the good practices, how can some of the questions from the previous panels be answered?

RECOMMENDATIONS

- While there is a difference between scientific and normative agendas of disciplines, most disciplines have some interplay, albeit in a varying degree. It is appropriate (and perhaps also attractive) to make the normative agenda of a study programme explicit.
- It is essential to approach the region with an interdisciplinary approach, highlighting different contributions that can be made. The goal is to have competence in “interdisciplinary grounded critical analysis and reflection”. How the programmes are structured is not important, what is important is that students get the approaches and personal skills for addressing ever new problems.
- Community-building of like-minded (constructing an “epistemic community”) is an important element of the integration of the region.
- Highlighting a common identity of the Euro-Mediterranean is important in that regard. Humanities have a role to play, for instance by teaching the interplay between culture and tourism, through the use of cultural routes, fortress trails and similar ideas, which demonstrate the common identity among the places and peoples. Students need to understand they belong to a broader context and get to know it.
- It is important to build capabilities for intercultural communication. Useful methodologies in that regard are role-playing, simulations, story-telling, group work revolving around dialogue, rather than power.
- Knowing languages of the region is a huge asset. There should be a balance between the South trying to learn European languages and culture, and Europeans doing the same for the languages and cultures of the South. This proposal is explicitly against learning one language – and for language diversity. I.e. English is the universal language now, but this is not seen as positive.
- However, while the language is important, it is not so much the source of the problem. The more important skill is the cultural understanding that can be gained in interaction.
- Technical issues, such as Water-Food-Energy nexus lend themselves more easily to demonstrating the importance of the regional cooperation, while Cultural and Social Dialogues are much more challenging.
- The teaching of European Studies, while generally appropriate for including the Euro-Med dimension, rarely do so. Euro-Mediterranean dimension is hard to find, we have the “European” or “Mediterranean” perspective. However, the Euro-centric approach is inadequate for us to respond to the joint challenges. There is scope in teaching more about the Euro-Med as the EU’s neighbour. A good practice in that regard is the creation of the Euro-Mediterranean dimension/pathway/strand into the MA in European Studies.
- Mobility (for study or traineeship) to the region is an excellent tool for enhancing the understanding and appreciation for the region.
- We need to keep distinguishing between the notions of education and training and skills, and integrate them all into the programme.
- The value of joining forces needs to be made obvious and highlighted through dissemination. Researchers and students fail to see what would be better by joining forces (rather than replicating efforts in), e.g. in olive oil research.
- There is a lot of interest in the European Qualifications Framework, and the EU is investing quite a lot into programmes. Many teachers in the region are already integrated into European

programmes. These people are valuable resources to build on in the design of new curricula and re-design of existing teaching (which is something they already do).

- Whether we like it or not, study programmes are dependent on political agenda (through funding, accreditation or blunt political support). For example, for France the region of interest is Sub-Saharan Africa. The political agenda needs to be used pragmatically to demonstrate the value of the region and study programmes concerned with it. One tool to do so is to have students reflect in the public sphere on the issues that are of relevance to the region (e.g. by writing blogs, speaking online, volunteering).