

CONNECT: A Student-Centered Conference Model for Dialogue, Mentorship and Interdisciplinary Exchange

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Abstract: The CONNECT conference series was established as an alternative academic format designed to strengthen connectivity, trust, and opportunity within the Western Balkans, with a particular emphasis on students and early-career researchers. Rather than following traditional conference models focused on finalized research results and hierarchical presentation structures, CONNECT prioritizes dialogue, participation, and collaborative learning. Through interactive formats, including World Café discussions and project-based teamwork, students are positioned as active contributors to academic and societal discourse. This manuscript outlines the guiding philosophy of CONNECT, its emphasis on student-centered engagement, interdisciplinary exchange, and long-term community building, as well as the role of international academic networks and institutional support, particularly from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD; Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst). The article further contextualizes CONNECT 2025, held in August 2025 in Neum, Bosnia and Herzegovina, which focused on the integration of Western Balkan research communities into the European Research Area. The contributions collected in this special issue reflect personal, institutional, and thematic perspectives shaped by participation in CONNECT 2025, highlighting inclusive academic practices and regional cooperation.

Keywords: connections; science communication; DAAD; ERA; students

1. Introduction

From its very beginning in 2017, the CONNECT conference series was conceived with a purpose that clearly distinguishes it from conventional academic meetings. CONNECT did not emerge as yet another platform for presenting finalized research results or for reinforcing established academic hierarchies. Instead, it was created as a response to a much broader question: how can academic communities in the Western Balkans strengthen connectivity, trust, and opportunity, especially for students, through science, dialogue, and cooperation.

To understand CONNECT, it is essential to first understand what it deliberately avoids. CONNECT is not a classical scientific conference in which established professionals dominate the program with specialized talks addressed primarily to their peers. It is not an event where students sit quietly at the margins, absorbing information without the chance to actively shape the discussion. Nor is it a narrowly defined disciplinary meeting restricted to a single field of science. These familiar academic formats, while valuable in their own context, were never the model CONNECT sought to reproduce.

Instead, CONNECT was designed as a conference with students rather than merely for them. Students are not treated as future participants who must wait their turn; they are recognized as present stakeholders in academic and societal development. Throughout the CONNECT events, students actively participate in discussions, articulate their perspectives, and engage directly with peers from across the region. The format encourages openness and exchange, fostering an atmosphere in which ideas are explored collaboratively rather than presented as finished products.

A defining characteristic of CONNECT is its reliance on interactive formats, particularly World Café-style (Figure 1) discussions and moderated brainstorming sessions. These formats replace long sequences of lectures with dynamic, small-group conversations that invite every participant to contribute. Rather than emphasizing one-way communication, CONNECT prioritizes dialogue between students from different countries, between disciplines, and between generations of academics. This structure reflects a fundamental belief underlying the entire series: meaningful cooperation begins with conversation.



Figure 1. World Café session at CONNECT 2025.

The topics addressed at CONNECT further underline its distinctive nature. While science is always at the core, the focus is not limited to research itself. CONNECT engages

with questions of science communication, regional cooperation, international mobility, interdisciplinarity, and the role of science in civil society. Over the years, the conference has consistently explored how academic communities can contribute to social cohesion and integration into broader European and international frameworks. In this sense, CONNECT treats science not as an isolated endeavor but as a significant component of a larger societal ecosystem.

Crucially, the strong emphasis on student participation does not imply any lack of rigor or professional excellence within CONNECT. On the contrary, the conference is supported by a diverse and carefully curated network of accomplished contributors, including internationally recognized researchers and educators, as well as professionals from creative, cultural, and societal domains. Many participants bring distinguished academic careers with strong publication records and global recognition, while others contribute equally valuable expertise drawn from fields such as the arts, media, education, and public engagement. Their presence serves a purpose distinct from that of traditional conferences: rather than dominating the program, these experts act as mentors, facilitators, and enablers. They provide perspective, share experience, open new ways of thinking, and guide discussions, while deliberately preserving space for student voices to emerge, develop, and lead. For example, one of the lecturers was Duško Mazalica (Figure 2), a permanent member of the Children's Theatre of the Republic of Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose professional background in film, television, and theatre brought a valuable artistic and communicative dimension to the program.



Figure 2. Lecture by Duško Mazalica at CONNECT 2021.

Across its various editions, CONNECT has consistently functioned as a bridge-building initiative. It connects students across national and institutional boundaries, links early-career researchers with established scientists, and situates regional academic communities within a broader international context. These connections are not merely symbolic - they

have led to tangible outcomes, including follow-up collaborations, student initiatives, exchange programs, and long-term mentoring structures.

In essence, CONNECT is best described not as a traditional conference, but as a collaborative academic space in which dialogue, participation, and shared reflection take precedence over formal presentation. It is a place where students are empowered to think critically about their role in science and society, supported by experienced academics who view education, communication, and cooperation as inseparable elements of scientific progress. This philosophy, more than any single topic or format, is what defines CONNECT and continues to distinguish it within the academic community.

2. Project-Based Learning at the Core of CONNECT

One of the most distinctive and impactful features of the CONNECT conference series is its strong emphasis on team-based, project-oriented work. Beyond discussion and brainstorming, students at CONNECT are actively engaged in developing concrete projects, working in small, interdisciplinary teams under the mentorship of established scientists and educators (Figure 3). These mentors do not simply supervise from a distance; they work closely with students, guiding them through the process of defining a problem, structuring ideas, and transforming broad concepts into coherent, presentable projects.

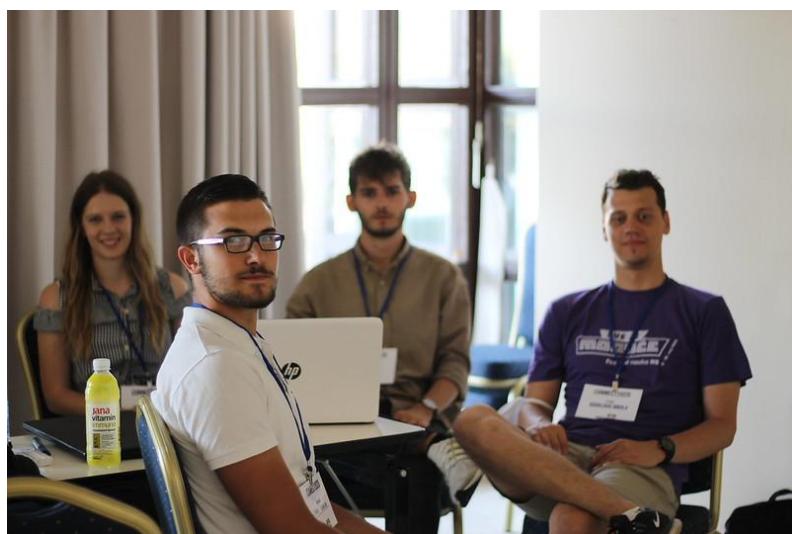


Figure 3. Teamwork session from CONNECT 2020.

This project work culminates in a public moment of exchange. Student teams are given the opportunity to present and defend their projects in front of fellow participants, mentors, and invited experts (Figure 4). These sessions are not framed as examinations, but as open discussions in which ideas are refined through collective feedback. Students learn

how to articulate their arguments, respond to critical questions, and engage constructively with different perspectives. These skills are essential for academic life but rarely practiced in traditional conference settings.



Figure 4. Project presentations from CONNECT 2025.

The range of project topics at CONNECT reflects the conference's interdisciplinary and exploratory spirit. In one edition, student teams analyzed and compared curricula of natural science study programs across the Western Balkans, critically examining how programs in fields such as physics or mathematics could be modernized to improve visibility and attractiveness. In another project, students were introduced to the basics of molecular modeling, exploring how computational tools can deliver interdisciplinarity and open new research and educational pathways. Other projects ventured even further beyond conventional academic boundaries, such as initiatives that connected the art of acting with science communication, demonstrating how performance techniques can enhance the clarity, accessibility, and emotional impact of scientific narratives. Together, these projects exemplify CONNECT's commitment to learning by doing and to empowering students to explore science as a dynamic, creative, and socially embedded endeavor.

3. The Role of DAAD - Supporting Connectivity Beyond Research

An essential element in the long-term development of the CONNECT conference series is the support provided by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD; Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst). From the very beginning, CONNECT has been aligned with DAAD's broader understanding of international academic exchange, an understanding that goes well beyond the funding of individual research projects or narrowly defined scientific goals.

DAAD is widely recognized as the world's largest organization dedicated to supporting the international exchange of students and researchers. While scientific excellence is an important part of its mission, DAAD's activities are intentionally broader in scope. Its programs aim to strengthen international cooperation by enabling student and staff mobility, supporting institutional partnerships, improving teaching and learning environments, and encouraging dialogue across countries and cultures. In this sense, conferences and initiatives such as CONNECT fit naturally within DAAD's portfolio, as they combine academic content with exchange, mentoring, and long-term networking.

For the Western Balkans region in particular, DAAD's support of CONNECT has played a crucial role. Rather than focusing exclusively on the production of scientific results, the CONNECT events supported by DAAD emphasize cooperation, mutual understanding, and the active involvement of students in international academic life. By supporting formats that bring together students, early-career researchers, and experienced academics, DAAD helps create opportunities for discussion, collaboration, and personal connection. CONNECT thus illustrates how DAAD funding contributes not only to research and education, but also to the development of durable academic networks and meaningful international exchange.

4. People and Community Behind CONNECT

From its inception, the CONNECT conference series was initiated and guided by a small group of scientists from Germany whose scientific backgrounds and professional experience strongly shaped its vision (Marcus Bleicher, Christian Sturm and Sascha Vogel). Marcus Bleicher (Goethe University Frankfurt, Figure 5) is a theoretical physicist working on the properties of matter under extreme conditions, with a strong focus on quantum chromodynamics, heavy-ion collisions, and large-scale numerical simulations closely connected to major international facilities such as GSI and CERN. Christian Sturm (GSI Helmholtz Centre for Heavy Ion Research) is deeply involved in experimental nuclear and particle physics, working within large international collaborations and complex research infrastructures related to FAIR and CBM experiments. Sascha Vogel (Science Birds GmbH), originally trained as a theoretical physicist, brings extensive expertise in science management, doctoral education, and science communication, with a strong focus on teaching young scientists and translating complex scientific ideas to diverse audiences. Together, their complementary expertise in fundamental research, experimental science, large collaborations, and communication formed the foundation of CONNECT as an initiative that combines scientific credibility with openness, dialogue, and student empowerment.



Figure 5. Prof. Marcus Bleicher giving an introductory lecture on CONNECT 2021.

A defining strength of CONNECT has been the strong and continuous involvement of academics from the Western Balkans. Colleagues such as Dubravko Klabučar (University of Zagreb), Mirza Hadžimehmedović, Vedad Pašić, and Elvis Baraković (University of Tuzla), Saša Ceci (Ruđer Bošković Institute, Zagreb), Jadranko Batista (University of Mostar), Nemanja Rakić (University of Banja Luka), Jovana Nikolov (University of Novi Sad), Tijana Prodanović (University of Novi Sad), and Stevan Armaković (University of Novi Sad) ensured that CONNECT remained firmly embedded in the regional academic context while actively fostering cross-border and international cooperation. In addition, the invited guest lecturers made an essential contribution by bringing diverse perspectives and expertise, spanning topics from science communication to highly specialized research areas.

A particularly telling indicator of CONNECT's long-term impact is the role assumed by former student participants. For example, student participants from earlier CONNECT editions, Ajla Nurkanović (University of Tuzla), Goran Stanić (University of Novi Sad), and Tom Reichert (Goethe University Frankfurt) later became co-organizers of some CONNECT conferences. Their transition from participants to organizers reflects the core idea of CONNECT - students are not only involved in academic dialogue, but are encouraged and enabled to take responsibility for shaping and sustaining the initiative itself.

5. CONNECT 2025: Context and Focus of the Present Special Issue

The present special issue is dedicated to the most recent edition of the CONNECT conference series, CONNECT 2025, held from August 25 to 29, 2025, at the Grand Hotel Neum in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Building on the foundations established by previous CONNECT

events, CONNECT 2025 placed a strong emphasis on strengthening the knowledge society as a key driver of regional cooperation and long-term academic development.

CONNECT 2025 used its extensive scientific network to connect students and early-career researchers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia with international collaborators from Germany, Turkey, and Hungary. This network has already demonstrated its value by fostering sustained scientific collaborations, institutional partnerships, and personal connections that extend well beyond the duration of the conference itself.

A central thematic focus of CONNECT 2025 was the alignment and integration of Western Balkan countries, particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, as EU membership candidates, into the European Research Area (ERA, Figure 6). The conference addressed the overarching question of how researchers, institutions, and policy frameworks in the Western Balkans can converge with the ERA, and how they can meaningfully benefit from active participation in its structures and programs.



Figure 6. CONNECT 2025 logo.

In this context, CONNECT 2025 engaged directly with the priorities defined by the ERA Policy Agenda, with particular attention to:

- deepening a truly functioning internal market for knowledge through Open Science, promotion of research careers, talent circulation, and gender equality;
- addressing the twin green and digital transitions, including the societal impact of artificial intelligence and sustainable ecosystem development; and
- amplifying access to research and innovation excellence across Europe, with a specific focus on Widening, Twinning, and COST programs under Horizon Europe as key instruments for strengthening research capacity in the Western Balkans.

The conference followed a symposium-style format, combining morning impulse talks with intensive World Café-style discussion sessions in the afternoons, and structured wrap-up presentations in the evenings. This interactive format actively encouraged dialogue between senior scientists, early-career researchers, students, and international partners, reinforcing CONNECT's long-standing emphasis on participation, openness, and collaborative learning.

It is within this intellectual, institutional, and regional framework that the contributions collected in this special issue should be understood. Rather than traditional conference proceedings, the articles presented here reflect personal, scientific, and institutional perspectives shaped by participation in CONNECT 2025, offering insights into

both the challenges and opportunities associated with building a more integrated, inclusive, and internationally connected research area in the Western Balkans.

CONNECT 2025 featured a rich and diverse scientific program combining keynote lectures, thematic talks, hands-on workshops, and interactive World Café discussions. The program addressed core aspects of the ERA, including Open Science, research careers and mobility, digital and green transitions, science communication, and access to European funding instruments. Contributions from senior researchers, policy experts, industry representatives, and early-career researchers provided perspectives ranging from proposal writing and science communication to international research infrastructures, artificial intelligence in science, and sustainable development. The complete CONNECT 2025 program can be seen at the following link: <https://www.connect-2025.com/2025/08/connect-2025-program.html>.

Together, these activities created a dynamic and inclusive framework for dialogue, skill-building, and cross-border collaboration, reflecting CONNECT's long-standing mission to support the integration of the Western Balkans into the ERA.

6. Conclusions

The CONNECT conference series has, over time, established itself as a distinctive platform for dialogue, collaboration, and capacity building at the intersection of science, policy, and education. By consistently combining high-level scientific expertise with inclusive, student-centered formats, CONNECT has contributed to strengthening regional academic communities while fostering meaningful integration into the broader ERA.

CONNECT 2025 represents a natural continuation of this trajectory. Through its focus on Open Science, research careers, digital and green transitions, and access to European research and innovation frameworks, the conference addressed both structural challenges and emerging opportunities facing researchers in the Western Balkans. Equally important, its participatory format encouraged open exchange between senior academics, early-career researchers, students, and international partners, reinforcing a culture of collaboration that extends beyond disciplinary and national boundaries.

The contributions collected in this special issue reflect the spirit of CONNECT 2025. Rather than conventional conference proceedings, they capture personal reflections, institutional perspectives, and thematic insights shaped by active participation in the event. Together, they illustrate how sustained regional engagement, international cooperation, and inclusive academic practices can support the development of a resilient and connected research ecosystem.

As CONNECT continues to evolve, its experience shows that long-term impact arises not only from scientific excellence, but also from openness, dialogue, and shared responsibility in shaping the future of research and education. It is in this spirit that the present special issue is offered, as both a record of CONNECT 2025 and a contribution to ongoing discussions on the role of collaboration, mobility, and inclusiveness in the ERA.

Acknowledgment

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Special thanks go to Prof. Dubravko Klabučar (University of Zagreb), who played a key role in establishing the initial network of participants for the first edition of CONNECT in 2017. Through his professional contacts, members of the academic community from the Western Balkans were first introduced and actively involved in the initiative. Special thanks are also extended to Prof. Milan Pantić (University of Novi Sad) for providing early information about the opportunity to engage with the CONNECT initiative and for facilitating the author's introduction to Prof. Mirza Hadžimehmedović, who played an important role as a co-organizer of the first CONNECT conference.

The author is also grateful to the more than 120 students and numerous other participants whose enthusiasm, openness, and active engagement shaped the dynamic and collaborative atmosphere of CONNECT across its editions. Their willingness to contribute ideas, participate in discussions, and work collaboratively lies at the very heart of the CONNECT philosophy.

Finally, sincere appreciation is extended to all guest lecturers and mentors who generously shared their expertise and experience. Their diverse academic, professional, and creative contributions were invaluable in enriching the program and in supporting the student-centered, interdisciplinary character that defines CONNECT.

All images and logos were sourced from the official CONNECT conference websites. For other details, please visit: <https://www.connect-2025.com> and <https://connect2020online.blogspot.com>.