

# Saying YES to video conferencing in education

**Commentators and observers have sentenced Slovak higher education to death on many occasions. Fortunately, it is still alive and, even more fortunately, the continually-condemned public universities have managed to support innovative and progressive initiatives.**

Recently, video conferencing empowered by the US Embassy has helped to launch an out-of-the-box study program initiated by the Center for North American Studies (CNAS) at the University of Economics in Bratislava, and has internationalized educational opportunities in the process.

Internationalization of education should be one of the key priorities in advancing the capacities and credit of Slovak universities. However, it is not particularly cheap. For instance, a short stay of a Fulbright specialist at our university costs approximately €8000. Having in mind the need to offer something unique for the university's international debut, and simultaneously considering the budget limitations, we needed to find a way to combat the "nedá sa" (is not possible) thinking and make it work.

## The birth of conceptualized video conference lectures at CNAS

In 2009 we decided to begin an introductory interdisciplinary course to North American Studies with the most interesting American lecturers we could find.

The US Embassy in Bratislava helped in several aspects and at the end of the day we had a course delivered primarily via video conference lectures by experts (e.g. Prof. Noam Chomsky, Dr. John C. Hulsman) from top universities such as Harvard, MIT, Georgetown, Penn State, etc. Today, we are running, with the cooperation of the embassy, the third year of the course. We are even joined by interactive audiences in Banská Bystrica, Košice and Warsaw. The impact of the delivered quality and the financial savings are indisputable.

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If the lecturer is prepared properly, and knows how to stay personal even on the screen,

the outcome can be truly entertaining and interesting. As for the student evaluation, today we know that on average 72% of students consider the course to be "reasonably hard" and the overall student satisfaction

correlates to 3, (on the scale from 1 to 4, where 4 is the highest evaluation).

## Vide Conferencing vs. Nature

Another example of successful video conference use dates back to the 2010 Icelandic volcano spring. Since the ash-cloud prevented air traffic, it was impossible for our Canadian guest academician to deliver the full course as planned. We used video conferences to deliver approximately 60% of the content. The rest was lectured in person after the circumstances permitted his arrival. This solution saved the students in the last class who wouldn't have been able to complete their study if the course had been canceled since their credits would have been nullified.

## Saying Yes to video conferences

Out of the 38 foreign lecturers lecturing for the CNAS in the past two years, 18 lectured via video conference. If there is a vote for me whether to employ videoconferencing as an effective tool in higher education, my choice is clear: Yes. Certainly, it can not be used as the only way to deliver education, but in a balanced mix it can make a difference in the context of Slovak higher education development efforts. There is a huge demand for greater quality and new approaches to education management. This makes it very encouraging for people working in this area, but at the same time,

it constitutes a big commitment since we don't live in the "nedá sa" era any more.

## About the Center for North American Studies

The CNAS was established in May 2008 under the academic auspices of Amb. Martin Bútora in the spirit of gradual internationalization of education opportunities at the University of Economics in Bratislava. It is currently the only area study program of its kind in Slovakia, at which anybody can obtain specialization focusing on economic and political know-how as well as cultural aspects of life in the USA and Canada.

The Center aspires to become the leader in introducing progressive and innovative changes within the Slovak higher education system by a variety of business-academic projects. It brought concrete results also in the field of humanities by using corporate know-how to design and create new courses for its academic offer. It attracts more and more students by being able to introduce new participative methodology, new technologies, case-studies, and problem solving oriented education. This academic year it offers 10 accredited courses where approximately two and one-half students apply for each vacant spot in a course on average.



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Today, CNAS thanks for enduring support to its main partners: the Embassy of the United States of America in Slovakia, the Office of the Embassy of Canada in Slovakia, the main business partner – the American Chamber of Commerce, the Fulbright Commission, IBM and the Euro-Atlantic Center.



US Ambassador **Theodore Sedgwick** opened this semester at CNAS