

## Interview with the 2022 CEEMAN Teacher of the Year - Aurora Díaz Soloaga



Aurora Díaz Soloaga

**Živa Žmavc Thongvanh:** Your passion for teaching shines through your statement: “Education is my passion, knowing new cultures my inspiration, and empowering new generations a catalyst!”. Could you share with us what motivated you to pursue a career in academia and what drives your enthusiasm for teaching and empowering new generations?

**Aurora Díaz Soloaga:** Since my years of study at university I understood that teaching probably combined many of the vital attitudes that characterize or attract me: curiosity, sociality and the joy of sharing, the continuous contact with young and energetic people, the possibility of influencing a better future, and being able to do so by motivating and generating attitudes in others. And although it took me a few years to dedicate myself more intensely to this task, I can say that in other professional fields in which I have worked I have always tried to have this educational vision in everything I do. And I can certainly say that equipping the younger generation with the skills to do good motivates me in a special way.

**ŽŽT:** You moved all the way from Spain in order to enhance higher education in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Could you share some insights into the similarities and differences you have observed between higher education systems in the two countries? How have these differences influenced your teaching methods or academic practices?

**ADS:** Actually, my reasons for moving to Kazakhstan were not primarily to immerse myself in Higher Education, although I was in contact with several local HEI from the very beginning, and a few years after moving to Kazakhstan I decided to get involved more intensively in Academia.

I would say that the main similarities are those shared by many other countries as well:

*the challenges of training new generations not only as technocrats capable of solving problems or start projects, but rather of inspiring young people to ask themselves questions, to go beyond what they are used to, to decide to "complicate their lives" and get involved in the complex problems that characterize their respective societies.*

Moreover, in both countries there is respect for higher education, I would even say a certain formalism when it comes to getting involved in educational processes.

And as for the differences, well, there are obviously many, since we are talking about countries that are very far apart socially and culturally. The history of each of them, their values, their trajectories in recent decades, make each of these countries very different scenarios for working in education.

**ŽŽT:** As a Senior lecturer at AlmaU you teach Leadership, Corporate Social Responsibility and Project Management. What is personally your favorite topic to teach and why?

**ADS:** My preferences are probably split between Leadership and Corporate Social Responsibility. I consider both courses fundamental for the development of mature awareness that a manager, a leader needs. But perhaps it is true that in the Corporate Social Responsibility classes I enjoy the most. Maybe it is because of the peculiarity of the development of this perspective in Central Asia. The fact is that I find it really interesting to see how the students discover this necessary perspective of any company: it is usually a new, fascinating and very revealing path for them.

**ŽŽT:** Your nomination for CEEMAN Teacher of the Year praises your involvement in social projects, combined with the engagement in academia. You have been leading a project jointly between AlmaU and Lehigh University, United States tackling one of the biggest problems of the largest city in Kazakhstan – air pollution. Can you tell us more about this project and what opportunities does it bring for the students?

**ADS:** Sure. This collaboration, which began in parallel with the beginning of the pandemic, has been for me at AlmaU the trigger for a much more committed and generous involvement with students. The idea from the beginning consisted of creating a group of students from the two universities, collaborating in the development of the idea, research and implementation, and from our point of view, that of the professors, to facilitate the process and in somehow catapulting the intercultural experience of young people: a real joy, a very interesting experience of synergies and mutual discoveries.

**ŽŽT:** In recent years, we have witnessed numerous significant global disruptions, which have frequently presented teachers with challenging circumstances. Can you share the most significant teaching-related challenge you faced during this period, and explain how you successfully addressed it? Did you find any positive take-aways from it?

**ADS:** I think that like many other teachers and professionals from different areas,

*one of the main challenges we are experiencing is the deep polarization of society, and therefore of the classroom, which is still a mirror reflection of the first.*

In this sense, it seems to me that everything that involves proposing a healthy critical spirit, together with openness to diversity and also taking advantage of the powerful intercultural base of this country (something very characteristic of this society) is of great help, when it comes to promoting open classrooms that embrace diversity of opinion on debatable matters.

**ŽŽT:** What does receiving the CEEMAN Champion Award mean to you?

**ADS:** Receiving this award has meant for me earning the trust and esteem of a serious and robust academic community, with all that that entails.

*I feel more supported, more accompanied, but also with more responsibility. That of always continuing walking and learning on the path of excellence and commitment.*