

## Inaugural address

### **Heidi Weidenbach-Mattar, Deputy Secretary-General, Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (Kultusministerkonferenz)**

#### **"Best practice results from Erasmus+ " European Conference on Dissemination and Impact in the schools sector, Bonn, 18<sup>th</sup> of May 2017**

Dear guests,  
Representatives of Ministries and National Agencies,  
Dear teachers and project coordinators,

Welcome to Germany and to Bonn! I am really glad and honoured to welcome you all here today: more than 200 participants from 31 countries.

In my welcoming speech I would like to address three topics:

- First of all I would like to say a few words about **Bonn** – the host city of the conference
- Then I want to give you a short insight into the work of the **Standing Conference of Ministers of Education of the Länder** in Germany - on behalf of which I have the pleasure to welcome you
- and last but not least: I would like to present some thoughts about the **Erasmus+ programme**, which is the reason why we are all here today.

You might think that these topics are a bit diverse. I will try to show that they have much in common.

As you will discover during your stay here, **Bonn** is a vivid and colourful student town in Germany. Bonn has a reputable **university** with a high number of foreign students, and apart from being the **birthplace of Beethoven**, it is the seat of a number of **UN-organizations**. Bonn is also called Telecom-City, as it is the headquarters of German Telekom. And, as you probably all know, Bonn was the capital of Germany until the German reunification. It is as such also the **birthplace of a stable Democracy** in Germany - a Germany that tried to cope with its past, and learned from it. It was in Bonn in May 1949 that the Grundgesetz, the German Constitution, was passed.

Currently, Bonn provides homes for more than 3.000 refugees mostly from Syria. Many citizens are actively supporting them, including several employees of the National Agency. If you have the chance to wander around the city, you will be aware of the **cultural richness** and the **cultural diversity** of this town. Now, I

brought up two key words, which Bonn stands for: a **stable democracy** and **cultural diversity**.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A **stable democracy** and **cultural diversity** are also key words to understand the political system in Germany, in particular the educational system. As you all know, Germany is a **Federal State** and the responsibility for education lies with the Länder, the 16 federal states. So there is not one educational system, but there are 16 educational systems in Germany.

Now, you might ask yourself: Not only 28 member states in the European Union, but also 16 Länder in Germany. How can that work?

In Germany, the Ministers of Education of the Länder are united in the "Standing Conference of Ministers", or in German: **Kultusministerkonferenz**. In the Standing Conference, the Länder cooperate closely in all matters that are of national and international importance.

The foremost goal is to ensure **quality standards** in schools, vocational training and higher education. One key task of the Standing Conference is to ensure the highest possible degree of **mobility for pupils, students and teachers** - throughout Germany and beyond. The conference also adopts recommendations as basic principles for all of the Länder. To give you one example: one of the most important recommendations in recent years is a **Recommendation on intercultural learning**.

The Standing Conference was already **founded in 1948**, one year before the Federal Republic of Germany. It still exists, and it still works even if now and again the model is put into question. There were some people who compared the Standing conference to a **turtle**, due to the slow pace that the common agreements of ministers sometimes take.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The situation that we are actually facing in Europe and the European Union – **countries drifting apart**, the **rising of nationalism** in many countries – made me wonder. Maybe the idea of the turtle would not be a bad model for the European Union. A turtle is moving steadily and reaches a high age, allowing her to gain wisdom.

Maybe some developments in the European Union came too quickly for its citizens, and maybe some dimensions of European cooperation have been neglected. This is the human dimension. This year we celebrate 30 years of European cooperation in

the field of education. Even though, we should be aware that - in comparison to other programmes and fields of European cooperation, in particular the economic field - education can be considered as a **neglected field**.

Why is that, you might ask yourself, as we have quite high numbers of University students who take part in the Erasmus programme and made it a success story?

It is true: Erasmus is a success story. It has brought a strong European dimension in university education and it allows many students to study in another European country. But many people in Europe do not have the privilege to enter university.

As we focus on **school education** today, we have to admit: Despite the high quality of the individual projects – Erasmus+ has not yet been a success story for the school sector as a whole.

In Germany, the number of school exchange projects under Erasmus+ **dropped significantly**. For the whole of Germany with its 40.000 schools, we could support about 170 strategic school projects in 2014 and about 260 in 2016. Although there is an improvement, the programme reaches only **0,6%** (percent) – much less than one percent - of the schools in Germany. In the Erasmus+ programme, we can support only a third of the number of projects that we could support in the last year of the previous programme, the Lifelong Learning Programme.

Erasmus+ is a programme with high ambitions and a strategic approach. But we have to realize that we have not achieved a sustainable impact in the school sector. If we want to inspire the young generation with the European values, we need a programme that reaches out to a **much higher number of schools** and to **all regions** in Europe.

What would be the impact or kind we wish for and expect from a European programme? Now I come back to the beginning of my speech: when I talked about the city of Bonn and what it stands for: a **stable democracy** and **cultural diversity**.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When we look at recent developments in Europe and in the world,

- the **rising of nationalistic movements**
- the **growing of intercultural and interreligious tensions**,
- and when we think about the **vulnerability of our youth** who can be easily attracted by extremist and terrorist groups:

What can we do about it? Isn't that the most important target of European cooperation: to live in stable democracies and in cultural diversity? It is in the same

sense that the EU-education ministers adopted the "**Declaration on Promoting citizenship** and the **common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education**" in March 2015. This declaration was drafted in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo in Paris. The EU-Ministers identified four fields of action with relevance to the Erasmus+ programme. You will address these topics in the thematic working groups this afternoon. One of the crucial challenges of particular relevance for the school sector is brought up by the use of the Internet and social media: we have to develop **critical thinking** and **media literacy** in the young generation to strengthen their personalities against indoctrination.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we all meet to share project results of Erasmus+ in the field of school education. The **most successful projects** from all of Europe will present their projects. Today we will also decorate the best projects that were coordinated from German partners. The little **ceremony** is intended to honour at the same time all excellent projects and success stories that are represented here today from all over Europe, from north to south and east to west.

I appreciate the excellent work that is done by all of you. I am aware of the fact that a lot of the work that especially teachers do to make international school projects successful is **extra-work**. Often you work extra hours, and sometimes you do not get the right support and appreciation for your work. It is work that you invest as you think that the experience that pupils and teachers gain through school partnerships is very important.

And you are right, it is very important, it is more important than ever. In your projects you give your students the chance to cooperate with students in partner institutions. Your students get the chance to develop **tolerance, cultural understanding** and **mutual respect**. It is the work in your school, in your organization, that can make a difference. I hope that many schools in Europe will have the chance to follow your examples in future.

Therefore I am glad and grateful that you all followed the invitation to this meeting and that you have come to Bonn. This is a unique chance for the project coordinators on one hand and for the facilitators of the programme on the other hand to learn from each other. It is also a chance to **prepare for the future of the European cooperation in the school sector**. Please take this chance!

I wish you all success in your work and with this conference.

Thank you for your attention.