

Opening statement, Michael Teutsch, Bonn 18-19 May

"Best practice results from Erasmus+" European Conference on Dissemination and Impact in the schools sector

Thank you very much for inviting me; it is a pleasure to be here.

Thank you to the German national agency, the *Pädagogischer Austauschdienst*, for organising this event. And thanks to all of you for being here, and for making this a conference with such an exciting programme.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues, the Erasmus programme is one of the European Union's most iconic and popular initiatives. It shows how the EU can make a positive and concrete difference to people's lives. It stands for mutual understanding and peaceful cooperation across our continent. And it stands for an economically thriving and socially inclusive Europe.

This is more important today than ever, because the European Union is, as we all know, undergoing a very difficult phase.

I am sure that many of us in the room have been very much relieved after the final results of the elections in France, but also in the Netherlands a bit before. The worst case scenario has not happened. But this is not at all a reason to relax and lay back. On the contrary, the fundamental challenges are still there, and it is more important

than ever that we speak about the positive contribution that the European Union makes to people's lives.

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As an education person I am very happy to see that education plays a very important role among the priorities of the newly elected French President.

And I am also happy to see that education has been very present in recent key policy documents on the future of the European Union.

In the Rome Declaration signed on 27 March 2017 at the occasion of the celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, Member States pledge to work towards "*A social Europe: ...a Union where young people receive the best education and training and can study and find jobs across the continent*".

Similarly, education is also very present in recent Commission reflection papers on the future of Europe. We have recently published a Reflection Paper on the Social Dimension of Europe' and one on 'Harnessing Globalisation'. Both point out that education is among the factors that will increasingly determine our societies' and economies' future. And last but not least, education is the first principle mentioned in the European Pillar of Social Rights presented by the Commission a few weeks ago. So there is clear recognition on

the importance of well-functioning education for our societies, economies, and citizens well-being.

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But at the same time, virtually all EU Member States are facing important challenges in their school education systems.

First, there are weaknesses in competence development. The latest results of the OECD PISA survey show that one in five pupils have serious difficulties in developing sufficient reading, mathematics and science skills. At the same time the share of pupils achieving very good results in Europe is relatively low: advanced Asian countries outperform even the best-performing EU Member States.

On top of this, school education does not always play in full its role to promote social fairness and inclusion. Too often young people from disadvantaged backgrounds show low levels of educational achievement. There may be some people saying "that's life". I think most of us here in the room would disagree. Because this is not a given. The examples of Estonia and Finland demonstrate that school education systems can deliver high levels of both achievement and equity at the same time. And we also know that more recent developments such as the integration of a large number of newly arrived migrants presents an important challenge to the education systems in a number of Member States, just as issues of how to deal

with the inclusion of students with special needs into mainstream education or equal education opportunities for Roma.

And finally, the pace of technological and digital change is having a profound effect on our economies and societies. Young people need to develop the resilience and ability to adapt to change. We know that already 90 % of all current jobs require at least some level of digital skills. Today, however, too few young people have sufficient digital competences. Digitisation also has a big impact and potential on how different areas of our society are organised and function. And I don't have the impression that education systems have already adapted to the massive digital shift we are seeing.

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These are EU wide challenges. The EU has the duty to offer Member States support in tackling them, while fully respecting subsidiarity. This is where Erasmus+ comes in. It will not be able to tackle all problems our societies or even just education systems are faced with. But it can make an important contribution. And we will see this in all the projects that will be presented in this conference.

In Erasmus+ we have 3 key actions: mobility, partnerships and policy support. These are actions supporting individual pupils and teachers, schools, and whole education systems. The three dimensions belong together. That is important to me.

Because mobility is not about individuals only. It is good for the individuals, but it is also about making the schools where people are working better places and whole education systems improve their performance and inclusiveness. And this is of course all the more true for our partnerships and policy support actions.

I was very much impressed by what the headmaster of a school I visited last week at the occasion of the Europe day on 9 May and the German back to school programme. He insisted that the projects at his school were not only the result of and to the benefit of the motivated teacher who puts a lot of effort in setting up these projects. For him these projects were part of his school's school development project. And that's exactly the way it should be. And even better, well-functioning projects should actually be disseminated even further in our respective countries, or Europe wide, such as we will be aiming to do through this conference.

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When inviting me, our hosts have also asked me to say a few words on the future of the programme, given that we are half way through the 2014-2020 period and starting our reflections on what is going to happen after that.

This is of course a bit difficult for me, as we have only started our reflections. In the Commission we are still discussing internally, so

everything I will be saying here on the future will be very preliminary and my own view as the head of unit in charge of school policy, but not an official or coordinated position of the Commission.

This is all the more true as the results of the mid-term evaluation of the programme will only become available in summer. And this will of course be an important element in making up our minds. This is why I would also like to invite all of you to participate in the open public consultation that is part of the mid-term evaluation. This public consultation is still open until the end of this month and easily accessible on the Commission's websites.

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But before we talk about the future, it is of course essential to get the current programme working right. We are very much aware that the start of the new programme was not easy, and that is was not easy in particular for schools.

I'd just like to assure you that we have clearly heard this message and that we are working on ways to facilitate and simplify access to the programme. We have introduced new types of partnership projects in the programme guide for which the administrative requirements are much easier than for the larger innovation projects. We are simplifying the electronic forms. And last but not least, we have, as of

this year, significant increases in the budget available, which will also make access much easier.

Of course not everything is done yet. This is ongoing process, and we are working closely with the national agencies to solve the outstanding issues. But I think I can say that we are making good progress and that this will facilitate the life of end users. You are all here, because you have successfully implemented projects in the programme. But please also spread the word to those who have been less successful than you.

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One thing I can say on the future programme that links to this argument is that we are not envisaging major changes in the structure of the programme. Of course there will be some changes based on experience from the implementation and political priorities, but I don't see a major change in the basic programme architecture coming.

When thinking of how Erasmus + can be further improved in the future – in the interest of European citizens – the following ideas come to my mind:

First, I very much hope that the future programme will be even more inclusive, allowing participants from all groups of society to participate. This could mean more attention to the schools sector as

a whole, because by definition all children, irrespective of socio-economic background, go to school. But even in the schools area, we have to make sure that not only the typically academically oriented school with a middle-class parents in well of areas participate, but actually all schools.

Second, we still need to keep raising awareness that Erasmus+ is not just for higher education, but all educational fields, and that it can provide huge benefits to schools, NGOs, local authorities, and others. And I would also very much ask all of you here to tell to your participants that it actually is a European programme. This may seem self-evident to many of you. But all too often we here that participants in mobility projects are happy about the opportunities they get, but are not necessarily aware that these opportunities would not exist if there wasn't a European programme behind it. So please spread the word, the European projects need your support on this.

A third topic to think about will be the impact of the digital revolution on our programme. We have a very successful eTwinning activity in schools which should be developed further. But we will also think more generally how virtual and physical mobility can be better combined for some forms of blended learning.

And last but not least, I very much hope that the future budget will give us some room to follow our ambitions and in particular allow

more and more participants to take part in the programme. But we also all know that the negotiations on the future financial framework will be tough. They will be even more demanding than in the past due to Brexit. Because our British friends have always been hard negotiators when it came to budget negotiations. But at the end of the day, they were still a financial net contributor and decisions will need to be taken on what to do with that part of the budget.

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Dear colleagues, as I said at the start, the European Union currently finds itself in a very difficult political situation. But we all know how important it is for peace, prosperity and democracy on our continent. And we can be proud to say that we work with a programme which shows Europe at its best. Let's use this conference to get inspired from each other. And let's discuss how we can make Erasmus+ even better than it already is today.

Thank you very much.