

Director General of Democracy, Snežana Samardžić-Marković

Launch of the Ethics in Education Platform (ETINED)

At the opening of the 7th Prague Forum:

***Towards a Pan-European Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity
in Education***

Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen...

I would like to thank the Czech authorities, especially Minister Valachová and Mr Jindřich Fryč, for hosting this, the 7th Prague Forum.

In the name of the Secretariat, I would also like to thank very much a person whose help has been essential for the organisation not only of this Prague Forum, but of all seven. I speak of course of Alena Spejchalová, who has been involved from the very beginning. Dear Alena, your dedication, great professionalism and efficiency in finding solutions to sometimes tricky problems have ensured the success of these meetings. I have been told that you were once a basketball player, and we can certainly see your team spirit shine through your professional commitments.

Dear Minister, Dear Jindrich, thanks to your longstanding dedication and commitment, we are launching our Ethics in Education Platform at this prestigious event. The pan-European Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education – also called ETINED – was one of the concrete political undertakings made by Ministers of Education at the 2013 Helsinki Ministerial Conference.

The Platform will be a network of specialists from the 50 States which are parties to the European Cultural Convention.

They will be co-operating with other international organisations and agencies engaged in the field, some of which are represented here today: Transparency

International, U4 Anti-Corruption Platform and IIEP-UNESCO. I would like to pay tribute to the immense body of work produced by your organisations and say how happy we are to be working with you.

I think we are especially lucky that this Forum is being held in the Faculty of Education of the Charles University, a University founded in 1348, one of the oldest in Europe, the university of Franz Kafka, Milan Kundera, Karel Čapek and so many other important figures of European and Czech history. Thank you, dear Rector, dear Dean, for welcoming us here today.

The Ethics in Education Platform has been designed to promote ethics in education and to tackle corruption.

When I tell people this, they are often doubtful or surprised. They say: *Really? Is there corruption in education?*

Well in some countries corrupt practices in education are well-known. It makes me think about a popular joke in one of our member States, in which a man visits a professor and says:

My son is such an idiot, he will never pass your entrance exams, to which the professor replies: *I bet you 1,000 dollars that he will!*

In other countries, there may be less public discussion of corruption in education. But this does not mean it doesn't exist.

In reality, as shown by recent examples in the news, no country can claim to be exempt from this scourge. I think of recent examples of ministers being obliged to resign for plagiarism in their university theses.

A recent survey from Transparency International measures public perceptions of corruption in education¹. It is true that figures vary enormously from one country to another – from 6-7 % to 70-72% – but the survey also shows that no country is exempt and that the European average is around 34 %.

¹ 2013 Global corruption barometer, Transparency International: www.transparency.org/gcb2013/report/

It is also true that there is no reliable data available on actual levels of corruption. This is because corruption in education takes so many forms and because, although it is sometimes obvious, it can be very difficult to pinpoint.

Corruption touches every level of education, from pre-primary to higher education.

It includes the most blatant forms of corruption – paying bribes to enter a certain school, obtaining diplomas dishonestly or buying a research paper written by someone else – right through to the most hidden, such as: teachers selling books or extra lessons to students and only allowing those who pay for such “services” to pass their course or exam.

All these forms of corruption vary and can be organised in a systematic or ad hoc way.

But they all pervert and disrupt the fundamental cement of our democracies: the trust we place in the system, the belief that rules apply to everyone. If we do not tackle corruption in education, we are effectively teaching children that those who get ahead are those who know how to flout our societies’ rules and standards. On that basis, how can we possibly develop a culture of democracy?

Traditionally education has been seen as a passport to a better life and a means to create a better society. Schools and universities are rightly vaunted as places – perhaps the only ones – where young people can succeed on merit alone; where everyone is equal, irrespective of their background.

One of the main elements of corruption is unfairness. It perverts education, so that, instead of contributing to social cohesion, it contributes to further differentiation. Access to education is then no longer based on merit or on need and academic qualifications are no longer linked to achievement.

The social costs of corruption are steep. Citizens lose trust in the democratic system. The international reputation of the country suffers.

Let me quote Professor Stephen Heyneman:

In a democracy, the public takes a very active interest in the fairness of its education system. If the public does not trust the education system, more may be sacrificed than economic growth; it might be said that current leaders, whether in commerce, science, or politics, had acquired their positions through privilege rather than achievement. If the school system cannot be trusted, it may detract from a nation's sense of social cohesion, the principal ingredient of all successful modern societies.

Sometimes corruption can be dangerous at an individual level. Who wants to be treated by a doctor with fake qualifications, for example? And corruption in the form of sexual harassment can damage young people for the rest of their lives.

At group level, corruption can amount to the discrimination of certain communities.

Clearly a solution must be found.

And that is why the Ministers of Education of the 50 States Parties to the European Cultural Convention agreed at the Helsinki Ministerial Conference to join forces and work together on ethics, transparency and integrity in education. They agreed to create a dedicated Platform for this purpose.

The idea was to commit to fundamental ethical principles. And, today, we are launching that very platform.

The aim of the Ethics in Education Platform – ETINED – is to promote a new, holistic approach to achieving quality education and addressing corruption. This approach calls on all relevant sections of society to commit fully to fundamental positive ethical principles for public and professional life. It does not rely on top-down mechanistic, regulatory measures.

Corruption cannot be fought through legal norms and structures alone, as important as these are to set up the reference framework.

If we want to see a change in the situation over the long term, what is needed is a change of mentality and culture. Unethical behaviour must be considered unacceptable by the public and everyone else involved. People must feel confident enough to speak up if they witness corruption; and those who are involved in corruption should feel both ashamed and insecure – because they expect to be found out.

Through the Platform, the Council of Europe aims to:

- Share information and best practices on transparency and integrity in education;
- Help develop answers to the challenges posed by corruption in education and higher education;
- Create a “virtuous cycle”, so that everyone in education commits to fundamental, positive ethical principles.

The platform will pool resources and best practices on ethics, transparency and integrity in education and disseminate this information through training, tools, guidelines and a website.

We will begin with:

- Guidelines on ethical principles and behaviour, based on consultations with those involved at regional roundtables;
- A seminar on plagiarism;
- A study comparing policies for academic integrity in the 50 States;
- Checklists and policy recommendations on diploma mills,
- Pilot projects in interested countries...

To conclude, I am proud today to officially launch the Council of Europe’s Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education.

As we will have ample opportunity to discuss over these two days, ethical behaviour is a *sine qua non* of a living democracy. Corruption is its antithesis.