

Informal on-line conference of Ministers of Education of the State parties to the European Cultural Convention under the Greek Presidency of the Committee of Ministers

29 October 2020

Address by Judge Mr **Vassilios Skouris**, Former President of the European Court of Justice

COVID.

Ministers, ladies and gentlemen,

At our previous conference, in Paris, COVID was unknown.

Today, COVID-19 determines our policy and our practice. It has closed schools and universities, moved courses online, and suspended exchange programs. COVID has some students by the wayside and too many teachers exhausted.

Today, no public policy can be developed without taking account of a disease that only a year ago was unknown. Today, we all know what COVID is – and yet the many things we do *not* know about COVID remind us of the importance of education and research.

COVID is a byword for problems and improvisation. But the story of COVID is also one of resilience, of rising to challenges, and of lessons learned.

One COVID lesson is that although the immediate response was *national*, our lasting response must be *European*.

The political declaration and the Roadmap for action before you today seek to provide exactly that: a European response where we agree on principles and then implement them within our education systems and at our schools and universities.

[SLIDE 1]

The response focuses on four areas:

Strengthening democracy through education

Innovating the ways in which we learn and teach

Assessing and recognizing qualifications

Ensuring the right to education for the most vulnerable students

The value of education is measured by how well it prepares new generations for life as active citizens in democratic societies as well as for the labor market, how well it stimulates their personal development, and how well it provides our societies with a broad and advanced knowledge base.

[SLIDE 2]

The Council of Europe's Education program does that through Competences for Democratic Culture; through Digital Citizenship Education; through our ETINED Platform for ethics; transparency and integrity in education; through structural reforms based on democratic values, as in the Bologna Process; through the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees and other capacity building projects; and through Partial Agreements like the European Centre for Modern Languages and the coming Observatory on History Teaching.

All our programs and projects take as their starting point that ensuring the right to education is a public responsibility.

The COVID pandemic may change the ways in which we exercise this responsibility, but it does not change the principle.

It does not change the fact that to be meaningful, education must be of high quality.

And it does not change the fact that to be of high quality, our education systems need to offer good opportunities to all students and help them develop both their talents and their aspirations.

Ministers, ladies and gentlemen.

[SLIDE 3]

COVID hits hard but it does not knock us out.

Through the Council's mix of the intergovernmental program, capacity building projects, and partial agreements, we will work together to

- ensure the right to education;
- help build democratic, sustainable and resilient societies;
- further inclusive quality education

The COVID response we design for and through education will ensure that we deliver the kind of education our societies need because, through education, we will develop the kind of society we want.

This is no small task, but it is one to which we must rise, as Europeans. We must – and we will.