



Hellenic Ministry of Education
and Religious Affairs



Greek Chairmanship
Council of Europe
May – November 2020

Présidence de la Grèce
Conseil de l'Europe
Mai – Novembre 2020

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Informal Conference of Ministers of Education organised under the Greek Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers

The education response to the COVID crisis Political declaration

29 October 2020

Political statement

Preamble

The Ministers of Education of States parties to the European Cultural Convention, meeting online on the occasion of the informal conference of Ministers of Education organised by the Greek Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers on 29 October 2020, endorse the declaration prepared by the Steering Committee for Education Policy and Practice (CDPPE), and:

Reaffirm the intention to ensure the right to education, as enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights, Protocol 1, Article 2 as well as articles 17, 7, 10 and 15 of the European Social Charter, also in times of crisis.

Reaffirm that the right to education can be ensured in a meaningful way only if the education offered is of high quality, as confirmed in [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2012\)13 by the Committee of Ministers to member States on ensuring quality education](#).

Further reaffirm the determination not to allow the health crisis to turn into a crisis of democracy, and underline that education is key to this endeavour to make our societies sustainable and resilient.

Express gratitude to and appreciation of the way in which education systems and institutions as well as teachers, administrative and other education staff, leaders of schools and higher education institutions, students, and parents responded to the COVID-19 pandemic that hit Europe in the first half of 2020.

Recognize that the speedy response was all the more impressive as the COVID-19 pandemic presented an emergency situation that could not be foreseen and for which reliable plans could not be laid.

Recognize that some of the issues with which educators and institutions were faced during the COVID-19 crisis originate in longstanding weaknesses of our education systems. In this context, reaffirm that investment in education is an investment in the future of Europe and of our individual countries.

Reaffirm the need to draw the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic to enable our education systems and institutions to meet future crises as well as to adjust and improve their functioning in the longer term.

Reaffirm the determination that by drawing these lessons, we will be stronger rather than weaker in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this context, reaffirm that the response to the COVID-19 crisis should be guided by the need to protect the dignity of all human beings.

Reassert that education aiming to value human dignity and human rights must develop a sense of fairness, respect and empathy in students.

Reassert, as expressed at the informal meeting of Ministers of Education in Paris on 26 November 2019, that developing creativity, communication, and critical thinking as well as responsibility and ethics is a key task of our education systems.

Recognize that the education we offer today must reflect the kind of society we wish to build tomorrow.

Reaffirm that public authorities have the responsibility for ensuring the quality of all education offered as a part of the national education system, regardless of whether it is public or private¹.

Reassert that the public responsibility for education is as important to the future of our societies as that for public health.

Reaffirm that international openness and cooperation, including cooperation between the Council of Europe and other institutions and organizations where possible, are essential for meeting the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath.

Pledge to work for this importance to be reflected in public budgets.

Recognize that the Education Programme helps address issues raised in reports by Council of Europe monitoring bodies in a sustainable manner and is therefore uniquely placed to provide sustainable solutions to issues raised in these reports.

Recognize that weaknesses in our education provision imperils the right to education, in particular for vulnerable students.

Reaffirm that democracy, human rights and the rule of law, on which we build our education, must be reflected in our response, which will encompass all school subjects and academic disciplines, encourage interdisciplinary learning, teaching and research, as well as closer cooperation across educational stages and at points of transition, and make good and responsible use of the pedagogical and technological opportunities at our disposal.

Reassert that our education systems and institutions will fulfil all major purposes of education: preparation for sustainable employment; preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies; personal development; and the development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base².

In responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasize that we can draw on the experience and the *acquis* of the Council of Europe's education programme, including its instruments developed through the cooperation under the [European Cultural Convention](#) over more than seven decades.

The education response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Times of crisis make safeguarding democracy particularly important and challenging. We reaffirm the importance of education to developing the culture of democracy that will enable democratic societies with their institutions, laws, and elections to function in practice.

¹ Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2012\)13](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on ensuring quality education, paragraph 11.

² Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2007\)6](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the public responsibility for higher education and research, paragraph 5.

Public authorities must therefore establish and maintain the framework within which education is provided. The principles of [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2007\)6 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the public responsibility for higher education and research](#) apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to all areas of education.

We recognize that in times of crisis, it is particularly important and challenging that the right to education be ensured through innovation and adaptations that seek to safeguard the principles of which our education builds as well as its quality.

In this context, we underline the importance of integrating the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic in the pre- and in-service education of our teachers, taking into consideration the voice of parents and families as well as of civil society.

Our response to the COVID-19 pandemic will encompass whole school, whole institution, and whole system approaches. It will emphasize the need for cooperation between all stakeholders as well as across and between countries and education systems.

We recognize, in particular, the crucial role of teachers.

We also recognize the important role played by private providers, in particular from the business community, in developing platforms for online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. We call on these providers, in cooperation with education institutions and the public authorities responsible for education systems, to help transform online education from experimental crisis mode to stable online and hybrid learning which respects the privacy of users and excludes adverse effects of commercial interests on the neutrality and variety of education provision within the frameworks established by public authorities exercising their responsibility for education systems.

Strengthening democracy through education

We share the following observations:

- As stated in the [Declaration adopted by the 25th session of the Council of Europe Standing Conference of Ministers of Education](#), held in Brussels on 11 – 12 April 2016, preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies is one of the main purposes of education³.
- As stated in the same declaration, one of the fundamental goals of all education for democratic citizenship and human rights education is not just equipping learners with knowledge, understanding and skills, but also empowering them with the readiness to take action in society in the defence and promotion of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law⁴.
- Democracy will not function in practice unless it is underpinned by a set of attitudes and behaviours that encourage citizen participation in political processes and decision making, further commitment to participation in public debate, encourage conflicts to be resolved peacefully and develop an appreciation of the value of diverse societies.

³ Idem.

⁴ Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)7 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, paragraph 5.g.

- The [Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture](#) (RFCDC) constitutes the basis on which our education systems and institutions will continue to develop these competences at all levels and in all strands of education.
- In the case of higher education, academic freedom and institutional autonomy are cornerstones of democratic societies. Public authorities should set the framework for academic freedom and institutional autonomy and continuously monitor the implementation of those fundamental rights, while encouraging the adoption of sustainable long-term strategies for higher education⁵.
- The role of stakeholders, including staff, students and parents as well as civil society in the development of education policy and practice must be strengthened and given greater recognition, nationally as well as in local communities.
- The COVID pandemic has underlined the importance of sustainable development and of education as an essential actor in achieving it.

We ask that the Council of Europe:

- Develop further guidelines and materials that will make the RFCDC the cornerstone for developing a culture of democracy through education in times of crises.
- As part of its work on the democratic mission of higher education and within the European Higher Education Area, contribute to developing understanding and practices of academic freedom and institutional autonomy that make these fundamental values a reality in increasingly complex democratic societies.
- Seek to strengthen the engagement of higher education institutions with their local communities.
- Provide expert assistance to its member States in reviewing their laws and policies on education, including higher education, so that they are adequate for addressing any future pandemic or other crisis.
- Incorporate to the extent possible these new initiatives in its cooperation and capacity building projects in education.
- Strengthen the role of its Steering Committee for Education Policy and Practice (CDPPE) as a key platform for European cooperation in meeting the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.
- Contribute to the overall development of education policy and practice in cooperation with other international institutions and organizations, on the basis of its commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law as well as its experience and *acquis* in the field of education.

⁵ Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2012\)7](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the responsibility of public authorities for academic freedom and institutional autonomy, paragraph 7.

- Improve the visibility and strengthen the involvement of the Education programme where education is specified in Council of Europe conventions and explored by monitoring bodies.
- Pursue its contribution to the implementation of [the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4](#), in cooperation with UNESCO.

Innovating the ways in which we learn and teach

We share the following observations:

- [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2012\)13 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on ensuring quality education](#) underlines that in democratic societies, everybody should enjoy equal opportunities so that they can exercise their right to education and benefit from a quality education, commensurate with their aspirations and abilities.
- This recommendation underlines that social inclusion must be an integral part of our understanding of quality education. Ensuring equal opportunities to education requires a systemic response within our education systems.
- The COVID crisis underscores the need for education systems and institutions to reassess and review the way in which they teach, and students learn, including how they provide education for students with special needs. While this will require them to take account of the experience of the immediate COVID response, permanent adaptations cannot copy emergency measures.
- [Recommendation CM/Rec \(2019\)9 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on fostering a culture of ethics in the teaching profession](#) outlines measures to ensure all education provision is ethically sound.
- The massive substitution of face to face by online learning and teaching during the COVID-19 crisis needs to be developed into a model of high quality learning and teaching distinguished by the ways in which education systems and institutions combine different modes of delivery, ranging from classroom teaching through work in smaller groups to making use of quality online and blended learning resources and possibilities and further develop the role schools play in developing students' social competences.
- Blended and online learning must be supported by highly skilled education professionals enjoying good working conditions and quality resources. While the modes of delivery will and should evolve, the role of well-prepared teacher educators, teachers, curriculum developers, and other education professionals will remain crucial.
- For increased recourse to blended and online learning to become a feature of inclusive and high quality education, schools and institutions, teachers and students as well as their parents must be equipped with both the required infrastructure and the competences and skills to make good use of it. Developing competence in information technology and its use should be among the objectives of teacher education at all levels.

- Quality assurance criteria and arrangements for education at all levels must take account of and encourage pedagogical innovation that draws on a variety learning resources and modes of delivery.
- Particular attention should be paid to addressing all forms of online fraud in education.
- [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2019\)10 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on developing and promoting digital citizenship education](#) as well as the Declaration on [citizenship education in the digital era](#) adopted by the informal Conference of Ministers of Education held in Paris on 26 November 2019 outline key principles for online teaching and learning of young and adult learners.
- The Council of Europe project on [Digital Citizenship Education](#) provides important resources to be used in all our education systems, notably through the Digital Citizenship Education Handbook, a series of lesson plans adapted to the COVID crisis and the ongoing work on equitable partnerships between business enterprises and education institutions.
- The Council of Europe [Learning Modules Online](#) (LEMON) provide practical online teaching and learning resources to education professionals across Europe with topics reflecting the priority areas of the Education Programme of the Council of Europe.
- The European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) resources, such as a treasure chest of resources for learners, parents and teachers and open-access webinars for language professionals, provide schools and authorities with quality on-line and blended language education opportunities.

We ask that the Council of Europe:

- Develop guidelines and materials, using various media, that will help our education systems and institutions as well as education professionals and stakeholders adapt their approaches to teaching and learning, drawing on the experience of the COVID-19 crisis as well as good practice developed nationally and internationally and making use of the opportunities offered by online methods and Artificial Intelligence.
- Explore ways of strengthening the role and recognizing the importance of teachers, including the role of competences for democratic culture and for providing blended and online education in initial teacher education and in-service training.
- Through the ETINED Platform, develop guidelines for ensuring ethically sound teaching, learning and education provision in times of crisis.
- Develop a model framework to govern equitable partnerships between business enterprises and education institutions, respectful of the overall public responsibility for education.

Assessing and recognizing qualifications

We share the following observations:

- Assessing education qualifications on the basis of learning outcomes is a basic obligation of education systems and institutions. These assessments are the basis for

students' progression within education systems and qualification frameworks as well as for their access to the labour market.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the need for our education systems and institutions to rely on a variety of assessment methods and demonstrate flexibility in their use and acceptance.
- In particular, examinations and assessments in the 2019/2020 academic year must be given their full value. The principle that qualifications should be recognized unless a substantial difference can be demonstrated between the foreign qualification and similar qualifications in the country in which recognition is sought applies also for these qualifications.
- Transition between the various levels and strands of education, such as between primary and secondary and between secondary and higher education, must be fair and transparent for the right to education to be effective.
- Assessments must be valid not only within the country or education system in which they were undertaken and the qualifications for which they provide the basis were issued, but also across borders.
- The [Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention](#) (ETS 165) and its subsidiary texts set the European standard for ensuring all applicants the right to fair recognition of their qualifications.
- The Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee and the [ENIC and NARIC Networks](#) have undertaken measures to ensure the right to fair recognition in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages](#) (CEFR), together with/complemented by the [European Language Portfolio](#) (ELP), sets European standards for curricula as well as for assessing and self-assessing language competences.
- The [European Qualifications Passport for Refugees](#) (EQPR) provides a method for assessing qualifications held by refugees and asylum seekers even when these qualifications cannot be fully documented and a format for describing the assessment so that it may be accepted across borders.

We ask that the Council of Europe:

- Develop guidelines and materials that will help education systems and institutions develop diverse and flexible methods for the assessment of qualifications, drawing on the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic and adapted to both the “new normal” and preparing for future crises.
- Building on the Lisbon Recognition Convention, develop guidelines and materials to ensure the right to fair recognition also in times of crisis.
- Pursue the assessment of qualifications held by refugees and asylum seekers through the EQPR and work for its acceptance by education institutions and employers.

Ensuring the right to education for the most vulnerable students

We share the following observations:

- Education systems can be of high quality only if they provide access to learning to all pupils and students, particularly those in vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, adapted to their needs as appropriate⁶.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that special efforts are required to make equal opportunities in education a reality for those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds as well as the potential of education to help overcome inequalities in society at large.
- Public authorities have the responsibility for ensuring quality education also for those who are unable to make successful use of mainstream education programmes for very diverse reasons, which range from lack of proficiency in the language(s) of instruction or substantial differences in previous educational curricula to learners with special needs⁷.
- An essential part of ensuring the right to education is developing competences in language(s) of schooling for preventing underachievement and therefore their role in ensuring equity and quality in education, as outlined in [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2014\)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the importance of competences in the language\(s\) of schooling for equity and quality in education and for educational success](#).
- The exceptional measures required to address the COVID-19 pandemic were especially challenging to students from disadvantaged backgrounds or who are vulnerable for other reasons. This includes students whose parents are unable to support their children in their schoolwork.
- In particular, the rapid shift to online teaching and learning in many cases left those with greatest need for follow-up with insufficient possibilities for close contact with teachers and particularly exposed to online harassment, including that of hate speech.
- In addition to facing particular challenges in continuing their education during the COVID-19 pandemic, vulnerable students will remain in need of support measures as they gradually return to face to face or blended education.
- Students⁸, staff and parents facing issues of mental health require particular attention and support, and therefore health and treatment services (e.g. psychological aid, dedicated phone lines) should be made available.

⁶ Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2012\)13](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on ensuring quality education, paragraph 6a.

⁷ Covered, with different wording, in *ibid.*, paragraph 26.

⁸ 12.9 % of higher education students according to a recent survey commissioned by ESU.

We ask that the Council of Europe:

- Develop guidelines and materials that will help education systems and institutions ensure the right to quality education also for vulnerable students, adapted to both the “new normal” and preparing for future crises.
- In cooperation with member States, ensure greater visibility for key messages on inclusive, plurilingual and intercultural education for decision-makers, school leaders, teacher educators and teachers from the Council’s rich *acquis* in this area, including through the [platform of resources and references for plurilingual and intercultural education](#).