

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends

It is a great joy as well as an honor to speak at this conference on the Human Right to Quality Education, which marks the 100th anniversary of World University Service. I will not claim to have known WUS from the very beginning of its existence but certainly since the 1990s, when WUS – in particular through Wolfgang Benedek – was among the Council of Europe's most reliable partners in South East Europe, at a crucial time.

What we did then, some 25 years ago, was closely linked to the topic of this conference: how can we ensure the right to education, and how can we make sure education is of quality?

No word pops up more frequently in the public education debate than – precisely “quality”. We could get the impression that quality is predefined, it is out there, and “all” we have to do is achieve it. Reality, of course, is more complex. Quality is a concept whose use is not only frequent, but also vague. If we want to assess whether we do something well, it helps to know what we are trying to achieve in the first place. We cannot judge a house by the quality criteria for a car.

Therefore, in 2012, the Council of Europe developed a recommendation on ensuring quality education. In our understanding, the quality of education cannot be divorced from its social dimension, to use the terminology of the European Higher Education Area. One can sometimes get the impression that the more exclusive a university is, the higher the quality. But quality education must be *inclusive*, not *exclusive*. No education system can be of high quality if it leaves many of its students by the wayside. No education system can be of high quality unless it offers all its prospective students opportunities commensurate with their abilities *and* their aspirations. Quality education cannot be a human right unless there is fair and equal access to it. It is perhaps a comment on the value of university rankings that none seems to measure real education quality.

We are living through a health crisis that seriously challenges the notion of inclusive quality education. Make no mistake: the response to the COVID crisis by students, staff, education institutions, and public authorities was, for the most part, impressive by any standard. Education was moved online quickly, and classes were interrupted but not discontinued. The emergency response was overwhelming. But it was an *emergency* response. Classes cannot stay online forever. The quality university of the future will combine different modes of teaching and learning, including both face to face and online.

The COVID crisis raised the broader question of how we can ensure the right to education in times of crisis. In the course of summer and early fall last year, the Council of Europe developed a Roadmap for Action as well as a political declaration on the Education response to COVID-19. The latter was endorsed by the Ministers of Education of the 50 States parties to the European Cultural Convention, at a conference organized by Greece, as part of its presidency of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers.

Ministers reaffirm their intention to ensure the right to education, as enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Social Charter, also in times of crisis. They reaffirm that this right can be ensured only if the education offered is of high quality. They 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 of a broad, advanced knowledge base.

They reaffirm that public authorities have the responsibility for ensuring the quality of all education, regardless of whether it is public or private, and that the public responsibility for education is as important to the future of our societies as that for public health. Not least, we cannot allow a public health crisis to develop into a crisis of democracy.

Both the Action Plan and the political declaration outline measures intended to:

- Strengthen democracy through education;
- Innovate the ways in which we learn and teach;
- Ensure the fair assessment and recognition of qualifications;
- And the right to education for the most vulnerable students.

In the time allotted, let me focus on two issues.

Getting your qualifications recognized has been made considerably less difficult through the Lisbon Recognition Convention, developed by the Council of Europe and UNESCO and now ratified by 54 countries.

That is true as long as you can document your qualifications. But if you have to flee your home, your diploma may not be the first thing you put in your bag. Therefore, the Council of Europe has developed the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees, which has a double purpose: devising a sound method of assessing refugee's qualifications even when they cannot be fully documented and describing them in such a way that the assessment can be accepted if and when refugees move from one host country to another.

We are carrying out this project in cooperation with the UNHCR and now 12 countries. Out of 708 candidates interviewed, 594 have received the EQPR. Many have obtained a job or a place of study on the basis of the EQPR. The first recipient, a Syrian physiotherapist, is now working in a related field in Norway. More than 50 EQPR holders who are now studying at Italian universities.

If refugees are condemned to inactivity, they will be frustrated and demotivated and will eventually lose the qualifications they had. If they are given the opportunity to use and develop their qualifications, they will be motivated, they will help their host countries, and they will be well placed to rebuild their home countries. As Europe now prepares to receive refugees from Afghanistan, it is important that we have this instrument that can make the difference between a vicious and a virtuous circle.

The second issue is directly linked to democracy and human rights. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are essential to the quality of higher education and research. They are also essential conditions of democracy. Both democracy and the quality of education are threatened in Europe today. Not only in Belarus, even if the violations of basic democratic and academic rights are particularly flagrant there. Wien now hosts an institution that had to move here from the neighboring country because of new legislation combined with government efforts to silence its critical voice. As we commemorate the 30th anniversary of the construction of the Berlin Wall, we need to remind ourselves that the freedom and democracy we thought we had won when the Wall was demolished cannot be taken for granted.

This conference marking the 100th anniversary of World University Service provides an opportunity to explore the many ways in which we can ensure the human right to quality education, whether under conditions we may naively have considered normal or under emergency conditions. We will need political courage, and we will above all need education. As the Chilean sociologist Eugenio Tironi said: if we want to answer the question “what kind of education do we need?”, we first need to answer a different question: “what kind of society do we want?”.

May our children and grandchildren live in societies where they will enjoy quality education as a human right. That requires *we* not take it for granted.

Happy anniversary, WUS – your work is as important today as it was in the immediate aftermath of World War One, five score years ago.

1270 words = 9.9 minutes