



Eminent 2011 – eTwinning¹ Conference
GENOA, 16-17 November 2011

Welcome address by the EDUC chair, Mr Alin NICA (10 to 15 minutes)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here with you in Genoa at the Eminent/eTwinning annual Conference.

To begin with, let me thank you and the European Schoolnet² for the invitation to deliver the welcome address on behalf of the Committee of the Regions' President Mercedes Bresso.

As your programme has various facets and works on various subjects, I am also going to address them from different related perspectives.

Firstly, as Chair of the Commission for Education, Culture, Youth and Research within the Committee of the Regions, I want to express appreciation and to commend your efforts and moreover your impressive results. Your activity is valued by our Committee and your achievements are duly noticed.

I would like to mention that already back in 2007 a study³ commissioned by the Committee found that **local and regional networks** at EU level in the field of school education are a fast developing phenomenon. And the **eTwinning** programme was used there as the illustrative example of a successful framework in this sense.

Indeed, the study showed that the programme launched in 2005 witnessed a doubling in the number of schools registered in only one year and until February 2007 already 8,000 schools were participating in projects facilitated by eTwinning. I see that now you count for almost **89,000 schools** and more than **140,000 teachers** involved. So you have already established an impressive track record that you could be proud of, but this success equally obliges you for a sustainable continuation.

1 The *eTwinning* portal is accessible at <http://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/index.htm>

2 <http://www.europeanschoolnet.org/web/guest/about/thisiseun>

3 An evaluation sheet on "Modernizing School Education in Europe" compiled in 2007 by the Europa-Institute of Saarland University (Department of Law)

The important role of the European Commission has to be mentioned here, as well as its support in promoting the creation of virtual school partnerships via Internet. In fact, eTwinning constitutes a convincing example of “good value for money”. It demonstrates that a well thought investment in providing access to the eTwinning portal and helpdesk support allowed schools to find their partners and moreover helped unlocking the potential existing in so many dedicated teachers.

A few words about the Committee of the Regions

As many of you know, the Committee of the Regions (CoR) was established by the Maastricht Treaty in 1994 as a consultative body to provide representatives of local and regional government with a voice at the heart of the European Union. The European Commission, the Council and the European Parliament are obliged to consult the CoR's 344 members on proposed EU laws across a wide range of policy areas, including education, culture, and information society.

In fact, about 70% of the EU legislation is implemented on the local and regional level depending on the governance structure in each Member State. So it is the CoR that gives this level a say over the drafting of the legislation. It also helps bringing Europe closer to its citizens and encourages a culture of subsidiarity in order to ensure that decisions are taken at the closest practical level to the citizen.

The Committee of the Regions and education

Depending on national systems, local and regional authorities are responsible for various levels of education ranging from pre-school to adult education and training. Therefore, the local and regional authorities have a key role to play in these domains, which makes them central actors in the implementation process for achieving the strategic objectives set at national and European level.

Many of the subjects that you are developing with the eTwinning programme made the object of CoR opinions in the recent past. I will illustrate them with some examples that I hope would enrich your debate in the next two days.

Understanding the importance of education and training in ensuring the smart, sustainable and inclusive growth foreseen by the Europe 2020 Strategy, the CoR insisted on building the skills and knowledge to that match market requests. We need to develop better education and training systems, which also take into account the actual and future trends in terms of skills needed for the jobs of tomorrow. These are often first identified at local and regional level.

Furthermore, European cooperation in the area of education and training is closely linked not only to employment and sustainable economic development strategies, but also migration issues, including multilingualism, demographic trends, and EU policies on social inclusion, business, research and innovation. As a result, it falls to the local and regional authorities to ensure an effective implementation of education and training policies incorporating all these aspects.

A simplistic economic perspective would not be sufficient because equally important is the broader role of education in developing the person as a whole and its social dimension, as well as ensuring equal opportunities and access to education and mobility.

The CoR believes that efforts made in the areas of reading, writing, mathematics, science and ICT are by no means incompatible with the teaching of other school subjects, which all contribute to the development of other qualities, such as creativity, self-respect and social skills. Moreover, education geared to sustainable development, and especially raising awareness of climate change, biodiversity and the conservation of all natural resources, together with the development of media literacy, are essential and intrinsic components of active citizenship.

Because it is essential for all young Europeans to receive an education that suits their professional needs and personal development throughout their lives, but it is equally important for them to receive, throughout their time at school, the knowledge that will enable them to feel like EU citizens.

In achieving this, we need not only good, modern education systems, but we also need very good and dedicated teachers. And I am convinced that eTwinning is especially helpful in this direction by facilitating the exposure to new, original teaching methods, allowing for experimentation and moreover providing a conducive environment for combining efforts and teaming up in teaching pupils.

Put it simple, a TEACHER is the person that has gained the trust of his/her pupils by proper behaviour and constant dedication to the profession, and thus becoming a model to follow.

We need to add more to this core, since the modern time will live in witnesses the technology progressively shaping learning. Our day-to-day life seems to be set on *fast forward* and we need to keep pace with the rapid developments in so many fields. This is where **Information and Communication Technology** comes in handy.

The CoR has acknowledged the ongoing transformation of the education systems. Therefore changes, even radical ones, are needed. It is no longer the job of education to provide a vast amount of information. Rather, the essence of education is learning to learn, i.e. helping people to improve their learning skills, thus enabling them to acquire and process information themselves. Here digital literacy assumes pivotal importance.

The CoR underscored that Europe's full potential for developing ICT services in the public and private sectors should be fully exploited, including in education and training. EU-backed public-private partnerships involving local and regional authorities and ICT-development SMEs in the area of public ICT services can serve as an excellent cornerstone for building up local skills and knowledge across the EU.

In today's global economy, **languages** constitute another important factor for success. The CoR underlined the need to develop progress in language acquisition at primary and secondary school; the education process must provide more opportunities to speak at least one foreign language at primary

school. And it is commendable to see the strong multilingual feature of eTwinning, where virtually all European languages are represented. And I would emphasise here the positive effects of minority languages and linguistic diversity in Europe, that also foster creativity and innovation in the context of promoting all types of cultural heritage, to the benefit, not least, of economic development.

The CoR also supports measures to develop the European dimension in **sport**, particularly at the grassroots level, that have an important role to play in fostering social cohesion and healthy habits.

In addition to these important components that make for a modern and effective education system, I would briefly refer to the benefits of **mobility** in improving young people's knowledge, skills and experience and thus facilitating their entry into the labour market and exploit their potential to the full.

The CoR insists that education must be at the heart of youth mobility. It urged that educational projects which promote mobility be extended beyond 2013 and requested more funds for establishing future framework programmes. This request was responded to, at least from the European Commission, that proposed for the post-2013 period a 73% increase in funding for the next "Education Europe" programme.

It is encouraging to see that eTwinning is ensuring in its turn a special type of mobility, without necessarily making the trip, at least not in the physical form. By using the virtual space, it allowed instead for numerous online trips, meetings and cooperation, not only between schools in the Member States, but also in other countries participating in Lifelong Learning programmes.

And this brings me to my **second** point of view, from the perspective of a Rapporteur:

Last year I drafted an opinion on the implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy and in particular the Eastern Partnership initiative.

One important message was that contacts must be stepped up with a view to transferring knowledge through specific cooperation projects between local and regional authorities. These would include twinning agreements between institutions and communities, but also teaching and study visits. I believe this holds true also in the field of education. I am glad to see that schools from Croatia, Iceland, Norway and Turkey are participating in the programme, while others from Switzerland or FYROM are expected to join.

If the benefits of cooperation were demonstrated in the case of these countries, it would be even more beneficial to engage with **schools from across our neighbourhood**. The potential for development is substantial there, be it in the Eastern Europe or the Southern Mediterranean. Even the modest investments in providing for example easier access to knowledge in the shape of internet **libraries**⁴ or collection of **best practices** could yield considerable results.

4

A compelling demonstration on the substantial impact of libraries is given by the initiative "**Room to Read**", which believes that "World Change Starts with Educated Children". Its findings are based on its experiences in Asia and Africa, but they could hold true for other parts of the world. More details available on <http://www.roomtoread.org/Page.aspx?pid=281>

Last, but not least, I am here as a young local politician and mayor of Dudeștii Noi in Romania.

It is with great pleasure that I see more than 4,000 Romanian schools participating or having participated in eTwinning projects. In my county only there are 87 schools involved. But I was equally sad to see that our school is not plugged in. It is true that it takes part in the Romanian eSchool programme financed by the EU. From your website I learnt that the two neighbouring villages are implementing several projects with eTwinning. So after this conference I will have some valuable fresh knowledge about what eTwinning means and what it can do and I might inspire another joining up to the programme.

Closing remarks

I would like to conclude by thanking again the organisers for this very relevant and timely conference.

It only remains me to wish all the success in finding the answers to the ardent questions on how to further develop eTwinning to educate not only skilful and competent graduates, but also active citizens that feel European.

Since I have spoke about the future I would like to end with a quotation by William Gibson (the man who marvelled in 1989 about the prospects of the *world wide web*): "**The future is already here—it's just unevenly distributed**".

Keep up the good work!