

1 UniCollaboration plenary session

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<https://videos.unileon.es/video/5d78eaa68f420872148b45ea>

Virtual exchange is one of the programmes which really charmed me at the beginning and kept on growing. I work in the European Commission, in the close team of the Cabinet of the Commissioner of Education and Culture. The good thing about this job is that if you have the chance to meet the right people and you have enough energy, you can influence things. You can make sure that things that were more or less on the political agenda are finally up to speed and have a promising future.

To speak about virtual exchange, I can give you some key words which we are going to elaborate for the next 45 minutes: ‘terrorist attacks’, ‘Bataclan’, and other such words. I can also speak about the teachers’ views, the fact that teachers today need more motivation, social acknowledgement, and prestige. I also mean to speak about digital skills and the myths around them, starting with ‘digital natives’; an expression we use so quickly that falls short of our expectations. Virtual exchange is also about mobility.

Erasmus, the fantastic jewel in the European Union’s crown, the best project we ever elaborated, is still a project for a happy few. We can speak about languages, intra-European cohesion, social cohesion, our ability for intercultural exchanges, and understanding with third countries; but do not forget that we also have many things to discover amongst ourselves as Europeans.

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However, the last five years in the Commission have been complicated. We are reaching the end of a mandate that started in 2014. Since then we have spent most of our time dealing with crises; Greece, migration, terrorism, the aftermath of the euro and the financial crash in the last ten years, and Brexit of course.

In the middle of a crisis, you do not really have time to think about long term projects, like education. We cannot really say it was on the top of the agenda in 2017. The Commission is a world that is very much dominated by economists and lawyers, and we had to deal with crises that were shaking the foundation of the European Union. In 2016 we were all scared, all those working there were wondering how long it could last; but this is far behind us now.

I just wanted to tell you that the first three years of this mandate were complicated because we did not have the visibility that a topic like education deserves. Adding to that the fact that the European Union is not the main player; the main players are the national and regional ministries. You draw up the curricular, you decide how you are going to educate your children. We are here for you guys to meet, to improve the European coordination. We are here also to set common objectives and more. One such objective is Erasmus, mostly devoted to mobility but not just. It has also served the purpose of actions like this conference.

This is our role, but again it was a bit frustrating that a topic that is socially so important could be omitted in the European agenda until 2017. Education is always among three or four main concerns. However, in 2017 everything changed for us because heads of states started to speak about education. With fresh news on Brexit, we realised what was the best plan to offer.

Remember in 2016 when everyone was criticising the Commission? Our last card to play was Erasmus. We could not solve the migration crisis, there was fear everywhere. Europe was considered a disaster, but we still had Erasmus. Suddenly, we realised we had something powerful that had become widely known. It is a big success, and we still have many things to deal with amongst us as Europeans. We have to discover each other, and also the course of policies that sometimes have a huge impact; for instance the Erasmus impact.

So you see from 2017, the next two years were busy for very good reasons. The Commission wanted to do more for education and culture. Now there was a clear objective which was largely shared by all the Member States; the European Education Area. That means, that from early child education and care, to skills training, to universities and PhDs, we would try to include all this in the European Education Area.

The European Education Area means more mobility. What do we mean by mobility? Not just physical mobility but also more social cohesion. We have a huge problem of social cohesion among our Member States and also with third countries, especially when it comes to the South Mediterranean area.

We also have a problem with digital skills. I speak about problems because sometimes we tend to have this messianic point of view. Firstly that digital technologies are going to solve all our problems in classrooms, and secondly that we can use them very well, especially youngsters.

We have to acknowledge that digital technologies, if not used properly, can be toxic. We have huge problems with addiction, a lack of concentration, and superficiality, not to mention problems of digital citizenship, like bullying, and a total lack of critical thinking. It is really very surprising to see how people can be totally manipulated with media; emotions manipulated within weeks, to the point where they turn against their communities. We saw it and again this is one of the things we have to tackle.

Even in terms of digital skills we often point to the teachers. This is the point of today's project. We often point at the older generations, and then we tend to assume that the digital natives, those who were born with a smartphone in their pocket, are fine. We do not need to care about them. Well it is one thing to be digitally confident, and another to be digitally competent. The truth is that even the majority of the youngsters are not digitally competent. It is one thing to watch a video on Youtube, or to send a Snapchat, another to write a letter in Times New Roman font size 12, and even another to be able to have the basics of coding and programming. On the basics of coding and programming, I think

that the vast majority of people are lagging behind, old or young. On typing a letter, I think my parents can do it better than many youngsters. So digital skills and digital citizenship need to be tackled.

Language is another aspect that we have to look at very carefully. We made a recommendation to the Member States for them to adopt – 1+1+1 – to be able to speak your own language plus another European language plus another foreign language, whatever it is and wherever it comes from. This might be a very ambitious objective, but ambitious objectives also have the advantage of lifting the level up, and this is where we are headed. First of all, we already have many people in the European Union who are trilingual or bilingual. The idea is to make sure that people not only learn English, but also develop the DNA of the European Union, which is diversity; cultural diversity and linguistic diversity. We have 24 official languages in the European Union, and hundreds of other languages. English is great but there are other languages in the world, especially in Europe.

Let me also speak a bit about teachers. We know it can get a bit frustrating because we often have very good ideas to implement in the European Education Area. Our pupils should be more entrepreneurial, they should speak languages, they should be trained in values, they should be so many things, and at the end we speak about everything but the teachers; the true cornerstones. Without motivated and acknowledged teachers, everything I am saying is premature, nothing will happen, nothing will be different. We do not speak about them the way we should. We also do not give them the funding. The results of a survey published in June recommended a focus on literacy. What are teachers' problems? Not just salaries, that can be a problem in some countries more than in others, but there is also a problem of social acknowledgement, prestige, authority, and respect. Four words I was not allowed to mention four years ago in the Commission because they were reactionary and conservative. So I say them again. Social acknowledgement, respect, authority, prestige – all very important. Teachers suffer from a lack of social acknowledgement, even when you look at the countries that are doing best in terms of teachers, mostly Finland. Finland is the best example we have in Europe, probably the best in the world.

Why are they so happy? It is because they have social prestige. So that makes a difference. I remember the first thing I heard when I joined the Cabinet of Education; in Spain, primary and secondary school teachers, even in crisis, were paid more than a Finnish teacher. So you see, salaries are part of the equation and we must look at them but we must also look beyond. One question is training; the continuous training of teachers, training in foreign languages, and training in digital technologies as well. Even if teachers think they know about digital technologies, some things cannot be improvised. Some things need to be taught. I would also say every teacher needs a degree of autonomy and the tools and keys to their own kingdom: the classroom.

So you see this is the landscape we have now. Those are the big problems we are looking at. We in the European Commission do not have burdens like you. We do not go into the detail of the curriculum, we do not go into the classrooms. I mean, we visit them of course, but it is true that most of the burden of education is more on your shoulders, not mine. It is more on the teachers, the school directors, the rectors, and of course on the universities and the national and regional ministries. Those are the main players, though we look at you, we help you, we advise you, and in many ways we support you.

It is very reassuring then to see that many people in the Commission are now speaking about education, especially prime ministers. Many of them are saying to triple Erasmus, which is easy to say, but we may need to curb some of their enthusiasm. It is true that in a period of economic uncertainty we do not know the budget for the next several years. To already fulfil the proposal of the Commission we would have to double Erasmus. We are going to cut European funding for almost everything except three things: defence, migration, and education. That is a clear sign. It is not that we are going to improve Erasmus, it means we are going to double it, and yes we still have not negotiated with the Member States yet – the people with the money. Erasmus is becoming the secret cow. Will we have less money then now? I do not think so. Will we have twice as much as now? I do not know, but I am sure we will have more, and education is very much at the top of the political agenda, which is very good news.

If I stressed all these problems first it is because they are the ones we see with a birds' eye view. From social cohesion, common values, and a sense of belonging to teachers' training, all have a point in common with virtual exchanges. Their beauty is that if they are done well and are widespread, they can address partially every single big problem that I have identified in the European Education Area. That is why I think that we all have to see the future of virtual exchanges with optimism. I think we can be very optimistic because the wind is at our back and we are all open minded, I do not think anyone is against them. I think that more and more people will be more receptive, more permeable to the beauty, the charm, and the efficiency of virtual exchanges.

Let me give you my personal version of it. For me the first contact I had with virtual exchanges was after the terrorist attacks of Charlie Hebdo. This is when it all started. I will spare you the details, you all know what happened. There was an education, security, and communication dimension. That is for example what the French said from the very beginning and what they tried to implement. We said, well we also have to replicate that at a European level. That is why, seven weeks later, the Commissioner called all the education ministers to Paris and we agreed on a declaration, a very consensual one. However, the European Commission also had some homework to see how we could support Member States in improving intercultural dialogue, a sense of belonging, and adherence to common values. It was not only about speaking about intercultural dialogue, but also about ensuring that within our societies we agreed on some unnegotiable sorts of rules. That was really part of the agenda. You might not like it, but this was the way the decision was taken. Of course, we also spoke about diversity, discrimination, and the third pillar of this whole declaration – critical thinking, which we have now. That was signed in 2015, very consensually, as I told you, and now we have to implement them, but implement them how?

Then I had a phone call from the counter terrorist team, from the Minister of antiterrorism in the European Union who said: "Have you heard of something called the Stevens Initiative?", to which I replied I had not, and they told me to look into it. So, what is a Stevens Initiative? Mister Stevens was a US Ambassador killed in Libya, and his family decided to add meaning to his

death. They created a platform for virtual exchanges between American and Middle East students. The resulting impact was measured by MIT, and this is where you say: “OK, there must be something serious behind it”. When I started digging into it, I realised that what in the beginning looked like an utopian initiative, actually raised levels of empathy. It does not solve all problems, but the dialogue is welcoming and the exchanges are well done, increasing levels of empathy.

In 2015, we had Erasmus, a very powerful brand. We did not even need the funding of a foundation like the Stevenson Initiative. We had our own money, but what could we do with it? This is where Erasmus virtual exchanges started.

Of course in the European Union we were more or less familiar with virtual communication. There were some studies in 2011 and 2014, and also we had another jewel in the crown, one that I really appreciate: eTwinning, one of the largest teacher networks in the world. There are about 600 thousand teachers now signed up, and many projects. When we started there were 300 thousand, and five years later that has doubled. It is really growing like a mushroom, and I very much think that it has the potential of being the next Erasmus. It is a fantastic platform and it works extremely well. It is ten years old now, and in more than 40 countries, going beyond Europe; precisely one of the things we wanted to do, that is expanding to third world countries, especially the South and Middle East. That is why we managed to develop it even more in Tunisia, Lebanon, and Jordan. The charm of eTwinning is, first it belongs to the teachers, second it is free, third it leads to virtual exchanges among classrooms, and fourth, it is really one of the best intercultural dialogue machines I have ever seen. It starts very young, at 11 or 12 years old, which is even better than starting at 22. The earlier, the better.

I went to Tunisia to see the eTwinning team, and they showed me some video exchanges they were doing with Germany, Romania, Greece, and France where they were calculating the circumference of the room, according to the Earth, and according to an old Greek mathematician’s formula. Even if it was mathematics, you could see that it was pure intercultural dialogue. If you do that from ten to

16 years old you can hardly get radicalised at 18. So that for me was a perfect situation and a fascinating project.

So you see, we are already familiar with this, and this came out of Erasmus in the virtual domain.

As you know better than me, virtual exchanges can serve many different purposes. They can be intercultural dialogues, languages, digital skills, teacher training, and soft skills, etc. We entered through the angle of intercultural dialogue, antiterrorism to be more precise. Giving life to this programme was very complicated; we had to convince many people, go through many layers, but in the end it was all useful because now the project is alive and kicking and has very promising results I am optimistic about, and they are very positive both for universities and for youth organisations. Another important aspect of virtual exchanges is the lesson we learnt that speaking to universities is fantastic, but we were already speaking to like-minded people. You have to go beyond, you have to reach the people who are likely to distrust you, as we are all a bit socially conditioned. That is why youth organisations are even more important. They are harder to reach out to, but are definitely one of the targets we have. We can say universities are even more optimistic because there is already a culture of mobility, there is already a cultural exchange. The way the Tunisian kids were doing maths with Romanian kids means they were having an intercultural dialogue. In universities one hint that is important for the future is that you can also mix it with physical mobility. This is what we mean by blended mobility. Can you combine both? Yes. The purpose of combining both was also to reach out to many more people. Erasmus is fantastic, we are all extremely proud of it, it is the best brand the European Union ever produced. It changed the lives of nine million people. We do not have a footnote to justify that but, it is really fantastic. At the end of the day it is only 10% of the students that benefit from it. We still have a huge margin of manoeuvre to extend to people who naturally are not interested in Erasmus. Those are not only students, but also teachers.

First we have to work on students who do not have such an international background, who do not speak languages, but we also have to make sure that

it benefits other categories. For instance, vet students, because of vocational education and training, are very important and we are already working on including them. We have invested hundreds of millions of euros to make sure that people who are doing professional training can benefit. It is more complicated to send Spanish 17 and 18 year olds to an industrial area, in Germany, where they are supposed to be operational after ten days and to speak German already than it is to send a German 23 or 24 year old student to the University of Leon with a very poor knowledge of Spanish. In three months he will catch up and at the end he will learn Spanish and be able to follow some lessons. It is a totally different setting and that is why I believe that university students will always be more receptive than those following professional training.

If there is one missing link in Erasmus, it is the schools. Fantastic things can be done with physical mobility in schools, sometimes two weeks of physical mobility at 13 or 14 years old can definitely change your life, though it is very cumbersome for teachers to go through 100 pages of bureaucracy which you are all familiar with, at least those of you who applied for Erasmus projects. There again this is also a fantastic example of blended mobility, if you are able to combine the fire power of Erasmus with this virtual mobility, you can improve intercultural knowledge, badly needed digital skills, and also improve soft skills. In other words, what youngsters are missing today. We heard from big companies who came to our offices and said: “You know what there is a lot of youth unemployment in Europe, and I have many vacancies that I cannot cover. What do we do about it”? They said it is not only a problem of aptitude it is also a problem of attitude. So these social skills, these soft skills some people call 21st century social skills, come from big companies. When you have CEOs saying they are looking for curious people able to work in teams, solve problems, and communicate in several languages, I think we should listen. Again, this is something that virtual exchanges can definitely tackle.

Another thing that I learnt from the beginning is that virtual exchange is not very easy to sell. When you see a newcomer and want to do an Erasmus virtual exchange, they look at you as if it meant not having a great idea so trying to make it virtual, and that is considered ‘the wrong good idea’. Then virtual

became so trendy that in the end it did not mean anything. It is a word that today is devalued, as it can be a problem as well. Youngsters who live in a 100% virtual world today are sick. Is it so good to be so virtual, to be always sitting in front of your screen, on Facebook, Twitter, or WhatsApp, and then not even be able to say hello or engage in a conversation? Is that really what we want? Virtual is suspicious; it can be superficial, toxic, and cover the fact that you do not have the imagination to do something tangible.

At first I was a bit sceptical on the value of virtual exchanges. Then I saw that MIT was measuring its value in the US and that in Europe many people were already working on it and that it raised levels of empathy. It took me some time to digest and to understand virtual exchanges, and that is why I still remember the key things that made me change my mind.

You need to do a lot of pedagogy, so once you leave this conference in three days, remember that it is important, do not take it for granted. You cannot improvise virtual exchanges, it is very important and it is why teachers need to learn and get some type of academic acknowledgement for both themselves and their students. Call it credits, or call it initial teacher education. There are ways, this is also a message for national ministries: do not hesitate to put it in the teachers' official curricula. It helps a lot, and once it is structured, it attracts many other people because it gives the impression of officiality, in this case totally justified. For eTwinning for example, we already have two or three countries, Poland for example, that put eTwinning in their teachers' official initial training. Can we do something similar for virtual exchanges, either Erasmus or not? I think that it is one of the key questions that we may have discussions on. Please put it on the agenda, because it is very important. As is, of course, training the teachers.

Virtual exchanges that are not properly moderated can be totally counter-productive. Here are some concrete examples. If you put some Swedish and Palestinian students in a room and they start talking about 9/11 you know perfectly that the first comments are going to be offensive to both sides. Some will say that it is a plot, others will say "you are dangerous terrorists", things like that. If

you do not have someone who is able to moderate that, and to channel negative energy to raise empathy three months later, it is totally counter-productive.

Another thing that I learnt as well is that it has to also be labour oriented. If I went out tomorrow for example to Cairo University and said I had a programme that could prevent radicalisation, nobody would listen to me. However, if I say that I have a programme which is going to help them acquire social and international skills, improve their image, and look good on their CV could make a huge difference. Using this angle of labour market relevance is very important.

For the third part of my intervention, let us have a brief look at the future. First you have good reasons to be optimistic. I do not know if this Erasmus programme is going to be renewed, but I think yes. I think that now virtual exchanges are on the agenda and we have more or less the big structure of the next Erasmus on the table, which means seven years, which already gives some structure and stability. We are pretty sure that there will be some funding for virtual exchanges and we will do our best to mix them with physical mobility, because in the end if our aim is to democratise Erasmus, then virtual mobility must be part of this plan and it must not be done only through physical exchange. We also think that now education is much higher in the political agenda, at European and national levels, and they are much more open to this kind of programme as long as they are well justified and the results are measured and satisfactory.

I wanted to also say that this report is the most exhaustive study I have ever read on virtual exchanges. So congratulations, it is an excellent report which can be shown, do not put it in the drawer. We have good reasons to be optimistic as long as virtual exchanges are well explained and the value is clearly demonstrated to policy makers. Do not sleep now that things are getting better, because at the end of the day, even if the Commission puts millions in the Erasmus pot, most of the work is on your shoulders again. It is you who have to talk to directors, to universities, who have to make sure that those programmes get recognition at higher education levels. It does help you

because you get a sort of legitimacy with European support, but at the end of the day you are the main actors. Those things will be consolidated once the 25 universities have a consolidated programme on virtual exchanges. Are we there yet? I do not think we are, but we are on really good tracks. Let me also give you two or three pieces of advice.

The first is actually a thing that I did not find in the programme, which I actually think is relevant for virtual exchanges; rural areas. Do not forget rural areas please. When we speak about virtual exchanges we tend to look at the Middle East, at Asia, at Africa, at how wonderful it is to have our cosmopolitan conscience and state of mind. Yes that is part of the plan, but do not forget that even within Europe we have regions within our countries, and I think that Leon is a good example. In many ways, virtual exchanges can partially address the ageing of the population. I saw wonderful programmes of eTwinning at school level, but I also saw wonderful programmes in regions that are of villages that are still active thanks to eTwinning. Sometimes it is schools or universities which are the last barriers before a region starts to multiply. This is the only additional angle to the project you could find. All the others are exhaustively covered. You sometimes speak about this cosmopolitan state of mind that is very important, but do not forget that there are people who are very far from it. They simply do not want to become cosmopolitan and that is fair enough. They simply want to be themselves and be part of and be informed about the rest. Here again through virtual exchanges we can really do something.

Also do not forget intra-European cohesion. One of the things I loved most about this project is that you have different ministries involved. It is very geographically balanced within the European Union, which still has divides on topics like migration for example. There are many things that we do not know about our neighbours. We are 27, in a club. We share 30% of our national sovereignty. We do things that are very important that really impact our life yet we do not know each other at all. Is that sustainable? I do not think so.

We could do topics in the curricula, subjects of the European Union, many speeches, but if you take people from the rural areas in Portugal and send them

to Kracovia and the other way round, that does not cost so much because we are speaking of basically 30 days of mobility that can make a huge difference. We have already pre-empted four billion euros in Erasmus for that. It is another way of ensuring that we know each other a bit better.

Virtual exchanges even at university levels can also improve this knowledge because at the end of the day, the classical Erasmus students that we all like are here in this room, we are fine, we are all vaccinated, we do not need the European Union for that. What about this 90% of students who do not benefit from mobility because sometimes they simply do not want to? For some, virtual exchanges could do a bit more than for their neighbours.

Do not forget those aspects, the world is fine but we still have to do quite a lot of work here in Europe. With all that being said I must say that again, I do not know where I am going to be in two months but I am sure that in ten years I will hear good news about virtual exchanges. I am also pretty sure that my kids will go to university, some of them in ten years, and I trust that one third of the curricula might be already mobility blended, physical, or virtual. For them it would be as normal as taking a geography course or a mathematics course in a room like this one. So keep the faith please, the wind is in your back.

Q&A

Q. I thought your presentation was fascinating, it gives us heart in what we do and I would like to thank you for pointing out the issue of rural areas because I think that is something that has not come across my radar to speak of that we should be interested in looking at. You are probably right. When the Ministry of Education from Madrid came to talk about this project about a year ago, that was one of the first things they saw the potential of virtual exchanges having.

In Castilla Leon we have huge problems of empty villages and things like that. They talked about even internally in Spain virtual exchanges between cities and villages and stuff like that.

Could you tell us a little bit about examples of eTwinning that were doing things like that. Could you tell us a bit more about what is happening there?

For example there was an Italian lady who was teaching in a beautiful rural area but really 'lost from the hands of God'. Basically she was a teacher in several schools and some were about to close, and because she was a very motivated eTwinner, she started setting up ambitious projects with other countries. At the end, what she managed to do was to resurrect not only her school but three or four in the neighbourhood, so a region actually. A small region, but still a region. It had a great impact on the prestigious schools because if you are a parent, you do not want to play games with your kids' education, you want to get your kids the best school possible. So that one rural school is not going to offer not even a slight opening to the international world today in 21st century Europe. It is not necessarily attractive. You might even be tempted to send your kid 50 kilometres away or send them to a boarding school Monday through Friday. At the end of the day though, through virtual exchanges, you can keep your school alive which means your village alive, while having an opening to the rest of Europe and to the rest of the world. Today eTwinning is 40 countries as I said we just signed Jordan and Morocco. In Tunisia we have 200 schools for example so it is already at critical mass; it can have a crucial role.

That is the best example I can give. It takes a good internet connection and a motivated teacher; that is also very important, which is a big problem also, as well as some administrative problems like authorisations because you are reliant on your regional authority. Once you have a good connection, technology, and a motivated teacher, it can really have a revolutionary impact.

You see not only was it revolutionary in Tunisia, it was also wonderful to see the impact. It was very touching when I went and I saw the teacher doing this project with five other European countries. If that's not intercultural dialogue, then what is? It was wonderful. In Europe, once again those things can be used. Imagine now that a school in Leon is about to close because parents are not motivated to send their students there. Show them that there is a European programme and you have a 5G or 4G connection on a broadband, and on that basis you can make

sure that your kids are going to travel virtually before they travel physically one day. Again, coming back to physical mobility in schools, we put four billion euros on the table. I think that we will have at least three billions to invest. We can do something with that. There are only the high schools from Madrid, Avi, Budapest, and Copenhagen that are going to benefit from that. It is fine but I would much more prefer a school for example from a village in Leon going to meet somebody in the countryside of Budapest or Poland. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe have huge problems of de-population as well. If you go to the Baltic countries the countryside is dying because everyone is going to the capitals. This is really one common problem we have in Europe. There is not a European country that is not fighting de-population in general and the desertification of rural areas.

Q. I think one of the things that strikes me is that eTwinning has been around for a long time and for universities there was almost the assumption that people would get on mobility. The target has always been 20%, which we haven't reached, is that perhaps why virtual exchange didn't reach universities, because it was almost felt that there wasn't the need for it?

It could be, because some universities which are international teach 70% of courses in English for example and did not feel the need to do those things. I think that we have to do a lot of pedagogy on virtual exchanges. We still need to explain the virtues of the virtual better. At first sight it can be one of these 'uber' types of ideas. It is much better than that, much more than that. You just need some time to digest. Stick to the faith of the converted. I remember my scepticism the first month, how slowly this idea started to convince me. Good advocates and persons who come with Excel spreadsheets with results. Figures speak a lot in these types of cases, where you need to convince people of the benefits of virtual exchange. I believe that that is the key. This is what works for us, at the Commission at least, and having the energy to fight for two years to get this project on track, and it worked.

Q. For the Commission is there a priority of virtual exchange increasing or of physical mobility with Erasmus or are they seen as one thing?

The Commission sees it as one thing that complements the other. It is not two parallel streets. It is really one way to make sure that more and more people benefit from this international experience. At the end, and where universities are moving, is towards this blended mobility.

I can give you a very good recent example. This is a project that is going to change the way we study; the way my kids will study at European universities. We have the first pilot project, the results were published in June, three months ago. We had 1,000 students at 11 or 14 universities teamed up together in several projects of seven or eight, sometimes by faculties, sometimes by subjects. We put the money on the table, and in the end we are creating European universities. European in identity, not that we are replacing anything. It is just a way to physically create studies of four years of Erasmus. Instead of choosing one year of Erasmus it means that maybe my kids will be able to chose studies where they will study for one year in Budapest, one year in Madrid, one year in Copenhagen, and one year in Paris, and at the end they will get one single diploma during which the teachers will have been in touch virtually and physically. In the end it is as if you had one diploma from one university but you studied in four or five different ones. This is the trend though. We put this project on the table recently. The universities' appetites were so big that suddenly we had to find 20 more million euros to cover their appetite. We know that this is going to happen every two or three years because we have the impression there is so much appetite that it is going to be consolidated any time soon.

Those are examples of blended mobility. Those projects are built on blended mobility. Do we see it as two different tracks? Absolutely not, we see it as one blended track for sure.

Q. You mentioned the example of eTwinning and gave Tunisia, Lebanon, and Jordan as examples. As we know Lebanon is already a huge refugee hosting country in the region. How do you assess the potential of virtual exchange as an education in general as a policy tool in migration?

In many different ways. For example, both for the integration of migrants that come here and for learning the language, especially for a youngster of eight years old with parents of 40 years old; integration is better achieved in school.

Also in the case of Jordan and Lebanon for example, what do you do with the refugees that have been there for three or four years in camps? They have schools, it is not that they are totally abandoned in camps. You have examples of both. I know people who saw very good schools in camps. The problem is those teachers need to train another generation and therefore virtual exchanges with Jordan and Lebanon, especially with Lebanon, was of utmost importance for the Palestinian kids. The question was should it be open to the Palestinian kids and of course the answer was yes. You see how a central cultural dialogue can already be implemented there for populations that are in a difficult situation. Especially for pupils who already do not have a positive relationship with the Western world and might have many prejudices about us. Some prejudices that might end up very bad. I come back to the very first point of entry that brought us to virtual exchanges. My preference goes for programmes that start early. If you give a first touch at 11 or 12 years old, it is almost like a vaccination to me. At the end when you see communication at such a young age it can be very nice because first they can discover many things that they have in common. They probably listen to the same horrible singers and they can speak about football and things like that. I would prefer that they talk about things that are a bit more sophisticated that really create impact, but when you see in the classroom, even if they are dressed differently, if half the girls in the classroom wear a scarf but listen to Justin Bieber, it creates some affinities.

In the first talk I had about the Stevens Initiative, they were not very sure and they said it would solve all the problems, people are not going to understand others' point of views; yet it raises empathy. You start to have a natural respect for people who have very different points of view. That might be enough or not. At least it is a very good start. For Jordan and Lebanon definitely yes. The policy with longstanding refugees can make a difference, we are very positive about it, definitely.

Q. In Poland we have our problems, but one of the things that we are proud of is this huge impact of eTwinning partnerships at all levels starting right from kindergarten and rural areas and this introduction into the core curriculum; that was also something unique.

My question goes to the relations between the European Commission and the Council of European Languages Policy Division. Last year we saw a huge launch of the new common European framework of reference with the new scales for interculturality and negotiation, negotiating between languages. How are the two institutions cooperating? Are they hopeful?

Believe it or not we are good buddies! We have a different geographical scope. We also have a different relationship with our Member States which is often based on the conventions of the Council of Europe. There are some cases where we are not on the same track but normally we are. They do the international stuff and we try to make sure that the Member States follow those things. They do not have the power to have a recommendation. Member States say can you please teach three languages; 1+1+1 as I said before. The fact that we are doing this 1+1+1 totally matches their objectives. The Council of Europe is very keen on the minority languages and diversity and so are we. That is why one of the messages we are saying is that it is very important that everyone speaks English, but we also need to make sure that we promote other European languages. The minority languages are part of our agenda as well, not as the most important file on our table, but there is some work being done, very much based on the Council of Europe. In this way, in the majority of areas, we are on very good terms.



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