



PORTUGAL 2007
Presidência do Conselho da União Europeia



Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Conference

Teacher professional development for the quality and equity of lifelong learning

Lisboa, Parque das Nações – Pavilhão Atlântico – Sala Nónio
27 and 28 September 2007

Ján Figel

Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Youth

Madam Minister,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's a great pleasure for me to be here with you today.

I believe that Education and Training of the highest quality are the key to enabling all our citizens to lead fulfilling and active lives.

Education and Training are also crucial for the European Union to achieve the ambitious goals it set itself here, in Lisbon, a few years ago.

I am therefore pleased that the Portuguese Government is doing so much, during its Presidency of the Union, for education and training.

In particular I would like to thank the Portuguese Presidency for organising this conference about the Professional Development of Teachers.

Someone once said: "To be a teacher you must be a prophet—because you are trying to prepare people for a world thirty to fifty years into the future".

I think this encapsulates the challenge of teaching today, when our societies, our economies, our workplaces and even our homes are changing so rapidly.

Just one generation ago, it was still possible to predict with reasonable certainty most of the knowledge and skills that school pupils would need for the rest of their lives. But this is no longer the case.

Young people can no longer expect to spend their whole lifetime in the same job, or even in the same sector of employment.

Their career paths will change in ways that no one can predict. The jobs they will be employed in may not even exist today; and the knowledge they require may be knowledge that we currently do not teach.

This climate of change has several implications:

Firstly, it means that we need to help young people develop cross-cutting and transferable skills that they can adapt and use in changing situations.

This is why the Member States of the European Union in December adopted my proposal for a European Framework of Key Competences for lifelong learning, which describes the eight areas of knowledge and skill that we believe all citizens will need if they are to take part fully in the Knowledge Society.

Secondly, it means that we need to re-think the role of the school: to what extent can schools really face up to the challenges of the 21st century?

This is why I have launched a public consultation on the future of the school – an issue which I know will be discussed by another conference here later in the year.

And thirdly, it means that we have to find new ways to help our teaching profession provide the kind of teaching that is required by our young people, our employers and our society.

So, Professor Rodrigues, your conference could not have come at a more opportune moment. I believe that the way we educate and support our teachers is of vital importance for the future of the Union.

This is the reason why the Commission has recently published a Communication on Improving the Quality of Teacher Education.

I should like to take a few moments to explain to you how the European Commission sees the situation, and what we think are the key challenges facing us all.

I think that we sometimes forget the importance - and the complexity - of the role that we ask our teachers to play in our society.

We ask them to prepare our young people to be the citizens of tomorrow; to help develop their talents; to help fulfil their potential for personal growth and well-being; and to help them acquire the complex range of knowledge and skills that they will need as citizens and as workers.

That's quite a task!

We also expect our teachers to be able to make use of the latest technologies; to keep up-to-date with the latest developments in their specialist subjects and in pedagogy; to be facilitators and classroom managers.

In addition, in many Member States, classes nowadays comprise a more heterogeneous mix of young people than ever before: pupils from different social backgrounds, from different cultures, different levels of ability and disability, and sometimes pupils with different mother tongues and cultural backgrounds.

And yet, we also know that, even in these circumstances, teaching must be of the highest possible quality.

When researchers looked at all the factors that could have an influence upon student performance, they found that teacher quality is the most important of all.

I think you will agree with me that we need to make sure that our six million teachers get not only the initial education, but also the continuing training and support throughout the whole of their careers, to enable them to perform these very demanding tasks.

And yet, there is definitely room for improvement.

We know that many countries are experiencing shortfalls in teaching skills, and have difficulties in updating teachers' skills.

We know that, by comparison with other professions, teaching has a high proportion of older staff; in some countries, over 40% of teachers are in the age group 45 to 64. This means that we run the risk of losing much valuable experience when these teachers retire.

We know that teachers' skills need to be continuously updated, and yet continuing training is compulsory in only eleven of our Member States; and even where it is compulsory, it often lasts only three days per year.

And we know that teachers at the start of their careers are often discouraged by the difficulties of their tasks and sometimes move to other professions; yet, only half of our Member States offer newly qualified teachers any systematic support or training during their first years in the profession.

Now, of course, this is only a snapshot. And of course, there are some outstanding examples of very

good provision for Teacher Education in some countries or regions.

However the Commission believes that, in Europe as a whole, the situation is not sustainable in the long term.

We need to put in place highly effective systems of lifelong Teacher Education.

Education and Training systems are, of course, the responsibility of Member States. However, our work with national experts over recent years has convinced us that many of them face the same kinds of challenge in trying to improve their Teacher Education systems. By working together we can find common approaches and common solutions.

Indeed, the proposals that we make in our Communication are based largely upon the advice we have received from Teacher Educators, policymakers and stakeholders from across Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Our Communication sets out a number of proposals for improving the quality of our Teacher Education.

I'd like to highlight for you what I see as fundamental.

First: initial teacher education has to be of the highest quality; it has to give new teachers a sound knowledge of pedagogy as well as of their specialist subject matter; it has to comprise practice in real classrooms, as well as theory.

You know that several Member States now require their teachers to have a degree at Masters level – and these are often the countries that perform well in international tests.

Given that teaching is now such a complex profession, and that it is facing such high demands, I am sure that many other countries are now reflecting on whether this is an approach that is worth considering.

Second: As I said earlier, the world is changing rapidly. The skills and knowledge that our young people need are evolving all the time. Developments in educational research need to be assimilated, and teachers need to keep their specialist subject skills up to date.

The logical conclusion of all this is that initial Teacher Education can never be enough to sustain a teacher for a career that will last 30 or 40 years. For teachers, and especially for teachers, the practice of lifelong learning is an absolute must.

Third: It follows from this that a piecemeal approach is not enough. The clear message we get from stakeholders is that, if we are serious about keeping the skills of our teachers up to date, provision for teacher education and continuing development needs to be coordinated as a single, coherent system at national level, and must be adequately funded.

Fourth: teaching is a profession; and as with members of every other profession, we should expect teachers to play their part in developing professional culture and values, and in extending the boundaries of professional knowledge.

There is scope for much closer collaboration between Teacher Education institutions and teachers in the classroom, so that teachers can take advantage of the latest research findings, and so that what is taught in Teacher Education institutions is based upon what really happens in real classrooms.

This also means that we need to encourage all our teachers to adopt the culture of reflection that is already practised by the most effective teachers. We need teachers who can evaluate the effectiveness of every lesson they give, and learn from their successes and failures.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I believe that teachers' performance will be improved, teachers' satisfaction with their jobs will be greater, and teachers will be encouraged to stay in the profession for longer, if they have access to a well-resourced, coherent and attractive system of education, training and support from the beginning to the end of their careers.

I know from our discussions with experts that these issues are shared concern.

And Member States face very similar problems when trying to equip their teaching workforce to provide education of the highest quality for our young people.

That is why we feel that it is useful to have a debate about them and, in particular, to disseminate good practices from all our Member States.

I would like to finish my intervention with a reflection that comes first of all from my being a father of four: we should keep in mind that our children are our hope, the best asset we have for the future of Europe. In order to equip them with the best possible human values, skills and competences, we need first class education; and education does not require only material means, like buildings and books, but first and foremost capable, motivated, well-trained and respected teachers.

Let's not forget it and let's work together to improve this essential aspect of education.

Thank you.