

Education and culture: perspectives in Ireland and in the European Union
Address to the Joint *Oireachtas* Committee on European Union Affairs
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Honourable Members of the Oireachtas,

I am very honoured to speak to you today, and I would like to congratulate you on your Committee's deep engagement on the Future of Europe. I understand that you have carried out an extensive public consultation on this important topic, and I look forward to hearing some of your insights during our discussion this afternoon.

Education and culture are high on the political agenda in the European Union. At the recent Social Summit in Gothenburg, Sweden, Europe's political leaders held an exchange on their views for education and culture.

I am proud that this debate built on an ambitious vision set out by the European Commission. In our policy document, our Communication on Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture, we set out our ambition for a Europe capable of harnessing the full potential of education and culture, to build resilience, promote social fairness and active citizenship, and strengthen European identity in all its diversity.

We want to work towards a Europe where learning, studying and doing research are not blocked by borders. A Europe where skilled and independent citizens find or create fulfilling jobs, contribute to growth and innovation, and feel empowered to shape our communities. A Europe where people share a strong sense of European identity and feel connected to our common cultural heritage.

What does this mean in practice? The Communication calls for a European Education Area enabling the mutual recognition of higher education and school-leaving diplomas and study periods abroad. It suggests that we improve cooperation between universities and the mobility of students with the support of an EU student card. It proposes steps to help Member States boost the level of skills – including

basic skills, language skills but also digital and entrepreneurial skills, as well as transversal skills and competences – and promote lifelong learning.

All of this – be it mobility and recognition, skills development, support for teachers and educators – needs to be based on solid funding. Hence the Communication recognises that to reach these goals, the future Erasmus+ programme will need to be substantially bigger than the current one.

The Communication also reaffirms the EU's commitment to safeguarding our common values and our cultural heritage, with continued support for the cultural and creative sectors. We want to develop a strong European Agenda for Culture to help us uphold European identity and diversity.

All children and young people should have the opportunity to realise their full potential and positively contribute to society. However, reality shows that the talents of millions of young people are lost each year; poorer students are three times more likely to be low performers than their wealthier peers. I believe we all need to do more to overcome these challenges, and the EU is willing to play its part.

I am pleased to announce that I will be hosting the first European Education Summit in Brussels on 25 January 2018, to follow up on the ambitions we have set out. The Summit will bring together Ministers, academics, stakeholders and civil society in order to work towards a high-level political consensus on tackling inequality in, and through education. We must join forces to address underachievement in basic skills, to make our education systems more inclusive and ensure they benefit from smart investment. And we must develop a clear picture of what skills are needed for the decades to come. I count on the active participation of Irish authorities.

Indeed, Ireland has plenty of experiences to share. Over the last decade, this country has undertaken unprecedented national efforts to modernise its education sector – and all of this despite going through a very difficult period. During the recent economic crisis and the subsequent structural adjustment, it sheltered education from major and far-reaching fiscal consolidation measures.

Ireland has also greatly improved in providing basic skills, combating early school leaving and inequalities, as well as in promoting participation in pre-school education. It is one of the leading countries in Europe in tertiary attainment, and has put forward a set of fairly ambitious goals for the future.

Ireland is investing in education, with a new impetus in terms of public spending for the sector and a very promising 2018 budget for education and training. It also intends to focus more on educational infrastructure and higher capital expenditure, in particular with a view to attracting talent from Europe and the rest of the world.

However, a number of challenges remain. They include the inclusion of disadvantaged students, the affordability of, and access to childcare, the long-term financial sustainability of third-level education and the ongoing reform of further education and training. The European Commission stands ready to help Irish authorities in their efforts to make Ireland's educational systems one of the best in Europe.

In the field of youth, the Commission is currently preparing a review of the EU Youth Strategy, the framework for our youth policy cooperation. The proposals we will outline before the summer will be based on young people's and youth stakeholders' input, as well as on the evaluation of the current strategy. One priority is already clear for me: we need to reach out to many more young people to make sure that our youth have opportunities to engage and be heard in the democratic process, no matter where they are or what their background is.

Another youth-related matter has been high on our agenda this year – this is the European Solidarity Corps. Since its launch, more than 43,000 young people have registered, showing their enthusiasm for solidarity and willingness to volunteer or work to support others. I expect the Corps to get its own legal basis and budget next year, following agreement of the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament.

Throughout 2017, we have celebrated the 30th anniversary of Erasmus. A unique programme which has given nine million people – among them tens of thousands of Irish people – the opportunity to study, train, teach and volunteer abroad, providing them with the skills and outlook need to thrive in life.

With more than 900 events and a huge involvement on social media and in the press, the campaign reached more than 90 million European citizens, well beyond those already benefitting from the programme.

But this year was also an opportunity to take stock and to develop a common vision for the future of the programme. My priority is to reach out to many more people from a wider range of backgrounds. I also want to strengthen mobility of school pupils, for example.

And, as I said at the beginning, if the future Erasmus+ is going to support our political objectives effectively, it will need to be beefed up. Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, and Antonio Tajani, President of the European Parliament, have called for a substantial budget increase to make sure that the future programme is “9 times more ambitious”.

During the final EU-level event of the 30th anniversary campaign in Brussels, the Erasmus+ Generation Declaration was presented. The Declaration contains 30 recommendations from the community of those who have benefited from the programme on how to make Erasmus+ “a bigger programme” with “a bigger impact on the future of Europe”.

In sport, we focus on promoting physical activity and grassroots sport. The third edition of the European Week of Sport, which took place in September, attracted 12 million participants. With its first edition having taken place only three years ago, I am pleased to see how much the idea has spread, and how fast it has been adopted by Member States and the sport family. This year, together with my fellow Commissioners Phil Hogan, in charge of Agriculture, and Vytenis Andriukaitis, responsible for Health, I launched a new initiative to promote healthy lifestyles across policy areas such as sport, education, food marketing, innovation and research.

Sport is very much about joy and physical wellbeing, but it also has a bigger role: it helps build communities. This is something I have seen here in Ireland at first hand, when I met with leaders of the GAA at Croke Park and attended an All-Ireland hurling final just over two years ago.

To highlight this role of sport in communities, I have launched the #BeInclusive EU sport awards which recognise organisations using sport to increase social inclusion

for disadvantaged groups. I was honoured to hand out the first awards at the end of November.

Finally, we have just launched the European Year of Cultural Heritage. I want to place children and young people at the heart of this initiative. By encouraging them to discover and engage with Europe's cultural heritage, through a wide range of activities and programmes, we can enable them to become guardians of our cultural heritage – and use it to build the Europe of tomorrow. This is why the educational value of cultural heritage will be emphasised throughout the Year.

The European Year of Cultural Heritage is not a "Brussels" event, far from it. We want people to explore and connect with heritage close to where they are. That is why we will see a series of initiatives and events at European, national, regional and local levels. At national level, the Year is managed by national coordinators appointed by all 28 Member States and I am pleased to say that Ireland is enthusiastically represented by the Heritage Council.

I heard quite a bit about what is planned in Ireland throughout the Year – just this morning, I attended the Creative Ireland Forum where I launched the European Year of Cultural Heritage in this country. I trust that you will make a success of the Year.

Honourable Members,

Deep structural changes are affecting our societies and economies at a time when many people also cope with the breakdown of social connections and families. The policy fields I am responsible for, education, culture, youth and sport, have a crucial role in creating the resilience we need to overcome these challenges. They can empower people, enabling them to lead independent, fulfilling lives and build inclusive, fair societies. It is therefore heartening to see these policy areas at the top of Europe's political agenda – let us work together to ensure they stay there.

Thank you.