

Speech Simon Steen for the opening session of the ECNAIS conference in Athens 14-16 April 2016

I welcome all participants from in and outside Greece and especially the Greek and the foreign speakers, who will be introduced later.

A special word of welcome for Mrs. Lexia Hulst, the former secretary of ECNAIS and her husband.

We got apologies for absence from Carlos Diaz-Muniz, Honorary Vice-President of ECNAIS, who gives us his warm regards.

I want to express our gratitude to the board of the Hellenic Association of Independent Schools (HAIS), especially to the chairman Kyrailidis Charalampos and George Linardatos, board member HAIS, for all the support we got from them during the preparation and organization of this first ECNAIS conference in Greece.

This ECNAIS annual conference is this year hosted and co-organized by the HAIS & ECNAIS. We welcome more than 125 participants from 16 countries, who are all interested in the challenging conference theme *Empowerment of society through freedom of education*.

By choosing this theme ECNAIS want to express that the Greek independent schools belong to the ECNAIS family with a strong tradition of freedom of education, freedom of parental school choice and the right to establish independent schools as fundamental citizens' rights within the EU and in broader Europe.

Independent schools all over Europe, each with their own profile and curriculum, offer parents, students and - within the given variety of schools – also teachers, the opportunity to choose just that specific school, that best meets their own expectations, talents and skills.

By so doing, independent schools are completing the different national school systems in Europe and contribute with school choice and innovative school practices to the modern social and economic development of their countries.

A country that neglects the freedom of education will in the long run pay a price for it in terms of wasted talents of the new generation.

It is important to realize that not only the independent schools, but also the public schools need a certain degree of autonomy to educate the new generation in the best possible way for the future they will face.

In this conference we want to focus on the different perspectives on the freedom of education, such as the economic, social, juridical and last but not least the pedagogical or educational perspective.

ECNAIS has given HAIS full support on the European level for the struggle of the Greek independent schools to survive the undermining policy of the Greek government.

The representatives from 16 countries gathered at this conference in Athens are strong believers in decentralization in education and in school autonomy. Our presence here in Athens is a statement to the Greek government and their political allies in the Greek Parliament: please make room for diversity in education that will benefit the new generation and will strengthen the society in the near future.

We are facing a lot of uncertainties in nowadays times.

Peaceful lives can suddenly be destroyed as happened recently in Paris, Istanbul, Brussels and other places)

Many Syrian refugees in Turkey, on the Greece islands and the Greek waste land and also in other European countries are running away from war and destruction.

Ukrainian people are desperately longing for stronger cooperation with democratic Europe and for transparency in public governance. Unfortunately, and I have to say to my own disappointment, the referendum in the Netherlands about the EU association treaty with Ukraine had a negative outcome.)

We live in what is called by the American sociologist David Baker 'the schooled society'. This demands not only respect for the right to education for everyone, but also the right to develop ones individual talents.

The formal and informal education systems need to respond to these demands. Independent schools can contribute to this response and by so doing they strengthen the necessary economic and social innovation within society, public institutions and in profit & non-profit companies.

Let's use our stay in Athens also to share our thoughts, feelings and believes how to live together in a peaceful way in a growing multi-ethnic & multi-cultural Europe. Maybe the recent Peace Education Manifest of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES) can inspire us and for that reason I quote from this manifest

'As members of the WCCES community, it is our duty to help educators elaborate their understanding of diversity, and subsequently create a more inclusive learning environment for all students. Helping educators to expand student identities toward a more global and interconnected framework is essential in deconstructing the marginalizing and divisive discourses that often permeate our educational institutions.'

We are proud on the big number of distinguished speakers who will contribute with their presentations to the conference today and tomorrow. Mr. George Linardatos will introduce the Greek speakers and Mrs. Sofia Reis, Secretary-general of ECNAIS, will introduce the video presentation of MEP Mr. Andrew Lewer.

Before we continue with the conference program I invite my colleague in the Executive Committee of ECNAIS, Mr. Per Kristensen, for a short in memoriam of Mrs. Milka Slavcheva, the late president of the Bulgarian Association of Private Schools, which hosted the ECNAIS seminar '*New approaches in learning as key for success*' in Sofia in November last year.

I thank you for your attention and I wish you an inspiring conference.