



ECNAIS

European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools

OPENING ADDRESS OF SIMON STEEN, CHAIRMAN OF ECNAIS, AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING SESSION OF THE ECNAIS CONFERENCE IN THE ITALIAN PARLIAMENT IN ROME 20 APRIL 2017

I welcome you all to the 29th annual conference of the European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools (ECNAIS) about
MODERN SOFT SKILLS IN VALUE BASED SCHOOL PROGRAMMES
with special attention for
THE INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS' RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGE OF IMPROVING THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC FUTURE OF YOUNG PEOPLE.

We - 110 participants from 14 European countries - are gathered here in the beautiful Sala della Regina of the Italian Parliament for the official opening of the conference.

I want to express our gratitude to the students of the Istituto Sant'Orsola for their special performance with songs and poems just at the start of the conference earlier this morning.

We are grateful for the willingness of the Compagnia delle Opere Educativa to co-organize this conference together with ECNAIS. I mention especially Mr. Stefano Montaccini, the representative of CdO in the Management Committee of ECNAIS, for his stimulating role. Only thanks to his dedication and the cooperation with him and his colleagues of the Service Centre of CdO it was possible to organize the ECNAIS conference 2017 in Rome.

The actual meaning of soft skills

More and more we become aware that the world in which the young generation will start their adult life will differ a lot from the world as we know it today.

Many rapid social, technological and economic changes are taking place. Different kind of national and international think tanks, knowledge institutes and research agencies are pointing out that we have to prepare the new generation in time for their partially unknown future

It's necessary that independent schools, which are in many European countries suffering from a lack of sufficient governmental support like in Italy, be faithful to their entrepreneurial and innovative nature, keenly focused on the added value they want and can offer their parents and students. The education proposal of independent schools is value based by making use of the inspiring philosophy of freedom of parental school choice and of a stimulating vision on school autonomy and school community.

We share with CdO/FOE the strong conviction that the attention to soft skills from the Italian independent schools' sector can show evidence of how autonomy is able to promote an education system matching students' human and cultural needs. For that reason it is very important to widen room for actual school autonomy and to show that independent schools are more able to contribute to social and economic development in Italy and Europe.

Three distinguished speakers

The urgent need to pay attention to these so called 21st Century or "soft skills" in education is recognized by international educational researchers, economists and sociologists. Three distinguished key note speakers from Italy and Spain, prof. Giorgio Vittadini, prof. Caterina Calsamiglia, and prof Luisa Ribolzi are proof of this; a special word of welcome to the three of you.

They will clarify the background and underlying ideas of soft skills and they stress the need to embed them in the school programmes and activities. Not as a substitute for what is called the more basic cognitive skills, but as a necessary enrichment for the future orientated development of children. Together they are part of the education and training for mature personality and active citizenship.



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School panel

How this education and training for mature personality and active citizenship takes shape in value driven independent schools will be shown later today by various independent schools throughout Europe.

Representatives of schools from Ukraine, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark and Bulgaria will take an active part in a panel discussion with the audience. We can compare their experiences and visions with those of their Italian colleagues by visiting Italian schools during the second day of the conference.

OECD

The Organization for economic cooperation and development (OECD) has clarified the importance of what is called 'the 21st Century skills' for the social and economic future of the new generation. The World Economic Forum is even talking about soft skills you absolutely need to thrive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

The most frequently mentioned soft skills are problem solving, creativity, cooperation with others and ICT competence. Empathy is mentioned as the social skill most needed to become competent to act as a responsible and active citizen.

Character traits

I want to underline the strong connection between soft skills, the forming of the person and the development of the character by referring to the Italian neuroscientist and Nobel Prize laureate Rita Levi-Montalcini, who considered devotion, self-confidence, serenity and courage as the four character traits necessary for overcoming any problem in life.

And the Dutch neuroscientist and expert in the development and functioning of the teenager's brain, Jelle Jolles, has stated that a child should learn much more about itself, about his or her place in the world, about how he or she is related to others and there should be much more contact between the parent, the child and the teacher.

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For the ones who attend an ECNAIS conference for the first time it is good to know that ECNAIS is a non-political, non-confessional, international association for collaboration between national associations of independent schools in European countries. ECNAIS was founded in 1988 and represents the interests of national school organizations for independent schools all over Europe. The member organizations are not only from EU countries, but organizations from Iceland, Ukraine, Belarus, and Turkey are also active members. ECNAIS has been increasingly active since in sharing experience, expertise and knowledge by organizing annual conferences and seminars for its members. We were for the first time in Rome with our conference in 2004 and in 2009 we had our annual seminar in Rome. And last but not least ECNAIS lobbies for the recognition and public funding of independent schools at a European level. Since three years we organize together with other European organizations a Hearing about the freedom of education and the parental right of free school choice in the European Parliament in Brussels in the third week of January. We make the Members of the EU Parliament more aware of the long history of the independent school sector in the different European countries. By so doing we underline the cultural enrichment which the civil society will gain, when there is sufficient room in the national legislation for an alternative approach by value driven independent schools. These schools give shape to the European notion of plurality and reflect the diversity from within the civil society.

ECNAIS Seminar about inclusion later this year

The next ECNAIS event will be the annual autumn seminar, this time about inclusion in education, in Prague from 23-25 November 2017.

Finally I bring you warm greetings of the honorary vice president of ECNAIS, Mr. Carlos Diaz Muniz, who is the former chairman of ECNAIS and of Mrs. Sofia Reis, the former secretary general of ECNAIS who couldn't attend the conference this time.

I wish you an inspirational conference and a good stay in Rome.

Thank you for your attention.