"The Independent Sector & Diversity in Education: Creating a Learning Society” was the theme for the ECNAIS Conference held on the 17th and 18th of November in Warsaw, Poland.

Supported by the EU Lifelong Learning Programme “Jean Monnet” the ECNAIS Conference gathered in Hotel Sofitel Warsaw Victoria with more than eighty people from fourteen countries. Among the participants there were experts, teachers, researchers and headmasters, eager to discuss diversity, freedom and the future of Education in Europe.

For 48 hours, seven key-note speakers helped participants to think about diversity in Education, leading them to find solutions for more autonomy and pluralism within schools.

During the two day conference, the audience had the opportunity to hear Jón Torfi Jónasson (University of Iceland), Peter Boren (Linnaeus University in Sweden), Inge Nuijten (Institute of Servant-leadership Performance psychology and Talent development in the Netherlands), Jan de Groof (College of Europe- Bruges), Piort Laskowski (Wielokuturowe Liceum Humanistyczne in Poland) , Alexandre Homem Cristo (Instituto Ciências Sociais in Portugal) and Chris Sigaloff (Knowledgeland in the Netherlands).

“Creating a Learning Society” was the motto.
And one may ask “what is a Learning Society”? Well, that question itself could feed a two days’ conference, but in summary the participants urged to question and to reflect on how to prepare young people for the future; priorities have to be switched. Meaning: to focus on learning instead of teaching.

Then, equally important, the reflection on how to create and enhance opportunities for pluralism and diversity. Having a standardized education development is stopped. Like Chris Sigaloff pointed out: “If you do what you did, you get what you got”.
That is why, Education for the Future was so discussed in Warsaw. Schools should put more emphasis on new forms of communication and on the search and understanding of the needs from the communities they belong to.

Jón Torfi Jónasson goes deep in those matters, defending that there should definitely be new subjects in schools. When asked about what those new subjects should be, he didn’t want to name one, but he definitely pointed out that traditional subjects should be a small percentage, leaving space for other (new) subjects.

“Labour market is moving a lot, Education should also respect that. The world is moving really fast and in what extend are you applying that to Education?”, he asked his audience.

Of course, when discussing independent education, you have to mention Sweden. And what better way to approach Swedish education than having a Swedish teacher speaking about it?

Strangely, at least for some of the participants, Swedish education has actually grown worse. It is still a successful case study but has been facing some challenges. The statistics show worse results in education. What the statistics do not show is that a big percentage of students are immigrants and that actually makes the numbers go down.

But the biggest controversy came up when Peter Bóren explained that anyone can be a teacher in Sweden. That is right, it is up to the headmaster to decide if one is qualified to teach or not.

For most (maybe all) of the participants, that just does not make sense. To educate well you have to be educated to do it. How else can you be sure that students are getting the best Education?

After the presentation, Peter Bóren explained that he is totally against the idea that anyone can teach. But, that is a war between the left and the right wing. Probably doomed to stay in Sweden for some years.

Education legal framework architecture in international law is one of the most complex questions. To go into detail on the principles stated by the conventions, treaties and other legal instruments and its connections and consequences on the national legislations, was a challenge for those who develop independent schools all over Europe.

The EU has the power to impose some laws but mostly national laws tend to be predominant.

This was explained by Jan de Groof, who brought legal framing to discussion. But he also suggested that the EU should have a bigger role in legislating for Education in Europe.
He believes that the EU “should be the dynamic motor of enhancing, screening, detecting legislation and promoting policies that would lead to a more respect for diversity and pluralism within the Education sector. It is not enough to put it on paper, you have to do it for real.”

During Jan de Groof’s presentation, there was room for some good reflections. There was given an example of a gay teacher in a Catholic School in Denmark that was fired because the school argued that he was off the parameters of the institution. Here you have the conflict of two fundamental rights. However, Jan de Groof said that if the school has a written document that attests that it is a fundamental principal of the school to have straight teachers, than the school can fire a gay teacher without any problem. Although that is true, Jan de Groof is very reluctant. He believes that the legislator has to look at each case separately and analyze which fundamental right is predominant.

After discussing the future of education and the legal framing of education in Europe, it was very important to look at education as a market. Schools tend to position themselves in comparison with others but we also see that parents tend to choose their children’s school based on a number of criteria such as rankings (how schools are evaluated and positioned in comparison to each other), quality of education (“is it a good school?”), “does it have good results in national exams?”), distance or school composition (“how far away from home or job is it?”).

During his presentation, Alexandre Homem Cristo underlined the importance of diversity. He believes that diversity should come first, before quality. Of course society should not neglect quality of schools or teaching but, Alexandre Homem Cristo says that in a world of rapid development, diversity is the only way to guarantee the future: It is the answer for the unknown.

However, there are still many countries with a great lack in these matters. “Freedom of choice means, first of all, having choices to choose from”, Alexandre Homem Cristo pointed out.

And of course, one cannot forget the teachers - who are the faces of education. Teachers should know they have a great power in their hands. Inge Nuijten defends that teachers (as leaders) should see the talent of each individual student. However, Inge Nuijten says that we have to be aware of the word “talent”. Teachers should encourage more those who work hard than those who have what we usually call talent. The dangerous of it is that you easily get “lazy talented students” instead of “good hardworking students”.

Furthermore, the teacher should be able to gain the respect of the students without having to be authoritarian.
Inge Nuijten also believes that the quality of the student is related in a big way to the quality of the teacher. Not so much related to what the teacher knows but what the teacher can pass to the students; how can the teacher make the student become the best possible version of themselves both as a person and as a student.

The ECNAIS Conference “The Independent Sector & Diversity in Education: Creating a Learning Society” provided reflection, discussion and inspiration for those who live for education and most of all, for those who believe in an Education for the Future based on pluralism and diversity.

On the whole, the ECNAIS conference in Warsaw gave hope to all the participants, showing that all members are making a difference, each step at a time, in Education.

After exchanging experiences and ideas, it is up to each of the participants to try and make a real difference in their communities and in their countries.

Freedom of education, linked to diversity, should make it possible to free ourselves from the chains of the past. It can lead us to a vision aimed at the future, aimed to an understanding of the forces that block progress in education. Only in this way, freedom of education, linked to diversity, can contribute to a civil society, ready for the future.