
Closing Speech by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta at a National Conference entitled “Immigration and Education: A Need for Policy”, organised by the Office of the Pro-Rector for Student and Staff Affairs and Outreach, the Faculty for Social Wellbeing, the Faculty of Education and the Ministry for Education and Employment – 13 April 2018

[Salutations]
Distinguished guests
Dear friends

Thank you for inviting me to make some brief remarks, at the end of this important conference, on the essential topics of immigration and education in our Maltese islands.

I would also like to thank the Pro-Rector, Dr Carmen Sammut, and her Office for Student and Staff Affairs and Outreach; the Faculty for Social Wellbeing; the Faculty of Education; and the Ministry for Education and Employment, who, as I am informed, all have contributed to the facilitation of this constructive conference.

I must commend you, Dr Sammut, for this excellent initiative, to bring together so many strategic stakeholders, to speak about their efforts and share their experiences, while also exploring the grey areas in our educational system.

This analytical approach, together with the necessary determination, will definitely improve essential access to education for refugees and migrants in the Maltese Islands.

I am informed that this conference has highlighted the urgent need to identify new strategies to ensure the full and equitable inclusion of all the people who call our Maltese islands their home.

Education is key to inclusion.

Education is essential, to the much called-for integration.

Education is the way forward, to address unnecessary social tensions.

We must ensure that migrants are welcomed into our education system, especially children and young people who experience additional vulnerability and precarity due to their status, as migrants, asylum-seekers, or refugees.

Education embraces all the necessary dynamics, to reach out, and make all people aware of the enrichment that diversity can bring to our communities and society.

I believe that now is the time for us to step up our efforts, and to ensure a more active contribution towards the much-needed change, of some peoples’ perspectives.

We must move, together, towards the acknowledgement and appreciation of our islands’ diversity.

Our educational system must not only be truly accessible and inclusive, but also it must instil a sense of pride, as a society, as we consciously choose to value and to celebrate the richness of our diversity.

I have first-hand experience, gained during my many visits to schools and other institutions, around our islands, that the dynamic can change in profoundly positive ways, when our schools become safe spaces, of respect and of the celebration of diversity.

It is essential for us to prepare our children and young people, to appreciate diversity.

If we do not suitably prepare our children and young people, to be active and conscious members of a multicultural society, than we shall be losing out on the full enrichment of our democracy.

Let me share this very personal experience with you [Angie]

When our communities of learning become inclusive, when they become safe spaces for dialogue and discussion, the whole of our Maltese society matured, as it will be enriched.

In order to make this enrichment a reality, we need to build powerful synergies, amongst our authorities, our academics, and our civil society activists.

Together we need to understand what active inclusion and proper integration mean, in a twenty-first century democracy.

One thing which most certainly inclusion and integration are not, is the flawed ideology of “assimilation”.

Integration and inclusion definitely are not assimilation.

It is of utmost importance that we must never expect others to be stripped of their own cultural heritage and identity. A person’s identity is a potential source of strength and empowerment, which will be of benefit to our communities and society as a whole.

We must focus on strategies for inclusion, which prioritise a positive peace approach. We must ensure that we stand in respect and solidarity with all the diverse groups, who today make up the social fabric of our Maltese Islands.

I am convinced that this vital conversation, that has already begun on a national level, about the importance of inclusion, should be adopted as an ongoing process, for continuous evaluation, appraisal, and where necessary, change.

We must keep working, not only within our schools, but also on a broader social strategy for the empowerment of our whole society.

In this context, I see the urgent need for support, at all levels of engagement, including services for psycho-social care and multicultural education.

Again, I would like to share the experience from an initiative which the President’s Trust has taken, in collaboration with the Blossom Foundation and with the St Paul’s Bay Primary School, whereby we are providing comprehensive and effective psycho-social support to students, in this multicultural school.

However, I must stress that multiculturalism is not only limited to certain schools. I have been to schools in Mellieha, St Julians, and Sliema, just to mention a few, where a sudden cultural change has practically taken place over night.

These, and other schools in Malta, need support. Support, not only addressed to both migrant and Maltese children, but also opportunities of training for our educational professionals and their complementary staff.

There is no time to be lost, because the multiculturalism of our islands is a reality NOW.

Therefore, our response must be equally realistic ... our response must be rooted in a commitment to the dignity of each individual and every community, who, together, make up the vibrancy of our contemporary society.

Education is fundamental, when it comes to creating the necessary pathways for the successful inclusion of migrants and refugees into the life of our islands.

This does not only apply to school children, but also to the young people and adults who come to Malta, with their own skills and abilities. We cannot afford to ignore their potential, and the specific contributions that they can make to our workforce.

Let me share another personal experience [Mohammed, Syrian - accountant to a tile-layer]

For this reason, our authorities must find innovative and efficient ways of regularising the qualifications and training which many migrants and refugees bring with them. In so doing, we shall ensure that the economy is enriched at various skills levels.

Moreover, I believe that we must continuously appraise, and ask ourselves some important questions, including;

Where are the grey areas in our educational system, and how can our educational system, at all levels, be made more effective, inclusive, and relevant in real time?

Effective inclusion and respectful integration through education, will be powerful evidence of our our commitment to safeguarding universal human rights, and to upholding the fundamental freedoms for all of humanity.

I would also like to mention, on this occasion, one very powerful initiative, recently launched under my patronage, which is seeking to address these grey areas in vocational and tertiary education for migrants and refugees.

Last year, an NGO called Spark15 was set up, with the goal of bringing together young people from different countries, to create positive change and promote holistic inclusion within Maltese society.

Let me quote from the manifesto of Spark15, which states that:

“Spark15 aims to help refugee and young migrants to attain full integration within the Maltese communities. By helping them to be active participants, encouraging diversity, and promoting a society that is more inclusive and accepting of others.”

Furthermore, Spark15 forms part of the Migrant-Led NGO Platform within my Foundation, which is the President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society.

From the beginning, Spark15 has focused most of its attention on access to education. Through the facilitation of my Foundation, they have met with stakeholders in the sector, and the thanks to the invaluable assistance of the University of Malta authorities, much valuable progress is being made.

I believe that it is the essential celebration of diversity, in all areas of life, which makes the inclusive education of migrants and refugees within our society a priority area. It is an area which we cannot afford to ignore.

Let us, therefore, do more, to ensure that each and every person, regardless of their country of origin, who call our islands their home, has access to the same educational opportunities.

Let us ensure that each and every person has same opportunity to make a valuable and respected contribution, to the sustainable prosperity and holistic wellbeing of the Maltese Islands.

Thank you for your attention.