PRO-RECTOR’S ADDRESS TO III MESCE CONFERENCE

Welcoming Address at the Third MESCE Conference by Pro-Rector, University of Malta

ALFRED VELLA

It is with great pleasure that, on behalf of the University of Malta, I welcome you to the third meeting of the Mediterranean Society of Comparative Education (MESCE). I thank MESCE for choosing Malta as its venue for the third conference. I am sure you will not be disappointed with this choice.

The country has a history which reflects the cultural hybridity that characterises this region. Our language is very much a reflection of this, being a derivative of Arabic with a strong influx of romance words. A cursory look at the programme assured me that many of the conference presentations, voicing some very pressing concerns regarding educational provision in the Mediterranean, reflect this cultural hybridity. No doubt, as educational researchers, you are engaging seriously with some of the major issues in the region.

Included are issues that, alas, have led to some very violent conflicts, still very much in evidence in this day and age. It pains me to observe that, like many preceding conferences of this type, this meeting takes place against the shocking backdrop of ongoing strife and violence in the nearby Middle East. Alas, a number of countries in the region, some of which are represented at this conference, are still far away from finding political solutions to the ethnic divisions evident in their midst. Ours is a conflict driven region which makes many of our research initiatives very hard to realise. We are often faced with situations when the presence of X in a project or conference automatically implies the absence of Y. I therefore admire the pluck and perseverance of dedicated researchers in pursuing projects of this kind, and comparative projects at that. They are often struggling against the odds. And yet their efforts are invaluable. Research, the encouragement of critical consciousness and the extension of one’s mental and cultural frontiers are central to the fostering of greater understanding among peoples and social conviviality. It is for this reason that I applaud the organisers on the choice of theme for this conference: Intercultural Dialogue through Education.
I am pleased to say that our only university, whose origins can be traced back to 1592, gives prominence to the Mediterranean dimension in scientific and humanistic research. It comprises a Mediterranean Institute that houses many research and teaching programmes in the field. This institute produces a well established peer reviewed interdisciplinary journal, *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*. This journal has mainly featured articles of a historical and anthropological nature; it has occasionally also carried articles focusing on specific aspects of education. Of particular interest to MESCE and conference participants is the fact that the University also houses the Euro-Mediterranean Centre for Educational Research (EMCER), directed by Professor Ronald Sultana, one of the key note speakers at the conference. This centre offers a master’s degree in Comparative Education with a focus on the Mediterranean area. It also produces another well established peer reviewed journal, the *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies*, which is now in its thirteenth volume and which, I understand, you will be adopting as the society’s journal.

I also note that a number of academics at our university have contributed to international debates on Mediterranean issues, including educational issues, by publishing papers in international journals and as chapters in books. Our university takes such research seriously since we regard ourselves as not just a teaching, but also a research university.

The Mediterranean dimension is however given importance in a variety of fields and research/teaching programmes at the University of Malta. Suffice it to mention that for many years the History of Mediterranean Civilisation, or should I say civilisations, featured as a compulsory core course in the BA programmes of the Faculty of Arts. We have had a well developed area of Contemporary Mediterranean Studies. The Mediterranean dimension is also given prominence in our scientific and environmental studies programmes. The University has also been active in MedCampus programmes. In short, one cannot do justice to the University without referring to its Mediterranean vocation.

And yet we cannot be complacent. We realise that much more needs to be done. Research programmes of the kind I have just mentioned require greater support, not only from the University but also from other entities both locally and abroad. In this regard, I am pleased to see that the Strickland Foundation has made a significant contribution to this conference by sponsoring the presence of a key note speaker from the Arab world. It would have been great had other entities, that purport to have this international vocation, followed this foundation’s lead. Conferences of this kind require appropriate funding to ensure the presence of representatives of countries lying within both the Mediterranean’s Northern and Southern shores. I also encourage the participants to devise ways by which
their specific educational agendas will be given prominence in the MEDA programmes. To date, education has not featured in these programmes.

I trust that the Malta meeting of the Mediterranean Society of Comparative Education will continue to provide evidence of the valuable educational research that is taking place in the region. Hopefully this will continue to place education high on the priority list of international institutions within and outside the region. I trust that this research will give the Mediterranean region greater visibility in the comparative education literature on a par with such regions as Latin America and East Asia. And I look forward to seeing some of the papers, presented at the meeting, published in academic journals, conference proceedings and other edited volumes. I would also like to see their findings disseminated through a variety of media, not only strictly academic ones. The findings of this research need to reach an audience that is wider than the restricted academic one, if they are to have a salutary effect on policy making in the related areas.

On behalf of the University, I wish you a productive two days conference which should also serve to establish MESCE on a sound footing.