



Address by the Minister of Education and Culture Mr George
Demosthenous at the Conference "Literacy for All"
Filoxenia Conference Center
5 and 6 September 2012

Your Royal Highness Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands,
Dear representatives of the European Commission and the Council
Secretariat, members of the High-Level Group, Speakers and
Participants

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to Cyprus and I am pleased
to address the Conference "Literacy for All", co-organized by the
Ministry of Education and Culture and the European Commission within
the context of the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European
Union.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, in the early 21st century, when the technological and scientific
development evolves rapidly, a "ghost" from the past, that many
thought was eliminated, at least in developed countries, still looms over
European countries: illiteracy is still here! And indeed, its presence is so
strong that it creates fears about the future of large segments of the
population and the prosperity of Europe itself.

Based on the research findings of the OECD, despite compulsory
education, one in five fifteen year-olds within the European Union lacks

the basic skills of reading and writing. Approximately eighty (80) million European adults, ie one third of the workforce of the European Union, do not have the minimum required level of knowledge to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work. Frequently, they are not in a position, to decipher and use the necessary signals or symbols, in order to integrate into their environment.

This is an issue with serious ramifications, which threatens economic growth and social cohesion, since will probably become a barrier to future employment of these people and even lead to social exclusion. In a rapidly changing world in which lifelong learning is now seen as the key to employment, economic success and full participation in society, lack of basic literacy skills may prove to be extremely problematic.

Effectively tackling the issue of illiteracy, could have positive consequences for people, their societies and economies, and could address other problems, such as poverty and unemployment. For this reason, the Cyprus Presidency has as one of its main priorities the fight against illiteracy and the promotion of Literacy for All.

The need for immediate action on this issue has already been identified by both European governments and the European Commission. EU Ministers have set a target to decrease below 15% the percentage of students with difficulties in reading, mathematics and science by 2020.

This is one of the five common European objectives for education. If we are to achieve the goals we set for 2020 for smart and inclusive growth, we need to act immediately to resolve the problem.

The question is what we do as European Union, as Member States and as authorities in charge of Education and Youth, to provide the opportunities and support our young people need to face the possible difficulties and problems of illiteracy.

To answer this difficult question, and effectively address the problem, the European Commission established an independent High Level Group which included 11 experts, chaired by Her Highness Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, in order to analyze the available data and evaluate the most effective policies in order to identify ways to achieve our common goal of improving literacy levels. The Group has completed its report, which we will have the opportunity to talk about during the work of our conference. The recommendations of the HLG will be a very useful material for those responsible for the prevention and decrease of illiteracy within Europe. The group's findings will be presented and discussed with the contribution of the distinguished members of the High Level Group, other speakers who are with us and all the participants of the conference, to come to definite conclusions, which will provide information and support to all of us in order to implement relevant policies and practices.

Based on the recommendations of the Group, the Cypriot Presidency will hold a discussion during the informal meeting of Ministers of Education in October 2012 and will subsequently promote the adoption of Council Conclusions in November on this issue, attempting to tackle illiteracy, through the provision of more qualitative education and training. Within this spirit, the Member States and the Commission will work together to reduce the rates of illiteracy in Europe, as part of the strategy for cooperation in education and training.

Dear Delegates,

Once again, I would like to thank Commissioner Vassiliou, the Director General and the members of DG Education and Culture, the President

and members of the High Level Group on Literacy and the distinguished speakers for their presence here today.

I welcome them and all other delegates who are here this weekend, in Cyprus and the Filoxenia Conference Center. I wish every success to the conference and a pleasant stay in our country to all participants.