



CONFERENCE “VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (VET: POLICY AND PRACTICE IN THE FIELD OF SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION)”

**Opening address by Mrs Olympia Stylianou
Permanent Secretary
Ministry of Education and Culture Cyprus**

Monday, 12th November 2012, 9:00 a.m.

Filoxenia Conference Center

Nicosia

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you all to Cyprus and to this Conference, which is organized under the Cypriot Presidency of the Council of the European Union by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education and the Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus.

Cyprus has been an active full member of the Agency since 2005 and looks forward to maintaining and developing a close and fruitful relationship with the other member states to ensure that through high quality research and development, those citizens of Europe with special educational needs receive the support and services required for their successful inclusion in society.

This Conference is the culmination of a three year project which aimed at identifying the factors of success and the challenges in the field of Vocational Education and Training for students with Special Education Needs in 28 countries, whilst exploring the current trends in the labor market towards higher qualification needs and the market for lower qualified people.

The education system in Cyprus is undergoing a period of change and transformation, through a far-reaching education reform, which includes an overhaul and modernization of school curricula, approaches and methods of teaching. Our vision is to achieve a democratic and student centered school, where each and every child receives the education it needs in order to be adequately prepared to face the challenges of the adult world. We are moving away from the rigid top – down approach of the past, towards a flexible system which adapts itself to the needs of the individual child. Teachers are given the pedagogic freedom to use the material and methods that will endure that every child acquires the basic skills



needed in modern society, so that they become active, creative, responsible and concerned citizens. This approach opens up new horizons for the children with special educational needs.

We have officially adopted the principles of inclusive education about twelve years ago, when a new Special Education Law based on this principle was passed. Our policies and practices were revised on the basis of inclusion and substantial progress has been witnessed.

Young people with special educational needs, who are included in mainstream education, can participate in programmes which promote employability skills and specific job training. This will include on the job training to enhance skill attainment and facilitate the transition from school to work. The Special Schools of Cyprus, which cater for children with more significant cognitive disabilities have a long history of providing their students with occupational training programmes. These usually combine programmes of employability training, training within the school and training within the work place. To promote ease of transition, many students are involved in joint projects with Governmental and Non Governmental Organisations which specialize in supported employment.

Nevertheless, we realize that there is still a long way to go towards the full achievement of inclusion, in education, through the democratic and student centred school, as well as in the world of work.

This is why we attach special importance to the project and this Conference on Vocational Education Policy and Practice in the field of Special Needs Education. We look forward to the outcome of your deliberations, as I am sure they will be very useful in our efforts for a more effective vocational educational system for students with special educational needs.

In this period where Europe faces significant economic difficulties it must be our commitment that those citizens who are the most vulnerable are not left behind. In our attempts for recovery we must ensure that existing programmes are maintained and developed so that those who are least able to promote their rights are assisted towards finding a meaningful and productive place in society.

Once again, I welcome you to Cyprus and wish you a pleasant and productive stay.