
Opening speech by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the Junior College Multi-Disciplinary Conference entitled “Breaking Barriers: Research, Practice and Collaboration”, 18 September 2018

Distinguished guests,
Dear students.

Let me begin by thanking the Principal and his team, of the Junior College within the University of Malta, for taking the initiative to organise such an important and distinguished conference.

Conferences such as this create a platform for interaction, for sharing, and for learning.

Above all, I would say, that this conference is an important exercise in critical thinking, and also in encouraging a multi-disciplinary practice and approach.

The inclusion of International speakers gives added value to the conference, as it continues to enhance the sharing and the exchange of wisdom among the participants.

Therefore, I would like to welcome the international speakers to this conference, and to our country.

I hope that you will not only give your best insights to the topics under discussion during this conference, but also find some time to enjoy the rich historical and cultural heritage, which our islands have to offer.

The theme chosen for this conference, namely, “Breaking Barriers: Research, Practice, and Collaboration”, is especially appropriate.

Working across the barriers imposed by conventions and social constraints, and learning how to develop innovative and strong collaborations, is becoming increasingly important, in a world that, unfortunately, is imposing borders, encouraging territorialism, and promoting egoism.

Such an inter-disciplinary approach, which this conference is promoting, is fundamental, to achieve a dynamic and pragmatic academic environment, which will rub off on the students, who become agents of positive change within their communities.

I also believe that the ability to think in innovative and groundbreaking ways is an essential prerequisite, for a healthy and vibrant democracy.

As history has shown us, progressive ideas have always been developed and discussed within universities and institutions of higher learning.

Academics and researchers, together with students, have been, many a time, catalysts for change in many situations.

Academics, researchers, and students, many a time, have been known to challenge and to transform the most deeply held beliefs and rigid mentalities of our societies, by breaking down barriers, through the discovery of new perspectives.

Change and innovation can only happen when the status quo is questioned, and new ideas are aired, discussed, and given the space to grow.

I believe that expanding our knowledge and gaining wisdom can only happen when we are confident enough to encourage a diversity of perspectives, which are discussed in an honest and respectful space.

This conference is definitely creating such a space.

Fundamentally, such an approach is only possible when we prioritise, encourage, and promote critical thinking.

I believe that safeguarding the values of critical thinking in education is essential, in order to implement more effective strategies for social progress and effective active citizenship.

As we all know, education is an inherently political activity, linked to issues of social justice and social solidarity.

Through education, we not only learn how to perform various activities, but we also learn how to be certain kinds of citizens.

Education gives us an identity.

However, there are worrying signs that the people of Europe are not feeling empowered enough to be the necessary active citizens of their countries.

Coming across some of the latest indicators from Eurostat, only 12% of the adult population in the European Union said that they felt engaged in processes of active citizenship.

This means that the vast majority of Europeans do not feel that they can engage in the democratic process of their respective countries, in a meaningful way.

For this reason, critical thinking, fostered through an educational system that breaks barriers and develops innovative approaches and connections, is essential to nurture deeper levels of understanding, participation, and solidarity.

This commitment to be catalysts, to encourage critical thinking, and also to be the critical voices of our societies, is crucial, to reach to strengthen our democracies.

In the words of Paulo Freire, education is “*an intervention in the world*”, capable of promoting sustainable growth and positive social transformation.

I believe, and I am sure you will agree, that critical thinking is a fundamental value, for us to strengthen a more substantial democratic way of life.

As we all know, critical thinking enables individuals to participate in democratic life, by reasonably weighing different options, by respectfully taking alternative views into consideration, and by gathering information to make informed decisions.

By thinking critically, beyond the barriers imposed by the status quo, academics, researchers, and students have the opportunity to explore ideas, while also questioning underlying assumptions.

Our democracies require reflective citizens, who possess the skills and the abilities to think critically, and to apply their knowledge in practical ways, for the benefit of our societies as a whole.

Effective critical thinking must certainly include skills for reasoning and argumentation.

However, critical thinking for democratic life must also include an openness to take our knowledge into the public sphere, and to take practical action, where needed, in a spirit of social justice and solidarity.

Critical thinking, active citizenship, and democratic participation are a way of life.

A way of life that is necessary, for every citizen, to feel included, embraced, and valued.

I believe that this moment in history is a defining time for our democracies.

We must be bold, in the face of rising extremism and populist rhetoric, which is increasing the risks of social tensions in so many of our countries.

It is up to us to respond to these threats, through education, knowledge, and the acquisition of wisdom, to be the critical thinkers, the effective collaborators, and the informed citizens, which are so much needed in this uncertain world of ours.

To be effective, I believe that we must be capable of actively engaging with our political and social institutions, to create the necessary positive change.

In this way, we shall truly be breaking barriers, to nurture a spirit of social justice and solidarity, for the benefit of all of our communities and societies.

Thank you for your attention, and I augur you a fruitful conference.