

Monday 12 August 2013

To:

Marc Durando
Executive Director
European Schoolnet
Brussels

Cc:

Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs; Ministry of Administrative Reform & e-Governance; Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Development & Competitiveness; Ministry of Interior; Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Welfare; Ministry of Public Order & Citizen Protection; Presidency of the Hellenic Republic; members of the Greek Parliament

Greek members of the European Parliament

EU agencies involved in education & digital initiatives (Scientix; DG DIGIT; European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism & Youth; Eurydice; European Institute of Innovation and Technology; European Training Foundation; Education Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency; Committee of the Regions: EDUC; Digital Agenda for Europe: Pillar VI: Enhancing digital literacy, skills and inclusion & Grand Coalition for Digital Jobs)

Subject: ICT classes to be eliminated from upper secondary education in Greece

Dear Mr. Durando,

My name is Mina Theofilatou and I am writing in the capacity of teacher of Informatics in Greek secondary education. Perhaps my name rings a distant bell: I had the honour of receiving from you the first prize in the poster competition at the 1st Scientix Conference in Brussels in May 2011¹.

Needless to say, the prize was a great honour, and unexpected too, as the theme of the conference was closely linked to the STEM European Schoolnet projects running all over Europe, whereas my poster was about my students' contributions to Wikipedia since 2007: I had no idea Wikipedia was on European Schoolnet's "agenda". It was however a priority for the Greek Ministry of Education: 2011 was dubbed by the Ministry as the "Year of the Digital Encyclopaedia²" and editing workshops were held all over the country to promote Greek Wikipedia as a learning tool, especially to upper secondary – higher education audiences³. Moreover, throughout the past two years the Ministry has been trumpeting Digital School initiatives⁴ for incorporating ICT and "blended learning" in secondary education. It should come as a surprise then that 2 years, 3 title changes⁵ and numerous "digital school" initiatives later, **the Ministry is planning on eliminating ICT classes from general upper secondary curriculum in Greek schools.**

The much discussed law bill for the "New Lyceum" (upper secondary) saw the light of publicity late Friday night: ICT teachers were shocked to learn that two of the classes they

¹ <http://www.scientix.eu/web/guest/conference/competition>

² http://www.minedu.gov.gr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2298%3A02-03-11-2011-etos-psifiakis-egkyklopaideias&catid=69%3Agenika-eggrafa&Itemid=144&lang=el

³ The Wikipedia editing guide I had written for my pupils was made freely available and was adopted for the purposes of the "My Wikipedia" campaign: <http://mycontent.ellak.gr/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/mywikipedia-tetradio.pdf>

⁴ <http://digitalschool.minedu.gov.gr/manuals/sxoleio.php>

⁵ In the past 4 years, the Ministry of Education has changed name three times: from "Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs" (1974-2009) it was renamed "Ministry of Education, Lifelong Learning and Religious Affairs" (2009-2012, "coincidentally" within the core period of LLP 2007-2013 funding), then "Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs, Culture and Sport" (2012-2013) and then to its current "Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs". It has been estimated that each change is equivalent to a cost of €500,000 (new signs, stamps, letterheads etc. for 15,000 schools) <http://www.protothema.gr/greece/article/206443/poso-tha-kostisei-h-metonomasia-toy-yp-paideias/>, meaning a total of €1,500,000 over a period of four years, three of which officially under national financial crisis.

taught, namely "Communications Technology" in 2nd Grade of Lyceum and "Application Development in a Programming Environment" in 3rd Grade would no longer be available to students who had chosen to pursue a career in Engineering & Technology sciences. These classes were taught for the past 14 years to pupils who had selected "Technology orientation" in the last two grades of secondary school, while ADPE was one of the lessons examined at a national level in the context of Greek Tertiary Education Entry Exams. So what became of all these revolutionary digital initiatives so ardently promoted by the Ministry? Could going back to the University Entry System practiced some 20 to 30 years ago⁶ be credulously integrated into a law bill for the NEW Lyceum?

In the member-states of the European Union keeping pace with the Information Society and the Digital Age of the 21st Century⁷, such a time warp to the past would sound unimaginable. In Greece under crisis however, one can easily draw conclusions by plain watching the news on TV or the Internet. For the past 3 years we have been bombarded by disaster scenarios related to our country being in a bankruptcy situation and in desperate need of external financial aid and reforms to balance the fiscal deficit. Ruling politicians have done little to go through with the reforms that have been identified as necessary in the "Memoranda of Understanding" that have been signed between the "Troika" and the Greek government, for fear of "political cost"; this means that each time the state "runs out of money", new measures need to be taken in return for the next loan instalment. Teachers were one of the easiest targets: first our salaries were slashed by approx. 40%⁸. Then they increased our working week by 2 hours, and threatened to relocate us to any place in Greece if we were identified as "surplus" in our own region⁹. Finally, when we started discussing a strike in reaction to all these unfair measures, they proceeded to issue a mobilisation order against us, served to each and every one of us by a policeman at our school or worse yet, our doorstep.¹⁰ In other words, the act of THINKING has pretty much been penalized (with help from mainstream media, who have thrown "tons of mud" our way).

Now our rulers have drawn the last straw: the government has started firing teachers "cold-turkey". The government is in a constant chase to dismiss a total of 15,000 civil servants by the end of the year; this has been imposed as a requirement for the disbursement of upcoming loan instalments. As no reformative measures (combatting bureaucracy, fighting tax evasion, rational allocation of personnel on the basis of transparent evaluation results etc.) have ever been successfully deployed for fear of political cost as mentioned earlier, the only "legal"¹¹ solution they can resort to is eliminating job positions. Less than a month ago, 2122 technical secondary school teachers¹² were dismissed, with absolutely no cause or warning. How did they pull it off? By eliminating 46 different courses in technical secondary education literally overnight: not a single study had been carried out in the direction of indicating that these courses were unpopular (quite the contrary!) or unviable. Naturally, the job positions of the teachers working in schools offering these courses were eliminated as well.

⁶ Throughout the eighties and nineties the entry system was based on 4 orientations, with 4 special lessons each and no ICT classes, as they were practically non-existent then: the new system shall be quite the same.

<http://www.tovima.gr/society/article/?aid=507072>

⁷ See "Informatics education: Europe cannot afford to miss the boat", Informatics Europe & ACM Europe Working Group, April 2013.

⁸ As an example, my monthly salary was 1260E (5-year engineering graduate, 2 children, C2 foreign language and 7 years of experience in 2011) plus benefits (approx. 2000E/year), now it's 890/month and no benefits.

⁹ If the draft presidential decree is approved, many teachers – myself included – will be forced to resign, as they cannot afford to be distanced from their families!

¹⁰ see my blog post <http://agrypno.coma.blogspot.gr/2013/06/this-was-not-accepted-for-publication.html>

¹¹ According to the Greek Constitution, a legally appointed civil servant with a clean administrative record can be dismissed only if the agency he is employed with is abolished.

¹² Tables with names of the dismissed teachers: <http://www.koutipandoras.gr/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Diathesimotita.pdf>. Some 250 of them possess postgraduate degrees. Article about a teacher with 20 years of experience and who had received an excellence award three years ago from the then Minister of Education Anna Diamantopoulou: fired as well. <http://panosz.wordpress.com/2013/07/21/success-story-10/>

But it's a long way still to the 15,000 limit, and teachers are easy targets: we are often described in the media as lazy, arrogant and incompetent¹³, so the government expects little reaction from the general public. Which brings us back to the New Lyceum: in order to get rid of hundreds more teachers, they blatantly intend to send upper secondary students back to the "Dark Ages".

This why I – we! – are appealing to you. In a country where tax evasion is still riding high¹⁴, where the infamous "Lagarde list"¹⁵ has been ridiculously presented by one involved politician after another as "lost" or "misplaced", where politicians and their protégées continue to live an opulent life, the scapegoat to their incompetence will be EDUCATION. Pupils will be deprived of the option to follow a technology-oriented curriculum at school with lessons such as programming and communications (which will most certainly affect their choice of career) and ICT teachers will see the years they have spent promoting knowledge, technology and innovation in their classrooms go to waste, and their own decent living a memory of the past. If not for any of the above, by helping us you will justify the objectives of the European Commission "ICT in schools survey"¹⁶ and the "Grand Coalition for Digital Jobs"¹⁷: **digital jobs cannot be created where digital education is at risk.**

The law bill is currently under public consultation and it is expected that the final bill will be submitted to Parliament at the end of August. We kindly request of you, in your capacity as Executive Director of European SchoolNet, to take regard of the points put forward in this letter and support our case with the Greek Ministry of Education. As we have received no valid answers from the people planning these supposedly innovative changes, we are counting on European education institutions to press for such answers. In particular, we would really appreciate an explanation for the following:

What is the rationale behind eliminating constructive ICT classes such as "Application Development in a Programming Environment" from upper secondary school curricula, especially when the changes are supposedly being introduced as "innovations" in the name of the NEW Lyceum?¹⁸

This letter shall be communicated to mass media in Europe; in addition, it shall be translated into Greek and communicated to all involved parties as well as mass media in Greece. **Education and digital literacy cannot be the scapegoat to a system incapable of timely and justly coping with crisis.**

In closing, I believe you will find the following video of interest: it is a national television interview on a mainstream news show. Pavlos Charamis, Chairman of the Research and Documentation Centre of the Greek Secondary Education Teachers' Federation, explains the reasons computer programming was eliminated from secondary school curricula. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1xI0kMIU7E> (with English transcription).

¹³ There was uproar against Greek teachers when they reacted against the extra two hours per week. On first thought, it does sound reasonable; on closer investigation and considering a previous average of 20 hours teaching per week (plus office work which is mandatory but not counted), the augmented schedule will mean that 1 out of 10 us will now be considered redundant by the government, which was their intention in the first place. Plus the "compulsary relocation" clause was carefully concealed from the public.

¹⁴ Interesting article on mind-mapping tax evasion in Greece, and how it led nowhere (English)

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/money/2012/01/05/144747663/how-a-computer-scientist-tried-to-save-greece>

¹⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lagarde_list

¹⁶ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-13-341_en.htm

¹⁷ <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/grand-coalition-digital-jobs-0>

¹⁸ An explanation they may produce is that two hours/week of ICT have been introduced into 1st Grade. They may however choose to conceal the fact that this class will be a selective one involving the teaching of ICT *skills* (**not Informatics**), and that this selective was already in place for almost a decade in 1st and 2nd general until it was **eliminated 2 years ago**, only to be "halved" and reintroduced – most likely with the same outdated textbook – in the New Lyceum. This can hardly be called a victory for innovation.

Thank you very much for your time. I am naturally at your disposal for any other information/input you may need.

Kind regards,

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