Firstly, thank you very much indeed for inviting us to your beautiful city and these lovely islands. And thank you very much Minister, we greatly admire and appreciate Spain’s leadership and passion for the Safe Schools Initiative.

Spain has been very consistent in supporting education. As the next chair of the group of countries which supports my office, we look forward to your leadership in steering countries on their commitment to the Safe Schools Declaration.

We are all here to talk about keeping students, teachers, schools, universities and higher education institutions safe during conflicts.

In a sense, we are here to talk about our future – the future of our world. Schoolchildren like Greta Thunberg are already engaged with the future – of the planet.

For millions of students, though, the future is simply drowned by the horror of the present. Stuck in conflicts, their immediate concern is daily survival – and of maybe being able to go to school one day.

Students like Khaled, a 10-year-old I met in Homs in Syria last year, who, along with his family, was displaced by the conflict. He told me - and lots of other children I meet in humanitarian crises tell me - how much they would love to go to school.

Unfortunately for children like Khaled, modern conflict increasingly see men with guns and bombs deliberately attacking schools, universities and higher education institutions. And it’s gotten worse over the last five years, according to new research by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack.

In the last five years, more than 14,000 attacks on education were reported in 34 countries.

Often the death, damage and destruction result directly from the use of explosive weapons. In Yemen, for example, some 2,000 schools are inoperable now, including 256 that have been destroyed by air strikes or shelling and more than 1,500 that were damaged by air strikes and shelling.
In countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, out-of-school children face a higher risk of recruitment by armed groups, they face a higher risk of kidnappings, they face a higher risk of enslavement, they face a higher risk of child marriage and they face a higher risk of early pregnancy.

Girls caught in conflicts are particularly affected – they are more than twice as likely as boys to be out of school.

In at least 18 countries over the past five years, women and girls have been targets of attacks on education both as victims of sexual violence, and because armed groups oppose women and girls getting an education.

We know all this because of the Education Under Attack reports, for which I commend the UN’s education lead, UNESCO, which launched the first report 12 years ago in 2007. These reports monitor attacks on education, including higher education.

I am an optimist; I think we will not let these children and youth down. Countries are taking on the responsibility of protecting their future. So I think it’s very good that so far, 89 States have endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration.

The signing of the declaration has some effect on how States behave. So for example since the Yemeni Government signed the declaration, they have been trying to raise awareness of the need to maintain schools as safe spaces.

The Government of Burkina Faso has drawn up a new strategy for the protection and continuation of education.

Last year, the Democratic Republic of the Congo participated in a review to work out how it could improve its compliance with the declaration.

We also have seen some positive steps in the United Nations.

The UN Security Council for example has included attacks on schools as grounds for targeted sanctions against the people who commit them, for example by imposing travel bans and by seizing the assets of the men who order the men with guns to attack schools.

I would encourage all UN Member States here to work together to develop a political declaration to build on the steps already taken in the Security Council.

Funding for education in protracted crises, including conflict, is also massively below what is needed to get children into school. That is one of the reasons why, from the funds that I manage – the Central Emergency Response Fund and the Country-Based Pooled Funds – I have this year made education a priority.

I have asked all the Humanitarian Coordinators working for the UN around the world to give me more proposals of how they can protect schools and support education through the funds we manage.
The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, which includes our partners in the UN and the humanitarian community, has also been working with governments to protect schools and the rights of students. And we see some results from that. Aid partners’ concerted efforts in South Sudan led to 27 schools which had been occupied by men with guns being vacated by Government armed forces in 2015.

These organizations are often working in very difficult conditions. In the past year, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in the Kasai region affected by conflict, where scores of schools were attacked or destroyed, my colleagues at UNICEF provided education to more than 270,000 girls and boys despite the difficulties of access and funding.

But we have to do a lot better than what we are doing at the moment. Especially on three key priorities.

Firstly, we need every country to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration.

Secondly, when countries sign up for the declaration, they have to implement the obligations under it. For every good example – like the one I mentioned before from the Government of South Sudan leaving schools – we are seeing too many examples of forces occupying schools. That has to stop.

And thirdly, we need consistent and longer-term funding of the education in humanitarian response plans. In 2018, while sixty per cent of the total of the humanitarian activities in the humanitarian response plans the UN coordinates were financed, which meant that we raised a record amount of money, US$15 billion, only eleven per cent of the funding needed for education were financed.

The choices of what gets financed and what doesn’t gets financed are made by donors. The agencies and the UN present a plan. The governments and the donors decide what to finance. And one of the things we all have to do is to persuade governments that in the future they need to finance education more.

So, for the sake of Khaled, that little boy I met in Homs, and countless of other children I went to talk to over the two years I have been in this job, we have to leap up our efforts to do much better both for them, but also as a wise investment for our own future.

Thank you.