

## Post-secondary Education with special reference to MATSEC English

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**Abstract:** This paper takes as its point of departure the Report of the Working Group on the Future of Post-Secondary Education (2017) and following a brief overview of the institutions that provide education at this level, turns the spotlight onto the two state institutions that provide education at post-secondary level. Their characteristics and the challenges that they face are expounded on and recommendations made are revisited in light of this analysis. The discussion is informed by data collected during focus group meetings with teachers and students. Prior to this Report, the post-secondary landscape had been relatively unchanged for several years, and a major overhaul was proposed one that factored in among several other considerations, the divide between the academic and the vocational streams. The paper briefly analyses the Matriculation Certificate Reform (2019) and questions the extent to which this reform has adopted recommendations made for the post-secondary sector in the 2017 report.

**Keywords:** post-secondary, vocational, English, MATSEC

### Introduction

At the time of the writing of the report entitled The Working Group on the Future of Post-Secondary Education in Malta commissioned by the Minister of Education, the situation regarding the post-secondary sector had been relatively unchanged for quite a few years, since the introduction of the MATSEC system. One of its main characteristics was its disparity. Not only was there and still is, a huge difference between the vocational and the

academic, but there was and still is a wide gap between the two most important post-secondary institutions, namely the Junior College and Giovanni Curmi Higher Secondary School. Each caters for thousands of students. They are quite different, the first reporting to and is an integral part of the University of Malta, and the second reporting to and is, for all intents and purposes, another secondary school reporting to the Ministry for Education and Employment. The Junior College is widely perceived as having a more prestigious place in the hierarchy, partly because it is a part of the University, and partly because it does not cater for students working towards a second chance to get into university but solely for those that meet the full entry requirements. The Junior College is autonomous as regards recruitment, wages, and nomenclature, among other aspects, while G.C. Higher Secondary School is an integral part of the Ministry for Education and Employment and not autonomous at all. Conditions of work in the latter are identical to those of state secondary schools and indeed Giovanni Curmi is considered for administrative purposes, as noted above, as another secondary school. This difference is crucial in terms of delivery and status, which often leads to resentment on the part of Giovanni Curmi staff. This is fundamental in order to understand the politics of the system. These differences will be further elaborated below.

Together with the two state post-secondary institutions described above, there are four others forming part of the Church and Private School systems. St. Edward's College provides educational facilities at all levels, including post-secondary. It has traditionally been run on the British Public-School model and, perhaps because of its high fees, is considered beyond the means of most parents in Malta. The same applies to St. Martin's which is also considered beyond the means of most.

Church schools, on the other hand, do not charge fees and though a contribution is asked for it is well within the reach of most parents and is voluntary. This makes the two schools, De La Salle and St Aloysius very attractive and elitist in academic terms. St Aloysius, in particular, has extremely high entry academic qualifications at Sixth form level and is often considered the most successful school of all in terms of results. Data from the student focus groups showed very clearly that St. Aloysius students were able to think much more critically of the system as a whole than JC or GCHSS students; this was not unrelated to their academic selectivity.

## **The two state post-secondary institutions**

The two state institutions accept any student with appropriate qualifications at SEC level – which is the end-of-compulsory education level - resulting in a wide variety of student ability. To be admitted into Junior College a total of six SEC level passes at grade 5 (or grade C from foreign examination boards, mainly British ones) are required. On the other hand, the GCHSS’s mission statement explicitly states that the school provides a ‘second chance’ education. Consequently, entry requirements here are four SEC subjects at grade 5 (or grade C from foreign examination boards). The school thus offers not only a full course intended for university entry but also allows students to re-sit SEC subjects to achieve the necessary grades. The Advanced and Ordinary level course thus caters for students who do not have the full range of grades to prepare for Advanced Matriculation courses at Junior College. One result of this is that GCHSS has often been perceived as attracting the lower-achieving students, and hence has often been perceived as having a lower status than Junior College, Independent, and Church schools. However, more and more students with full qualifications are joining this school because of its set up as described below.

## **Aspects of school and student cultures**

The school day at Junior College stretches to 5 pm. One result of this is that students often have quite a few free periods and this encourages social and cultural life. There is time for extra-curricular activities which are an extremely important part of its attractiveness for a particular type of student. On the other hand, it was clear from the extensive focus group meetings that some students feel very lost in this situation and they feel very little connection with their lecturers on a personal basis. Some students after long years of functioning in tightly run primary and secondary schools where there is little room for ‘freedom’ are unable to cope with this. On the other hand, data showed that some students favour the atmosphere at Junior College as it is much less restrictive and more enjoyable. At GC Higher Secondary School, lessons end by three o’clock, leaving very little time for extra-curricular activities, and few free lessons. Breaks are limited to 15 minutes in the morning and thirty minutes at noon. Again, this is seen as a benefit by some and a disadvantage by others. However, the most striking difference is class size. Classes are of a maximum of 25 students at Giovanni Curmi and very often considerably less. This tends to facilitate teacher-student interaction and seems to be a highly significant factor for many

students choosing Giovanni Curmi, even though they have the qualifications to attend Junior College.

There seems to be an ideological difference also in attitude to students. At Junior College students fresh out of fifth form at age 16 seem to be considered capable of transitioning from secondary school culture to a university situation where there is much more autonomy. The question that is often asked is whether such students should be considered adults or in the process of transitioning to adulthood. Levels of 'maturity' depend on the individual and psychological factors and hence learning implications are enormous. One aspect of this is the fear on the part of many parents that the several bars in the proximity of Junior College will entice their children to 'run wild' during free periods between lectures. Indeed, there have been unpleasant reports on the situation. There are virtually no bars in the vicinity of GCSS and very little time between lessons. Thus, the cultures in which students are immersed can be quite different.

### **Autonomy**

Another important factor affecting the difference between the two colleges is a direct result of their autonomy or lack of it. Junior College recruits its own lecturers often, as is the case with most universities, not requiring previous teaching qualifications or experience. Their wages are quite higher, student contact hours fewer, hours are flexible in the sense that teaching staff are not obliged to stay on the premises between lectures, and they have access to additional funds related to academic work. Extremely central is the prestige of being a lecturer and not a teacher. Junior College often attracts experienced and very qualified teachers from GCSS because of the better working conditions, thus depleting GCSS of some of its best teachers on a very regular basis.

### **Teacher recruitment**

Following on from the above is another, very important difference, that of teacher recruitment. GCHSS has little or no say in the choice of teachers 'transferred' to its fold and as conditions at GCHSS are in their turn often perceived as 'better' than in other secondary schools because of fewer if any disciplinary problems, this attracts many teachers who may not necessarily fit the bill. I have personal experience of this as I was the Head of Department of English at GCH for many years. Funding, recruitment and so forth are the

responsibility of MEDE, who do not necessarily have the best experience at post-secondary school to make the best decisions. The teachers at GCSS also have no guarantee that they will not be transferred back to other secondary schools at any time and have little incentive to continue furthering their studies or skills, compared to Junior College lecturers whose position is assured. Indeed, many who continue developing their academic careers do so in the hope of being recruited by Junior College.

### **Assessment systems**

In 1997, the Matriculation Certificate was launched; it is the qualification that is awarded to students leaving the secondary school system. To qualify for it, students need passes in two Advanced level subjects and four Intermediate subjects one of which is Systems of Knowledge which is compulsory. The Matriculation Certificate has the advantage of being both wide and rather deep compared to the previous system of three Advanced level subjects which is still available especially for students planning to study abroad.

This system has been often criticized because it was originally planned that a subject at Intermediate level would roughly comprise a third of the load of an Advanced level subject. However, the syllabus of each Intermediate level subject often contains the same elements of an A level but is intended to be taught less intensively. In the focus groups, many teachers criticized this system saying that it was very difficult to decide where the limits are. Several complained that sometimes the examinations at the two levels were equally challenging. Others also complained that two or three lessons a week are not enough to cover the Intermediate level syllabus.

The examinations are entirely summative and terminal, that is, a student is assessed in all subjects at the end of the two-year course. This proved too demanding for many students and changes were effected: students were allowed to take Intermediate level examinations after one year of the two-year course. However, this very often caused problems for the school administration as those students who passed the examinations in the first year tended to be disruptive in the second year. Moreover, they settled for making the grade and did not strive to better it in the next examination sitting at the end of the course. Some schools, particularly Church schools, objected strongly to this practice.

However, the main problem has always been the summative and terminal nature of the final examinations which leads to cramming and is not flexible

enough for many students' abilities and competencies. The whole of one's future depends on examination after examination held in a very short period of time, which is so often nerve-wracking and leads to burn out among many otherwise very able students.

Complaints regarding the compulsory subject known as Systems of Knowledge have been legion. Most students reported that though they saw its value they perceived it as an added burden, an extra examination not pertinent for their future careers. This perception is endemic although university students attending the university were far less critical in their evaluation than they had been while sitting for their A levels.

Another criticism has been that there is no provision for accrediting non-formal and informal learning which often makes a huge difference to student skills and competencies. Indeed, these are often regarded as a waste of time by many students whose only objective is to achieve the MATSEC certificate at any cost. Non-formal and informal learning is a necessary, if not vital part of the post-secondary student experience and necessary to a holistic education. Because of the nature of the systems, as stated above, there is more scope for these activities at Junior College than at GCHSS which, as its name implies, is a secondary school and recent adjustments to the secondary school system have aimed to alleviate this problem.

Another very serious problem is the relatively large number of dropouts from JC and GCHSS. These often occur a few weeks into the start of the school year. Some can be attributed to students opting for a job, but again, it seems that many drop out because of the vast difference in expectations between SEC and Advanced level. Many students feel unprepared for sixth form studies and find the going much harder than anticipated. Many opt to change subjects after some weeks or months, but this poses an equal challenge as they then need to catch up with their peers. The problem is one of flexibility.

There seems to be a huge gap between secondary schooling and the examinations related to this, and post-secondary schooling with its MATSEC system. Student feedback was emphatic regarding their lack of preparedness, not only for realizing the differences in depth between MATSEC and SEC, but also for the research methods required at post-secondary level, and for the different setup and pedagogical approach adopted, especially at Junior College. Here, because the institution is an integral part of the University of

Malta and prepares students for university places, a lecture mode of transmission of knowledge and skills predominates. At GHSS on the other hand, an essentially classroom approach characterizes the teaching since the approach in secondary school is too guided and has very little space for autonomy. Students felt that everything had been prepared on a plate for them and that this had not helped them transition into sixth form education. Pedagogy at this level needs to be essentially andragogical or at least leading to a development of this approach. The shock effect of transitioning between the two approaches is often perceived as traumatic for some students. No generalizations can be made. Some thrive and some flounder. This, in turn, clearly links to the students' preferences for either Junior College or G.C Higher Secondary school depending on whether they are still thinking in secondary school mode or whether they feel comfortable with a university college model.

From the student focus groups, it was clear that students felt that the pastoral systems in both secondary schools and sixth forms are not effective enough. Many felt that they had no one to turn to when facing difficulties, even though counselling systems are of course in place and often effective. It seems, however, that many students somehow do not perceive these systems as relevant to their problems. Counselling at post-secondary level is one where the student approaches the counsellors; the latter often do not have enough information to identify a student in need, especially of an academic nature. For example, student cumulative records drawn up during the entire life of the student at primary and secondary levels are not available at post-secondary level. In the age of big data, this needs adjustment.

Artificial Intelligence offers great opportunities to personalize education. So does block-chain technology. The immutability and security of block-chain make it ideal, for example, for recording student progression. These are not futuristic visions but actually available at this point in time, and will become even more so in the very near future. AI and bio-tech technologies are disruptive and will change the way we think, behave and work. The working group paper takes some account of this, especially in its endorsement of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, but change is so rapid, that even this is probably out of date.

### **English at MATSEC level**

English provision at this level is provided in the form of Advanced level and Intermediate level. Most institutions assign at least six lessons a week for the

former and two for the latter, but this differs widely according to school and subject and the perceived academic abilities of the students attending the institution.

At Intermediate level, the written papers and an oral examination are set – all, up to now, terminal and summative. The written paper consists of three components: Writing, Reading, and Literature. Some schools opt for preparing students for two literary works, others for one. The student chooses one during the exam. The oral component is held some weeks before the written component, which results in sixth forms normally being pressed to finish their syllabus by April or sometimes March. Many criticize this system for reducing the school year to two terms only.

This problem is further complicated as the MATSEC system is specifically designed for students at Advanced level. Besides the oral component, three written papers are set, with eight sections, all of which are compulsory and equally weighted.

- Paper one consists of a question on a set Shakespeare text, a question on a set poetry text, and literary criticism of an unseen poetry text.
- Paper two consists of two questions on set novels and literary criticism of an unseen prose text.
- Paper three consists of a language essay, a summary-writing task, and linguistics.

It bears emphasizing that that the system is summative and terminal, with an inherent lack of flexibility which many students perceive as intimidating and even uncaring. The Advanced-level programme is assessed in its entirety at the end of the two years. It cannot really be labelled as student-centred. It was Sir Ken Robinson (2016) who complained that standardization was the bane of present educational systems.

The present system has been in place for a long time, and over that time the world has changed rapidly, so rapidly in fact, that it is no wonder that the system has not kept up. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when the world is dominated by new technological systems, the skills required are quite different from those of the past. When the Matriculation Certificate was developed there was no Internet, research was laborious, and information was not at the tip of one's fingers. The world of work was also radically different from the present one, which is being constantly taken over by new technologies and hence requires

new skills. Especially central are the skill of learning to learn, critical thinking, understanding that information underpins present societies, and if the rapid changes continue, as they undoubtedly will, all of us will have to 'reinvent' ourselves continually in order to be relevant and not, as Yuval Harari (2018) puts it, be 'the useless class'.

The present system does not reflect 21<sup>st</sup> century skills as envisaged by the OECD (2016) and the World Bank, for instance. The present syllabi are not reflective of present and future skills. The English syllabus, in particular, is not designed for developing and testing, for example, communication skills, research skills, and collaboration, among others.

If today's students are to succeed in their careers during the Information Age, they need to develop the following twelve skills:

1. Critical thinking
2. Creativity
3. Collaboration
4. Communication
5. Information literacy
6. Media literacy
7. Technology literacy
8. Flexibility
9. Leadership
10. Initiative
11. Productivity
12. Social skills

These skills are intended to help students keep up with the lightning-pace of today's modern markets. Each skill is unique in how it helps students, but they all have one quality in common. They are concerned with preparing students for the future which is often unknown. We cannot say how the world will be like in twenty years' time; all we can say is that it will be very different.

It can be argued that some of these skills are catered for in the present post-secondary syllabi. In this way one can argue that critical thinking is fostered in, for example, essay writing and literary criticism, but there is still an enormous gap between what is actually happening in class and the desired outcomes envisaged by the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and the current worldview??.

The present system is essentially modelled on a mass-production style of operation, where students are exposed to the content in the form of lessons or lectures, asked to write something occasionally and then tested and assigned to heaven or hell. It is a one-size-fits-all system, which is not flexible, not geared to generate initiative, not geared towards collaborative learning and production, and lacking in developing critical thinking skills. From this perspective, the current educational system – both pedagogy and assessment – is almost totally obsolete.

The twelve skills listed above call for much more than writing for nine hours and speaking for some ten or fifteen minutes – which characterize the current examination setup for English. They require a radical re-think. The question is, not what to do but when to have the courage to implement this reform. These ideas are very disruptive to and impinge on the comfort zones of lecturers, teachers, and school administrations. Who will have the courage to bell the cat? The 2017 Report makes relevant suggestions, but it seems that there are many difficulties in the way, and not surprisingly, the upshot could be a reform that is too little and too late.

Another feature of the MATSEC system is that it is entirely under the control of the University of Malta, and so does not really reflect the needs of society as a whole. There are two systems at work, the academic and the vocational and very often the twain shall never meet. The very fact that the University has such high prestige means that MATSEC, whether intended or not, has a higher status than vocational education. Does this reflect the needs of every student or indeed the nation? The experience of many countries (notably Scandinavia and Germany) shows that one is not necessarily more conducive to achievement than the other. In these countries, there is much more parity of esteem between the inductive system characteristic of vocational education and the didactic ideology of the academic world.

The policy underpinning *My Journey* (2016) which is being developed in secondary schools is an interesting development towards vocational education and time will tell whether it will succeed in achieving the desired objectives. However, it is not reflected at the post-secondary level where the two strands are pulled apart. One approach to start the process of giving dignity to those whose learning styles do not fit the academic mode of teaching and learning is to make sure that both academic and vocational systems are certified by a National Assessment Authority. This will add much

to parity of esteem. In this regard, the possibilities offered by block-chain technology are endless.

### **Previous suggestions regarding post-secondary systems**

By far the most impressive suggestions regarding post-secondary reform have been the 2005 review 'Strengthening an Examination System' and the 2011 report 'An Evaluation of the Impact of the MATSEC system of student participation in further and higher education'. It is perhaps ironic that some of the authors of these documents that have been radically criticising the system for so many years are closely related to the workings of the very same examination system. Perhaps the most salient feature of those suggestions has been to reform the 2+3+1 system (characterized by two A-level subjects, three at Intermediate and Systems of Knowledge) with a model where students sit for five or more Intermediate subjects in the first year, and then further develop their successes at this level by choosing two or three subjects at Advanced level. This will be very useful for various reasons. Perhaps the most compelling one is that many sixteen-year-olds do not have a clear idea yet of what they wish to study at post-secondary and tertiary level. Yet they are forced to choose Advanced level subjects. The model allows them a taste of the different subjects before making decisions regarding their careers – which will be heavily influenced by the choices they make at sixteen when they are still fresh out of a lead-me-by-the-hand approach from secondary school. It is also worth noting that success at post-sixteen levels does not relate much to success at SEC, especially with regard to Mathematics but also to most other subjects. The 2005 MATSEC recommendations have enormous implications with regard to the life chances of students, who are in the process of maturing to adulthood but are not yet adults. This system would also tie in very well with increasing the parity between academic and vocational routes, which can then be more easily mixed and matched. Nomenclature of certification is very important here.

### **Challenges and recommendations of the Working Group Report**

The 2017 Report on which this paper draws, identified twenty-six challenges and made recommendations for meeting those challenges. The more relevant challenges to this discussion have been selected and reproduced below. They are followed by recommendations for those challenges to be met.

## **Challenges**

- **Challenge One.**  
*One-size-fits-all teaching and learning is not fit for purpose.*
- **Challenge Two**  
*Post-secondary represents a critical stage in the lifelong learning journey of young people*
- **Challenge Three**  
*The formation of a post-secondary system should be holistic and not exclusively oriented toward examination success.*
- **Challenge Four**  
*There is little recognition of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in the curriculum.*
- **Challenge Five**  
*MATSEC syllabi are perceived as too challenging by learners.*
- **Challenge Six**  
*Technology education is currently focused on computer studies, not digital pedagogy.*
- **Challenge Seven**  
*MATSEC examination schedules put pressure on teachers, students and MATSEC Support Unit.*
- **Challenge Eight**  
*Teachers need to have support systems in place.*
- **Challenge Nine**  
*There is a need for clarity on the governance of functions relating to curriculum, assessment, certification and service provision.*

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendation One**

*Ensure policy buy-in translates into a commitment to implement in sector within prescribed timeframes*

### **Recommendation Two**

*Appoint a Task Force to develop and implement short-term strategy and associated programmes*

The above two recommendations encapsulate all the challenges identified above. They are self-evident if anything is to be done to address the current situation and indeed, shortly after the publication of the Report, a task force was established as is explained below.

### **Recommendation Three**

*Develop a formal transition plan for all students moving from secondary to post-secondary education*

This recommendation addresses Challenge Two (above). From data collected from the focus groups, it was very clear that the gap between secondary school and sixth form is perceived to be very wide by many students, more so in some subjects than in others. For example, students who had not studied English Literature at secondary school found the Literature texts taught both at Advanced and Intermediate levels very demanding.

Another facet of the same problem is that despite their low grades many students still choose to study that subject at post-secondary level. While some do not manage to achieve the required levels, many find it very hard, and many others fall by the wayside. Perhaps if they had been guided well in their secondary schools, they would not have made these choices. Some, however, do not have much choice as their grades are low in most subjects and then, there is little that can be done except to give them all the help possible. This issue was raised several times in the focus groups held with Junior College lecturers, some of whom suggested that only students with grades 1 to 3 should be allowed to choose a subject at Advanced level. This, however, would widen the gap between JC and GCHSS even further. One suggestion was that struggling students be asked to attend extra lessons designed to accelerate their progress. However, at the time of writing SEC results do not give a clear indication of the areas which a student needs to improve. High marks on the Oral component hide a poor performance on the Writing skills, and vice versa.

Such provision is, at the moment, beyond the resources and perhaps the vision of even GCHSS let alone JC where, it is clear, many lecturers feel that they should cater only for the high achievers.

This recommendation for a transition plan would also imply better counselling in secondary schools and a move to a more personalized system. Perhaps it is about time to move towards an Individual Educational Programme for all students, at least in the last years of their secondary education. Allocating mentors who follow students' progress and provide feedback and advice to individual students is required at all levels.

#### **Recommendation Four**

*Implement changes to the examination model in order to provide a developmental and formative experience at the sixth forms which are academically oriented.*

This recommendation aims to address at least Challenge Three, and it has several implications with regard to other challenges. As noted above, the system as it stands does not meet the requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century model as promulgated by international organizations. It is difficult to see how a summative terminal examination model can possibly address these issues as listed above.

Especially important is the need to reconsider relying exclusively on writing as the channel through which to assess students at both Intermediate and Advanced level. Many if not all, of the components of English papers, can be tested orally, and in so doing, rather than regard oral skills as a separate component to be assessed in isolation, it could be integrated and become a vital part of assessment.

This will not compromise standards; on the contrary, it would address the issue of many students memorizing notes or essays and regurgitating them in the written examinations. 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills, especially communication skills and critical thinking are essential to the new economies.

This recommendation is also related to the issue of lack of flexibility in the Advanced and Intermediate examination models. By adopting a modular system and moving away from a wholly summative and terminal one will bring about many benefits not least of which is the formative nature of such an assessment. One objection made by some teachers and lecturers is that students will tend to forget the content presented in modules which have already been achieved. This can and should be addressed by including a synoptic examination or another form of assessment at the end of the course.

Only a radical reform of the MATSEC system and a move towards andragogical teaching methods can effectively tackle the problems.

#### **Recommendation Five**

*Facilitate alternative pathways to accommodate the desire of those students who wish to move to and from academic paths to a vocational education stream*

From the focus groups, especially, it was evident that many students drop out because the academic didactic approach is not suited to their learning styles. Little attempt is evident in secondary schools to address this extremely important issue, despite the availability for several years of the *Let me Learn* programme.

It must be stressed that the academic model is not intrinsically better than a vocational inductive model. There is little or no exchange between the two systems with, unfortunately, (for historical reasons) the academic model still being regarded as 'better' and a vocational model as suited for the less able or intelligent. From the focus groups, it was clear that this attitude still prevails, and that parity of esteem is still a distant dream. Flexibility is key. By adopting a modular approach, it is very possible for modules appropriate for both the academic stream and the vocational stream to be developed and delivered on the same course. For example, modules designed to develop and assess grammatical components, set in appropriate contexts, should be available for the two systems, with the modules being mutually recognized. The development of block-chain technologies regarding certification would prove very useful in tracking progress and recording assessment on courses designed around modules.

### **Recommendation Six**

*Revisit the stages in learner journey where secondary school students are compelled to select core subjects*

Requiring students to take decisions in terms of choices of optional subjects at school, comes too early on in their life. And since post-secondary schooling is very much the result of decisions taken in secondary school, there is an urgent need to raise awareness of this issue and provide young people with access to information on the full range of choices available to them.

### **Recommendations Seven and Eight**

*Address the need for change in the teaching & learning pillar at level 4 to facilitate acquisition of skills*

*Develop training and ongoing professional development for teachers of post-secondary students*

It would be useless to try to move towards an andragogical approach without teacher training and continuous professional development. Teaching practitioners at this level would need to help students move from the pedagogical to skills more appropriate for higher learning.

Many other challenges are related to these suggestions as these are addressed towards change in the system in a holistic way.

### **Recommendation Nine**

*Embrace technology to align teaching in the class with the needs of 21st-century learners*

A policy on post-secondary education must embrace the advances in technology and find ways of incorporating these in today's education system. It is vital that due attention is given to the alternative methods of delivery and credentialing in order to accommodate a rapidly increasing student population and the diversity of their needs. Emerging models, such as hybrid learning and competency-based education, are revealing the inefficiencies of the traditional system for non-traditional students.

### **Recommendation Ten**

*Commission an external expert review of the MATSEC curriculum, focusing on international parity and quality standards*

This recommendation addresses the challenges linked with curriculum development and assessment, as these issues cannot be separated. Earlier reports regarding Malta's national examination board have provided creative ideas and although so many years have elapsed since the 2005 report, not much has been done. It is pertinent to ask from where the resistance is originating. Such a reform is likely being perceived by many practitioners as entailing considerable change. The implementation of this suggestion will probably result in the introduction of modular systems in sixth forms, as they are already being implemented in the vocational sphere both at MCAST and other places.

## **Recommendation Eleven**

*Use Open Education Resources and MOOCs to redesign and deliver accessible, competency-based curriculum content*

A recurring focus of the 2017 Report is the need to update present practice with 21<sup>st</sup>-century realities. The present, and even more so, the future work environment requires constant upgrading of skills vitally important for both employers and individuals. Much of this will have to be achieved using MOOCs, on-line learning, and similar learning platforms. Learning-to-learn skills should be at the core of the system, however many employers complain that these skills are sadly lacking even among university graduates. The flipped classroom model and others should be encouraged. Such approaches will increase independence and entrepreneurship in learning.

## **Recommendation Twelve**

*Focus on reducing risk of early school leaving by offering alternative pathways and solutions*

Early school leaving is clearly a major problem at post-secondary level. The present one-size-fits-all is intimately linked to the still prevalent idea that the academic and vocational are distinct and never the twain should meet. There are many ways to discourage early opting out of the system, with student-worker schemes being re-considered. Experience shows that some students feel that they should start work before the age of eighteen because of family circumstances or because they do not want to be a burden on their families. The present stipend system does not offset these feelings. Such schemes can take the form of apprentice schemes, temporary work, etc. and should not be limited, as is currently the case, to the vocational sector.

## **Recommendation Thirteen**

*Develop programmes that can actively contribute to student pastoral care and socio-developmental skills*

Pastoral care is an essential component of any educational system at this particularly sensitive phase of growth. Institutions should consider introducing a Group Tutor much like is adopted in secondary schools. Moreover, EIPs should not be limited to statemented students but extended

to all students. Lecturers and teachers would need to be trained as this pastoral aspect should not be left to counselling services only. Each educator should consider pastoral care as a primary task. A good citizen is not necessarily one who passes examinations but one who has developed moral, social and psychological skills so necessary among students aged sixteen to eighteen who are in the process of becoming adults but are not yet adults.

#### **Recommendation Fourteen**

*Involve learners in the design and testing of post-secondary curricula*

A holistic view of education implies that students are not passive recipients of the content but active participants in the creation of content and skills arising from the teaching and learning experience. If students are provided with a degree of agency over learning solutions, it would bring to the fore yet another aspect of 21<sup>st</sup> century skill formation.

#### **Recommendation Fifteen**

*Invest in ongoing regular waves of quantitative and qualitative research on the sector*  
This is intended to address several of the above-listed challenges and is intended to jolt the system to one that is more responsive to changing economic, social and other needs. A system which does not reflect through ongoing research is not a thriving one.

#### **Recommendation Sixteen**

*Determine Government's position as an employer and contributor to the sector and secure teachers' commitment to change*

This recommendation is aimed at asking authorities to take a fresh look at the discrepancies between the different institutions at post-secondary level, in terms of status, salary, conditions of work, and so on. It should be pointed out that feedback from the focus groups did not indicate that the institutions should merge, as the different approaches are necessary to motivate all educators involved.

## **Recommendation Seventeen**

*Set up National Commission for General Education (NCGE)*

The concept behind this proposal was to set up one authority for all post-secondary schools. Such a move is often perceived as taking Junior College out of the University sphere and positioning it closer to the other post-secondary providers.

## **Recommendation Eighteen**

*Restructure and reposition MATSEC into the designated Authority for National Assessments (NAA)*

This recommendation aimed to initiate a process of collaboration among the various sixth form providers, particularly GCHSS and JC. This was not aimed at decreasing the autonomy of JC, as some interpreted it and as was expressed during data collection for the report, but to promote autonomy for the sector as a whole. With MATSEC an integral part of the University of Malta, curricula are naturally oriented towards satisfying the requirements of the various departments of the university and do not necessarily take into account the interests of the nation as a whole. This denotes a narrow approach to education, one that does not maximise resources, and does not take into account all the interests and views of all stakeholders, including students. Moreover, it is not conducive to the changes necessary to moving towards a 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to education, which is so obviously urgently needed. This suggestion would have many implications and would require a change in the mode of thinking of authorities in every school.

This is the most crucial recommendation and is closely linked to the previous one. The present system, as noted above, means that MATSEC is under the control of an academic orientation towards post-secondary education. But unlike virtually all other countries in Europe, we do not have a National Authority responsible for educational certification, which certifies both vocational and academic certificates, which would be a very positive step to increasing parity of esteem. It is the view of many that the local academia, not necessarily MATSEC itself (as evidenced by the reports co-authored by MATSEC representatives almost fifteen years ago), look down on vocational education. I have personally been told by a very influential member of the academic staff that they are the only people who are fit to decide for students

at this stage. The patronizing attitude is, in my view, not respectful of the learning styles of so many students and detrimental to their life chances as it favours those who are able to learn in traditional, academic ways.

### **The Aftermath**

The report on The Future of Post-secondary Education was published in January 2017. Two and a half years later, in July 2019, a Matriculation Certificate Reform was published by the University of Malta and feedback from the public solicited. It is not the aim of this paper to conduct a comprehensive review of the proposed reform so recently published at the time this paper was written. However, a comment relating this proposed reform and the 2017 report is called for.

The reform to the Matriculation Certificate falls short of putting into practice the suggestions proposed in the report submitted by the Working Group on the Future of Post-secondary Education, or even reflecting its overall spirit, as shall be illustrated below.

The proposed Matriculation Certificate Reform reflects the 2017 report's recommendations only in an extremely limited way, and does not, by any means, represent a radical change in philosophy. It is too little, and we are very late in the game. Above all, it does not convincingly approach the spirit of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills that several other European countries are embedding in their educational systems. The essence of the reform would see the list of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills integrated into all of the curriculum at the same time. To be effective the skills must form an integral part of each subject syllabus. Otherwise, they will not engender the shift in thinking that is being envisaged.

*'MATSEC launched a more focussed discussion and after a close analysis of the Matriculation Certificate concluded that a re-structuring was necessary to reflect the changing society within a European and global context.'*

The above signals a most promising start. Below, I reflect on select parts of the proposed reform (which are presented in an order different to that of the document).

- *The MATSEC course will last two full years. Students will not be permitted to sit for individual Intermediate or Advanced level examinations before they finish the full course.*

This will definitely satisfy school administrations, however, it is neither flexible nor student-friendly in the sense discussed above. Some students can do the whole course in two years, and no doubt some can obtain the Matriculation Certificate in just one year, but some students may need three. If they fail at the end of two years, they will be required to repeat the last school year. They will probably have to attend lessons in all the subjects even in those they would have passed. From experience, it is clear that some will not consider it worthwhile and will drop out. School requirements may involve expelling a student who does not attend a required number of lessons.

The problem could be solved by adopting a modular system, where students need to attend only the subjects or modules they have not passed. This will provide flexibility and will not appear so daunting to the students. Clearly, a synoptic examination would still be necessary to ensure that the student has a whole picture of the subject.

In addition, the proposed reform does not seem to cater for adults who wish to obtain their certificate on a part-time basis. If a modular approach had been adopted, individuals may have time to attend some modules, especially if modules are also made available at suitable times, and gradually build up the Matriculation Certificate. However, it seems that the reform does not match the life-long learning needs of those who wish to continue with their academic education.

- *Students with severe literacy difficulties may replace the requirement of a pass in a foreign language with a pass in either English or Maltese.*
- *School assessments contribute a minimum of 20% to the final results of the Advanced and Intermediate examinations.*

The reform document proposes that twenty per cent of the final examination mark will be assigned to course work. It is not clear whether these marks will be awarded on the basis of work submitted during tutorials or in some other way. The reform document explains that the coursework will be set by the

colleges themselves and moderated by MATSEC. The implications of this are several and they are serious. No mention is made of a modular system.

The question that arises naturally is why have the proponents of the Matriculation Certificate Reform not considered the recommendation of the 2017 Working Group for the adoption of a modular system? That report and its recommendations were based on data collected locally, together with research on post-secondary models.

The Matriculation Certificate Reform also suggests that credit should be assigned for non-formal and informal education. Special attention is being given to sports. This suggestion is in line with the Working Group's report and it is hoped that it will prove invaluable to many students.

- *The Systems of Knowledge examination will be reviewed. It will not include the currently required project, which, important as it can be, is often commissioned by students to others.*

The problem lies not in the changes as such but in the fact that it seems that this is the only subject that is being linked explicitly to fostering 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Perhaps the wording is ambiguous, but no single subject should be singled out with regard to these skills. They should be integrated into each subject and assessed as a part of each subject.

21<sup>st</sup> century skills should not be regarded as a subject or part of a subject but an intrinsic part of the curriculum as a whole. This would be very difficult to achieve without the introduction of a modular system which will include different modes of assessment. The writing mode is the easiest and least time-consuming to assess. It is obviously a very important part of any curriculum. But other modes are equally important. For example, if a student is able to plan an essay well, the same skills can be applied to a presentation or an oral assessment. Clear thinking and speaking are intrinsic to good communication and team work, and critical thinking, especially, seems to be very lacking in many Maltese students' abilities. The way these skills are to be fostered needs much further elaboration.

- *The reform document also mentions the introduction of a foreign language, other than English or Maltese, as a compulsory subject at intermediate level. Students will be able to choose to sit for a proficiency certificate in this subject.*

This proposal was not made in the working group report and may well be justified in political terms. This measure has been harshly criticized by advocates of English (an official language) and Maltese (our national language) as being detrimental to our students.

What is interesting from the point of view of the working group report is that certificates in proficiency are not being offered in English and Maltese. These, apparently, will remain in the present format, which includes quite a lot of literature and are mostly concerned with writing skills.

These subjects should also be offered at a proficiency level as the skills acquired are more relevant to those not opting to continue at university in either subject. Experience shows that some students may write a coherent language or literature essay but remain entirely unable to express themselves confidently in the language.

## Conclusion

The Working Group Report on the Future of Post-secondary Education was far-reaching in scope and was not limited to MATSEC examinations and so it still remains to be seen what developments will take place in that area. But the MATSEC reform proposals give a very clear indication of the direction that has been chosen in curricular terms. The question is, and it is not very difficult to answer: Qui bono?

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