

Bulletin on the Signs of the Times:

Education, Media, and Culture

April 2024 – June 2024

Stories

In relation to **education, media, and culture**, four main themes led the news during the months between April and June 2024: (1) **The MCAST collective agreement**; (2) **Statistics on the educational system**; (3) **Restoration projects**; and (4) **The initiative of the Archbishop's Delegate for Culture**.

The first story set in this bulletin relates to **the MCAST collective agreement**. In May, *Malta Today* published an article on how disputes over the collective agreement for MCAST educators could impact students during the examinations period. This concern was highlighted due to the ongoing directives issued by the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT). One of these directives instructed educators not to divulge marks for any assessments to students or to the college itself. The *Malta Independent* reported that the directives were issued on the 10th of May as talks over a new collective agreement had failed. It was also reported that teachers were mainly negotiating for an increase in wages as wage increase projections had not been updated in two and a half years. In June this concern was reported again as students were facing delays on receiving the results of their examinations and other assessments, therefore impeding their ability to apply for further studies or start their careers. The *Times of Malta* (TOM) reported that this directive was impacting around 8,000 students. The TOM also reported that during this month, Dr Joachim James Calleja did not have his contract renewed for the role of MCAST principle and this role would come to an end in August. Regarding the disputes, Joachim James Calleja told the TOM that while he attended the discussions, he was not involved in the decisions and the directives. Later in June, the TOM reported that the MUT dropped the directive, while retaining others, so that students could receive their assessment marks.

The second story set relates to **statistics on the educational system**. In June, the *Malta Today* reported on statistics published by Eurostat which provided information on the level of education in European countries. These statistics indicated that Malta has the fourth highest percentage (40.8%) of the population with a low level of education. The countries which have a higher percentage are Turkey (61.8%), Portugal (46.2%) and Italy (41.7%). These findings coincide with those published in a report by the European Commission¹ in which the percentage of 18- to 24-year-old early school leavers was also higher (10.1%) than the EU average (9.6%), although this is slowly decreasing. Malta also has the fourth lowest percentage of individuals who have vocational training (13.8%). 31.1% and 28.1% of

¹[European Commission - Country Report Malta 2023](#)

the Maltese population have a medium and high educational level respectively². The EU also set a goal that by 2030, 45% or more of 25- to 34-year-olds should have a tertiary education. In 2022, this percentage was of 42% in the EU and in Malta this percentage was at par (42.4%). Within the same age group Malta also has a higher percentage of women who obtained a tertiary education (47.9%) when compared to men (37.8%). A similar trend was also reported in an article by the *Malta Today* where statistics show that girls outperform boys in their SEC examinations. More specifically, girls from state and church schools tend to obtain better grades when compared to boys in the Maltese, Maths and English examinations.

The third story set relates to reports on **restoration projects**. In May, the *Malta Independent* reported that eleven historical heritage sites in different localities will be restored through a scheme for local councils. Restoration works will be carried out in several churches in Birkirkara, Mellieħa, Qormi and Żejtun and other structures including two niches in Mqabba and two facades in Tarxien and Ħamrun amongst others. The *Malta Independent* also reported on a Restoration Funding Scheme in which several structures and items within various churches will be financed, including paintings, altars and doors. The TOM reported on a plan brought forward by Paola's parish priest to set up a cafeteria on the roof of Christ the King Basilica. The earnings made by the cafeteria would serve for the basilica's upkeep, including energy tariffs, restoration works and repairs. The *Malta Today* reported that the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage opposed the proposal and initiated talks with the Paola parish and the Kummissjoni Patrimonju Kulturali tal-Knisja (KPKK) to discuss how the basilica can be maintained.

The fourth story set is related to an **initiative by the Archbishop's Delegate for Culture** which aims to develop the Catholic Institute into a new cultural hub, through a process of institutional renewal³. The Rooftop Series is one of several projects which aims to carry out this mission while showcasing local talent and artists. This project will include a series of intimate concerts in which musical artists will perform at the rooftop of the Catholic institute⁴. Another project called the *Opera Nova Project*, will provide masterclasses to classical voice students to provide them with the skills required for a professional career.

Commentary

The fact that the collective agreement for MCAST educators is still yet to be approved after two and a half years is a disservice to the educators, as such a delay is depriving them of fair and appropriate wages, especially when considering the financial difficulties which impacted many families following the pandemic and the rise of inflation rates following the war on Ukraine which occurred in these past months. While the directives issued by the MUT are understandable, as negotiations have been severely delayed, these should not have such a negative and direct impact on the students who are caught in the middle of such disputes. A similar delay in collective bargaining was also reported for teachers in state schools and an agreement was signed only recently. Such delays should not become

²[Which countries are home to the most educated people in Europe?](#).

³ <https://culture.church.mt/>

⁴ <https://culture.church.mt/event/rooftop-series-chasing-pandora/>

commonplace, especially when this has implications on the livelihood of so many teachers and on students' education. These may also have a ripple effect on other professions and new careers as these depend on an effective educational system.

Additionally, there is a need for improvement in the education sector with a focus on quality education which treats students as individuals with different learning needs. The statistics presented by the Eurostat with regards to the high number of people with a low level of education and of early school leavers indicate that many students are being left lagging behind, depriving them of a fruitful education. The National Education Strategy announced by the Ministry of Education is hoped to achieve this much needed change in the educational system⁵. By 2030, this strategy aims to reach certain goals set by the EU. These goals include reducing the percentage of early school leavers below 9% and reducing the percentage of low achieving 15-year-olds below 15%. Additionally, a focus on vocational careers, such as healthcare, education and trade skills is also needed, especially in the face of the current skill gap which the employment sector is facing. However, an improvement of working conditions and pay for these much-needed professions also needs to be implemented. The current situation among MCAST lecturers, for example, leaves much to be desired for those currently in that career but also for students who are considering a similar career path. While gender differences in the education system, where females tend to outperform males, is a trend found in all of Europe, it is also something which should be looked at, by seeing how boys' educational achievement can be placed on par with that of girls, especially within state and church schools where such differences seem to be more pronounced. Despite the higher percentage of women with tertiary education in Malta, they are not as present in the workforce (71.4%), when compared to men (85.5%)⁶. This means that while women obtain greater achievements in their educational journey, the skills and knowledge they obtain from such an education are not being utilised in the workforce.

The government schemes aimed at financing the restoration of several heritage buildings and structures are commendable and should continue. The upkeep of our churches, art and other historical structures is important, as such heritage helps to keep us in touch with our culture and identity as Maltese. Additionally, they attract and are admired by numerous tourists all year round. With regards to the proposal for the cafeteria in the Paola parish basilica, there seems to be a need for more financial support for parishes which might not be receiving enough donations to keep up with their expenses.

The initiative carried out by the Archbishop's Delegate for Culture is commendable and more such initiatives to enhance and showcase local artistic talent are required. This is especially the case when local artists, such as those in the film industry, currently struggle due to underfunding and a lack of exposure. The exposure given to these artists can not only enhance their careers but also increase the appreciation of the arts among the public, therefore bringing forth a greater awareness and need to invest in these talents. The Opera Nova Project included in this initiative is also commendable, as it supports young artists by providing them with the skills and opportunities to pursue a career from their

⁵ [National Education Strategy 2024 - 2030](#)

⁶ [NSO - Labour Force Survey - Q4 2023](#)

talents. Such initiatives encourage the integration of the spiritual and cultural aspects of life, moving towards the enhancement of a holistic development.

Reflection

There is a need for overall improvement in the education system, regarding the quality of the education provided to students. The National Education Strategy is expected to improve the quality of education, by providing more attention to the student as an individual. However, issues of teachers' and lecturers' pay and working conditions may also have a negative impact on students' educational achievement and on the quality of education provided and therefore this must also be factored into the National Strategy.

Follow-Up

- Church schools are to keep working with teachers, unions and government structures to ensure that delays in collective bargaining are avoided as much as possible.
- Church schools are also to look into the factors which are causing the different educational achievements between boys and girls.
 - This could be done by analysing the differences in teaching methods used in boys' and girls' schools if any are present or seeing ways how such methods can be modified or adjusted in boys' schools to help elevate their academic achievements and bring them on par with that of girls.
- The Church could assess or continue to assess how parishes with large expenses, such as the one in Paola, can be better supported financially or guided to receive support through schemes or other funds, so that they can better preserve their heritage.

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