

Bulletin on the Signs of the Times:

Education, Media, and Culture

January 2024 – March 2024

Stories

In relation to **education, media, and culture**, three main themes led the news during the months of January to March 2024: (1) **Shortages in the education sector**; (2) **Plans for restorations**; and (3) **Valletta's heritage and culture**.

The first story set in this bulletin relates to **shortages in the education sector**. In January, through a parliamentary question, Hon Clifton Grima reported that there are a total of 180 pending cases for students who are waiting for an LSE, with the oldest application dating back to October 2022¹. Currently, there are 4,202 students making use of an LSE of whom 1,473 make use of a full-time LSE and 2,729 make use of a shared LSE². The Minister also added that there are 3,652 LSEs currently working in schools, making it the largest number of employed LSEs in the country to date³. The Minister stated that the shortage of LSEs will be addressed through the National Education Strategy⁴ and a newly revised inclusion model. In February there were also reports of a shortage of nursing graduates and students. The *Times of Malta* (TOM) reported that, according to the University of Malta (UOM), in 2023 only 83 nurse graduates qualified for the nursing career when compared to 149 in the previous year. This marks the lowest number of nursing graduates in the last decade. An article from *Malta Today* reported that the Health Ministry will conduct a study to determine why students are choosing not to pursue a nursing career. More specifically, this study will attempt to explore students' attitudes and perceptions towards healthcare education programmes and careers related to healthcare, as well as the factors which encourage and discourage them from pursuing these careers. Ultimately, these findings will be used to inform policies and programmes aimed at encouraging more students to study for these careers.

The second story set relates to **plans for restorations** which were reported in the past three months. The newspapers reported on several initiatives both by public and private entities to restore different historical sites. In January, the Public Works Department and the Żurrieq local council signed an agreement where the former was to carry out maintenance work on the Xarolla Windmill. This agreement was reached after the windmill was damaged by adverse weather. In February, *Malta Today*

¹ <https://pq.gov.mt/PQWeb.nsf/0/C1257D2E0046DFA1C1258A9A004C496E?OpenDocument>

² <https://pq.gov.mt/PQWeb.nsf/7561f7daddf0609ac1257d1800311f18/c1257d2e0046dfa1c1258a82003d269e!OpenDocument>

³ <https://pq.gov.mt/PQWeb.nsf/0/C1257D2E0046DFA1C1258ADE0022B3E1?OpenDocument>

⁴ <https://education.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/NATIONAL-EDUCATION-BOOKLET-DEC-2023-2030.pdf>

reported that a private developer filed an application to restore the *Għar il-Ġobon* windmill in Birkirkara, which is a Grade 1 building. The proposal aims to recreate the windmill's sails and restore its façade and also includes commercial development, including a restaurant extension and an underground sports facility and childcare centre. For this proposal the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage (SCH) requested a method of statement for the excavation and restoration works to ensure that the stability and integrity of the windmill is preserved. In March, the Gozo Ministry launched a Gozitan heritage restoration scheme for councils and administrative centres. Through these schemes, councils and centres can identify and propose the restoration of a number of structures, artifacts and sites which have a historical, architectural and/or artistic value. Therefore, it can include statues, niches, and alleys. *Malta Today* also reported that the Malta Tourism Authority, the SCH, and the Restoration Directorate will collaborate towards the development of a conservation plan for the Victoria lines.

The third story set relates to reports on **Valletta's heritage and culture**. In February, the TOM reported that a meeting between the Archconfraternity of the Holy Crucifix, the Culture Ministry, the Lands Authority, the Malta Tourism Authority, and the Valletta Local Council was held prior to the Holy Week processions which were celebrated this year. This meeting was prompted after last year's Holy Week processions were disrupted by the commercial activity of certain catering establishments in the city. During last year's procession, the organisers were met with tables and chairs blocking the way, loud music, and mockery from the customers of these establishments. This year, the meeting was held to ensure that last year's disruptions are not repeated and that catering establishments remove their seating when such processions are ongoing. Similarly, in March, the TOM reported that the Ombudsman made an appeal to regulate and increase enforcement with regards to outside catering areas. He urged that establishments which breach their permit are to be fined and have their tables and chairs confiscated. He also commented on how this seating and plastic tent structures are not only an eyesore which impact the visual aspect and character of the city, but also pose a health and safety risk. This appeal was made after it was reported that an ambulance had to squeeze past restaurant seating to pass through Merchants Street during a medical emergency.

The TOM also reported on the development plans in Manoel Island. The development proposed the construction of three, four and five storey high residential clusters made up of 323 residential units. It also proposed the construction of an underground carpark with an overlying clubhouse hosting a gymnasium, swimming pool and padel court. The former hospital building was also proposed to be developed into a restaurant. The development will include open spaces and the restoration of Fort Manoel. The St George chapel will also be converted into a lapidarium, where items of archaeological interest will be displayed. This was included in the development proposal following a discussion with the SCH. In reaction to this proposal, *Flimkien għal Ambjent Aħjar* and *Moviment Graffiti* raised the concern that the proposed residential blocks could affect the views from Valletta, and therefore, impacting the city's UNESCO heritage status. Additionally, the TOM reported that the application for the three residential blocks was initially set for approval but was later deferred by the Planning Authority to confirm whether they were within Valletta's heritage buffer zone. The TOM also reported that the Planning Authority deferred this application a week after revoking their approval of the apartment block proposed near the Ġgantija temples.

Commentary

The shortage of LSEs reported in these articles is worrying and is creating a lacuna for children who are already struggling with their education due to their learning difficulties. The long waiting list, the longest case being over a year old, is also worrying as this marks a crucial learning period where these children are not having their needs met and therefore, risk falling further behind in their education. Additionally, while the National Education Strategy includes strategies aimed to improve the inclusion of children with learning difficulties, such as revisions to the curriculum of Learning Support Centres, it does not include strategies which directly address the shortage of LSEs. Providing more attractive work packages to LSEs could help to encourage more individuals to apply for the job. Also, a focus on improving the inclusion and integration of children with learning difficulties within the educational system as a whole could also reduce the need for LSEs. However, should this be implemented, the educational system needs to be centred around the individual needs of each student, to ensure that they receive a quality education. The shortage of nursing students and graduates is also a worrying issue which needs to be understood and addressed as fast as possible. Similarly, providing attractive job offers and improving working conditions for nurses, could help with the retention of current nurses and encourage young students towards the profession. The initiative to carry out a study is a positive one as it will help shed more light on the perceptions of youths towards this career. Using the information collected from exit interviews with nurses who are leaving could also help gain a greater understanding on the issues which pushed them to terminate their job. This information, however, then needs to be followed-up by the implementation of proper policies and changes which will not only encourage students to take up a nursing career but also ensure that they remain in that career later on.

The initiatives put forward to help the conservation and preservation of a number of historical sites, structures and buildings are commendable and similar efforts are encouraged for other sites which are in need of conservation. The initiative to preserve historically and culturally significant structures spread throughout the localities and streets of Gozo is also commendable, as this also seeks to protect structures which may not be as renowned or would not normally be given the proper attention. A similar initiative for localities in Malta could also be considered, as many such structures are often neglected.

With regards to the reports on Valletta, it is evident that there is a lack of consideration and care for the city's character and heritage, as it is being sacrificed for commercial activity and profits. The proposed development of Manoel Island and the take up of public space from pedestrians by catering establishments impact the visual and cultural aspects of the city. The encroachment on public space by catering establishments is also impacting the intangible aspects of Maltese culture, such as religious traditions and practices. Therefore, the conservation and safeguarding of our historical and cultural heritage need to be all-encompassing. The authorities cannot implement initiatives and plan for conservation or restoration on the one hand but allow the destruction and ruin of this heritage on the other, as the efforts of the former will be undermined by the latter. Additionally, a question which should also be posed is why sites and land which house structures and buildings of cultural significance are owned privately and have failed to be purchased or acquired under the public domain. Such situations risk that these structures are lost or undermined by developments and

commercialisation, as relevant authorities tasked with protecting such structures may not have as much power to safeguard them.

Reflection

Students are still interested in healthcare professions, as the number of doctors in our country is on an increase, even if the number of nursing students is on the decline. Therefore, there is a need to reflect and appreciate the effort and dedication which nurses put into their careers and how important they are in our society. However, this appreciation should be shown by elevating the status of the nursing career, listening to our nurses and taking concrete action in addressing the issues they face. Only then can we start encouraging students to take up a nursing career.

It is a shame that treasures which make up our heritage, whether they are tangible, like our city of Valletta, structures, and artifacts; or intangible, such as our traditions and practices; are not all being safeguarded and invested in. While some are being protected, others are either neglected or at the mercy of profiteering. A holistic approach which also includes authorities regulating businesses and the construction industry is needed to safeguard our heritage.

Follow-Up

- Church schools could continue to assess whether the measures taken to support students with learning difficulties are effective and whether these are helping them receive a quality education.
- All children within Church schools should be encouraged to create inclusive communities which cater for everybody, regardless of their personal situation.
- With regards to the shortage of nurses, Church schools could also help to promote caring professions and their respective subjects to encourage more students to take up these career paths.
- The Church is to continue towards its efforts to safeguard its heritage and to speak out when developments and illicit practices threaten the traditions, surrounding character and social fabric of parishes. One such example is the effort made by the Archpriest Can. Joseph Curmi to remove the seatings which are encumbering St George's square in Victoria, Gozo.

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