

Bulletin on the Signs of the Times:

Education, Media, and Culture

July 2024 – September 2024

Stories

In relation to **education, media, and culture**, three main themes led the news during the months between July and September 2024: (1) **SEC examination results**; (2) **National Strategy for Further and Higher education** and (3) **Restoration works on churches**.

The first story set in this bulletin relates to the **SEC examination results**. For the year 2024, the MATSEC Examinations Board published two reports¹ on the results obtained by students for the main exam session held in June and the supplementary or revision session held in September. For both sessions, the majority of students registered for the examinations on core subjects (Maths, Maltese and English). For the maths examination, a total of 4,622 students registered for the main session. 52% of these students obtained a passing grade (grade 1 till 5), 40% failed and 8% were absent. A total of 1,130 students registered for the maths supplementary session, of these, 24% obtained a passing grade, 61% failed and 14% were absent². With regards to Maltese, a total of 3,968 students registered for the main examination session, of these, 64% passed, 31% failed and 5% were absent. For the supplementary session, 633 students registered for the exam, of which 30% passed, 67% failed and 3% were absent. For the English exam, 4,519 students registered for the main session, of which 71% passed, 25% failed and 4% were absent. With regards to the English supplementary session, 34% passed, 64% failed and 1% were absent². According to an article published by the *Times of Malta* (TOM), a third of students obtained a passing grade between 1 to 3 in one of the core subjects while one fifth received a failing grade in either of the core subjects. The statistics presented above are similar to those obtained in previous years. The TOM also published articles on revision classes provided by Jobsplus which prepare students who will sit for the supplementary exam sessions. Around 850 students applied for these revision classes and, of these, 630 applied for the maths revision classes. The *Malta Independent* (MI) reported that 60% of students who attend these classes improved their grades and 89% pursued their education further at post-secondary levels.

The second story set relates to the **National Strategy for Further and Higher education**. The TOM published an article on a new national strategy which was launched in July by the Malta Further and

¹<https://www.um.edu.mt/media/um/docs/directorates/matsec/researchandreports/generalstatistics/GeneralStatistics-SEC-2024-Main.pdf>

<https://www.um.edu.mt/media/um/docs/directorates/matsec/researchandreports/generalstatistics/GeneralStatistics-2024-SEC-Supplementary.pdf>

² In this case, the percentages don't add up to a 100 due to the numbers being rounded.

Higher Education Authority (MFHEA) and the Education Ministry. This national strategy is set to be implemented by 2030, with the aim of having a co-ordinated policy design within the education sector which takes into consideration future demographic, technological, socio-economic and geopolitical trends. This strategy will be based on seven main pillars which aim to provide high-quality and accessible education. These are the following³:

1. Joining up the policy design within the education sector for better coordination.
2. Taking advantage of opportunities in new areas such as those on new technologies, climate mitigation, well-being and aviation amongst others.
3. Making investments to upgrade educational facilities and providing ongoing training and development to educators and other stakeholders. This pillar also focuses on providing support to students who face social and/or financial difficulties which impact their studies.
4. Developing guidelines and procedures for robust quality assurance mechanisms.
5. Improving the relevance of teaching, learning and research.
6. Increasing inclusion by widening participation and including adult learning.
7. Continuing the work carried out to meet key EU education targets.

With regards to the last pillar, the EU aims to reach the following goals by 2030: to have at least 45% of young adults (25–34-year-olds) obtain a higher education qualification and to reduce the percentage of early school leavers to less than 9%. Malta has already achieved the first goal, with 46.2% of young adults possessing a tertiary level of education compared to the EU average of 41.3%⁴. With regards to early school leavers, Malta is above the EU average of 9.5%, as 10.2% of students do not further their studies⁵.

The third story set relates to several **restoration works on churches** which were carried out throughout the past three months. In July, the TOM reported that restoration on the 14 paintings of the Way of the Cross at *Ta' Ġiezu* Church in Rabat were to start. In August, three restoration projects were reported. These were the restoration of the exterior structures and apertures of the church of St Bartholomew in Żurrieq, the façade of the St Joseph chapel in Ħal Tarxien and the 17th century crucifix at the Jesuit's church in Valletta. *It-Torċa* also published an article on how the government will provide financial assistance of around €400,000 for the restoration of the Christ the King Basilica in Paola. This assistance will also cover the installation of a viewing platform which will be placed at the top of the Basilica to make it accessible to tourists. With regards to the cafeteria, this is to be relocated outside the Church. In September, restoration projects were reported on two chapels: the one at Fort St Angelo in Birgu dedicated to the Nativity of Our Lady and the other dedicated to Our Lady of Light in Żebbuġ. For the former chapel, restoration works on the altar were completed and included two new paintings.

³https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ressources/malta_mfhea_national_strategic_plan_2030.pdf

⁴https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat_lfse_03_custom_13314165/default/table?lang=en&page=time:2023

⁵https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat_lfse_14_custom_11240071/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=a76197f4-93aa-491e-a4a2-e91c5f575c2e

For the latter chapel, restoration works are near completion. The side and rear façade of the chapel have been completed while works on the front façade and bell tower are still ongoing.

Commentary

When looking at the statistics presented by MATSEC with regards to the examination results, the majority of students tend to do well in the core subjects. However, out of these three subjects, maths seems to be the most difficult for students, with only half (52%) of those who sat for the exam passing. Therefore, an evaluation on the teaching methods surrounding mathematics needs to be carried out and changes to make learning more engaging, interesting and simpler are required, as it is a subject which often creates anxiety in students and parents alike. The MATSEC report also shows that the majority of students who carry out a re-sit fail to obtain a passing grade. Considering these high fail rates there is a need for more support, perhaps both academically and psychologically, for students who make an effort and opt to retake the exam. There should be a further investment in revision classes, such as those provided by Jobsplus, which should also be promoted and made accessible to students, especially those who tend to do poorly academically or come from a disadvantaged background. However, efforts mostly need to be centred on improving the quality of mainstream education as emphasised by the National Strategy.

The National Strategy launched to improve higher education is a good initiative especially in its efforts to make post-secondary and tertiary education more up-to-date and relevant for the changes in the world of employment and innovation, especially when considering the issue of skill gaps. The inclusion of adult learners and the support to students with social and/or financial difficulties is also commendable, as it provides support to those members in society where educational attainment could make a big and positive difference in their lives. With regards to the goals set by the EU, Malta is doing quite well with regards to the percentage of young adults who attain a tertiary education and therefore, this National Strategy is hoped to continue promoting such progress, especially for students who enter higher education and struggle to keep up with the new challenges they meet. With regards to the percentage of early school leavers, however, their reduction requires greater efforts. While higher education has become more open and accessible to students with different abilities the quality of education provided in primary and secondary schools also needs to be improved. Efforts to encourage more young people to choose the teaching career also need to be carried out, as quality education cannot be guaranteed without these professionals. Currently, there are 137 job vacancies for secondary and post-secondary teachers within the education department⁶, indicating a great demand. In 2022, a parliamentary question answered by Hon. Clifton Grima indicated that there were only 5 students who were undergoing the MTL course to become mathematics teachers in secondary schools, therefore highlighting a shortage of these teachers⁷. Issues related to teachers' working conditions and the way in which negotiations are carried out also need to be considered, as recent controversies regarding educators' collective agreements, such as the case in MCAST, do not encourage young students to pursue this career. Therefore, this shortage of teachers is also something which needs to be addressed by national strategies on education.

⁶ <https://edurecruitment.gov.mt/>

⁷ <https://pq.gov.mt/PQWeb.nsf/0/C1257D2E0046DFA1C1258845002FDA09?OpenDocument>

The continued preservation of our churches, chapels and other works of art are commendable as they help to preserve our heritage, history and identity. These restoration works also help to make places of prayer and worship more welcoming for the community and improve the aesthetics of the built environment in our localities, which can be enjoyed both by the local community and tourists alike. While works on churches and art pieces are usually appreciated and commended by the community, controversial projects such as those for the cafeteria in the Christ the King Basilica received heavy criticism. While the cafeteria was intended to pool funds for the much-needed restoration works and upkeep of energy tariffs of the Basilica, some members of the public expressed disagreement with placing commercial activity in a place of worship. They also questioned why parishes were being financed and supported through government initiatives instead of by the Church. Therefore, this type of controversy calls for more transparency and openness in parishes within their locality and the public about the costs and works involved with financing the restoration of parish churches.

Reflection

A study carried out in 2023 indicated that 2 out of 5 children and adolescents in Malta between the ages of 5 and 16 years of age show symptoms of mental health problems⁸. Societal and structural pressures for academic achievement, without a focus on more holistic development and long hours spent in schools and after-school clubs away from the family can partially contribute to the high rates of mental health issues which children and adolescents face⁹. Therefore, it is important that authorities responsible for their education help to improve, rather than negatively impact students' mental health. A focus on overall development which centres around teaching skills that help students navigate life and enhance their wellbeing needs to be implemented in schools by adding them to the curricula and giving them greater priority. This is to be carried out along with reducing material in the current curricula which might be too technical, specific or irrelevant for young learners, so as to reduce the workload on teachers and students. Additionally, increased psychological support during highly significant and stressful moments, such as exam periods, also need to be implemented and made accessible to students.

While students should aim to obtain the best grades they can attain, they should not be pushed to aim for perfection, so that they can be relieved of any excess pressure which can sometimes prove counterproductive. This change in mentality can also help students to accept the challenges that come with post-secondary and tertiary education, where standard average marks and grades normally decline due to the increased difficulty which comes with higher levels of education. As for students who are not academically inclined, other options for development and educational attainment should be provided and made more accessible to make career development outside of academic achievement a real and tangible possibility within society and therefore also contribute to a change in mentality. This can be done by introducing more hands-on or practical sessions and assessments in mainstream and

⁸ <https://timesofmalta.com/article/mental-health-crisis-four-child-psychiatrists-seeing-1000-clients.1060257>

⁹ <https://socialsecurity.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/NationalStrategyforPovertyReductionandSocialInclusion2025-2035EN.pdf> (page 91)

post-secondary education. Additionally, opening a new trade school can also provide different opportunities and career paths to students and help to train workers which are currently in high demand.

Follow-Up

- Church schools could enhance their services related to mental health to help alleviate the stresses of exam periods for all students and to support those who failed their exams, keeping in mind that accessing these services could be difficult for students, especially in high-achieving contexts.
- The restoration works on churches, chapels and works of art are encouraged to continue. Other efforts to protect our heritage, such as speaking out against construction projects which undermine or damage it, as well as in cases where it is neglected, are also recommended.
- More transparency and communication related to the processes and costs involved in carrying out these restoration works can also help the public to appreciate the work and effort put into such projects, while also increasing appreciation for our heritage among the public.

Alessia Camilleri
Research Officer
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