

## Bulletin on the Signs of the Times:

### Education, Media and Culture

January – April 2025

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## Stories

In relation to **Education, Media and Culture**, three main themes led the news between the months of January and April 2025, these were: (1) **The discovery of hunter-gatherers in Malta**; (2) **Policymaking within the education sector** and (3) **Holistic Education**.

The first story set in this bulletin relates to the recent **discovery of the presence of hunter-gatherers in Malta**. Previous knowledge on Malta's prehistory indicated that the first humans on the island were farmers. However, new evidence found at Latnija cave in Mellieħa, indicates that the first humans in Malta were hunter-gatherers. This discovery was part of a project led by two professors: Prof. Eleanor Scerri of the Max Planck Institute of Geo-anthropology in Jena, Germany and of the Department of Classics and Archaeology at the University of Malta and Prof. Nicholas Vella of the Department of Classics and Archaeology, also at the University of Malta. This evidence consisted of cooked remains belonging to animals such as fish and deer as well as other organic and man-made material related to hunting activities. This evidence is dated to around 8,500 years ago, 1,000 years before the first farmers were believed to have settled on the island. These findings were deemed important, not only in the context of the human history in Malta but also due to implications on the knowledge surrounding primitive humans within the international, scientific community. This is because the presence of these remains in Malta indicates that primitive humans were capable of travelling long distances by sea, something which the scientific community did not previously believe to be the case. The report related to this discovery garnered the attention of the media in Europe and was featured in a number of international scientific journals. The newspapers also reported that Education Minister Hon. Clifton Grima confirmed that school curricula and Maltese history books will be updated to accurately reflect this recent discovery. Following these significant findings, it was reported that the Ministry of Culture intends to fence off the site surrounding the cave where these discoveries were made, to protect the site and allow archaeologists to study it further, as the potential for more discoveries has not been excluded. Later in April, Latnija cave was officially declared to be a Class A scheduled property by the Planning Authority (PA), therefore giving it the highest possible protection status from unauthorised activities which may damage any significant archaeological material present.

The second story set relates to **policymaking within the education sector**. In April, the Education Ministry launched a Transformation Centre within the Malta Education Foresight Forum (MEFF) which will create a space where educators, students and other stakeholders in the education sector can explore and discuss new ideas, as well as provide feedback on the educational system. Through this process, the Ministry intends to create an educational system which is proactive, dynamic and relevant for the future. The launch of this centre is part of the National Education Strategy (which was discussed

in a previous bulletin) which aims for the education sector to become more person-centred and to include educators within the policymaking process.

The third story set relates to discussions and initiatives surrounding **holistic education**. In January, public discussions on school hours and whether these should increase, sparked another discussion on the need to provide students with a holistic education which is not solely centred around academic subjects and learning. Weighing in on the discussion, Labour MP Ramona Attard suggested that an extension of school hours should not include teaching subjects which are on the curriculum but should instead be used to provide time for students to finish their homework and engage in extra-curricular activities, such as drama, art, sports and so on. She suggested that school facilities and grounds could be utilised to host these extra-curricular activities, therefore reducing travelling time for parents. She indicated that such measures could help students from a disadvantaged or poor background to access extra-curricular activities and receive better instruction when carrying out their homework. In March, the newspapers reported that the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation launched a project named FitMAP Malta, which aims to introduce a national fitness monitoring system which will assess students' fitness levels, promote physical literacy and provide recommendations on how students can improve their physical well-being through daily physical activity. The project will initially be carried out in six state secondary schools. Twelve PE teachers have been trained to use the system and, together with students, they are to provide feedback on the project at the end of the scholastic year. The newspapers also reported initiatives related to improving students' digital skills. The first initiative involved the distribution of two-in-one tablet laptop devices to Year 4 and 5 students. In the second initiative, Year 6 students will be taught about artificial intelligence (AI) and how it can be utilised, starting from next year.

## Commentary

The discovery led by Prof Eleanor Scerri and Prof Nicholas Vella was given great recognition and importance, not just locally, but even internationally. This highlights the importance of such projects and their contribution to the history and identity of Malta. Therefore, it is commendable that the authorities and government bodies took the quick and necessary initiatives to protect the site and encourage further studies. Giving the site a Class A scheduled property status is also important, and it is hoped that such status is respected by the public, developers and planning authorities. Similar courses of action to protect other pieces of archaeological evidence found in excavation and construction sites are also encouraged. Therefore, such preserving measures should not be taken exclusively on sites where discoveries garnered a lot of media attention or when found on public land, but also for sites which are currently being developed or are set to be developed, both by private and public entities.

The introduction of a centre where educators, students and stakeholders can share ideas and discuss feedback on the education sector is a much-needed initiative, both for the students (who are the primary stakeholders) and the educators, as they both have important perspectives to share. This initiative is also important as it makes the decision-making and policymaking process more democratic, lending an ear to those who are directly involved in and/or impacted by the educational process on a daily basis. However, it is important that such discussions and processes allow educators to speak freely and

that voices who criticise the status quo are heard, considered and not shunned. The voices of students with learning difficulties should also be included and heard.

With regards to the topic on holistic education, there seems to be a growing awareness, even among government bodies and authorities, that the education system is currently too focused on a rigid and restrictive curriculum which highly focuses on the academic and fails to see students as active and holistic learners. There is a growing need for an education which does not just dispense information and knowledge but also provides skills and abilities which allows students to explore their talents, navigate everyday life and improve their physical and mental health. The FitMAP project is a good initiative to assess and improve on the fitness and physical health of students. However, if other initiatives or changes are not made in conjunction with it, such as increasing hours dedicated to PE classes in the curriculum or encouraging more physical activity in students' school routine, this project cannot be used to its full potential. The provision of electronic devices to students is positive, on the one hand, especially when considering students from poorer backgrounds, who may have limited access to these devices and fewer opportunities to develop their digital skills. On the other hand, such devices can also increase screen-time for students and possibly unsupervised internet use. This is especially an issue to consider in the light of a study published by the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC)<sup>1</sup> which indicated that, among 44 countries in Europe and Central Asia, Malta has some of the highest percentage of problematic social media use and gaming among adolescents. 18% of adolescents in Malta engaged in problematic social media use, ranking second highest. This issue was the most prevalent in girls. Similarly, 19% of adolescents were categorised as being at-risk for problematic internet gaming, ranking the highest. This issue was the most prevalent in boys. Therefore, education and skills related to the responsible use of the internet, especially on the unhealthy aspect of its prolonged use and the dangers posed by harmful, misleading and/or age-inappropriate content and by meeting strangers online should be provided in schools in conjunction with the provision of these devices. The introduction of AI in the curriculum is also an important step to improving education, as this technology is quickly becoming integrated, both in our daily lives and in the employment sector.

## Reflection

The discovery made at Latnija cave brings about the question of how many other undiscovered pieces of history are possibly out there, both those which are yet to be uncovered and others which have been buried under our built environment, therefore bringing to light the richness of our nation's history as well as the need to preserve and increase appreciation for and awareness of our heritage. It also brings to the fore the important work which archaeologists and researchers in Malta carry out to uncover our history and make Malta's heritage richer.

Nowadays, children are spending more time away from their parents and their education is more and more heavily reliant on formal education and extra-curricular activities. Therefore, the need to focus on a more holistic and less academic formal education is crucial for children to develop a wide range of skills which are needed, not only for the world of work, but also for their everyday lives, ranging from health habits to the personal use of technology. However, for this change to happen there needs

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<sup>1</sup> <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/378982/9789289061322-eng.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>

to be a shift, both in mentality and concretely through a thorough change in the curriculum, as subjects which focus on soft skills, physical health and artistic talent are usually deemed secondary to academic ones when, in reality, these skills can only enrich, not just students' experience in schools, but also their understanding and perspective on the material being taught. The newly launched transformation centre is hoped to allow such important topics and ideas, such as moves towards a more relevant and holistic education, to be discussed.

## Follow-Up

- Entities within the Church who safeguard and study the Church's heritage should continue to let their curiosity and thirst for knowledge guide them to continue unveiling and sharing with the public the rich history of the Church in Malta.
- Church schools are to continue in their efforts to provide a holistic education for their students which focuses on their different talents and prepares them for the challenges of life.
- Church schools should also encourage their students, educators and relevant staff to participate in the discussions held within the Transformation Centre to allow them to share their insights and ideas for a better education system.
- Any relevant feedback from the Transformation Centre should also inform developments within the Church schools.

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**May 2025**