

'Achieving Valuable Education for All: An Exploration of Curricular Challenges in Reforming Malta's Secondary Education'

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Abstract

Maltese Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) examinations form the basis of this research study because of ongoing concerns about Malta's high rates of early school leavers (ESL). There is significant debate within the Maltese learning community regarding how the SEC subjects should be taught, developed, managed, examined and reformed. To this effect, this research seeks to explore why Malta is still amongst highest in Europe with ESL in light of current education policy developments taking place to bring about change in the Maltese Secondary Education.

In 2015, the Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC) Examinations Board called for further studies to explore the nature of poor performance in the SEC examinations. MATSEC's call for action triggers specific research methods aimed at exploring subjective experiences and developing an understanding of the factors influencing pupils' poor performance in the SEC examinations. Since experiences are complex and subjective in nature, there is opportunity to view the problem from multiple perspectives using various sources in order to provide the basis of new and reflective understanding of this problem.

The objective of this research is to go beyond the scope of the examiners' statistical reports and National and International surveys to learn about the nature of this problem from policy analysis as well as the views of the pupils and other learning stakeholders (parents/teachers/examiners/policy makers). This study applies a specific methodological framework that examines the problem from various perspectives through qualitative, systematic research. This consisted of three stages: a context and literature review of initiatives and perspectives that shape current policies and practices in the Maltese secondary education; critical discourse analysis of three key policies; and interviews with education stakeholders.

The context and literature review revealed how reform in the Maltese secondary education has dealt with on-going clashes of different ideas about principles of value and practice of equality in Maltese education. The policy analysis and interviews revealed how such tensions are *still* present in the Maltese education system today. The key tension is revealed to be a binary divide between traditional concepts of value in education and the wish for a more open and inclusive education for all. The differences of opinion are characterised by people's strong ties with the country's past and how the system is torn between comprehensive and selective models of education. This is the first time that qualitative research has explored underpinning tensions of educational reform in Malta by exploring why education reforms in Malta seems to be agreed upon in principle but not in practice.

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Author's declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the Regulations of Bournemouth University. The work is original except where indicated by special reference in the text and no part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other degree. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author and in no way represent those of the Bournemouth University. The dissertation has not been presented to any other University for examination either in the United Kingdom or overseas.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. R. Hall', written over a horizontal line.

SIGNED:

DATE: 23rd June 2021

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Professional Background

My professional background in education commenced in 2008. I was an assistant lecturer in a Higher Education institution and entrusted with the challenge to contribute to the development of a series of the first vocational media production courses in Malta. The main purpose of this was twofold; to introduce media production courses to contribute to a positive change in Maltese media professional productions and to introduce media courses to help individuals gain more critical media literacy skills. However, from a personal point of view, I also learnt about the benefits of educational research regarding how teaching and learning can improve students' lives.

My passion for research in education started at that point. I am passionate about education; the importance of education is something that has always been paramount in my life as I was brought up in an environment where education was promoted. Therefore, my upbringing drove me to question, later in my professional life, how my contributions to educational research could effectively help facilitate improved educational experiences for students.

Through various educational and professional experiences, I have been lucky to have been provided with numerous opportunities to test and experiment different educational methods for various outcomes. One professional experience that left an indelible mark on me was an educational literacy project that I developed and managed called 'Reading the Image'. In this project, I used media as a constructive learning tool to induce knowledge dialogue between peers in non-formal learning settings. I took from Sarah Pink's argument, that media tools and techniques can be used not only as means of communication but also to help students' educational performances. Therefore, I saw potential in using media tools and techniques to facilitate experimental learning experiences for students to encourage reading, writing, interpreting texts in non-formal education settings.

Through 'Reading the Image' I set out to explore how learners could make use of their senses and experiences in learning how to appreciate poetry and culture in the Maltese language. This project helped me shape my professional views on education because I realised how good educational experiences could be facilitated through non-traditional inductive learning processes. Through 'Reading the Image' I also realised how students can improve their literacy skills whilst teaching focused on creating opportunities in class for dialogue with content rather than encouraging students to learn it by heart.

After successfully completing my first attempt of this project in a non-formal learning setting, I came to a point where I realised how inductive teaching processes such as 'Reading the Image' could also be effective in formal educational settings. Particularly, in Maltese language education where examination reports (MATSEC,

2018, 2019) show how Maltese students tend to fail their exams, whilst also outlining an absence of a 'meta discourse' about why this is happening. However, it also became clear to me that teaching and learning in formal secondary education settings in Malta is dominantly driven by the idea that 'good education' translates into traditional and non-experimental types of teaching practice.

I realised this tension towards using inductive learning methods when I was working on my pilot research project during the first years of my Doctoral research degree. This set out to implement an experimental teaching intervention, similar to Reading the Image, but this time in a formal learning setting. The pilot project consisted of a comparative study between two types of lessons, one traditional and one experimental (inductive). For the experimental intervention, I chose to work with a teacher preparing students (age 15-16) for their end-of secondary school examinations. The experimental method involved an initial showing of a short film to students (n=15) in class. Subsequently, students were asked to share their views inductively about the short film in class and to discuss the meaning of a poem as part of their curriculum in-light of what they learnt from the film. Students were then asked to use their own mobile phones to choose a theme and take photos and use visuals as a language to describe their own understanding of the poem. The teacher and the students who participated in the pilot project were asked to give their feedback and to share their experiences about the project.

General feedback provided by the teacher and the students, agreed that the experimental learning intervention was more interesting than the traditional class. Furthermore, the potential to feel engaged in a critical discussion about culture and the poem was enhanced in the experimental group compared to the traditional lesson. However, the participants' also identified there was not much room for such an intervention to be implemented in day-to-day curriculum. This was clear from the feedback because the participants claimed that with the amount of content, the available resources in schools and the time allocated for students' preparation for the examinations meant it would be impossible to deliver such an intervention on a regular basis.

Before the start of my pilot project, I envisaged my intervention could potentially be an alternative learning solution to addressing students' lack of ability to think critically about Maltese poetry. However, from this project I also learnt how important it is to understand more about the underlying factors that drive challenges in education before developing interventions that could offer possible solutions.

At this point I realised that more research is needed to learn about the drivers that contribute towards particular problems in Maltese secondary education. Particularly in high stakes learning settings where education is characterised by strict exam-driven teaching processes. As revealed in the feedback given by participants for my pilot study, drivers could be both practical and curricular. However, the experience of working on the pilot project helped me to understand the importance of in-depth research about what could be contributing to problems in Maltese secondary education in order for clear solutions to be identified.

1.2 Context

Within Malta primary and secondary schooling are compulsory and there are three main types; state schools, church schools and private schools. Fifty percent of students who attend primary and secondary education are enrolled in a state-owned institution (Eurodyce, 2016). All state schools are funded by the Government whilst church schools are mainly subsidized by public funding and private schools follow a fee-paying model. All types of secondary schools prepare students for the SEC examination process at the end of compulsory education. The number of SEC exam passes determines the students' progression to post-secondary education. Even though different types of schools in Malta differ in operation processes, student admissions and funding; all students are prepared for the same SEC examinations. This situation is significant because it reveals how the SEC is central to the Maltese secondary education, just as GCSE and A level examinations are central to the UK examination system.

1.2.1 Malta Teachers' Union

The Malta Teachers' Union (MUT) is very important for this study because it has an influential role in Maltese education policy making and curricular operations in schools. The MUT was established in 1919 and it was Malta's first trade union organization. One of the MUT's main role is to represent the voice and to safeguard the interests of professional educators through negotiating conditions of work when authorities propose new curricular initiatives, particularly in mainstream education. The role of MUT has been instrumental in bringing change in past education reforms, particularly the 1988 Education Act whose principles are still central to Malta's current education system. MUT has proposed significant solutions in the past for various sectors such as its role and input in giving teachers official professional recognition through the enactment of the Education Act in 1988. To date, MUT still considers this contribution as its greatest achievement. Since 2017, MUT has also been facing its own ideological conflicts as it opted to extend its membership intake to all management grades in the Maltese education sector. This decision has been interpreted as a conflict of interest by several members of the union as they argued that education management in Maltese education has close ties with the Ministry. This reveals a divisive ideological tension amongst the MUT members which resulted to the setting up of a new union, the Union of Professional Educators (UPE) in 2018.

1.2.2 SEC

As part of the National educational reform in 1985, just over thirty years ago, Maltese policy-makers introduced an affordable local examination system aimed at the general public. This reform introduced a newly local Maltese examination body, the SEC. At the end of compulsory studies at age sixteen, students sit for a series of one-time SEC examinations. Students may only proceed to post-secondary educational institutions, opting for either a vocational or an academic streaming; depending on

the number and the grades of these one-time examination passes. More details about progression routes from compulsory education to post-secondary education will be discussed in chapter 2.

1.2.3 National Curriculum Framework (NCF)

The NCF document was first published in 1999 and was revised in 2010. This document is used as a reference in all Maltese learning settings, state, church and private. This document is to be used as a set of guidelines amongst schools and stakeholders and provide a “strategic direction by rationalizing the necessary changes and their implications for area/subject content, pedagogies and assessment” (2012; p.11). The NCF document suggest ways to schools and stakeholders of: providing an equal education for all; promoting exploration in education rather than conformity; empowering students to take risks and to respond constructively to social, cultural and economic changes in Malta (MEDE, 2012). However, the implementation of these ideals is identified in this research as central to the on-going debate about what and how should Maltese education operate to work within such principles.

1.2.4 Learning Outcome Framework (LOF):

The LOF (2012) was developed from the NCF (1999) document and is aligned to the four objectives of the education policy for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024. It is also the main driver of the My Journey policy (2016) which sets out to implement an education reform based on principles set by the LOF. The LOF’s mandate was to change the Maltese education system from exam-specific structures to a system based on principles of formative learning and assessment. Attard Tonna (2016), Head of the LOF project explained that: “The LOF has a strong focus on pedagogy and assessment; it promotes learner-centred learning and favours models of assessment which give clear and continuous feedback of one’s progress” (2016; p.171).

Malta’s LOF was launched to reform the Maltese education system with particular focus on the current SEC examination system. Teachers were invited to be involved in the design of the new LOF which impacts mainly on the curricula that prepare students for the SEC examinations. The main intended objective was to develop a LOF curriculum that shifted away from exam-centric syllabi by introducing formative learning and assessment structures. The project was aimed to be implemented in secondary school compulsory education in October 2017. However, the project has not yet been implemented due to lack of agreement amongst education stakeholders on how the LOF objectives are to be implemented in real-life scenarios.

The Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 and My Journey policies are central to the policy analysis chapter (chapter 4) of this research and will be used to further understand the issues that are holding back Malta’s education reform.

1.3 Situating the research problem

Education policy, pedagogic culture and the historic context of Maltese education are amongst the main subject areas of enquiry in this thesis. Dominant learning frameworks in Malta's educational system seem to conflict with the learning objectives set by Malta's educational legislation, particularly the principles of achieving valuable and inclusive education (Act XXIV of 1988). These principles are central to the Maltese education legislation but the implementation of these principles has historically been problematic particularly in secondary school education. This situation reveals how different curriculum priorities create tensions amongst education stakeholders who might agree with the principles but are resistant to change their professional practice.

Sultana (1992), argues that characteristically in Malta the aim of providing a valuable education has been characterised by the conflict between three different goals; economic, educational and ideological. The economic goal is driven by a mentality that education should reflect economic developments of the Nation, particularly providing skilled workers for the needs of the industry. The educational goal focuses on providing a valuable education that serves the needs and aspirations of the students. Thirdly, the ideological goal focuses on facilitation of quality and equality in education irrespective of the social class background, gender, learning abilities and disabilities of the student.

Conflicting views about how these three goals should be implemented in curricular developments in secondary education in Malta are historically evident, particularly the tensions between comprehensive and selective models of education. As Zammit Magion (1992) explains, when Malta introduced vocational education in mainstream secondary education during the 1970's, this conflict was at its height by the end of the decade. The aim was to eliminate selective models of learning and assessment by introducing a comprehensive approach to encourage more student achievements in secondary education (Zammit Magion, 1992). The introduction of Vocational education in mainstream secondary education also brought curricular conflicts between a comprehensive and selective models of education which resulted in the closure of vocational education in the early 1990's.

The underpinning curricular conflicts that brought vocational education to an end in Malta is taken as a historic starting point in this research because studies show that such curricular conflicts are still present today (Zammit Mangion, 1992; Sultana, 1998). The National Curriculum Framework for All (NCF) which determines modes of educational practice in Malta emphasizes the importance of vocational education in secondary schools (MEDE, 2012). In principle, the NCF set out to modernize Maltese education more than twenty years ago. The NCF marks the beginning of introducing alternative learning and assessment processes in the Maltese secondary education system in contrast to the current dominant exam-led structures, however much of the curricular developments stated by the NCF have still not been implemented.

This curricular conflict is characterized by issues of disagreements amongst stakeholders. Particularly conflicts that focus on how quality, standards, principles and practices should translate into real-life Maltese education. Such conflicts become visible when changes are introduced, or proposed, to the traditional exam-led educational structures in Maltese secondary education. Consequently, various learning initiatives and policies (discussed and analysed in this thesis) have been mushrooming in Malta during recent years to cope with the struggles and challenges created by the current mainstream secondary education system.

Mainstream education at every level in Malta is highly influenced by and dependent upon public policy. However, the phases at the end of compulsory secondary education generate particular attention because this stage dictates students' future whether they are to progress to post-secondary education or not. This learning phase is in the spotlight and highly criticised by the Maltese education community because it is underpinned by a selective ideology (Apap et al. 2003). This criticism appears to crystallise a binary tension between comprehensive and selective models of education. An investigation I conducted into the root causes of poor student performances at this stage of a student's secondary education (Attard, 2018) revealed how the impediments to modernisation in formal learning settings are complex and multifaceted.

In Malta, the desire to introduce change to the education system has been a feature of the country's educational discourse during its history but became critical once again in 2016 through a policy entitled *My Journey* (MEDE, 2016). The aim of this policy was to implement a new educational system based on the principles of Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF). The LOF builds on the principles of its preceding framework NCF and once again the introduction of change proposed in the *My Journey* policy brought resistance and controversy amongst the education community. Particularly because the changes being proposed by Maltese education authorities aim to re-introduce the curricular principles of comprehensive education. The key proposals focused on introducing a new formal examination system that moves away from the current one-size fits all system and which "ambitiously moves forward in democratizing academic, vocational and applied learning for all students within a framework of parity of esteem" (MEDE, 2016, p.11). Whilst in principle this change was endorsed by many, the main point of resistance seems to revolve around issues of implementing this proposal in educational practices. This situation reveals tensions, mainly between who is proposing to introduce change in Maltese secondary education and who is experiencing it.

The *My Journey* policy should have been implemented in schools during the 2017/18 scholastic year, however, the implementation of this new reform has been halted several times due to various disagreements between the compulsory education teaching community and policy makers in Malta. According to the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT), who represent the teachers' voice of the Maltese education sector, the LOF should be seen as a huge cultural change and not only a reform: "... it is a change in mentality and culture... [for] the LOF to be successful it needs a careful

implementation strategy and an agreement on conditions of work” (Times of Malta, 2016).

This reception of the policy highlights that whilst the need for change seems to be accepted in principle by teaching professionals and policy makers, the implementation of change is still a site of controversy and disagreement. This research aims to investigate the drivers that motivate this controversy, particularly the underlying curricular conflicts that characterize this problematic situation in the Maltese secondary education. This research seeks to answer three research questions (RQ).

RQ 1. What are the main characteristics that shape the Maltese education system?

This research question will be at the core of chapter two which focused on a review of historic landmarks and literature that characterise the Maltese education system today. The objective is to review past education policies, and their contribution towards the development of Malta's current education system and to establish:

- The role of education in Maltese society;
- The main critical perspectives regarding education in Malta;
- The socio/economic developments in Malta and their impact on the education system;
- Ways of measuring performance in education;
- The structure of Malta's mainstream education system;
- The key-learning stakeholders in Malta.

RQ 2. How are notions of contemporary education standards, value and experiences constructed by the Maltese education system?

This research question is at the core of the empirical stages of this study which will be analytically reviewed (chapters five and six). The objective of this research question is to analyse relevant policy documents and collate first-hand perspectives regarding experiences of Maltese education and how this impact attempts to introduce change in the Maltese education system. In order to answer this research, question the following shall be explored:

- Perceptions of students, parents, teachers, head teacher, SEC examiner and Ministry of Education regarding the preparation phases for mainstream formal examinations;
- Personal views about the dominant forms of measuring education performances in the Maltese formal learning settings by students and learning stakeholders;
- The current relationships between education performance results and the Maltese education policymaking.

RQ 3. What is the future of secondary education in Malta?

This research question builds on the results of the first two research questions. The focus will be on the key drivers that are motivating the idea of ‘modernising’ Malta's secondary education system and the impacts of this change on pupils’ education. The objective of this research question is to develop a professional recommendations that can potentially address issues of policy implementation. The details of the proposed recommendations will be postulated in a dedicated recommendations section in chapter 7.

1.4 Contribution to knowledge

This research investigates curricular challenges in the Maltese secondary education. As shown in the Eurostat statistics (figure 1-1 and figure 1-2 below), since 2008 and up until 2019, Malta qualifies as the highest country in Europe for early school leavers and has been so for quite some time (Eurostat 2008). This ranking evidently shows that despite curricular changes in the secondary education system it is clearly not having a positive impact on reducing the numbers of early school leavers in Malta.



Figure 1-1 Eurostat country ratings of early school leavers (2008)

Figure 1 Early Leavers from Education and Training in 2018 (Eurostat, 2019)

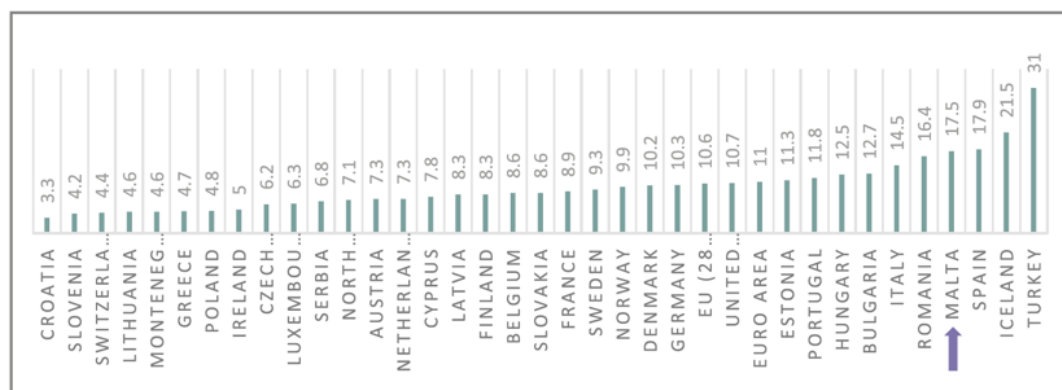


Figure 1-2 Eurostat country ratings of early school leavers (2019)

Although the Eurostat statistics provide numerical data on how Malta ranks in terms of its school leavers compared with other countries in the European Union (EU), it fails to provide an understanding of the factors that lead Maltese secondary school students to leave their education prematurely without achieving a basic level of qualifications. This research explores these factors in-depth and from various standpoints, to understand systematically issues that influence student retention, quality and standards of qualifications, and principles of learning and teaching practices. To achieve such an understanding I aim to answer 3 research questions (please refer to previous section 1.3 for research questions).

The first research question reflects on the context and literature about bringing change in Maltese secondary education, particularly the tension between comprehensive and selective models of education. It reveals the main principles and characteristics that shape the idea of change in the Maltese secondary education system and the critical challenges that keep resurfacing when authorities try to introduce curricular changes in Malta's secondary education to improve students' achievements in the SEC.

The second research question focuses on current issues of education policy and practices that set out to effect change in Maltese secondary education. This research question captures essences from policies and experiences by those who attempt to introduce change in Malta's secondary education and by those who experience it every day.

The third research question draws on the idea of change from policy and personal experiences. It sets out to understand how perspectives on change, from top-down (policy making) to down-up (education stakeholders) indicate possible futures for Malta's secondary education.

This study explores what current available statistics and reports cannot tell us about problems of curricular reforms and early school leavers in Maltese secondary education. Moreover, the results of this study contribute to an in-depth understanding, from various perspectives, of what can hold back the introduction of curricular reforms. The study systematically analyses different perspectives (policy, parents, teachers, policy makers and pupils) and describes the critical conditions and competing voices that create challenges in curricular reform.

This research study focuses on the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC), Malta's National formal examination system that operates as a gateway for pupils to progress from secondary to post-secondary education. In 2015, The Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC) Examinations Board called out for further studies that aim to research further into the nature of poor performance in the SEC examinations;

“Why is this happening? ... Low expectations? Other reasons? Only systematic qualitative research, which is beyond the scope of this report, can answer these questions.” (MATSEC, 2015).

MATSEC's call for action necessitates research which explores subjective experiences and develops an understanding of the contextual factors impacting on pupils' high dropout rates from Malta's secondary education. This thesis addresses this knowledge gap. Since experiences are complex and subjective in nature, this study seizes the opportunity to view the problem from multiple perspectives (Dixon-Woods et al. 2006) and from varied sources to provide the basis of new and reflective understanding of this problem.

Insights generated from this study about the situation of curricular reforms and student retention in Maltese secondary education provides a starting point for examining other national education systems. Although the findings are not generalizable, they are transferable to other contexts; the conceptual and methodological approaches could be used for other research studies that set out to explore national and international educational settings in which implementation of curricular reform is problematic.

This research helps us understand how curricular reform in education is not simply something that can be imposed by higher authorities and, therefore, it asserts that engaging and consulting stakeholders is critical in improving challenging situations of implementing curricular reforms in education. As such the recommendations are highlighted in chapter 7. Ultimately this study argues the need for a shift in mentality by education stakeholders about matters of communication in education. If, as I argue, curricular reform is not simply the result of the imposition of policy, then it is necessary to investigate the ways in which it is promoted, resisted, negotiated and accommodated in different ways by those with a stake in it.

The next section provides a short description of the sequence of chapters in this thesis and how each chapter contributes towards addressing these fields of enquiry.

1.5 Outline of thesis

1.5.1 Chapter two: Context and Literature

The chapter presents how the 1988 Education Act has brought educational developments in Malta that have shaped the current curricular reforms in Maltese secondary education. Education landmarks motivated by this Act shall be critically explored using key critical literature and theories. The outcome of this chapter is to establish insights of the tensions around current educational policies and learning practices in Maltese secondary education. I will illustrate the realization of a particular philosophy of education that characterizes Maltese secondary education today. This context serves as a background for the forthcoming chapters of this study. In this chapter I shall also provide a detailed description of the SEC, how it operates, who participates in it, the current examination process and why it is so central to the Maltese secondary education system. Furthermore, it will also explain why the SEC is considered as the gold standard system for assessing student performances in Malta and what is at stake if students do not achieve the required number of SEC examination passes and drop out from the educational system. This section also provides context about the latest developments that are taking place in the SEC examination system. Particularly the introduction of new Vocational Educational Training (VET) assessment models that were introduced as an alternative to the traditional academic type SEC subjects and their implications. Moreover, this chapter also sheds light on why and how curricular reform in the SEC examinations have become so central in the debate about the future of the Maltese secondary education.

1.5.2 Chapter three: Methodology

The methodology chapter focuses on a specific research approach that aims to help me understand how and why any attempts to modernize the SEC examination system are still subject to disagreement and wide controversies. This chapter will initially explain how the research questions were formulated and how they contribute towards the understanding of the drivers relating to the main problem/s targeted in this study. It will explain how a specific qualitative study research methodology was developed from the underpinning conceptual and theoretical frameworks. The chapter develops by explaining the methods employed in the research and the analytical processes of each stage of the research. Lastly, the ethical issues taken into consideration in the research are explored to ensure no harm came to any of the research participants.

1.5.3 Chapter four: Policy Analysis

This chapter constitutes the first part of the empirical research phase. This chapter, presents a detailed structure of the analysis, the documents that were analyzed and

the purpose of the analysis. Each section of this chapter consists of a background outlining the over-arching drivers that motivated the desired objectives identified in each policy document reviewed. The three policies were:

1. Framework for the Education Strategy in Malta (2014);
2. My Journey: Achieving through different paths (2016);
3. A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools – Route to Quality Inclusion (2019).

Each section presents the key analytic themes that were identified in the analysis and includes an in-depth analysis of discourse formulations identified in every policy document, showing how policy makers employ language to achieve change for various political, social and economic ends. Finally, every section of the policy analysis will be concluded with a short summary of findings, consisting of a general discussion about the findings from the analysis and a summary of topics that require further study.

1.5.4 Chapter five: Interviews

This chapter constitutes the second part of the empirical research phase. This chapter presents participants that contributed in the research, their role in the Maltese education system, why they were chosen to participate and why their contributions are important in this research. This chapter presents an overview of perceptions, anxieties, mentalities, feelings, professional and personal challenges, pressures, influences and recommendations to conceptualize how notions of practice and theory are constructed by the Maltese education system today. This chapter is also structured in sections and each section outlines the main themes and sub themes that were generated from the interview analysis.

1.5.5 Chapter six: Discussion of Findings

This chapter brings together the main analytic themes from chapter five and chapter six. Here it discusses the connections between findings from the two chapters and how these connections relate to Maltese history of education and literature reviewed in chapter two. This chapter generates new insights into the main research questions by synthesizing the outcomes from both parts of the empirical work.

1.5.6 Chapter seven: Conclusions and Recommendations

This is the final concluding chapter of this research. This chapter provides a synopsis of topics discussed in the exploration of the findings. This section also provides a summary regarding what has been answered by the main research questions as well as identifying new lines of enquiry. This chapter concludes with a list of recommendations that could help towards achieving solutions towards the main problems identified in this research. Moreover, suggestions for further studies also feature in this chapter.

1.6 In Summary

This introduction provides an overview of the research problem that is the focus of this doctoral study. It sets out the context and parameters in which the research problem takes place and the contribution to knowledge. It also outlines the structure of the thesis and how every chapter contributes toward the research study as a whole. Particularly, how each chapter builds towards the identification of research questions and towards the design of a specific methodology that can address the specificities of the research problems. A brief description is also given about how results are presented. Moreover, limitations of the study are also presented, however more details on specific limitations that impact the research design and data acquisition of this study will be presented in the methodology (Chapter 3) and analysis chapters (Chapters 4 and 5).

Following this introduction, the thesis will proceed chapter by chapter with a detailed description of the research context. In the following chapter, I shall begin my research journey with a thorough exploratory examination of historic events and literature that shape the Maltese secondary education system today.

Chapter 2 Context and Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a critical review of the origins and development of Malta's formal secondary education system. The following discussion is built around key moments or landmarks in recent Maltese education history, each of which exemplify some of the policy implementation issues characteristic of small-state education.

Bacchus (2014) explains, that education provision in small state countries such as Malta, are continuously characterized by: frequent economic fluctuations; rapid changes in industry requirements; lack of human resources and the Nation's aspiration to conform to other international education standards. These characteristics have historic roots in a linear progression of educational reforms and measures in Malta. It is important to critically discuss these landmarks because they symbolise significant characteristics in the dominant history of Maltese education (Sultana, 1999). This chapter sets the context for the study by presenting how these landmarks contribute towards the educational origins and the main principles that have driven, and are still driving, developments in secondary Maltese education system today.

At the core of Malta's current secondary education system are the promises set by the 1988 Education Act, based on principle of providing a valuable education for all students. These principles still stand today. Calleja (1994) argues that the promises set by the Act, particularly the promise that the State should provide valuable education for all, are key towards the understanding of Malta's current secondary education system and the challenges to sustain and promote the objectives of this legislation. Calleja also states that the Maltese education system is characterized by a unique "...history of cultural prejudices, isolation and subservience to foreign influences" (1994; 186). Conversely, as Calleja argues, the implementation of the promises set by the 1988 Education Act into practice have been problematic because of divergent interpretations of this Act.

The promise of providing valuable education for all in Malta has also been at the centre of tensions (Zammit Mangion, 1992; Sultana, 1999) between utilitarian and idealistic interpretations of this promise. The utilitarian perspective on valuable education for all centres on how Maltese education should contribute towards industry, the economy as well as the social interests of the Nation. Conversely, the idealistic interpretation of this promise focuses on giving every opportunity to individuals to succeed in education. Through a historic and literature review of these issues I will be in a better position to examine how these tensions continue to surface in Malta's mainstream education today.

In this chapter, key historic controversies will be discussed with a view to understand and diagnose how different mentalities and historic events in Maltese education have shaped the realization of a particular philosophy of education. The SEC, as a

nationally prescribed instrument of assessment, is a tangible curricular realisation of such a particular philosophy of education in Malta and, as such, has been regularly scrutinised and criticised. At the heart of the debate is how education provision in Malta has been previously characterized by different interpretations and attempts to achieve ‘value’ and ‘inclusivity’ in Maltese education. This is of particular interest for this study because these interpretations are currently influencing proposed reforms in Maltese education that set out to change how the SEC examinations operate within 21st Century Malta.

In the most recent education policy on ESL, ‘Early Leaving from Education and Training, the Way Forward 2020 – 2030, (MEDE, 2021) it is outlined how the main policy objective is *still* to: “Ensure inclusive and quality education for all” (2021; p.13). This reveals how the principles that underpin these objectives are still a priority and at the heart to the debate of how education provision in Malta should be. The diagram below shows six critical factors considered as risk indicators in this policy.

Figure 4 ELET risk indicators

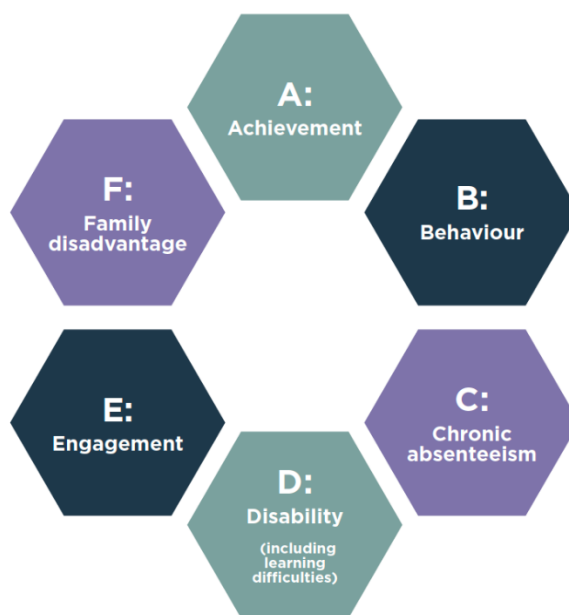


Figure 2-1 Early Leaving from Education and Training, the Way Forward 2020 – 2030, (MEDE, 2021)

2.2 Key concepts: value, inclusivity, and engagement

In this section I will draw upon educational literature to explore definitions of three key concepts; value, inclusivity and engagement in education. The following diagram (Figure 2-2) shows these three concepts alongside different educational theories that are widely featured in literature on ideology in education. This section explores these concepts and definitions to develop a conceptual framework that subsequently drives the empirical stages of this research.

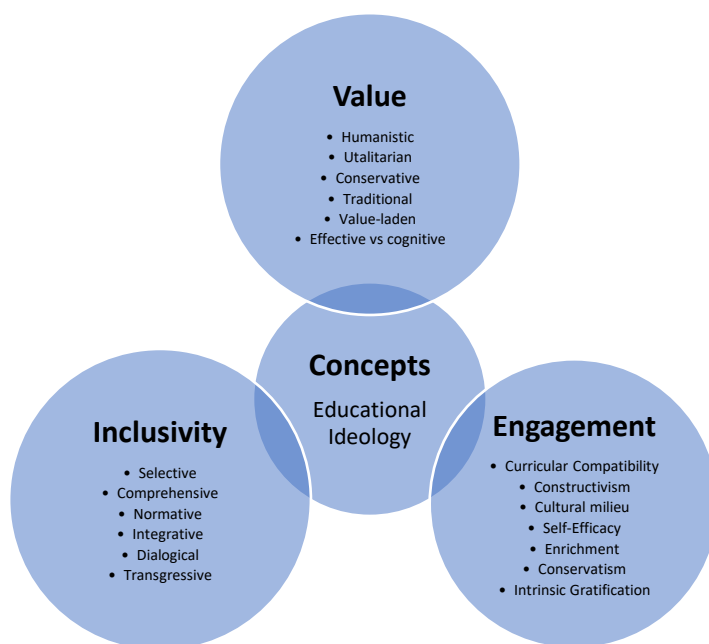


Figure 2-2 Key Ideological Concepts and Definitions in Education

2.2.1 Value

Value in education has traditionally been measured by results (Jacob, 2005) – in other words, by measuring educational value through students' exam results, or measuring educational value depending on teachers' salaries, working conditions, or other issues relating to teaching/learning resources. Jacob's study (2005) reveals how parents from advantaged or disadvantaged social backgrounds interact with the concept of educational value in diverse ways, viewing policy makers and education authorities as accountable in the achievement of valuable education for their children.

Value, however, is now a contested ideological concept in educational discourses, often revolving around the notion of education as a good in itself, and education as a utility. Biesta explicitly argues against policy-makers' tendencies to elide value with evidence-based education and argues for the valorisation of 'value' in itself (Biesta, 2010). Similarly, Aronowitz & Giroux (1986) argue in their book *Education Under*

Siege (the name of book clearly suggesting the need of radical change to traditional ideological concepts of value in education), that curriculum development in education should steer away from systems that favour traditional knowledge-recall models of education. Miller (2008) argues that education should be defined by the principles of **action** and **practice** that are accessible within the world that a student is familiar with. Miller asks "...is thinking valued and made visible? Is there student input? How will I know they understand?" (Miller, 2008, p.69). Miller's questions reveal how the idea of a valuable educational experience is a personal one for the students and the system that administers education should make the purposes of the learning visible for them. This means that the students' life experiences should be central to the educational process of learning. Biesta (2010) argues that in evidence-based education practices, questions can be raised about the value of students' learning in terms of knowledge, efficacy and application of students' work. As alternative to traditional evidence-based education, Biesta (2010) recommends that a value-based approach that puts the student at the centre of curricular development could provide a more humanised educational experience that address these deficits.

Educational value can be perceived in terms of humanistic aspects. This concept of value is fundamentally subjective as it sees the role of education in providing learning for students' own personal enrichment and for the good of society (Reid, 1998). The humanistic view of education emphasises the student's ability to critically think about value and achievement in education (Beatty 2013; Rivera 2015; Porter 2015). The key debate here is between a metrics-defined utilitarian concept of value and subjective perceptions of humanist education. In other words, how value in education should translate into personal enrichment as opposed to exam-driven performances in formal education systems. This is a key tension explored in this study and the concepts discussed in this section will, subsequently, inform the analysis of policy and interview data.

The conflict between **utilitarian** and **humanistic** ideologies is particularly present in educational landscapes where the idea of value in education is driven by learners' performances in selective exam-led systems (such as the secondary school system in Malta). Whilst initiatives in seeking value in education through humanistic learning and assessment approaches can be agreed upon in non-formal education settings these can be contested in mainstream education because of traditional selective and conservative value-laden principles of education.

A humanistic approach in principle shows how students could be given opportunity not only to learn how to complete tasks prescribed from above for the demands of the curriculum, but instead it could help a learner gain general skills in reaching their full potential. For Howard Gardener, the humanistic aspect in education should be set at the forefront of educational value. As outlined in his theory of multiple intelligences, it is important to approach the idea of value in educational processes from eight areas: musical-rhythmic, visual-spatial, verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalistic. In other words, giving learners the opportunity to relate to topics of knowledge from

various points of entry, unlike exam-led structures which tend to lean towards one point of interest, namely the recall of knowledge. Gardener argues that there should be other alternatives to teach and evaluate an individual's capabilities: "...the examiner scores the responses and comes up with a single number...[which] is likely to exert appreciable effect upon [the student's] future, influencing the way in which her teacher thinks of her and determining her ability for certain privileges" (Gardener, 2011, p.3). Gardener's theory of multiple-intelligences is often referenced in educational policies, it also features, incidentally, in Malta's 10-year strategy of education (MEDE, 2014).

Humanistic concepts of educational value are persuasive – Piaget, for example, argues that education should have a wider value in life. Piaget's definition of valuable learning outlines a stark difference from the objectives and priorities of metric-driven idea of achievement with exam-led structures. Exam-led structures are characteristically knowledge-recall oriented, focusing on the cognitive aspect of teaching and learning but not allowing much space for the affective life aspect. Education, for Piaget, should provide good values for people and is essential in producing good citizens. Educational value, therefore, is in its contribution to personal wellbeing and to society. Piaget explains that education consists of two inseparable components, the effective life and the cognitive life (Piaget, 1957), arguing that these two components should not be seen as separate entities to a learner's development of knowledge:

"They are inseparable because all interaction with the environment involves both a structuring and a valuation... Thus even in pure mathematics, without experiencing certain feelings, and conversely no effect can exist without a minimum understanding or discrimination." (Piaget, 1957, p.5)

Therefore, for Piaget, in order for a learner to achieve a holistic and a valuable learning experience, they should express their learning through an "internal regulation of energy" (Piaget, 1957), such as the personal affinity that a learner has with the topic in discussion together with an "external regulation" i.e. the value factor of the topic in discussion in real life terms (Piaget, 1957). Furthermore, Piaget's definition helps us reflect on whether the traditional idea of value in education should be rethought in light of the affective aspect to give students a holistic rendition of their learning achievements, focusing on educational value for people's own wellbeing, good citizenship and towards the good of society. This struggle over the meaning of value is one which characterises all education systems, and particularly Malta's.

2.2.2 Inclusivity

Contemporary approaches in identifying ideological concepts of inclusive education helps move away from the traditional idea that inclusive education should merely focus on students with different forms of disability. Inclusivity in education is a

complex ideological concept which is often used in education policies and practices. DeLuca (2013) argues that there needs to be a shift from traditional conceptions of inclusive education by providing a system that facilitates education for all forms of difference. Figure 2-3 shows DeLuca's theoretical foundation based on four conceptual stages of progression from traditional and idealistic forms of inclusivity towards an interdisciplinary approach for all differences. This theoretical foundation is based on four main conceptions.

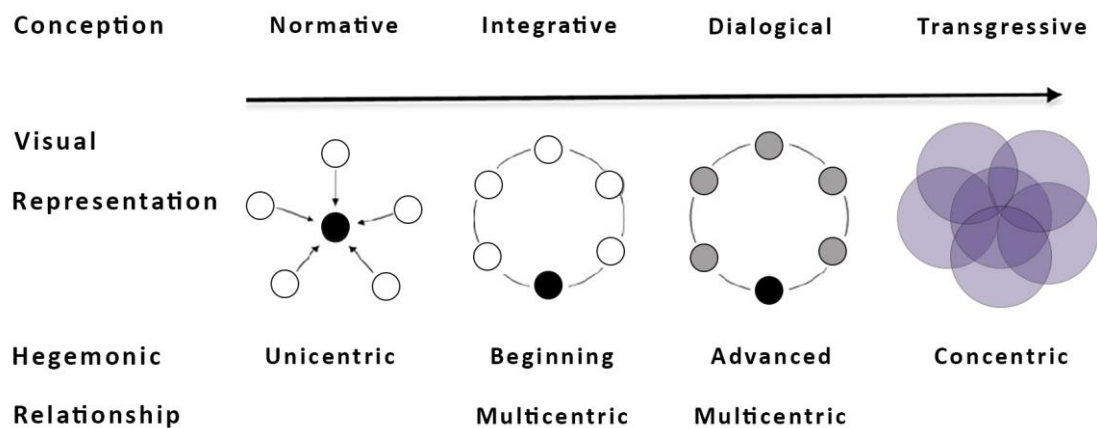


Figure 2-3 Adopted from framework of Inclusivity, by DeLuca (2013; p.326)

The normative conception of inclusivity represents the traditional ways of seeing inclusivity as means of encouraging minority individuals to be part of a mainstream 'normalised' group. A normative concept, as shown in figure 2-3, uses a unicentric model of inclusivity in which minority differences (represented as white circles in the diagram), are pushed towards a normalised mainstream group (represented in black). On the other hand, the integrative and dialogical conceptions of inclusivity are ideologically intertwined. These concepts represent a shift from a unicentric to a multicentric model for an equal environment for all diverse students. As shown in figure 2-3, a multicentric model signifies a drive for a system to facilitate same opportunities notwithstanding the different abilities and disabilities of the individual. Finally, the transgressive conception of inclusivity. This concept follows a concentric model of inclusion. A concentric model signifies how an ideal system should not only alter or introduce practices to facilitate for individual differences (multicentric model) but to channel students' diversity as means for new knowledge and learning experiences (DeLuca, 2013).

This section examines these four concepts as an interdisciplinary conceptual framework for inclusivity in education. I shall draw upon DeLuca's (2013) four conceptions and relate to the study of how cultural and social aspects (Coleman 1966; Bourdieu 1998; Fonteboa 2012; Abbott 2012; Topor et al 2012) can illuminate inclusivity in education.

2.2.2.1 Normative conception

DeLuca's 'normative concept' conceives inclusivity as an assimilative process that aims towards 'normalising' all differences towards a dominant cultural standard (DeLuca, 2013). I argue that this concept is prevalent today, particularly where inclusive education translates to a system of processes and practices that lead individuals to a one size fits all examination standard. The need for education practices to cater for different forms of knowledge transmission (Hannah 2013; Borg 2014), such as families, learning styles, social class, parenting styles, classroom spaces/resources and teachers' practices is evident in literature. This literature includes definitions that relate to a normalised concept of inclusive education. This includes providing education for a range of learning needs that impact upon students on daily basis such as; physical and/or mental disability, family circumstances, poverty, housing etc. As such, it is important to have a holistic view by including the process of socialisation (Bernstein, 1990). This refers to a learner's intrinsic and extrinsic values that stimulate the idea of inclusivity in education policy and teaching practice and includes culture, competence and schooling. However, the problem of normalising inclusivity, according to DeLuca (2013), is that the definition of an inclusive educational experience in this case is based principally on driving all students towards a 'same' standardised goal. Conversely, mainstream education systems should encourage educational practices to see beyond individuals' performances in school or exams by considering wider societal and structural barriers that impact upon learners. A contemporary case in point is how children's education suffered during Covid because of lack of digital access (digital exclusion) or not having the right home environment conducive to learning and/or anxiety and mental health issues during national and regional lockdowns. This, in itself, raises questions about the effectiveness of a normalised approach towards an inclusive education.

2.2.2.2 Integrative and dialogical conceptions

DeLuca's (2013) integrative and dialogical concepts of inclusive education refer to systems and initiatives that aim to provide an equal educational setting with various tangible outputs for student with different needs. These models of inclusivity are described by DeLuca as 'beginning' and 'advanced' as they describe a movement towards genuine multicentricity. This is analogous with the Gardener's advocacy of multiple intelligences discussed in section 2.2.1, Gardner's theory shifts away from a one-size fits all model in learning, although Sternberg (1999) argues that if every form of intelligence is treated as equal, where does this leave people with disabilities such as hearing loss or cognitive disabilities. This returns us back to a traditional normative notion of inclusive education exclusively as means to reach students with physical or cognitive disabilities. Sternberg (1999) refers to Gardner's multiple intelligences more as cognitive styles rather than independent structures of intelligence. This also seems to be aligned with the policy rhetoric in education. When policy attempts are made to encourage student equality and introducing change from selective models of education to comprehensive, for various reasons this drive for change seems to be highly contested and controversial in mainstream and formal secondary education teaching practice but encouraged in non-formal settings. This field of study includes

the impacts of culture on a learner's education (Boykin et al. 2005; Warikoo & Carter 2009), such as; social competence and social responsibility, social adjustment and diverse academic behavior competences, self-perceived academic competences (Faith. 2019), and lifestyle habits, health and physical activity (Abadie & Brown 2010; Tonje et al. 2014). The integrative and dialogical concept of inclusive education can be seen to underpin the above mentioned literature and discussion revolving around the tensions between how inclusive education should translate into real-life learning practices – a tension that is also central to the debate about comprehensive and selective education systems. Thus, any research study which explores ideas of inclusivity in education should take the integrative and dialogical process of socialisation into account.

2.2.2.3 Transgressive conception

For DeLuca, the transgressive model moves beyond the identification of specific groups and providing labels for disadvantage towards an environment in which “students...interpret and share their uniqueness as individuals [which] leads to a more authentic representation of student diversity and a more genuine context for inclusion” (2013, p.335). The transgressive concept of inclusivity means that the goal in education should not only be to provide an equal education for every student alike with no barriers but to use diversity as means to obtain new knowledge and to provide new learning experiences. Themes revolve around the concept of ‘equality of educational opportunity’ (Egalite, 2016) and are commonly found in education policies, school mission statements and reform proposals characterised in particular phrases such as ‘leaving no child behind’. However, I argue in this study that the challenges that under this promise are very controversial in educational settings where attempts are made to provide an equal education for all whilst preparing students for a one-time examination system for all. These challenges seem to be based on Coleman’s report (1966), in which inclusivity links with principles of social justice, featuring concepts of engagement gap, quality of learning, quality of teaching, and the role of the family and segregation of schools. However, I argue that these principles still fall short of the ideals of transgressive inclusive education. Focussing on how external factors can impact learners on a daily basis, reveals the social aspect of inclusive education, that aims to support those who are disadvantaged. In contrast, DeLuca’s transgressive model outlines that learning differences should not be categorised. He argues that a transgressive concept of inclusivity embraces all individual differences alike and to use inclusive education strategies as means to provide new knowledge and to ameliorate educational experiences. However, in practice transgressive models of inclusive education necessitates new resources and feasible structures to facilitate education for all needs. This concept calls for shift in mentality that is clearly quite problematic to implement. It is particularly troublesome in educational settings where systems, processes and practices lead students towards achieving single-type examinations that cater for students across the board.

2.2.3 Engagement

“Engagement is difficult to define operationally, but we know it when we see it, and we know it when it is missing” (Newmann, 1986, p. 242). This highlights the problem not just of apprehending engagement, but understanding it.

In this section Zyngier’s (2008) study of engagement in Australian schools provides a theoretical framework for understanding the concept. He notes that “governments and schools have developed many programmes that aim to improve students’ engagement with learning and improve educational outcomes for all students” and comments that the typical response is to assume “that the problem is with the students” (p.1766). He presents three contrasting perspectives on engagement: 1) Instrumentalist or rational technical; 2) Social constructivist or individualist engagement; 3) Critical-transformative engagement.

Zyngier’s first construction helps define what the critical contributors to student engagement are. Various issues of learners’ personal conditions contribute towards the learners’ engagement and overall idea of a valuable education. These can include personal issues such as the cultural milieu of the learner and the learner’s interpretation of experiences. The cultural milieu of a learner bring us back to Bourdieu’s statement regarding what should constitute a learner’s ability to take ownership of learning and being immersed in an empirical reality of the social world (Bourdieu, 1993). The instrumentalist view of engagement perhaps equates with the normative view of inclusion – it is based on statistical data and involves well-meaning teachers attempting to effect compliance from reluctant students. This inevitably produces a deficit.

The social constructivist model of engagement, conversely, involves “active learning...self-motivation, reflective shared goal setting and student choice” (Zyngier 2008, p.1772). According to Ryan and Deci the involvement of a student in their own learning can manifest through self-efficacy. In Beane’s (1982) definition below, student engagement emerges from a positive self-concept and self-esteem, with positive psychological results. Similarly, Ryan and Deci suggest “they need to experience themselves as competent and self-determining in these interactions. [The learners’] sense of being competent and self-determinant provides intrinsic gratification and is a prerequisite for psychological health” (Ryan and Deci, 1986, p.42).

Applying constructivist learning principles to a formally assessed educational system is fundamental in the development of diverse and dynamic learning platforms for students, however this also has its ideological challenges. Zyngier argues that constructivist educational approaches are key for students to take ownership of the content that features in subject curricula. However, constructivist educational principles have traditionally been challenging to implement in formal education systems. Particularly where exam-led structures are dominant. In exam-led educational landscapes, the ‘banking system’, a term used by Paulo Freire (1970) to criticise the limitations of traditional knowledge-recall model of education, clashes

ideologically, over concepts of education, with constructivist systems which inevitably creates an impasse unless it is resolved in some way.

Constructivism (Dewey 1938; Vygotsky 1986), also known as progressivism (Moss, 2010) has contributed widely in the field of child-centred education. According to Dewey, constructivism in education addresses the realities of today's social environments giving way to various scholars to take constructivism forward to promote connectivism (Siemens 2005; Downes 2010) as a learning approach that is strongly related to contemporary digital age realities. Connectivism has been critically reviewed as a current emerging learning theory in which educators seek to develop learning methods that exploit contemporary technology by engaging students to learn through collaborative learning styles (Crosslin 2016).

Conversely, the result of a curriculum based on selective models of education might undermine a student's ability to engage with his/her own educational experience. Beane states that; "...hidden curriculum features in the specific situation, such as teacher expectations, class climate and the like, may help or hinder. If negative, the removal of such barriers may influence achievement by helping learners feel they have a place and are accepted" (Beane, 1982, p.504). In connection with Beane's perspectives, Renzulli (2014) agrees that student engagement with learning can be achieved through **creative goal-oriented pedagogies**. Renzulli focuses on three types of student enrichment; **enjoyment, engagement and enthusiasm**, "focusing on a pedagogy or "brand" of learning that is based on inductive and investigative theories makes it possible to accomplish these goals" (Renzulli, 2014, p.541). Renzulli focuses on student educational engagement should be based on **creative thinking, problem solving, critical thinking and affective processes**. These concepts feature prominently in definitions of student engagement with learning and the objectives of the 21st century learning skills which are central to the development of educational policy and practice.

Vygotsky's constructivist approach links to Zyngier's final construction, 'critical-transformative engagement' in which he argues that learning engagement can only be achieved if the learning itself empowers students "... with a belief that what they do will make a difference to their lives and the opportunity to voice and discover their own authentic and authoritative life" (Zygnier, 2008, p.1773). In other words, when learning development is based on the principle of active learning in which it motivates students' involvement in constructing their own learning from the given knowledge. This goes beyond the simpler 'constructivist' approach, because, rather than teachers prescribing curriculum choices which align with 'official knowledge', students have greater control over the learning agenda which is, therefore, more authentic. Vygotsky's constructivism is also rooted in Piaget's cognitive contribution (discussed in section 2.2.1), and connects with the contemporary idea of student engagement in education, particularly how constructivist tools are encouraged to be used to provide an engaging learning experience for all students. Constructivism leans towards the idea that learning should be linked to concepts of social development (discussed in section 2.2.2).

“Learning is more than the acquisition of many specialized abilities for thinking about a variety of things. Learning does not alter our overall ability to focus attention but rather develops various abilities to focus attention on a variety of things” (Vygotsky, 1997, p.31).

The concepts of engagement, outlined here, are at the heart of this research, which seeks to illuminate how well-intentioned principles of engaging Maltese students in order to minimise early school-leaving often come up against an unwillingness to accommodate more radical pedagogy. Ownership of knowledge, standards, and pedagogy are all at stake in this debate.

2.2.4 Conclusion

The literature identified in this section reveals concepts of value, inclusivity and engagement in education are far from simple or universal and suggests, therefore, that the implementation of such ideas is likely to be subject to debate and disagreement. The literature explored in this section establishes a theoretical basis for some of the key concepts that underpin broad aspects of value, inclusivity and engagement in education and can, therefore, help to explain the ways in which these concepts are moulded by different approaches to policy making, teaching and learning.

On reflection, I find myself in crossroads when attempting to define what learning is and/or should be and to define its place in the world explored in this research. Particularly as in this research I am attempting to bridge the gap between theories of learning and the environments of education in which learning is nurtured. I now understand that education and learning are concepts that should be tackled from two main focus points. Firstly, from an epistemological stand point (as I am doing in this chapter), this focus constitutes knowledge that surrounds ideological concepts of education in general and in Malta and how it can manifest. Secondly, from an ontological perspective, this focus point revolves around the realities in the world of this research and the understanding of such a reality manifested in real-life practice. This challenge towards defining education ideology is a pivotal start for this research in the nature of discovering what education is in the context of this study and will be central in the following empirical stages of this research.

The concepts discussed in this section will be re-addressed in chapter 7, the discussion of findings chapter, and will link results that emerge from the empirical research analysis with the broader aspects of education ideologies discussed in this section.

2.3 Education Ideology in Malta

This research focuses on the process of curricular reform in Malta's secondary education, which is far from smooth and effective. It is essential, therefore, to elicit the ideological foundations of Maltese education which, I suggest, is characterised by a tension between humanistic and utilitarian beliefs about value.

Sultana (1997) argues that in Malta, parental ideals have an important stake in policy making and teaching practice and, ideologically, parents in Malta associate education (or lack of it) with social status and, therefore, educational achievement is a high priority for parents. When young people fall short of expected academic achievements then there is an associated blame on parents and young people, citing ignorance, lack of intelligence or low social status (cultural capital). As such, parents both reflect and drive educational ideology in Malta as 'influencers' on the notion of valuable education. Zammit Mangion explains that; "Parents have a strong belief in examinations and schools respond to their demands as a form of accountability for their efficiency and excellence" (1992; p.395). Maltese parents still strive to fund additional private tuition, over and above daily compulsory schooling, in order to enable their children to compete with their peers at secondary school and achieve 'high standards', thus reinforcing a culture of 'grades as capital'. Although parents often evince humanistic principles when asked about the purpose of education, their actions are often driven by a contradictory belief in education as a utility for their children to achieve specific social goals. There is, therefore, an ideological conflict at the heart of Maltese education which is perhaps not unusual, but given Malta's history and size it has led to some intractable problems.

In 1955 the first national examination system was introduced in Malta which provided opportunity for pupils to achieve certification that was internationally valued and recognised. Subsequently, parents refused to accept any other form of education in schools which were not directly linked with the examinations. This refusal from the parents reveals a utilitarian belief in the measurement of educational quality being determined by national examinations. This amplified the pressure on schools to ensure that every child is given all the possibilities to perform well in the national examinations. Buhagiar (1998), argues that parents' negative or dismissive views of extra-curricular school activities (or 'alternative' activities), illustrate the tension; on one hand there is a belief in the humanistic enrichment potential of extra-curricular activities, but this is outweighed by the utilitarian emphasis on formal measures of achievement.

In fact, the Grima report (2003), identified that parents still feel very strongly that pupils should be continuously tested by their teachers in preparation for their school examinations. Zammit Mangion links this ideology to a formalist teaching ideology in Maltese society that has been influenced by "exam-oriented attitudes" (1992; p.394) in schools and in homes.

The examination system resulted in a competitive ideology and selective education approaches that are still dominant in contemporary Maltese secondary education today. The comprehensive education system introduced in Malta in 1970's, was intended to reduce exam-oriented attitudes amongst learning stakeholders however

this was ideologically in contrast with the ethos of the national examination system. There was a lack of consultation and knowledge about comprehensive education systems which sparked controversies between education authorities, education professionals and parents. This led to ideological tensions about the objectives of comprehensive education and the re-instatement of selective models of education. These tensions brought examinations to be reinstated in mainstream secondary education in 1977 (just six years later). This measure led in practice to the development of a 'superior' class grouping, consisting of pupils considered 'high achievers' on the basis of their school yearly examinations results, showing promise in achieving success in the national examinations. Whilst the 'second class' grouping consisted of pupils who were perceived to be unmotivated and probably unable to achieve successful results in the national examinations. This change of direction went against the principles of comprehensive education.

Since then, and in light of ongoing ideological tensions between humanistic and utilitarian mentalities regarding the translation of 'value' and 'equality' into practice, I argue that educational ideology in Malta has resulted in a culture of negative attitudes, scepticism from learning stakeholders, and a lack of faith in the Maltese education system. These attitudes remain evident today, resulting in on-going pressures on the Maltese government and education authorities to provide valuable and equal education for all pupils and, crucially, to find agreement about what this might mean and look like in practice. In 1988, the Maltese government prioritised public concerns about achieving equality and value in education and introduced the Education Act of 1988. This Act aimed to rebuild public credibility of the Maltese educational system through the involvement of the government and the public to legally structure and articulate the meaning and the rights of equal and valuable education. The key aim was to introduce humanistic educational principles into law. Yet in reality this has caused controversies regarding how to implement such principles in real-life practice. The following section discusses the two dimensions that are central to the 1988 Education Act (Social and Academic) and pivotal in understanding underlying principles and philosophy driving current reform in Malta's secondary education system.

2.4 1988 Education Act

The 1988 Education Act is a milestone in the history of Maltese education. This Act promised to provide equal and valuable education for all, whilst also preparing pupils for life and education relevant towards the needs of the Maltese society (Act XXIV of 1988). Sultana (2010) claims that the journey towards establishing the Education Act promises had to start from re-establishing: "...credibility among parents, teachers, students and employers..." (2010; 155). The principles established in the 1988 Education Act were celebrated by many (Zammit Mangion, 1992; Sultana, 1997; Sultana et al. 1997) because, for the first time, they gave Malta independence from foreign influence.

However, the ways in which the principles of equal and valuable education were implemented into particular policies and practices have always been sources of controversy because of the broader social complexities in Malta that influence the decision-making process in education (Wain, 1994). In practice, to gain credibility, the Ministry of Education set out to re-establish a sense of ownership of the Maltese education system amongst learning stakeholders. In the 1988 Education Act legal roles and responsibilities are given, not only to the State but also to the parents, teachers and other learning stakeholders to ensure that every pupil receives a valuable education. However, as will become apparent in this section, this term continues to be contested and interpreted differently.

In this section, the Education Act of 1988 will be reviewed from two central dimensions the social and the academic. These two dimensions will be reviewed in reference to salient discussion points from a personal interview with Sir Hugo Mifsud Bonnici (2019), the Maltese Minister of Education who spearheaded the 1988 Education Act.

2.4.1 The Social Dimension

The 1988 Education Act presented a clear message about what is meant by providing valuable education for all without any prejudice. In practice this meant that compulsory education should be:

“... accessible to all Maltese citizens catering for the full development of the whole personality including the ability of every person to work...” (Education Act of 1988, p.277)

This objective has historically been challenging due to social factors, such as the economy and competing attitudes amongst learning stakeholders. The right of education for all is also emphasized in Coleman’s report (1966): featuring issues of achievement gap; quality of learning; quality of teaching; and the role of the family and the segregation of schools. However, Coleman (1966) also indicates that the answer to ensuring the right of valuable education for all is determined by equal share of ownership between policy makers and learning stakeholders. Consequently, the 1988 Education Act did not only prescribe the duties of the state to provide valuable education for all, but it set out to ensure ownership amongst learning stakeholders. This was established by legally setting the rights, duties and obligations of the parents and the policy-makers to ensure the sustainability of the Acts’ promises. Therefore, the introduction of this Act also meant the introduction of a tripartite responsibility between the state, educators and parents which was new for Maltese society. For example, although the Act puts emphasis on the obligations of the State to provide education and instruction for all Maltese citizens alike, the duties and the rights of parents are also legally stated as in the following:

“... to cause him [/her] to continue to attend school up to the end of the scholastic year during which the minor ceases to be compulsory...

It is the right of every parent of a minor to give his [/her] decision with regard to any matter concerning the education which the minor is to receive.” (Education Act of 1988, p.278)

During a personal interview with Dr Mifsud Bonnici (2019), Malta’s Minister of education at the time, he explained how in his view value equates to equality in education. He also explains why the right for valuable education for all was a core principle of the 1988 Education Act, and essentially a moral and political obligation within a democratic society:

“... valuable education is also the basis of democracy because in order to give each and every person the same right for a political vote, it is because the soul of every person should have no estimate value.”
(Mifsud Bonnici, 2019)

In practice this meant that through this Act, initiatives were introduced for the first time in Malta’s compulsory education by the Maltese Government to make compulsory education financially available for everyone, including fully funding of state and church schools in Malta so that all pupils regardless their social background would be entitled to a free education. Moreover, initiatives were introduced to move away from the fear of integrating learning stakeholders in Malta’s education policymaking. Such initiatives were also introduced to overcome the historical aversion to integrating the views of parents and students in educational policymaking.

As discussed in the historic context section, prior to the 1988 Education Act, there clearly was an aversion to integrating stakeholders in policymaking which resulted in strong divisions and problems in Maltese education history. Particularly in cases when the the teaching professionals and the general public were not consulted about government-led decisions in education. Giddens (1999) refers to ‘dialogic democracy’ as key in developing an education system that can address the wider concerns of a country’s political challenges and the ever-changing demands and social needs. He also explains that it is in a country’s interest to create opportunities of dialogue by engaging different learning stakeholders in the processes of education policymaking. However, I argue that opening opportunities for dialogue with all learning stakeholders also brought significant challenges in academic and administrative dimensions in Maltese education. In the following section I shall be reviewing initiatives that were introduced in the Maltese education system to encourage the principles of dialogic democracy.

2.4.2 The Academic Dimension

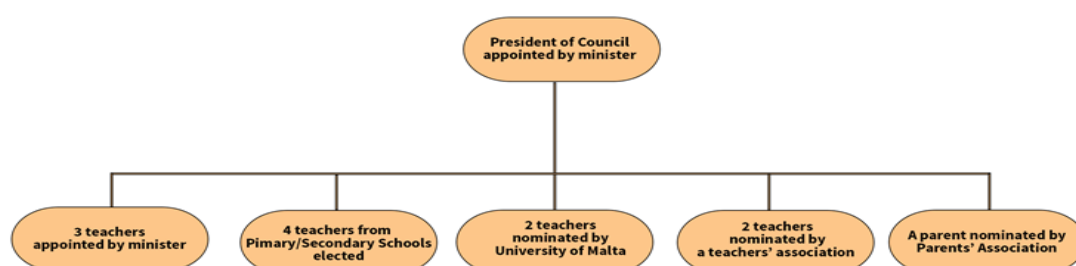
The Education Act of 1988 also had at its core the aim to re-establish the credibility of the Maltese education system amongst learning stakeholders, lost after the Ministry’s failed attempts in sustaining the comprehensive education system in the late 1970’s. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) was established to achieve

this goal (Zammit Mangion, 1992). Maltese education policy makers at the time, aimed to address the wider social concerns in education by introducing a policy framework that provided a platform of dialogue (NCF) among Maltese social constituents in order to regain credibility in the education policy making. The initiation of the NCF was one of the first education landmarks that were motivated by the 1988 Education Act and the NCF was set out to provide a ‘valuable’ curriculum by giving equal opportunity for every pupil to succeed (MEDE, 1999). This was important for education policy makers because, as Mifsud Bonnici once again shows that in his view, providing a valuable education is synonymous with equality. He explains that:

“the right to give everyone an education is all about giving everyone all the resources needed to learn and this should be the basis of our education. This is valuable education, because the value of every person has no estimate and one needs to invest everything to give people the chance to learn.” (Mifsud Bonnici, 2019)

The NCF was established to operate at both primary and secondary level education to provide equal curricular opportunities for all students. This framework was initially launched as National Minimum Curriculum (NCM) in 1989, revised and re-titled as National Curriculum Framework in 1995 and revised again in 2012 to facilitate for changes happening in schools. Secondary schools were particularly impacted by these changes in the beginning of the 1990’s. Changes brought forward by the Nationalist government at the time translated into reforms in the secondary education system, such as the Junior Lyceum, which eventually led to re-introduction of selective models of teaching and learning.

The NCF was originally established to reduce selective education mentalities amongst stakeholders through dialogue. The NCF involves teachers, pupils and parents directly in the consultation, planning and implementation processes of its vision (Figure 2-2). This was achieved through the establishment of a working committee, also known as the “strategy building team” (MEDE, 1999) made up of fourteen team members including key learning stakeholders, parents and teachers from different schools and other education officials.



The NCF working committee spearheaded the development of a policy document that was initially launched in 1995 and updated in 2005 and 2012. This framework still provides a minimum qualification structure for pupils every level of compulsory education, including all primary and secondary school learning in the state, church and private schools (more details about the current Maltese education structure will be given in the following chapter). From strategy building team discussions, the NCF provides a document consisting of a number of concepts and objectives for schools, teachers, parents and examination paper setters to use as guidelines for the different educational subjects. Each objective is divided in three sections, knowledge, skills and attitudes and each section provides a list of outcomes that need to be addressed in different subjects and in different levels of education. The development of the NCF was innovative. The NCF is significant because it involved a forum of learning stakeholders, teachers, policy makers and parents to take ownership and responsibility and to influence education policy.

Other initiatives implemented in Malta's compulsory education because of recommendations set by the NCF include the introduction of vocational education and training (VET) subjects in compulsory secondary education in an attempt to modernise Maltese education. Particularly by developing an educational platform for various learning abilities that are present in a secondary school educational setting. I shall give more details about the introduction of VET, as an alternative examination process in the SEC further in the following section 2.5.

Studies by Zammit Mangion (1992) and Sultana (1997) argue that although the 1988 Education Act brought initiatives such as the NCF to motivate collaborative dialogue amongst education stakeholders and to reduce selective models of education, Malta's government-led administration division is still characterised by a centralised and bureaucratic system that translates into a top-down education structure. Furthermore, Cutajar et al. (2013) argue that through such a system the full potential of the Act's principles cannot be achieved. Although there were opportunities to "develop a governance network" (2013; 118), a centralised education system in this context means that the Maltese government authorities are still at the centre of the development of every policy, reform, decision and measure in education. Despite the democratising aims of the NCF, the system is still characterised by a top-down education structure.

2.5 The Secondary Education Certificate (SEC)

Chapter 2 examined how the Maltese education system, since 1946 has undergone reforms and initiatives designed to reconcile quality and inclusivity in order to provide education for all. However, providing this in the Maltese education landscape has not always been successful because of conflicting ideologies and underpinning social and economic priorities. This observation is also echoed in the National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2012) report where it is stated that in recent years the Maltese education system has not always been able to provide a “...culturally appropriate and responsive quality education for all” (2012; p.38). This statement shows that even though several educational reforms and measures have taken place to address inequalities in education, it is still unclear what and how new policies are currently affecting education in Malta.

This chapter will explain how the traditional SEC was established, its purpose and how it operates in Maltese education today. The chapter will also review the key determinants of the 2014 Early School Leaving Plan (ESL) Policy and the implications of this policy on the SEC examination system. From this, I will clearly establish the particular issues that currently lie at the heart of the Maltese education system, and the gap in the knowledge base to understand why the education system is unable to reform.

2.5.1 SEC overview

This chapter focuses on the SEC, Malta’s National formal examination system for students to progress from secondary to post-secondary education. The SEC is a suite of examinations leading to a Secondary Education Certificate, which replaced the British GCE Ordinary level exams. The first SEC examination offered by the Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC) examinations board, was launched in 1994. This exam was designed to provide a Maltese certification “... that would be more consonant with Maltese educational objectives and the needs and aspirations of students and parents” (MEDE, 2005). Sultana (1999) explains that the SEC is also an example of a tailor-made education innovation that operates in the best interests of Maltese society. However, the SEC, just like the other significant educational initiatives in the past, is also underpinned by ideological conflicts and contrasting social and economic priorities. Disagreements amongst education stakeholders about the objectives and the processes of the SEC resulted in rapid changes in the SEC structure which will be discussed in this section.

The Maltese educational system encourages secondary school pupils to sit for a number of SEC examinations at the end of compulsory education in year 11. Figure 2-3 shows a visual description of the different stages of the Maltese education system.

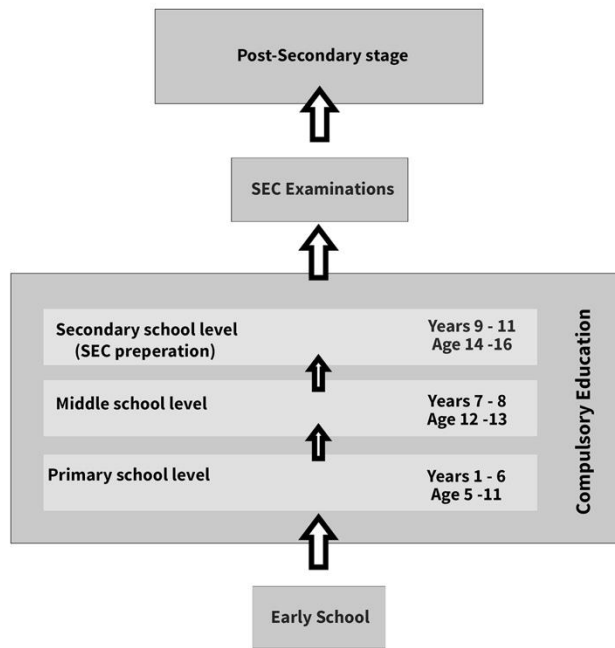


Figure 2-5 Maltese education school structure

The number of passes and level of grades in the SEC examinations determines pupils' eligibility to proceed to post-secondary educational institutions (vocational or academic). The SEC is governed by the MATSEC academic examinations board, which was established by the Senate and Council of the University of Malta in 1991 (MEDE, 2005). However, Sultana (1999) asserts that although the SEC is an independent National Maltese examination system, the "spirit of the GCSE" (1999; p.10) influenced the development of the 'traditional' SEC model. In the following section I will explore in more detail how this 'spirit' had an impact on the Maltese education system and will explain the key characteristics of traditional SEC, its purpose and how it operates in Maltese education today.

2.5.2 Current examination system

As previously highlighted, the SEC examination system is key for pupils' progression into main post-secondary academic institutions. There are two main routes of progression: academic and vocational. The academic route is geared to preparing students to achieve the necessary post-secondary A level examinations, as in the UK, enabling them to qualify for entrance to the University of Malta. In contrast, the vocational route provides students with hands-on education in specialized areas of professional work places.

Every post-secondary institution has its own entry requirements and the number of passes in core and non-core SEC examinations determines pupils' progression into

one route following their compulsory education. Every examination or qualification in Malta is aligned with a specific level in the Malta Qualification Framework (MQF) that is the equivalent to the European system of qualifications (MQF, 2016). Below, table 2-1 shows how the system of MQF levels work in Malta's education system and how SEC examinations are aligned in terms of value.

Table 2-1 (MQF levels of qualification) image captured from NCFHE website (2019)

6	Bachelor's Degree	
5	Undergraduate Diploma Undergraduate Certificate	VET Higher Diploma Foundation Degree
4	Matriculation Certificate Advanced Level Intermediate Level	VET Diploma
3	General Education SEC Grade 1-5	VET Level 3
2	General Education Level 2 SEC Grade 6-7	VET Level 2
1	General Education Level 1 School Leaving Certificate	VET Level 1

Similar to the GCSE, SEC applicants aim to successfully pass in a number of core and non-core subjects to be able to progress to post-secondary education. Core academic subjects in the SEC include Mathematics, Maltese language, English language and a Science subject (Physics, Chemistry or Biology). All other subjects offered in the SEC traditional model are considered as non-core but also academic. All SEC academic subject passes are equivalent to MQF level three.

Figure 2-4 shows the main routes for pupils to progress from secondary to post-secondary education. The Junior College is Malta's post-secondary institution that has the most demanding route of entry. This institution was set up specifically to prepare pupils to enter the University of Malta. To qualify for the Junior College, pupils need to be successful in at least six SEC subjects, four of which need to be core subjects plus another two from the non-core list of subjects. To qualify for the other MQF level 4 post-secondary academic and vocational institutions, four SEC examination passes are required. However, the subject requirements (core or non-core) are determined by the different courses. Figure 2-4 also shows how the SEC traditional model influences the main progression routes from level two MQF onwards.

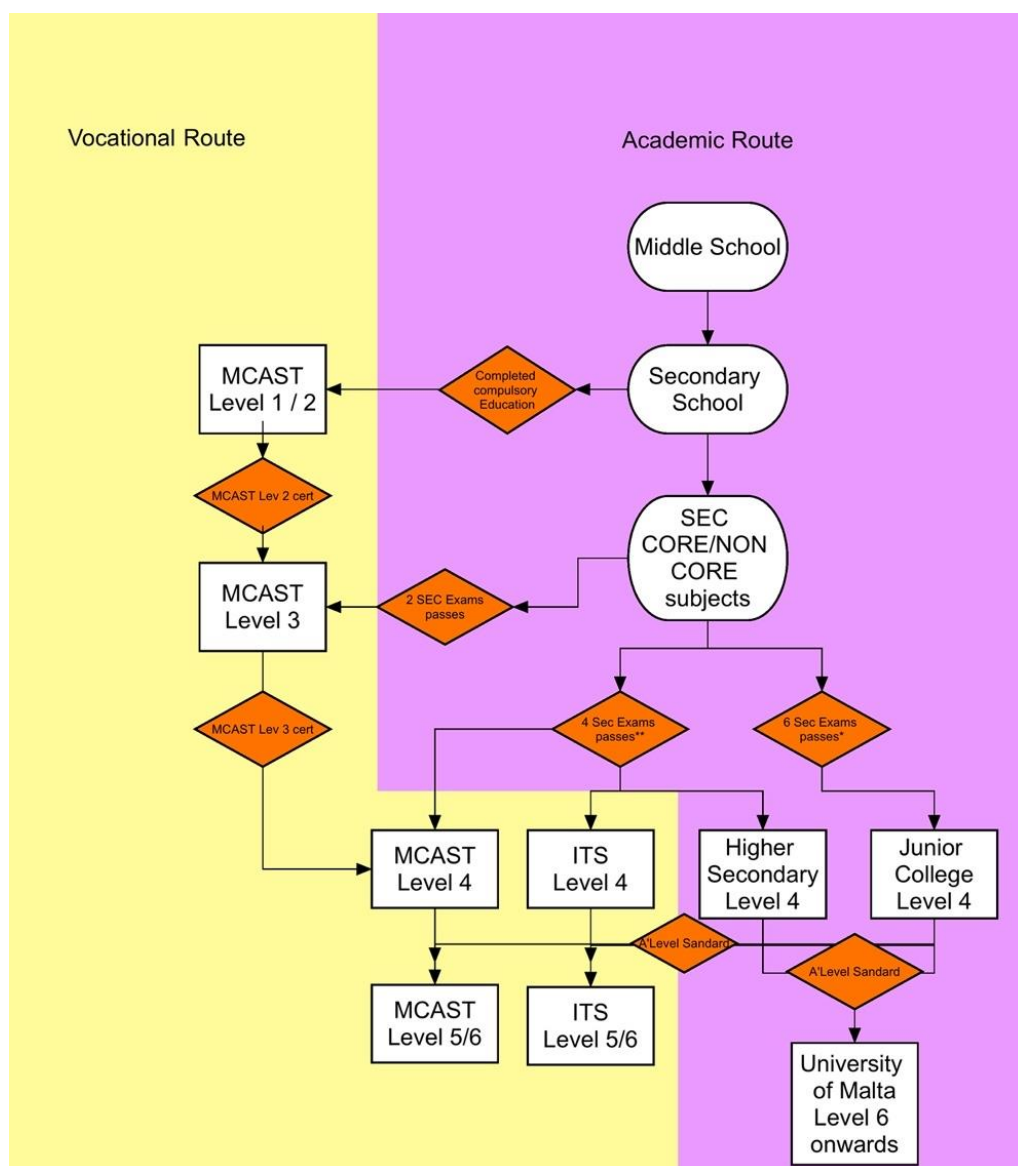


Figure 2-6 (progression from secondary to post-secondary school pre-ESL policy 2014)

* 4 SEC Exam passes (CORE) plus any other 2 SEC Exam passes (NON-CORE) ** Any SEC Exam passes (CORE/NON-CORE) subject to the entry requirements of post-secondary vocational courses

2.5.3 The SEC examination

The academic SEC examinations are typically time-constrained examinations held twice a year with some exceptions of non-exam assessment introduced mainly in science subjects. The May session is the main examination date with the September session held for pupils who opt to re-sit any SEC academic examinations in an attempt to achieve better grades. Every SEC academic syllabus and examination paper is developed and assessed by specific subject syllabus panels appointed and monitored

by the MATSEC, similar to the role of Ofqual in the UK. Every MATSEC subject syllabus panel presents a yearly report about the pupils' performances in the SEC. Every report is published on local Maltese media and the MATSEC website.

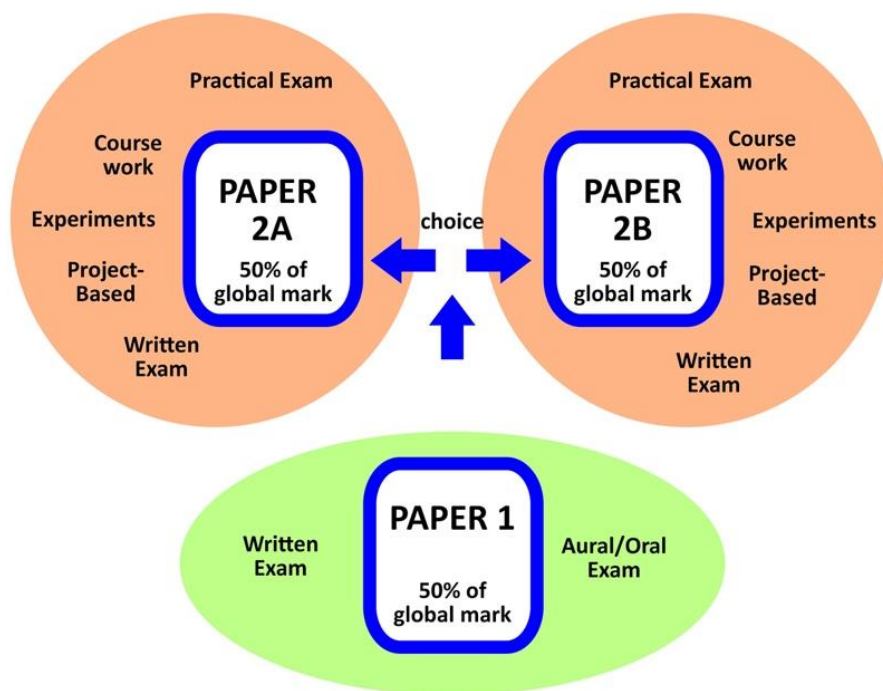


Figure 2-7 (a typical academic SEC paper setting)

Figure 2-5 shows that all SEC examination papers work in a differentiated examination system. The differentiated examination paper system obliges every applicant to primarily sit for a standard paper examination (paper one), however candidates can choose to sit for a second paper that is either at a higher level (paper two A) or a less-demanding level (paper two B). The SEC differentiated paper system has similarities with the GCSE higher and foundation examination tiers grading system. Figure 2-5 shows how the SEC differentiated paper system classification works in comparison to the GCSE's higher and foundation tier classification. As shown in figure 2-6, pupils who choose to complete the less-demanding second paper, can only achieve mid-range grades or less, similar to UK students who opt for the GCSE foundation tier examination.

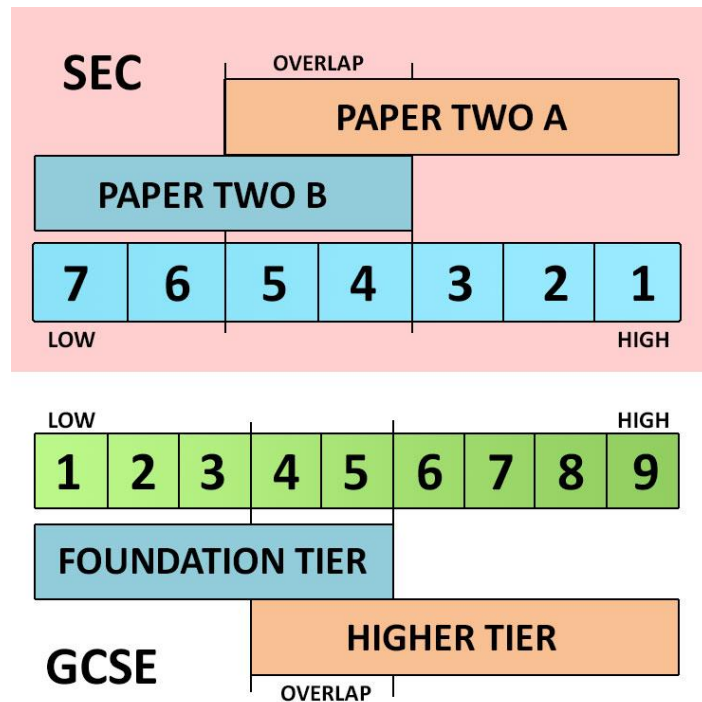


Figure 2-8 Differentiation grading system

Grades from one to five are considered as passes (grade five being the minimum pass grade) by the mainstream Vocational and Academic post-secondary institutions, and grades six and seven can give students options to use the certificate in the labour market. Any grades below seven are considered as unclassified (U) and are not recognised by any post-secondary institutions or the work place.

2.5.4 SEC assessment

The type of assessment used to measure pupils' performances represents another parallel between the GCSE and the traditional SEC examinations. On the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) examination board website (2019) only ten GCSE subjects out of thirty-nine link assessment measures to non exam-based assessments. SEC subjects in the traditional SEC exam system are also dominantly exam oriented. Table 2-2 shows exam/non-exam assessment weighting per SEC subject.

Table 2-2 (Exam/Non-Exam weighting, updated as per scholastic year 2019)

Subject	type	project	portfolio	Experiments	tests	coursework	Exams *	Practical Exam
ACCOUNTING	Academic						100%	
ARABIC	Academic						100%	
ART	Academic							100%
BIOLOGY	Academic	15%					70%	15%
BUSINESS STUDIES	Academic	15%					85%	
CHEMISTRY	Academic	15%		15%			70%	
CLASSICAL CULTURE	Academic						100%	
COMMERCE	Academic						100%	
COMPUTING	Academic					15%	85%	
ECONOMICS	Academic						100%	
ENGLISH LANGUAGE	Academic						100%	
ENGLISH LITERATURE	Academic						100%	
ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES	Academic	15%				20%	65%	
FRENCH	Academic						100%	
GEOGRAPHY	Academic					20%	80%	
GERMAN	Academic						100%	
GREEK	Academic						100%	
HISTORY	Academic						100%	
HOME ECONOMICS	Academic					30%	70%	
ITALIAN	Academic						100%	
LATIN	Academic						100%	
Maltese Language	Academic						100%	
MATHEMATICS	Academic						100%	
PHYSICS	Academic	15%					65%	35%
RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE	Academic						100%	
RUSSIAN	Academic						100%	
SOCIAL STUDIES	Academic						100%	
SPANISH	Academic						100%	
GRAPHICAL COMMUNICATION	Academic						100%	
TEXTILES AND DESIGN	Academic					40%	60%	
EUROPEAN STUDIES	Academic	15%				15%	70%	
PHYSICAL EDUCATION	Academic						40%	60%
DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY	Academic	50%					50%	
MUSIC	Academic						65%	35%

Ventura (2006; 207), ex-chairperson of the MATSEC board, refers to the traditional SEC examination system as a certification that is characterized by; "...a number of features that unintentionally led to selectivity." Critiques of the traditional SEC system (Sultana, 1992; Sultana, 1999; Cutajar, 2013), agree that traditional models of assessment such as examinations in the traditional SEC exam system are a main factor bringing a culture of selectivity in Maltese education, including schools, homes and also the labour market, that puts emphasis on students' ability to recall information. As revealed in Grima's report (2003) the traditional SEC examination system also brought a culture of examinations and testing amongst education stakeholders which reflects Sultana's (1996) main preoccupation of 'measuring' students' abilities in the Maltese education system. Inevitably, this preoccupation results in teachers and school administrators feeling pressured by the system to retain or improve the number of student SEC exam passes year after year. Grima's report also revealed the huge pressure that students and parents experience whilst going through the preparation processes for the traditional SEC examinations in order not to feel left behind.

Grima's report was part of an action plan commissioned by the Ministry of Education. The report outlines the results of a survey on assessment practices in schools in Malta and Gozo between April 2002 and March 2003. The aim of Grima's report was to examine from different perceptions of teachers and head teachers about different types of assessment found in formal secondary school settings. The report outlined how summative assessments were the dominant form of assessment used in secondary schools especially during the preparation phases for the SEC examinations. The report also concluded that assessment in schools, such as annual tests and exams were the most popular assessment tools used to evaluate a pupil's performance used in 64% of participating schools (n=119). Moreover, half yearly tests and exams (59% of participating schools), class/homework (57% of participating schools) and classroom tests (50% of participating schools) were also amongst the predominant forms of assessments. Only 1% of participating schools used other forms of schoolwork and assessment, which did not directly relate to pupils' ability to recall information (MEDE, 2003).

Despite the reforms, which were intended to introduce changes in assessment in formal education, the unforeseen consequences of an exam-led system became obvious that it was leaving a negative impact on students' early school leaving. Ten years after, the Grima's report (2003), shows that the Ministry of Education was concerned about how a culture of selectivity in examinations brought a lack of opportunities for pupils to choose alternative routes to the traditionalist 'exam-only' approach. MATSEC statistics indicate that since 2003, only 49% of students obtained the passes required to pursue their education (MATSEC, 2014). From a policy making point of view, the results of pupils' pass rates shown in MATSEC statistical reports was a key determinant contributing to the high rates of early school leavers (ESL) in Malta, and the introduction of an alternative to the traditional SEC examination became essential.

This chapter, explored how the culture of selectivity in the Maltese education system has been characteristically rooted in the Maltese social fabric for a long time. This culture of selectivity is still evident today in an examination-led education system (Sultana, 1992; Cutajar, 2013). As Zammit Mangion (1992) notes, historically in Malta, examinations in the past served as means for social conformity, mainly from lower and middle class families, schools and also employers. In which he meant that the main priority of the examinations was to see pupils' abilities, regardless of their social background or type of career they aspire to, to perform in examinations in the 'same' competitive standards as set by higher strands of society (Zammit Mangion, 1992). Therefore, the issue with the current traditional SEC exam system, is that although it was originally thought to provide a democratic, meritocratic system in order to meet the 1988 goal of inclusivity, it still serves to maintain old segregation.

2.6 ESL and the SEC

In Malta there is a huge problem of high early school leaving (ESL) (Farrugia, 2013) – the highest in Europe (Eurostat, 2017) see figure 2-7. Farrugia (2013) argues that the nature of the causal relationship between the SEC examinations and the ESL problem is potentially due to a misalignment between the SEC traditional curricula and the educational interests of the students.

In 2014, a new policy was introduced in order to reduce high Early School Leaving (ESL) rates that involved the introduction of Vocational Education and Training (VET) SEC subjects in the SEC mainstream examinations. The mandate being “... to redress the imbalance and seek to incorporate Vocational Education and Training (VET) education within mainstream education and in a way that it enjoys equal status with other academic subjects” (MEDE, 2014, p.26). The improvement was not dramatic and as shown in figure 2-7 here below, and one can argue about the correlation between students’ SEC pass rates and ESL. Particularly because, students are still failing to achieve the minimum requirements and therefore leaving education early.

In Farrugia’s (2013) study, a year before the introduction of 2014 ESL policy, just over one hundred year nine and ten pupils from state secondary schools in Malta were interviewed highlighting that students find SEC syllabi unengaging and the traditional SEC examinations too difficult (2013; p.91). Main factors that create pupils’ disengagement from the traditional SEC examinations were “...self-worth, difficulty of the examinations, dislike of school and school work, and the need or wish to start working...” (Ali & Farrugia, 2013, p.111).

Figure 1 Early Leavers from Education and Training in 2018 (Eurostat, 2019)

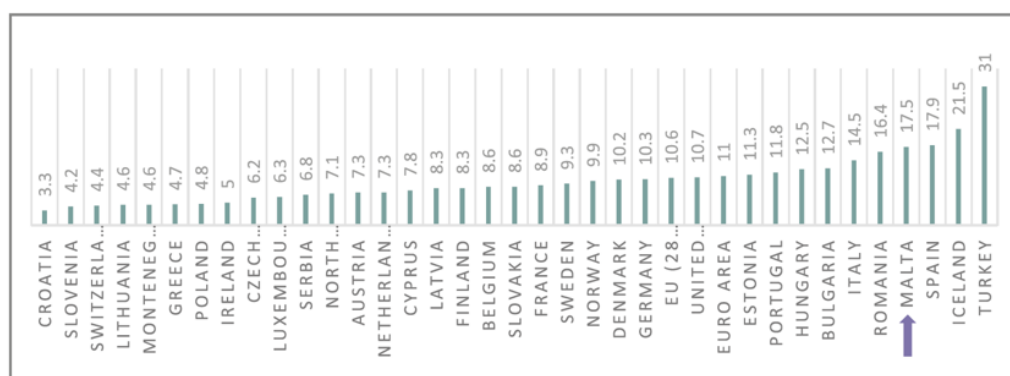


Figure 2-9 (ESL EU Ranking) as stated in Eurostat (2019)

In response, Malta’s Ministry of Education launched a policy called the Early School Leaving Plan (2014) aiming to curtail high ESL rates and to reach EU’s 2020 ten percent ESL objective. The ESL policy consists of a strategic plan to address the ESL

challenge (MEDE, 2014) and states that by definition, ESL pupils are those who “...do not have at least the equivalent of Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) passes (grades 1 to 7) in five different subjects...” (MEDE, 2014, p.7). EU statistics show evidence of an improvement by 2.3% (Eurostat, 2017) of ESL since the launch of this policy in 2014.

Conversely, general concerns highlighted in the 2014 ESL pointed towards the need for a change in the assessment process to facilitate progression from secondary to post-secondary school. The concern of student retention outlined by the Eurostat statistics prompted more awareness about the need for a more inclusivity in the Maltese education system (MEDE, 2014). However, this objective became problematic as attempts were being made by the Ministry of Education to introduce new curricula in the mainstream education system to cater for more students. Therefore, the need to change educational processes and to reduce pupils’ dropout rates was an ‘externally imposed’ determinant that led to the introduction of VET SEC subjects in the SEC mainstream examinations. This demonstrated a stark contrast to British educational policy at this time in which Michael Gove (then Education Secretary) to limit coursework, specifically in the GCSE examination framework (OGL, 2010). The introduction of the SEC VET subjects also revealed controversies amongst education stakeholders. Although in principle it was agreed that the introduction of these new subjects was an important step towards a more inclusive education the validity of such subjects was questioned. In fact, this ideological tension has recently been made explicit during a radio interview (PBS, 2018) between the Director General of Curriculum and a Maltese Language academic. In this interview it was discussed the introduction of new types of assessment for the same SEC subject, in particular the SEC Maltese Language examination. On one hand the Director General was in favour of such an initiative in order to facilitate formal assessment processes for more learning preferences. On the other hand, the Maltese Language academic was against different types of assessment for the same subject because it would in essence dilute the quality of the teaching. This tension had at its core issues around what Banks (1955) refers to as “... the aristocratic conception of the secondary school as a training ground for the intellectual elite” (1955; p.6). Undoubtedly, there has been progress in the introduction of alternative forms of assessment in mainstream education. In particular in other international educational landscapes such as Ireland, where vocational, academic and comprehensive types of education co-exist within the same education systems. However, from the radio interview between the Director General of Curriculum and a Maltese Language academic, one can argue how to date the introduction of alternative assessment processes is still controversial.

In 2017, Maltese education policy-makers launched a new Vocational Education and Training (VET) education policy aiming to implement the mandate set by the 2014 ESL Policy. To reduce high rates of early school leavers by introducing VET subjects into the SEC formal examination system. In 2016 statistics show that pass rate for SEC VET subjects varied between 80% and 100%. In contrast with traditional SEC subjects in which the mean pass rate was 68.5% (MATSEC 2016). The sharp increase in pass-rates of SEC VET subjects against pass-rates statistics from traditional SEC

examinations was generally perceived positively by policy makers and learning stakeholders. However, this perception changed when the My Journey (2014) policy was publicly launched in Malta and its implementation was set to start in the 2020 scholastic year. The policy stated that during the scholastic year starting 2020, pupils would be given the opportunity to choose from two options in the SEC. As stipulated in the policy, pupils could choose between the traditional SEC Academic or an alternative route that follows in principle the SEC VET in all SEC subjects (core and non-core). Both routes would also have the same MQF level three certification award and would be equally recognised by all post-secondary institutions (academic and vocational). This reform brought with it an ideological tension suggesting that there are issues of parity and prestige (Banks, 1955) amongst key education stakeholders. One can also argue here how this tension keeps resurfacing. How to date the introduction of alternative assessment processes in formal education is still controversial particularly with how core subjects should be assessed, and this needs to be addressed.

In the following section I shall be outlining the characteristics of the teaching and assessment processes in the SEC VET. I shall be unpacking unique differences between the SEC VET and the traditional SEC examinations to explain further why there are issues of parity and prestige.

2.6.1 SEC VET subjects

The origins of VET subjects in the Maltese education date back to 2002 when the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) offered MQF level three VET courses awarded by the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) UK. These courses were technical in nature and introduced by MCAST as a non-compulsory alternative education route to the mainstream traditional SEC examination system. The introduction of the SEC VET as a formal qualification with same 'validity' as the SEC academic exams was initiated in response to the MATSEC (2005) report which suggested that a series of vocational subjects should be introduced into Malta's mainstream examination system (2005). The report also stated that the introduction of the VET subjects "dovetails with the EU target of reducing early school leavers to 10% of students" (2005; p.6). Furthermore, since the introduction of the SEC VET subjects, the EU Education and Training Monitor report (2018), asserted that the ESL in Malta was reducing faster than other EU countries (2018). Since the MATSEC VET report in 2016 show evidence of a sharp increase in pass rates in SEC VET subjects, it can be argued how the introduction of SEC VET subjects in mainstream education contributes positively towards reducing ESL rates. However, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) Malta VET report (2017) also noted that challenges in introducing VET in compulsory education settings were cultural in nature and the current examination system was still predominantly traditional. Thus, the introduction of the SEC VET subjects in Malta's mainstream education led Maltese education policy makers to think of ways how to introduce

similar type of assessment process to replace the current Maltese examination system.

In 2012, measures were taken to start developing Malta's VET subjects and feature them as an option in Malta's mainstream SEC examination system. This measure was launched in the 2012 National Curriculum Framework (NCF) policy which stated that:

"They are intended to enrich the learning experiences of students of varying learning needs and interests, particularly those who benefit most from a strong practical orientation in their learning." (NCF, 2012, p. 62)

Despite this enthusiasm for alternatives, just four SEC vocational subjects (equivalent to MQF level three as shown in figure 2-8) were introduced to secondary school pupils in year nine by 2014.

6	Bachelor's Degree	
5	Undergraduate Diploma Undergraduate Certificate	VET Higher Diploma Foundation Degree
4	Matriculation Certificate Advanced Level Intermediate Level	VET Diploma
3	General Education SEC Grade 1-5	VET Level 3
2	General Education Level 2 SEC Grade 6-7	VET Level 2
1	General Education Level 1 School Leaving Certificate	VET Level 1

Figure 2-10 (MQF levels of qualification) image captured from NCFHE website (2019)

Since the introduction of VET SEC in the National examination system there have been the development of more VET subjects currently totaling six as non-core SEC exams. Figure 2-9 shows how current progression routes have changed since the introduction of SEC VET subjects in 2014. The main change involves the choice of any of the six SEC VET subjects instead of any other non-core SEC examination whilst qualifying to any post-secondary institution (vocational and academic) subject to the institution's entry requirements.

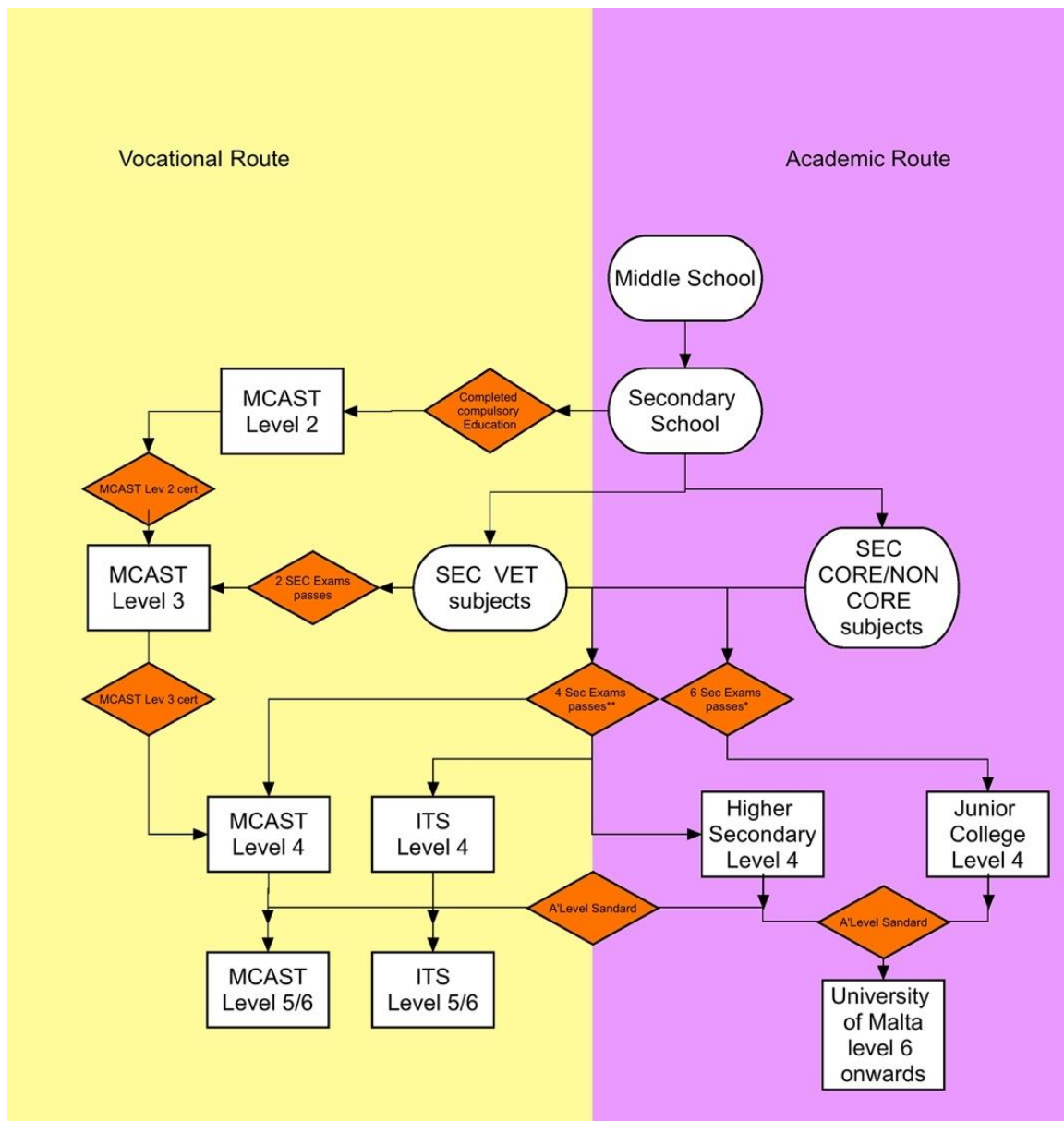


Figure 2-11 (current progression from secondary to post-secondary)

* 4 SEC Exam passes (CORE) plus any other 2 SEC/SEC VET Exam passes (NON-CORE) ** Any SEC/SEC VET Exam passes subject to the entry requirements of post-secondary vocational courses

2.6.2 SEC VET structure

The SEC Vocational Subjects Policy Document (2017) highlights the main changes effected by the SEC VET subjects affecting the structure and mode of assessment. The main differences include the timeline of delivery, the structure and the weighting of the grades. Figure 2-10 shows how each SEC VET subject, differs from the traditional SEC one-time examination. Both SEC and SEC VET subjects take three scholastic years to complete. However, each SEC VET subject consists of three units

in which one unit needs to be completed every scholastic year. This is unlike the traditional one-time SEC examination system which happen at the end of year three. In every unit three to five learning outcomes need to be covered and learning outcomes are linked to a total of eighteen criteria per unit.

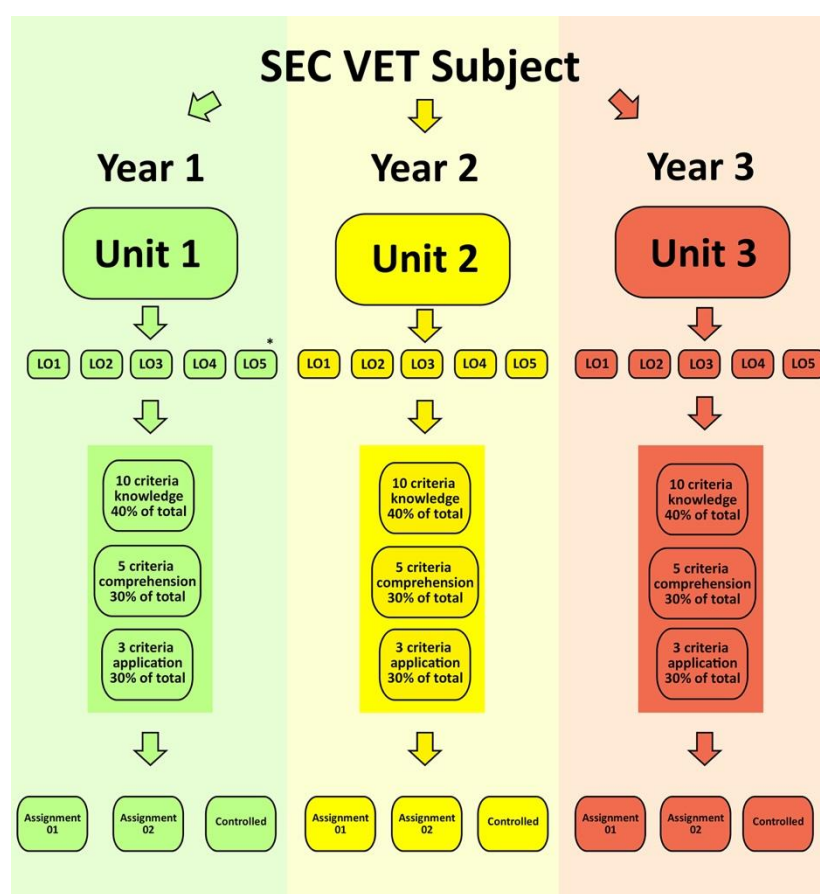


Figure 2-12 (SEC VET subject structure)

*Number of learning outcomes can vary between three and six

Every SEC VET subject comprises two assessment modes: course work, which the VET policy (MATSEC, 2017) refers to as ‘school-based assignments’; and the controlled assessment (end of year examinations). This change in methodology from traditional SEC to SEC VET, brought about significant changes in teaching method and assessment processes, namely the introduction of coursework as part of a formative assessment process and one yearly examination spread out in three years instead of the current one terminal examination at the end of year three and the shift in control over assessment from exam board to school teachers. However, such a change cannot be seen in a vacuum. The idea of value in the SEC VET subjects was also subject to change from the traditional SEC exams and I argue that not all education stakeholders were prepared for such a change. The following section will review how every school-based assignment and controlled assessment is identified and how each contribute towards the final global mark.

2.6.3 SEC VET assessment

In the SEC VET policy (2017), the 'on-going coursework' consisted of two school-based assignments that need to be completed in each scholastic year. MATSEC are responsible for the development of the subject syllabi and controlled assessment papers for every SEC VET subject, however, school-based assignments are developed and assessed by the teachers. The shift in control over assessment from exam board to teachers created a significant amount of controversy, particularly from teachers, students and parents, and will be discussed in further detail later in this section. Feedback is given to pupils individually after every school-based assignment is completed. A final grade is then be officially published by MATSEC. Figure 2-11 shows the weighting of total marks dedicated to one (out of two per unit) school-based assignment.

Ass. No.	Assessment Mode	Percentage distribution
1	Assignment 1	26 - 34%
2	Assignment 2	26 - 34%
3	Controlled	38 - 42%

Figure 2-13 (VET Media Literacy syllabus) MATSEC, 2017

In school-based assignments (a total of six per subject spread over three scholastic years), teachers need to develop an assignment brief front sheet (figure 2-12). Every assignment brief needs to include details of the course work to be completed at school or at home, the criteria that the assignment addresses, the points achieved by the pupils and the deadlines to complete the work. Pupils are asked to work individually or in groups to complete school-based assignments assigned by the teacher depending on the nature of the work.


 MATSEC SUPPORT UNIT University of Malta Msida	SEC		2014 - 2017	
	SCHOOL:	Gozo College Boys BSS (80)		
	YEAR:	Form 3		
	SUBJECT:	Health and Social Care		
ASSIGNMENT BRIEF - FRONT SHEET				
SUBMISSION				
STUDENT'S NAME:			ID CARD:	
UNIT TITLE:	Human Development and Healthcare		UNIT:	1
			ASSIGNMENT:	1 of 3
TEACHER'S NAME:			DATE SET:	
VERIFIER'S NAME:			DATE DUE:	
ASSIGNMENT TITLE:				
TEACHER'S FEEDBACK				
MAX POINTS	Knowledge (K) 4 - Comprehension (C) 6 - Application (A) 10			
GRADING CRITERIA	POINTS ACHIEVED	COMMENTS ON CRITERIA		

Figure 2-14 (extracted from VET SEC policy document) MATSEC, 2017

The mode of assessment used in school-based assignments is formative rather than summative, however the SEC VET policy (2017) does not provide guidelines regarding how formative type of assessment should translate into practice. The approach of continuous assessment is mainly left to the discretion of the teachers, depending on different class realities, available school resources and school policy. But data regarding how formative assessment translates into practice cannot be found in available literature, and it is still not known how formative assessment processes are affecting day-to-day teaching and learning experience. This is significant because there are gaps between the policymakers' and school front-liners' views on how should formative assessment processes be implemented and this can be another cause of disagreements and misunderstandings about the purpose of the new system.

One controlled assessment needs to be completed by the pupils in the form of an examination that takes place once at the end of every scholastic year (MATSEC, 2017). The controlled assessment is very similar to the one-time traditional SEC examination where students sit for an examination in their own school. The examination features a series of questions to be tackled in a time limit of 90 minutes. Nine criteria out of eighteen (as shaded in grey, figure 2-13) are dedicated to the controlled assessment; all other criteria listed in the rubric table need to be addressed in the other two school-based assignments. The level of depth and complexity of each question is linked to the weighting of marks allocated per criteria in the syllabus.

The distribution of marks in the SEC VET is different from the summative type of assessment characterized by the one-time traditional SEC examination. Each SEC VET school-based assignment and controlled assessment needs to cover a number of knowledge-based, comprehension-based and application-based criteria and for every criterion there are a number of marks allocated (K: 4, C: 6, A: 10 marks) that add up to a final global mark. Marks for every criterion can be given in full, proportionate or none at all, depending on the teachers' evaluation of pupils' work and performance addressing the criteria. Figure 2-13 presents the learning outcomes and criteria that pupils need to cover in order to complete one unit (out of three) in every SEC VET subject. Figure 2-13 also shows a total number of four learning outcomes and criteria and are presented in the subject syllabus in the form of rubric for teachers to follow.

LO	Knowledge	Comprehension	Application
LO 1 Understand how the different media contexts impact media content.	K-1: List the different forms and platforms of media. K-2: Identify various media texts and include their common features and characteristics.	C-1: Describe how a media text may be interpreted differently through different media platforms.	
LO 2 Know how contextual factors impact the dissemination of information through media.	K-3: Name the different types of institutions that make, own and govern the media. K-4: Define the different types of Audience. K-5: Outline how people, places, events and ideas are represented in different media texts.	C-2: Explain how audience shapes media and how media shapes the audience. C-3: Express various cultural representations found in Media.	A-1: Present a theme, based on research and personal reflection and experience, in a visual form to a specific audience.
LO 3 Demonstrate how all factors construct the <i>mise-en-scene</i> and contribute to the narrative.	K-6: Identify the elements that constitutes the <i>mise-en-scene</i> . K-7: Describe how the shot is an integral part of the narrative.	C-4: Describe how the elements of <i>mise-en-scene</i> alter the viewers' interpretation of images.	A-2: Develop an idea through synopsis, treatment and shot-list.
LO 4 Apply a range of camera techniques to produce a series of photographs.	K-8: Outline how key features of a camera impacts the resulting image. K-9: Identify the different types of lenses and their uses. K-10: Describe how to capture an image within different lighting scenarios.	C-5: Discuss how various camera techniques impacts the dynamics of a narrative.	A-3: Produce a series of 10 photographs to illustrate a story/theme.

Figure 2-15

(Unit 1/3 SEC VET Media Literacy syllabus) MATSEC, 2017

The highlighted criteria in figure 2-13 mainly consist of knowledge-based assessment criteria (four marks awarded per criteria) and one criterion that is comprehension-based (six marks awarded). Hence, the pupil in this particular controlled assessment can generate up to thirty-eight marks that add up to the global mark of one unit. The weighting of the total marks addressed in the controlled assessment is shown in figure 2-14. This shows how the process of assessment changes with more responsibility on the school teachers in terms of shared responsibilities in the assessment process. Particularly in grading and giving feedback to the students, and putting more accountability on the schools' administration to ensure that this process is done diligently and in-line with MATSEC standards and regulations. Therefore, it can be argued that another source of disagreement between policy makers and school front-liners to implement this new system can be linked to issues of shared responsibilities. Particularly, in establishing the roles of the teachers, the school and MATSEC in this system, issues of validation of grades and feedback amongst other administrative formalities whilst knowing that in the current system this responsibility was only within MATSEC's remit.

Ass. No.	Assessment Mode	Percentage distribution
1	Assignment 1	26 - 34%
2	Assignment 2	26 - 34%
3	Controlled	38 - 42%

Figure 2-16 (VET Media Literacy syllabus) MATSEC, 2017

2.6.4 SEC VET quality assurance

All SEC VET subjects are internally and externally verified. Internal verification (IV) requires the role of a school employee who should also be conversant in the particular field of the subject. The IV acts as a second assessor and feedback/grade verifier for the work done by the teacher. In addition, as stated in the MATSEC VET SEC Policy (2017), MATSEC is responsible for external quality assurance providing external verification. The external verifier (EV) is considered as an expert in the field and is employed by MATSEC on the basis of level of expertise and teaching experience. Similar to the BTEC's UK model of verification, the external verifier visits schools twice a year to ensure the smooth running of the VET subjects by getting feedback from the pupils, teachers and administration about the pupils' progress, challenges, assignment briefs, verification, content and resources. Every EV reports

twice to MATSEC about the progress of ever VET SEC subject and act as a liaison between the school and MATSEC.

2.7 Perspectives on new curricular reforms in the SEC

The introduction of the SEC VET and its processes in compulsory secondary education brought a change in the Maltese education system. The SEC VET has left an impact on the way these subjects are structured, the type of assessment and verification used to examine the works submitted by the pupils. The MATSEC VET report (2016) reviewed how pupils, school management, teachers and verifiers perceive the future of the SEC VET subjects. MATSEC has published a study report (2016) focusing on schools that introduced SEC VET since 2014. A positive highlight from this report noted that respondents felt that the continuous form of assessment (school-based assignments) had a positive impact in the learning experience, in fact 89% of the study respondents agreed that continuous assessment is “a more valid form of assessment” (2016; p.13).

The 2016 MATSEC VET Report (MATSEC, 2016) statistical data demonstrates that since the introduction of the SEC VET subjects there has been a sharp increase in pupils’ pass rates. Figure 2-15 shows how the mean number of passes for all units is above 92% in five out of six SEC VET subjects currently being offered.

Cohort	Unit		Total	V-AGRI	V-ENTE	V-HOSP	V-INTE	V-HESC
2015-18	Unit 1	% Pass	92.9	92.9	92.0	95.2	92.9	88.2
		>50	501	13	80	198	143	67
		<50	38	1	7	10	11	9
		Sum	539	14	87	208	154	76
2014-17	Unit 2	% Pass	92.4	100.0	97.2	88.0	80.0	100.0
		>50	85	7	35	22	12	9
		<50	7	0	1	3	3	0
		Sum	92	7	36	25	15	9
	Unit 1	% Pass	94.6	100.0	97.2	88.0	100.0	88.9
		>50	87	7	35	22	15	8
		<50	5	0	1	3	0	1
		Sum	92	7	36	25	15	9

Figure 2-17 Pass rates for SEC Vocational Subjects (extracted from VET SEC report) MATSEC, 2017

Negative factors emerging from the MATSEC VET report highlighted concerns related to the increased workload on both teachers and students to meet the requirements. This resulted in higher stress-levels reported resulting from more than one high-stakes assessment process taking place in every scholastic year. These concerns suggest that further study is needed to understand what the report refers to as a “...

new, parallel system to be incorporated in schools and, especially, in the Maltese psyche” (2016, p.49).

This chapter reviewed the strong relationship between the aims of a policy to reduce high ESL rates in Malta and to improve the pupils’ performance in the SEC examinations.

This chapter was important because it began by recognising how policymakers say there is a need for reform (because of ESL focused on the establishment of the SEC) on education policy and the context of Malta’s current education system. However, it became also clear that there are underlying issues which are prohibiting the Maltese education to reform. Key issues discussed in this chapter are: **the people who use the system; the politics and cultural challenges that underpin it; the limitations in which a system operates; other factors that characterise its origins and the specific policies that drive it.**

In an OECD report, Viennet and Pont (2017) provide several definitions and objectives of policy in education. These definitions lead to identification of policymaking and implementation in education as a process that seeks to find a consensus amongst contrasting perspectives – particularly, to find ways how policy can converge contrasting curricular ideologies in education. In this chapter it has been established that currently in Malta there are two main perspectives that make consensus for change difficult in the Maltese education system. These two perspectives are;

1. an education culture driven by traditional education philosophies;
2. progressive reforms being hindered by anxieties about quality.

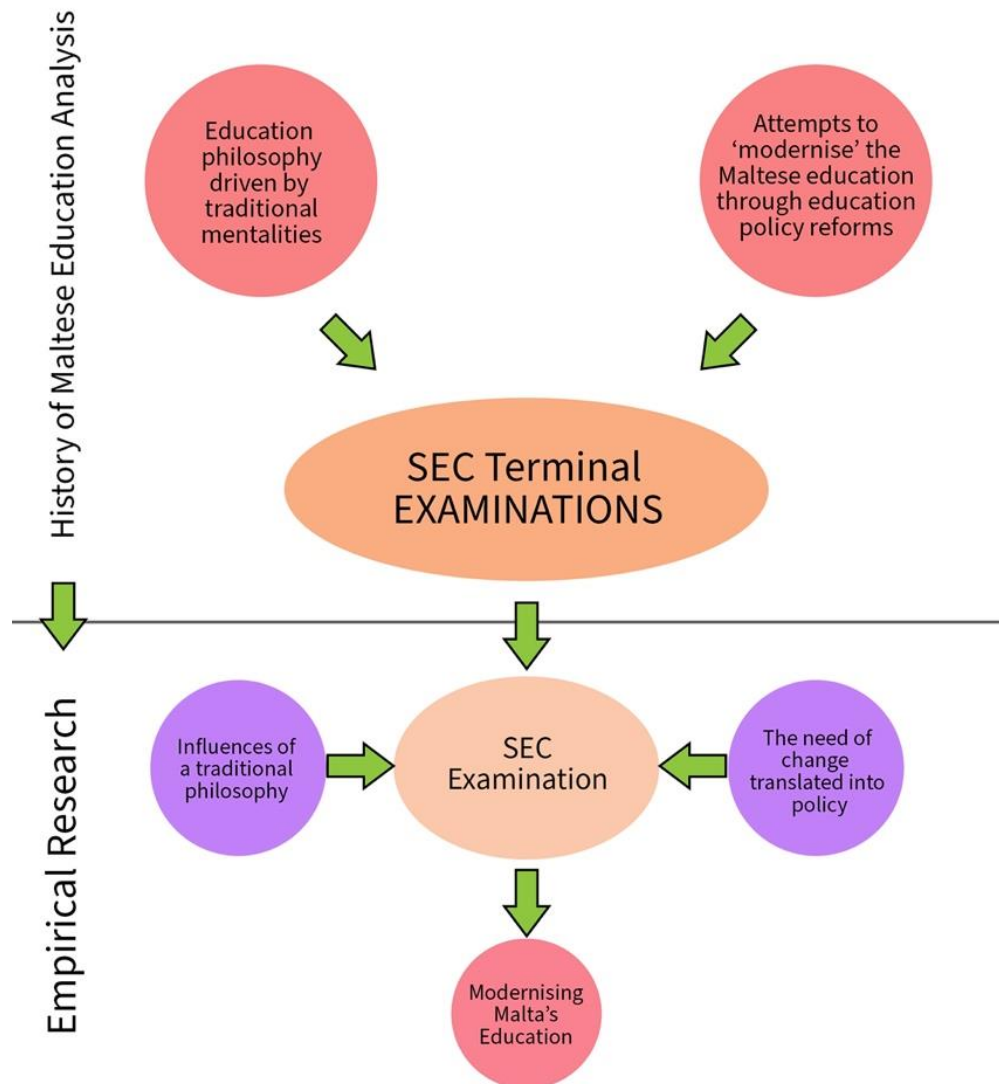


Figure 2-18 Perspectives on the new reforms of the SEC

Figure 2-16 shows how the two main perspectives established in this chapter constitute the tensions between education policy makers and learning stakeholders in instances when new educational policies are introduced (such as the SEC VET).

The empirical stage of this study will focus on how new policy objectives contrast with a traditional educational philosophy; an education philosophy that still seems to attribute the idea valuable education to the mode of delivery and assessment – in other words, ‘the medium is the message’. As stated previously in this chapter, the SEC examination system is deeply rooted in Malta’s education culture and we have seen how past reforms in this examination process affected learning stakeholders on various levels.

Furthermore, this chapter also revealed that currently, education policy makers in Malta are tasked (MEDE, 2014) with finding solutions to reduce the high rates of early

school leavers (ESL). Currently, seven years since the Ministry has made ESL a central objective in its ten-year plan to modernise the Maltese education system. Which in itself, seven years of negotiation between the Ministry and education stakeholders to implement the strategy is an indication of confidence in ability and autonomy. It has been established that ESL rates are one of the current 'externally imposed factors' that are driving Maltese education policy makers to implement 'mechanisms' of change in the Maltese education system. Pupils' examination success rates seem to be one of the main externally imposed driving factors for Maltese education policy makers to re-think the goals of the SEC compulsory examinations whilst introducing such mechanisms. As mentioned in the 2014 – 2024 Framework for Education Strategy in Malta (MEDE), one of the main objectives of this strategy is to launch new curricula to address the issue of inclusivity in the current Maltese education system. In fact, the forthcoming reform in the SEC examinations will steer away from the traditional one-time examination-led learning processes towards progressive learning approaches as stated in the My Journey policy (2017). "The new system builds on the current one but ambitiously moves forward in democratising academic, vocational and applied learning for all students" (MEDE, 2017, p.11).

However although current initiatives in Malta intend to improve pupils' educational performance and experience, there are challenges at operational, pedagogical and philosophical levels. In the coming years, the My Journey policy will be introduced in Malta's mainstream education; it will change the structure of Malta's education system and will significantly impact the structure of the SEC examinations. Thus, against this backdrop, the pursuit of sustaining the objectives set by the new policy reform will bring a new dimension in Maltese education that could involve new changes at a school and social level. This new dimension could also translate into the introduction of new learning initiatives that aim to bridge the gap between formal learning traditions and the attempts to 'modernise' the Maltese education through education policy reforms. However, as is apparent in the Historic context section of this chapter, attempts to implement modernization in the Maltese education system are fraught with difficulties and are characterized by contrasting views of how value and inclusivity should translate in real-life educational practice. Therefore, central to this study is to learn from personal and professional experiences of those who are going through the process of modernization in the Maltese education system. This will help me understand how current and future policy might finally realise ways to implement reforms needed to achieve the vision of 'valuable and inclusive education'.

In the following chapter I shall move on from an exploratory stage towards the methodological stage of this study. The study's main research questions will be presented, outlining what has been explored so far about the significant factors that drive Maltese education and what might be the ideal methodological tools to understand how the current context of Maltese education affects the lives of education stakeholders.

2.8 Conclusions

This chapter provides a review of the historic context and origins the current secondary education system. It also provides a review of critical factors that drive the curriculum decision making processes in secondary education in Malta and its objectives to serve the needs of the country. These key factors and characteristics have been reviewed and discussed in light of various oppositions, such as the on-going controversies about the understanding of value and equality in Maltese education and how this controversy has influenced the need of a national examination system (SEC) among other educational landmarks. Moreover, critical factors that drive negative attitudes, scepticism towards Malta's secondary education curricula and examination system and their influences on education policymaking. From this chapter it has also emerged how the history of Maltese education can be seen as an opportunity to learn from its origins and traditions because of how Malta's education system still have ties with the country's past. Moreover, how a stakeholder's competitive mentality can be torn between a desire for national specificity, and an obstinate idea of traditional proxies for 'quality'.

To further understand how Malta's secondary education is today, an examination of how competitive mentalities and exam-oriented attitudes feature in today's education is required. From this chapter the need has emerged to examine how the understanding of valuable and equal education translates into education policy and education practice in Malta today. But it also needs to be examined how/if education stakeholders feel part of the decision-making process, and the significance and effect of such involvement.

Chapter 3 Research Methodology

3.1 The research problem, objective and questions

Poor performance in the SEC examinations has created a substantial amount of debate within the Maltese learning community (Bezzina, 1991; Sultana, 1992; Cutajar, 2013) on how SEC subjects should be taught, developed, managed and examined. A previous study by Attard (2018), consisting of an analysis of MATSEC examination reports based on three-years (2015, 2016, 2017) and a selection of publicly available literature about the Maltese education. From this study it emerged that pupils' educational experiences in the SEC are affected by an examination culture that strives to understand and to communicate its role in Malta's educational landscape. Particularly affected by cultural contradictions about how schools should prepare students effectively for the SEC terminal examinations, whilst giving all students the opportunity of a life-long learning experience that goes beyond the requirements of the SEC examinations.

The results of the analysis show significant concerns by teachers, pupils and parents about the need for change in the examination process. Furthermore, it also showed how the past fifteen years, various interventions have been implemented in the Maltese education system in an attempt to address the need for change, mainly by introducing learning assessment initiatives such as the National Curriculum Framework (1999), the Learning Outcome Framework (2012) and the SEC Vocational Subjects (2014). However, even though the introduction of the SEC VET subjects seemed to have positive impacts on students' pass rates, these interventions have yet to bring about the desired improvements. This was evident in Malta's official examination board MATSEC who in 2015 called out for further studies that aim to research further into the nature of poor examination results in the SEC examinations;

“Why is this happening? Low expectations? Other reasons? Only systematic qualitative research, which is beyond the scope of this report, can answer these questions.” (MATSEC, 2015).

Thus, I argue that 'top down' policy initiatives have not been successful. Consequently, I aim to produce a multi-faceted picture of the system in order to present (subjective) evidence from stakeholders that will enrich our understanding of the problem. To this effect, this research identifies pupils' performances for the SEC as a core problem that warrants further study to systematically understand why this is happening, in light of education policy developments that are currently taking place to bring change (Viennet & Pont, 2017) within the Maltese education system.

Therefore, I aim to investigate current curricular conflicts in Maltese education by enquiring into the following: firstly, I want to understand what has shaped the Maltese education system today (**RQ 1**); secondly, I want to learn how notions of educational standards, value and experience are constructed by the Maltese education system today (**RQ 2**). These two fields of enquiry will enable me to

understand the possible future of secondary education in Malta (RQ 3). The objectives of the study are:

- to go beyond the scope of the examiners' statistical reports and National surveys to learn how notions of educational standards, value and experience are constructed by the Maltese education system;
- to learn about the nature of such notions from aspects of policy making and the experiential views of the pupils and other education stakeholders (parents/teachers/examiners);
- Establish why reform has been so difficult to implement and propose a way forward.

3.2 Epistemological Position

In aiming to understand the reasons behind what is hindering attempts to modernise Malta's education system, despite a recent history of frequent review and policy innovation, I find myself dealing with a system of subjective experiences that surround this matter. Thus, the epistemological position of this research is key to reaching the objectives of this study. Lather (1992) argues that studies that seek subjective understandings of a particular problem go beyond positivist certainties and require a qualitative approach to advocate arguments in depth. The research problem is considered as multifaceted, constituted by varied competing views and interpretations that are constructed by individuals, groups of people, and political objectives and realities in this context are subjective. Thus, entailing an interpretivist-constructionist approach (Arthur et. al., 2012) as opposed to positivism's reductionist approach (Mishler, 1990), to understand and interpret the research problem from its roots. Moreover, this research aims to interpret the research problem from peoples' views, which are also continuously evolving in time, vis-a-vis the wider scope and socio/economic developments within a society. Therefore, that is why I consider that the 'reality' within the context of my study as subjective, with no singular truth, observation or pre-determined meaning of such a reality. I argue that in this case an interpretivist approach enables me to formulate a sophisticated research methodology to engage with the main problem of addressing why policy hasn't had the desired effect and to provide an interpretation of the realities that characterise the research problem.

3.3 The Conceptual Framework

Qualitative education research seems to agree that problems in education can be explored through research methodologies that involve students and learning stakeholders' experiences. For example, in other studies such as Stewart et al., (2021), who qualitatively explored students perceptions of value in education by giving students a voice to communicate their experiences. To understand students' perceptions of value, the study captured various essences of student experiences through semi-structured interviews. This method granted students a level of

freedom to discuss their perceptions but also granted the researchers a level of control to focus on topics that the research wanted to shed light on.

Although the mentioned project employ a specific research methodology for a particular objective, an inductive and qualitative process was employed to understand key factors that impact negatively or positively on particular situations in education from peoples' experiences. As commonly argued in the wider theories available in literature (Gardner, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 1980; Bandura, 1995), interpretivist study approaches can help us understand problems in education in a qualitative, situated way.

In the absence of data that describes specific experiential challenges of pupils' education in Malta's SEC today, this research employs an interpretivist research methodology in order to understand the dynamics of the main problem that is at the core of this study. Since experiences are complex and subjective in nature, there is an opportunity to view the problem from multiple perspectives (Dixon-Woods et al. 2006) and from varied types of sources that can provide the basis of new and reflective understanding of this problem. It could also be argued that the problem at the core of this research could be framed within a 'context of discovery'. The context consists of historic and empirical issues that frame the main research problem (see figure 3-1).

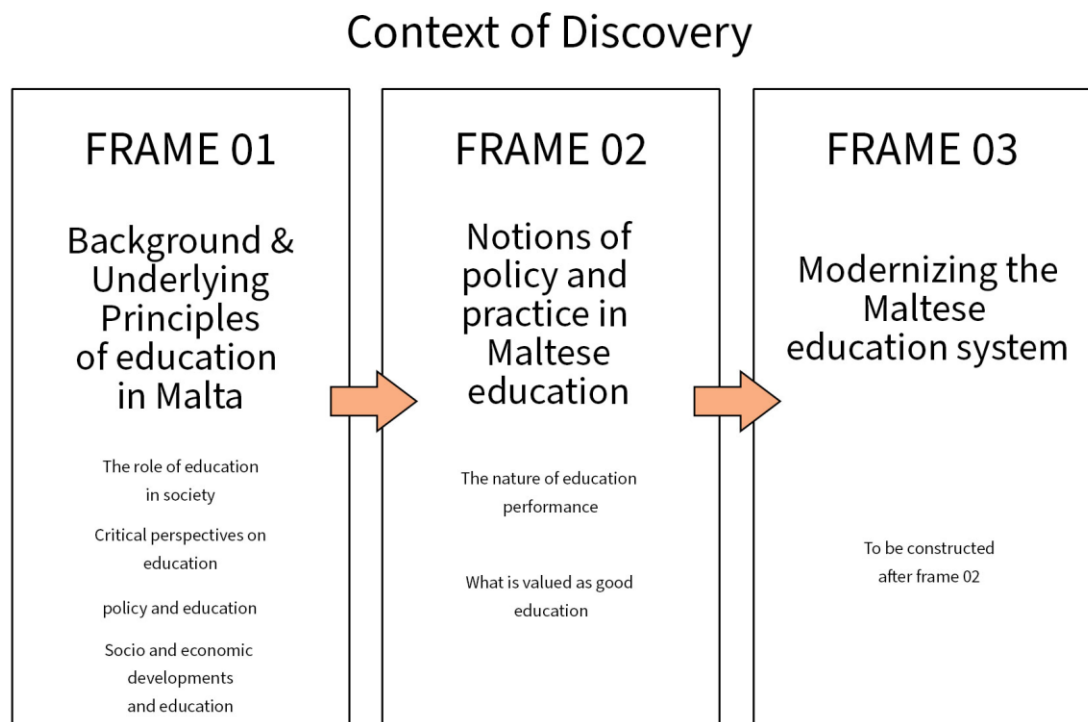


Figure 3-1 Conceptual Framework

To address the main research problem, I adopted a specific methodology that goes beyond the scope of the examiners' statistical reports and the National surveys,

mainly by learning about the nature of this problem from its history, from policy analysis and from the experiential views of learning stakeholders. I intended to explore and understand more critical drivers that characterise issues between policy making and education practice in the Maltese education system. The three main frames of knowledge that are featured in figure 3-1 gives a view of what is considered in this study as the 'context of discovery'.

Initially, the main focus of the Context and Literature review chapter (Chapter 2) was to address how formal examinations have historic significance in Maltese education and the Maltese society as a whole. This has been done through an exploratory review of recent historic education landmarks and events in Malta since the launch of Malta's Education Act 1988. Particularly how they are significant contributors towards the development of Malta's own education system and how the SEC examinations fit within this framework. The context and literature chapter allowed me to understand the main drivers that characterise Maltese secondary education today. This stage led me to lay the foundations for the empirical stage of the research. The empirical stage enabled me to look at problems within the Maltese education system from a policy making perspective and from daily experiences of people who experience education in Malta. This stage gave me the opportunity to look at the data in depth and interpret findings in substantial amount of detail. It allowed me to be driven by the data itself without being pre-determined by any position.

In the case of this research, I employed methods of qualitative data analysis (the rationale behind choices of methods will be explained in the following sections) and gave me the opportunity to explore data at verbatim; to interpret data from different sources; to generate themes and to discover commonalities differences and similarities from different sources of information. Although employing a qualitative stance meant that my research involved a smaller number of data sources than in quantitative studies, the data obtained and the results of the analysis were rich, in-depth and detailed. (Silverman, 2013)

This gave me the opportunity to understand the main problem targeted in this research through an interpretivist worldview of knowledge. An interpretivist stance does not limit me to relate to the main research problem by metric-driven quantitative measures and scientific interventions only. Methods commonly found in statistics, reports and National reviews. But, instead, I was immersed in the social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) aspects of education as an essential component in education research.

The following section discusses why a specific systematic methodology was used to develop depth of understanding of issues that characterise the main problems addressed in this research. An inductive and qualitative systematic analysis procedure will be explained further in the following section 3.4. It will also be introduced how different types of sources of information were examined to look for common patterns, contrasting and recurring concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006) about education and performance in Malta today and to understand the dynamics between

formal learning traditions and the attempts from Maltese education authorities to 'modernise' Malta's education system.

3.4 Research Design

As reviewed in chapter 2 (context and literature review), the issue of modernization in Maltese education is an on-going feature of the country's history of education. This is because there are many influences on the two main contrasting ideological (progressive/conservative) perspectives that characterise the Maltese education system. Thus, the context and literature review has revealed a consistent lack of consensus amongst stakeholders about how the Maltese education system should modernize. Therefore, I arrived at a stage where I needed to ask why are policy attempts to modernize the Maltese education system still unsuccessful?

The empirical stage of this study focused on the second frame of knowledge (Figure 3-1) and the objective was to learn from policy and learning stakeholders' experiences, about the main factors that influence the Maltese education system today. This study required a specific research design to facilitate a way into investigating the main problem by referring to various sources of information. Therefore, I needed to employ research methods that allowed me to look in-depth into non-statistical data. I needed to examine the process in which the ideals and objectives to modernize Maltese education are being constructed by education policy makers and by those who experience education on daily basis. As discussed in chapter 2, although the need for change in the Maltese education system is agreed upon by many, there are issues that are holding back the implementation of change.

There are many methods that can be used in qualitative research to achieve a detailed analysis of a multifaceted problem, such as ethnographic, phenomenological, participatory, cultural and observational studies. However, a research design based on policy analysis and interviews allowed me to gather information from real-life contexts and experiences (Summers et al. 2008). This approach gave me the opportunity to gain a real-life view of what the problem is really like.

This section shall discuss the key components of a specific research study design, including which sources of information informed this research and for which purpose, including the participants' sampling procedures, ethical considerations and data analysis procedures to ensure best possible outcomes from this inquiry. The questions of who and what featured prominently in the empirical stage of this study and lead towards a single case revelatory research design (Yin, 2003), because the study aims to draw on a variety of different types of data to achieve a holistic view of a particular problem (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Figure 3-2 shows a specific research study consisting of three stages of data analysis.

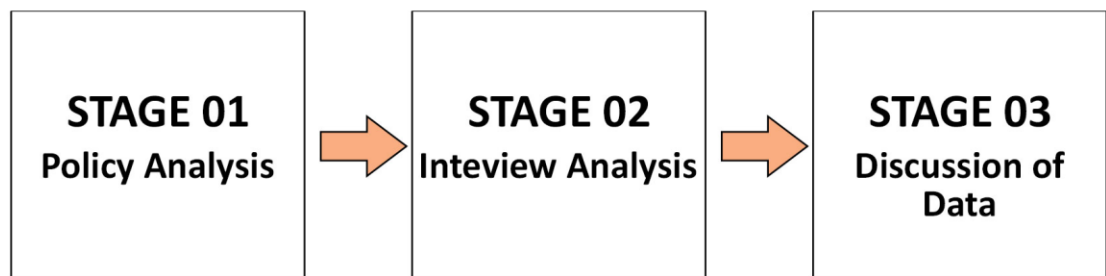


Figure 3-2 Methodological Framework

In the following sections I shall focus on each stage one by one.

3.5 Methods

3.5.1 Stage 01 Policy Analysis – Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) from key policy documents

For this research, education policy documents were analysed because policies can be considered as rich texts and sources of information that reveal stories about socio-political and economic environment that we live in (Foucault, 1995). As Hewitt (2009) argues, discourse analysis can be used as a tool to “...expose patterns and hidden rules of how language is used and narratives are created” (2009, p.2).

The aim was to give an overview about current concepts and the key drivers of change found in policy documents. Moreover, the aim of research method one was to synthesize diverse types of arguments from a number of key policy documents and to translate meanings as themes in relation to the enquiry objectives of the second frame of this study. The emerged themes from the analysis were then cross-examined with the discussion points held in a series of interviews in the second stage of the empirical study.

3.5.2 Fairclough’s three-point discourse analytic model

Fairclough’s three-point discourse analytic model gave me an opportunity to deconstruct the key education policy documents in three dimensions, the textual, the discursive and the social practice (1992; p.231). Moreover, through this three-point process this study could also identify salient objectives that could be considered as influential towards the future objectives of Maltese education.

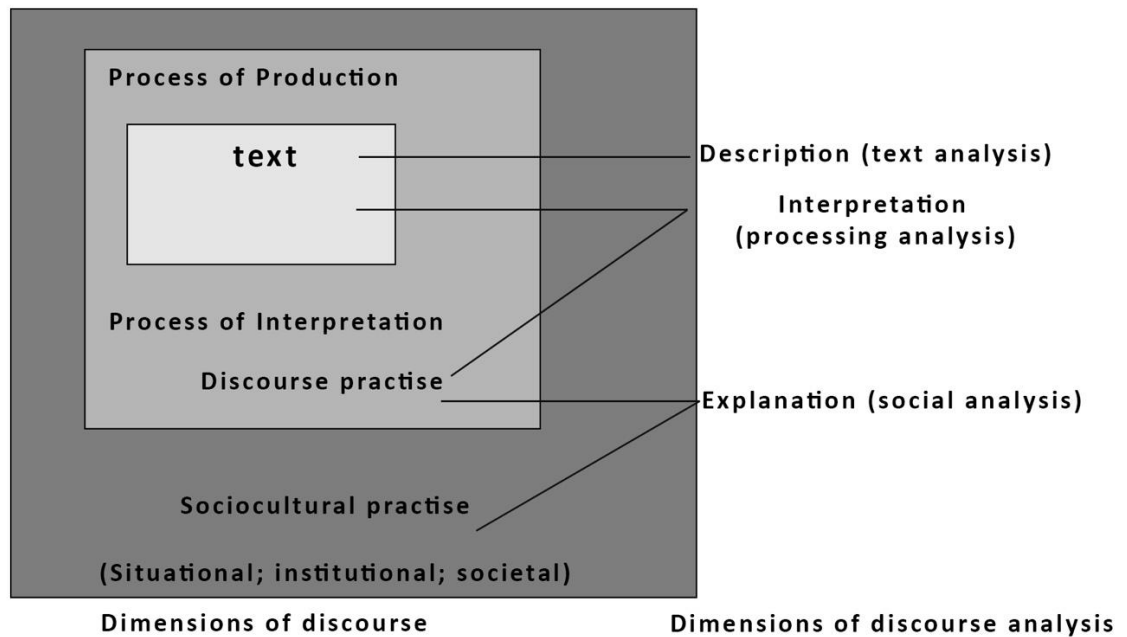


Figure 3-3 Adopted from Fairclough's three-point analytic framework, Fairclough (2010; p.133)

As explained by Dixon-Woods et al. (2006) a critical discourse analysis (CDA) procedure can produce a discussion of common patterns, contrasting and recurring concepts to depict a 'portrait' of how key concepts become consolidated and mobilised. The following steps were adopted from Fairclough's (1992) dialectical-relational approach, with the intended outcome to achieve answers relating to the objectives mentioned above:

1. The **textual stage**. This stage was work intensive as it involved inductive analysis. The analysis involved an initial description of the prose then an interpretation of the text, including a translation of concepts about the education objectives promoted in the documents. Fairclough (2010) divides this stage in three components: the textual composition, the grammar and type of vocabulary (2010; p.94). This stage was fundamental to the three-point process as it enabled me to identify key themes in the documents, as well as the type of language used to communicate the targeted objectives.
2. The **discursive stage** builds upon the textual stage, focusing on the purpose of the text, why was it developed, who is providing the text, by which institution and who is the intended target audience. Fairclough (2010) recognises the importance of how the broader societal and political issues can influence a text at the time of its production. Therefore, in the discursive stage of the analysis I captured the broad societal and political factors that impact the production of the key documents.

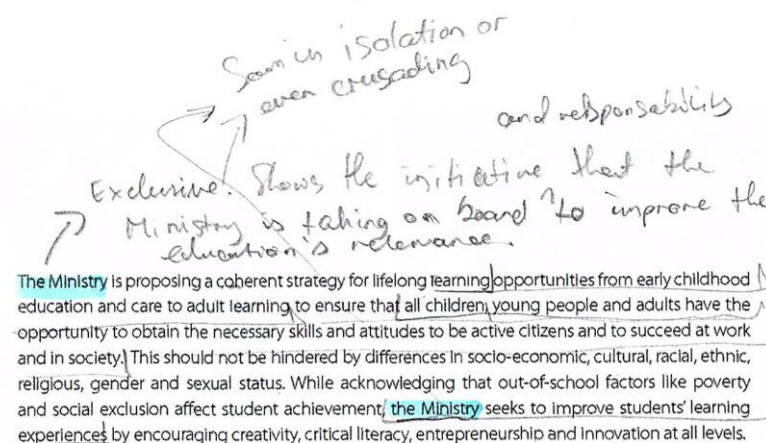
3. **Social practice** was the third important dimension of the analysis. This dimension included the analysis of chosen documents in relation to any events or initiatives in Maltese education system that may have taken place during or as a result of these documents. Fairclough (2013) suggests that in critical discourse analysis it is also important to view texts in relation to other societal practices, initiatives and perspectives at the time. I intended to focus also on these relationships to achieve an understanding of the social impact of these documents.

The following section explains how I incorporated the above into my research for the purposes of the analysis.

3.5.3 Applying Fairclough's CDA in my research

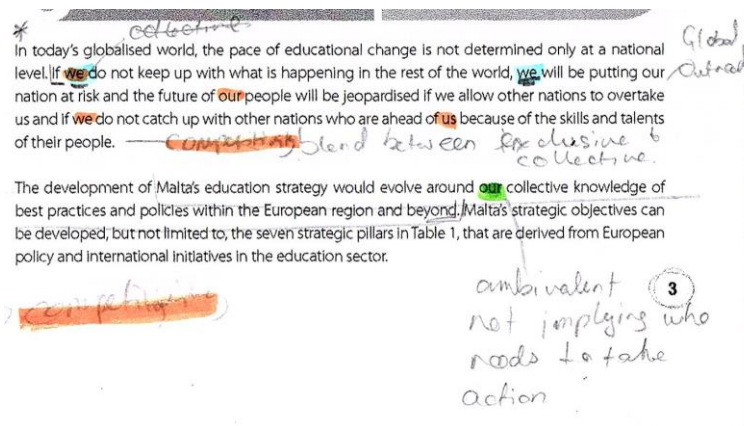
The full policy analysis consisted of three steps. The first step of analysis entailed an initial reading of the chosen policy documents. In this first step I applied Fairclough's **textual stage** of analysis in which I achieved an overview of the context, the aims and the objective of every policy. In the policy analysis chapter (chapter 4), this stage was presented as a background section for each one of the three policies chosen for analysis. The background section served as a point-of-entry into the analysis of each policy and identified the over-arching drivers that motivate the desired objectives set in the key policies.

In the second step I focused on the **discursive stage** (Fairclough, 1993). I needed to establish a sense of voice found in the key documents. Particularly discourse formulations found in the documents and for who is the information addressed to. The below examples (Excerpt 3-4 and 3-5) were extracted from my workings of the policy analysis of Framework for the Education Strategy in Malta (2014).



Excerpt 3-4

Framework for the Education Strategy in Malta (2014)



Excerpt 3-5

Framework for the Education Strategy in Malta (2014)

Excerpts 3-4 and 3-5 show a sample of how various discursive formulations were identified in the key policies. In this case, it was identified who is delivering the message and to whom the message is addressed. From the above excerpts it was identified:

1. how the Ministry positions itself in the text to address particular issues/objectives that feature in the policy strategy;
2. how modes of address shift when issues/objectives are addressed in the policy.

Moreover, this stage allowed me to identify who the actors are and what is being addressed in the policies. Also gaps of specificity were identified particularly who and what is involved to achieve the key objectives published in policy documents.

The third step focused on the and **social aspects** of discourse used in the policies. This step entailed cross referencing discourse formulations used to present key policy objectives with broad socio-political factors and educational theory. In this step I employed textual and semiotic procedures of analysis to convey ideological positions and influences that drive the promotion of ideas to achieve key objectives in the policy documents.

The results from the workings done in the second stage and the third stage of the policy analysis allowed me to group findings in specific themes. A total of 10 key themes were worked out from the policy analysis of each policy and each key theme was then analysed and discussed in chapter 4 (policy analysis chapter).

These three steps were critical towards identifying key themes that characterize each policy document and, moreover, to uncover the ways in which the policy makers construct the Ministry's objectives in specific policies. A more comprehensive

description of the process to complete the critical discourse analysis of the chosen policies will be given in the policy analysis chapter (chapter 4).

3.5.4 Stage 02 – Interviews

In this study various forms of data were used to gain insights on specific topics. In the interviewing stage of the study, face-to-face responses were required from pupils and adult learning stakeholders, amongst which are three fifteen-year-old pupils following their secondary school studies in Malta. In past research work I experienced working with focus groups. Whilst I was very satisfied with the results obtained from focus group responses related to topics that all participants were free to share their views upon. I felt that this method did not allow much space for deep and personal views about specific situations as opposed to interviews. As described by Silverman (2013), interviews allow space for more speaking time for the participants and to feel free to share in-depth, un-biased personal observations. This experience made me cautious about the research method to use in this research to ensure that no participant felt judged by or influenced by views from other participants. Another aspect of this research was that I set out gain sensitive material and needed to make sure that anonymity was kept at all times. Therefore, one-to-one interviews were employed.

To perform my research interviews I needed to obtain ethical clearances from both Bournemouth University and Malta's Ministry of Education. This research also involved working with children and it was important to adhere to the articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (2010). Particularly to article 16 to ensure preservation of anonymity of every child participant in the interviews whilst giving them the opportunity to express themselves freely (this will be discussed further in sections 3.5.4.2 and 3.5.4.3). Furthermore, a number of steps needed to be implemented to ensure quality in the processes of data capturing and data analysis. This research project got the necessary ethical clearances from both institutions and in this section, I shall be discussing transparency and comprehensiveness (Reynolds et al. 2018) as principles that I adopted in this study to ensure best ethical and quality practices.

3.5.4.1 Data collection processes

The type of interview chosen for this research also involved a decision-making process. Interviews can be structured, unstructured or semi-structured (Clough, 2002) and each type of interview warrants different purposes. This research employed semi-structured interviews as a methodological tool to collect data.

The aim of the interviews was to achieve depth of understanding of stakeholders' perceptions of the education system and proposed reforms, and they were, therefore, encouraged to share their thoughts 'freely' during the interviews (Clough, 2002). This research focuses on a specific research design that involved a specific stage in the current education system in Malta which mostly attracts controversy and

disagreements of introducing change, i.e., the SEC examinations. Semi-structured interviews gave me the opportunity to generate rich data focused on a particular point in the current Maltese secondary education system.

Semi-structured interviews were used to generate data from participants relating to first-hand teaching and learning experiences from a sample of people who are going through the preparations for SEC examinations today. The second research method procedure was essential to enquire first-hand information from learning stakeholders (number of participants and sampling procedure will be discussed in section 3.5.4.2). This stage helped me to learn from the participants' experiences why the situation in Malta seems to be so resistant to the changes proposed in education policies.

Silverman (2011) argues that semi-structured interviews give the opportunity to explore phenomena from personal 'experiences'. Whilst the first stage aimed to gain data from a discourse analysis of three policy documents, the second stage explored further the causes of the problem from direct personal elicitations. Silverman (2011) also argues that there are two main approaches that interviewers need to consider in the case where interviews aim to elicit experiences from respondents. First approach allows interviewers to focus on direct personal experiences of respondents about particular situations whilst the second approach, interviews are based on particular activities that take place at the outset of a situation. As discussed previously in the conceptual framework section of this chapter, the problem of introducing change in the Maltese education system is complex and multifaceted. Since I wanted to achieve 'openness' from direct responses of participants, therefore I opted for Silverman's first approach.

When doing interviews with young students, one should also consider issues of power imbalance (Kanieli-Miller et al., 2009). Considering issues of imbalance and taking action is important to achieve openness from young participants without any fear of consequences. To address issues of imbalance, particularly with young students, I tried to let participant elicit their own stories, their own experiences and their own knowledge about the subject matter. To do so I employed a rapport-building tactic to help participants feel at ease to answer my interview questions openly and freely. I fully-disclosed my position as a researcher with the participants, making clear the overarching objectives of the research, particularly how their experiences could contribute in the development of educational structures in the future that could help other people in their same situation.

The aim of this stage was to capture responses from participants to understand the problem from various standpoints. Therefore, using the first approach granted me to view the problem from the participants' direct experiences without any pre-conceived bias or agenda. As Holstein & Gubrium, (1995) explain, this approach of interviews give the advantage to pick up on personal conceptualisations about the problem through candid expressions of opinions and sentiments. Such conceptualisations cannot be addressed in quantitative statistical reports and

therefore allowed me to achieve a level of openness that I needed from the participants' responses.

3.5.4.2 Recruiting Participants

The Maltese education system, particularly the SEC examinations are experienced by many in Malta. As explained in chapter 2, the SEC is Malta's mainstream terminal examination system, therefore the SEC is experienced directly by students and teachers during secondary school education. However, chapter 2 also revealed the involvement of the students' parents in this stage and how students' performances and participation in the SEC is in the spotlight of the Maltese community because the SEC affects Malta not only on an educational scale, but also on a National scale. This shows how the SEC examination system impacts on and is experienced by many people from different walks of life.

It was not feasible to achieve in-depth data from all the people who experience the SEC in one way or another. I intended to employ a sampling strategy of participants for this case study to capture rich information experiences (Patton, 2000) to achieve depth. Therefore, a narrowly focused purposeful sampling procedure (Palinkas et al. 2013) was used to complement the aim and objectives of this research phase. The aim of recruiting participants had two objectives. Firstly, since the exam achievement results in the SEC reports (MATSEC, 2018) focus on students' performances based on school type, participants were recruited from two operationally diverse types of schools in Malta: a state funded and a privately funded school. I chose to work with two operationally diverse schools because it gave me the opportunity to collect a wider range of experiences from those who go through the SEC in different educational environments. My second objective was to recruit a representative sample of different stakeholders that experience the SEC from different point of views. Therefore, interviews focused on preparation for SEC examinations, particularly on those who experience the SEC from:

1. an administrative perspective (SEC administrator)
2. a policy making perspective (policy maker)
3. a schools' operations perspective (school head teacher)
4. a classroom/teaching perspective (2 teachers from 2 types of schools)
5. a classroom/learning perspective (3 pupils)
6. a home/parent perspective (2 parents from each school)

A total number of 10 participants were recruited as learning stakeholders and participants for interviews.

Before recruiting participants, I needed to get project clearances from two research ethics boards; Bournemouth University (BU) board of ethics and the Maltese Education Ministry's Research Ethics Committee (MREC). The process to achieve the necessary clearances to start research in schools will be discussed in a following section entitled ethical considerations. The MREC requested the initial ethical

clearance from BU ethical board. Once clearance was granted by both BU and MREC, two head teachers from two different schools, one private school and one state school (choice based on schools' availability), were contacted by MREC to inform the head teachers respectively and invite pupils in year ten (second year of preparation for the SEC examinations) to participate in the research. I was also interested to collect experiential views from high achieving pupils and from low achieving pupils to get a broader view of experiences and this was also listed as a requirement in my research proposal. This criterion of participant selection was important for the research to ensure that views are not only collected from pupils who find the system favourable to their learning preferences but also by those who find it challenging to educationally perform within the strictures of the SEC (see research proposal appendix 8). The chosen pupils attended a short pre-research meeting where I introduced the research project and handed the respective forms to endorse. Pupils gave assent (appendix 2) to participate and the contact details where interested pupils could get in touch if more information about the research project was needed.

Two parents of pupils who were going through the phases of preparation for the SEC were also requested in the research proposal and identified by the head teachers of the two schools. Both parents were informed about the research project by the schools' head teachers. The two parents were asked to give consent (appendix 7) and the contact details where interested they could get in touch if more information about the research project was needed. The time, day and place for the school interviews with parents, teachers, students and the head teacher were coordinated by the schools' administration teams.

The policy maker and the SEC administrator were personally asked by email (please see appendix 13 and 14) to participate in the research project. Both participants were chosen on the basis of their role. Both SEC administrator and policy maker agreed to participate, were asked to give consent of participation and the contact details where they could get in touch if more information about the research project was needed.

3.5.4.3 Ethics

To ensure the best interests of the research participants and quality of research, throughout the research phases, measures of transparency were taken for the participants to elicit their opinion impartially without any form of discrimination. Measures to ensure every participants' anonymity in the study and privacy in schools during the interviews were taken as steps of precaution. Particularly to respect every participants' right to preserve their own anonymity during data collection and analysis processes. As previously discussed in the recruiting participants section in this chapter, this study needed high and low performing students as well as students and teachers from two different types of school, however no inclusion/exclusion criteria were used to recruit participants. In the study proposal (see appendix 8) that was approved by BU ethics panel and subsequently the MREC ethics committee was sent to the participating schools where a number of requests were listed. Please see BU and MREC approvals (appendix 9 and 10)

In the case of this project, besides obtaining the necessary clearances from BU and MREC I also informed the pertinent authority via telephone call (the Commissioner of Children Trust in Malta) beforehand, to pre-advise about my research initiative and to open a healthy channel of communication, which could have led to assistance if and when sensitive matters could arise. On the other hand, the policy maker and the SEC administrator were approached individually by email and asked to participate for interviews on the basis of their professional role in the Maltese education. Please see email invitations attached (appendices 13 and 14).

In summary, the ethical considerations mentioned above (ie. ensuring transparency and comprehensiveness) allowed this study to:

1. avoid, as much as possible, any misunderstandings between project participants and myself by making sure that every step of the interviewing procedure is fully disclosed with all participants;
2. obtain every parental/guardian consent required when young participants are involved;
3. obtain consent from every adult participant involved in the interviewing stage;
4. obtain assent from every young participant who was involved;
5. anticipate the confidential rights of participants and non-participants;
6. avoid conflict with any pupils' educational progress;
7. protect the integrity of this project and projecting a confident tone of voice throughout the duration of this case study research.

These objectives will be tackled in more detail in this section. Moreover, as advised on the terms of reference to carry out research in secondary schools in Malta (Malta Ministry of Education Website), permission needed to be granted by MREC. Before the request was presented by MREC to the Heads of the two schools where this research was carried out. To apply for permission the following documents needed to be prepared and presented for approval initially by BU research ethics and subsequently by MREC:

1. Research proposal (appendix 8);
2. Research information sheet addressed to the Head of School (appendix 4);
3. Research information sheet addressed to adult participants and/or legally responsible parents/guardians of minors (appendices 4 and 3);
4. A consent form to be signed by adult participants (appendix 1);
5. A consent form to be signed by legally responsible parents/guardians (appendix 6);
6. Assent form for participating minors (appendix 2);
7. Approval from the Ethics Review Board of the respective institution (appendices 8 and 9).

BU ethics board and MREC approved this research as shown in the approval emails appendices 8 and 9. In the research proposal I requested that every participating

pupil should be in year ten (second year of preparation for the SEC examinations). Furthermore, as explained in the recruiting participants section, pupils, parents and teachers were informed and invited to participate by the school administrators and a short pre-research class presentation for the interested participants. The pre-research presentation and interview dates, time and a private place for the interviews were coordinated by the school administrators. Only the head teacher and the teachers' names were disclosed in the communication as professionals that work in the participating schools to be able to book their availability and confirm participation accordingly.

Keeping preserved anonymity with the interested research participants allowed me to be in line with the principles of the Social Research Association (2003) particularly the principle of "Preventing disclosure of identities" (2003; p.38). Therefore, I ensured that email correspondence between school administration and myself was not made public in any way and I ensured that the correspondence was only kept in my private email inbox. The purpose and research objectives were clearly stated on the participant information sheets (PIS), adhering to the ethics guidelines set by the Social Research Association "obtaining informed consent" (2003; p.27) and links to the guidelines' ethical principles of informed consent, "Maintaining confidentiality of records" (2003; p.37).

Malta's Freedom of Information Act (ACT XVI of 2008) states that people under the age of sixteen cannot provide consent independently and consent to participate in the interviews was needed by their parents/guardian. Therefore, participant agreement form (PAF) was issued to every child participant's parent/guardian to sign their consent for their child's participation. Furthermore, to fully respect the principles of obtaining informed consent, it was important for all participants, notwithstanding the minimum age of consent stated in the Maltese legislation, not to feel obliged to participate in the research in any way. Therefore, an assent form was also provided to the child participants to sign and to understand their rights to end their participation should they feel to do so without any consequences.

It was also important to take into consideration school policies of each of the two participating education institutions (state and independent) since the probability was that they differ from one another. For this case study I engaged with secondary schools in Malta; hence, it was imperative that every contributor was fully aware of every stage of the research and to make sure that no data collection method (such as use of audio recording devices) conflicted with any school policy. To ensure comprehensiveness of study I drew up a number of ethical objectives (listed above in this section). These objectives were in-line with BU board of ethics checklist and were necessary to complete and obtain research approval. Such ethical consideration warranted the drawing up of appropriate consent forms that eventually were sent to school authorities. Lack of consideration towards the institutional policy might have even prevented this project from progressing to further stages of this research. Research methods and objectives were clearly put forward to every participating school principal and every participant and getting a signature of approval was essential to supersede this ethical challenge.

Adult participants were also provided with a PIS to keep and a PAF to sign and understand their rights of participation. Participants were kept informed about every stage, whilst the purpose and the process of the research was also clearly presented in every PIS to help keeping a transparent relationship amongst all project stakeholders and participants. This hurdle was also addressed by having my contact details available for all participants who could get any clarification on difficulties encountered during the interviewing phases of the project.

Every interview with participants was audio recorded, uploaded on a secure password protected web space and interviews were used only for the main report of this study. From ethical and also legal stand points, since this project invited participants to share personal statements about their educational well-being, experiences and professional views, data was classified as anonymous and confidential and treated likewise. Therefore, all the information collected during the interviews was kept strictly as hard copy in a secure location, a password protected secure computer hard drive. Any participants' personal information could only be accessed and used by appropriate, authorised individuals and only when/if this was necessary for the purposes of the research.

3.5.5 Data Analysis

When all data was collected from the interviews, I needed to employ the right analysis procedure to achieve depth of understanding of responses given by the participants. I chose to employ a "tactical sampling" (Smith et al. 2008) method to ensure that local meanings that were captured during the interviews were conserved in the data analysis procedure (in English language).

Figure 3-6 shows how the analytic workflow comprises of a number of stages involving extracting descriptive codes in Maltese and English languages, generating analytic themes and grouping themes into major themes. This coding process is based on Saldaña's (2009) 'coding for patterns' approach. This approach involved a specific "analytic tactic" (2009, p.7) to process various observations in an exploratory manner. A 'coding for patterns' approach was ideal for this study because it allowed me to generate observations from different viewpoints about the problem of students' performances in the SEC.

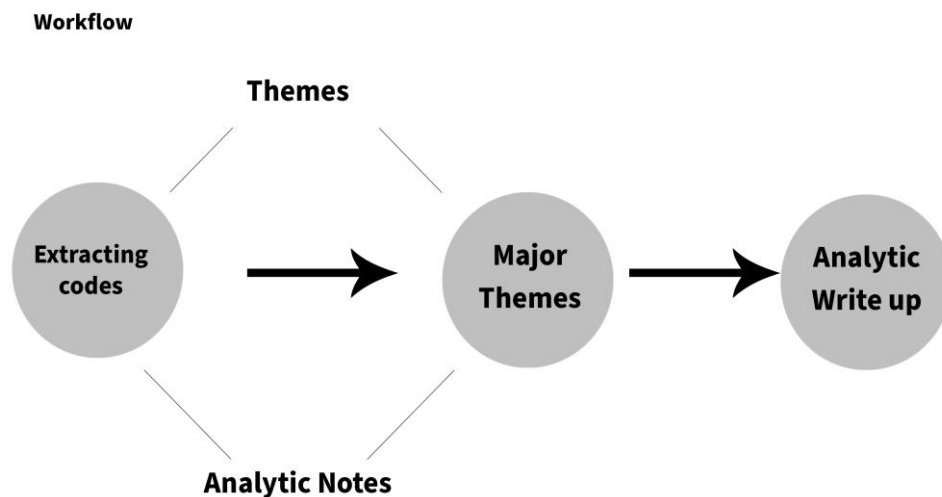


Figure 3-6 Coding workflow

In the first stage of the data analysis procedure, a number of descriptive codes were generated (in both Maltese and English languages) at verbatim from interview transcripts (see appendix 11). The first stage of descriptive coding lead into the second stage of analysis which involved the clustering of primary themes into major themes. These major themes were then used as basis for the analytic write-up then cross referenced with other major themes (see appendix 12) generated in the policy analysis in the discussion chapter. In the following sections I shall explain in more detail every step of this process.

3.5.5.1 Extracting codes from interviews

The national language status of Malta is bilingual (Maltese and English). In this research, participants were given the opportunity to make their responses in either English or Maltese language, although capturing data in two languages, English and Maltese presents its challenges (Yi Li, 2011). In this section I shall go through the rationale of choices, challenges and processes used for data analysis of interviews.

I am fluent in both Maltese and English, and carried out the qualitative interviews with the study participants (10 in total). Two participants, one student and one teacher opted to do the interview in English which presented no language translation issues. However, the other eight participants chose to do their interviews in Maltese. Since the interviews were done in two languages, this created philosophical and interpretative issues of translation (Li Yin, 2011). Li Yin argues that such issues are critical towards ensuring ethical and quality procedures of translation. Therefore, I adopted Danica Seleskovitch's (1989) process of deverbalization to conserve

essences of language that were shared by the participants during the interviews. The following examples show how this process was done in practice.

Interviewees were initially audio recorded with the participants' permission as stated in the previous section about ethics.

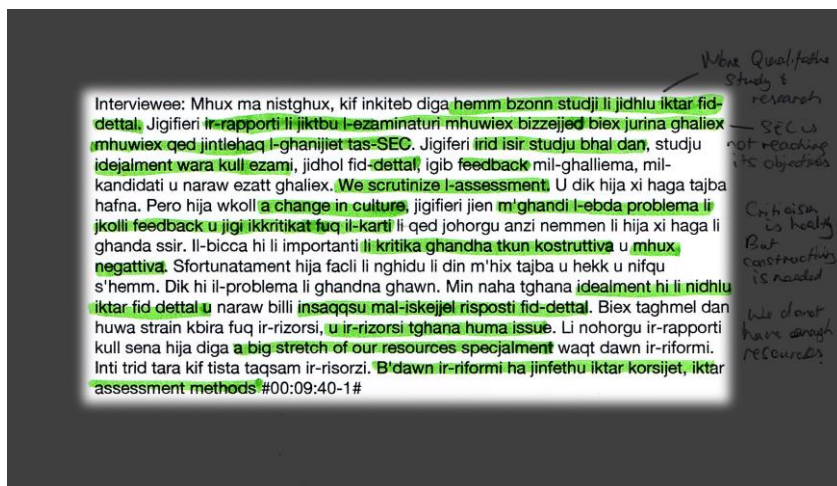


Figure 3-7 Interview sample (SEC Administrator)

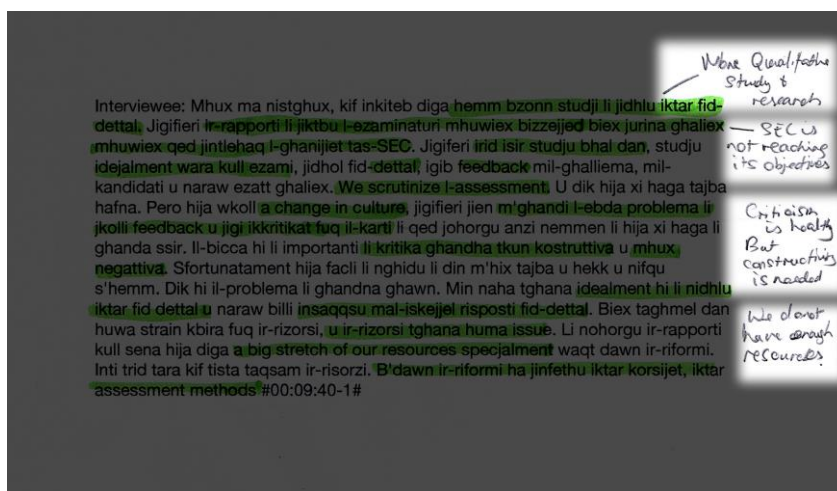


Figure 3-8 Interview sample (SEC Administrator)

The above excerpts from the SEC administrator transcribed interview gives a sample of how the process of deverbilization took place. Initially, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim in both English and Maltese languages depending on the participant's choice of language to do the interview. The above excerpts are taken from the SEC administrator interview transcription which was done in Maltese. I transcribed every interview in order to identify key statements (marked in green in the excerpt 3-7) from the original interviews in the Maltese language (8 interviews).

These statements were then deverbilized from Maltese to English language and processed to analytic notes as shown in the excerpt 3-5.

Figure 3-9 shows the full deverbilization process from audio recordings to the writing of key assertions in the English language.

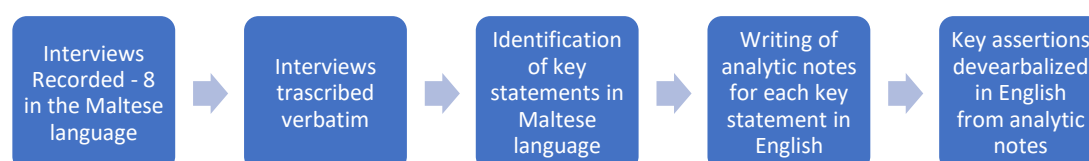


Figure 3-9 Deverbilizing Process

As discussed, Seleskovitch's (1989) process of deverbilization was employed which entailed in initially grasping a sense in which key statements were delivered by the interviewee. Excerpt sample 3-7 shows how key assertions done in the Maltese language were deverbilized in the English language. In this case these were: ***more qualitative study and research; SEC is not reaching its objectives; criticism is healthy but constructivity is needed; we do not have enough resources.***

These key assertions were then developed into analytic notes in the English language as per below examples:

More qualitative study and research, SEC is not reaching its objectives:

The examiner admits that not enough research is being done to understand the limitations of the current system. More studies such as this study, ideally after every examination should take place to get feedback from the teachers and the students to understand better why the SEC's objectives are not being met.

His appeal is to find more ways how to "scrutinize" the assessment through more fieldwork research in schools to learn from first hand experiences where the limitations of the system are. He explains how currently the dominant form of

research about the SEC is not necessarily empirical and can be limiting authorities to identify with the problems holistically.

Criticism is healthy but constructivity is needed:

The examiner also explains how generally stakeholders' views about the SEC system are rather negative and non-constructive. In his view, parents, teachers and students may find it too easy to say that something is wrong.

We do not have enough resources:

He explains that more resources are needed to get detailed feedback that can help the SEC achieve confidence to move forward. This implies a distance that exists between authorities and front liners in which consultation might not necessarily be at the centre of the new developments within the SEC system.

This method allowed me to ensure depth and detail of the qualitative interviews whilst limiting philosophical/interpretative issues in language processing. These assertions were then listed as codes and grouped under specific themes. This process will be explained further in the next section.

3.5.5.2 Developing major themes

As shown above in figure 3-9, the first cycle of the interview analysis process consisted of developing codes from analytic notes and grouped in specific analytic themes. After completing the first cycle of the interview analysis, a total number of **1,473 codes** were extracted from all the interview analytic notes. The following chart, figure 3-10, shows the number of codes that were developed per interview after the first cycle.

Participant	Codes
Independent School Teacher	156
Independent School Parent	159
Independent School Student 01	130
State school Head teacher	164

State school Student 01	92
State school Parent	183
State school Head Student 02	128
State school teacher	106
SEC Administrator	172
Policy Maker	251

Figure 3-10 (codes developed from interviews)

The second cycle consisted of a pattern coding (Saldaña, 2009 p.152,) process in which codes from all participants developed during the first cycle were firstly organised into themes then developed into major themes for the analytic write-up. Saldaña, (2009) argues that a pattern coding method is ideally used as a second cycle method to develop “meta-codes” (2009; p. 150) that organise together large number of codes generated from an initial cycle. For this research I am referring to such meta-codes as analytic themes. Saldaña also describes how meta-codes are:

“explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation. They pull together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis... is a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of sets, themes, or constructs” (2009; p.152)

Figure 3-11 shows a sample snapshot of this process. Particularly how in essence the pattern coding process entailed two stages: grouping initial codes from all participants into analytic themes and developing major themes that summarise analytic themes into smaller number of themes.

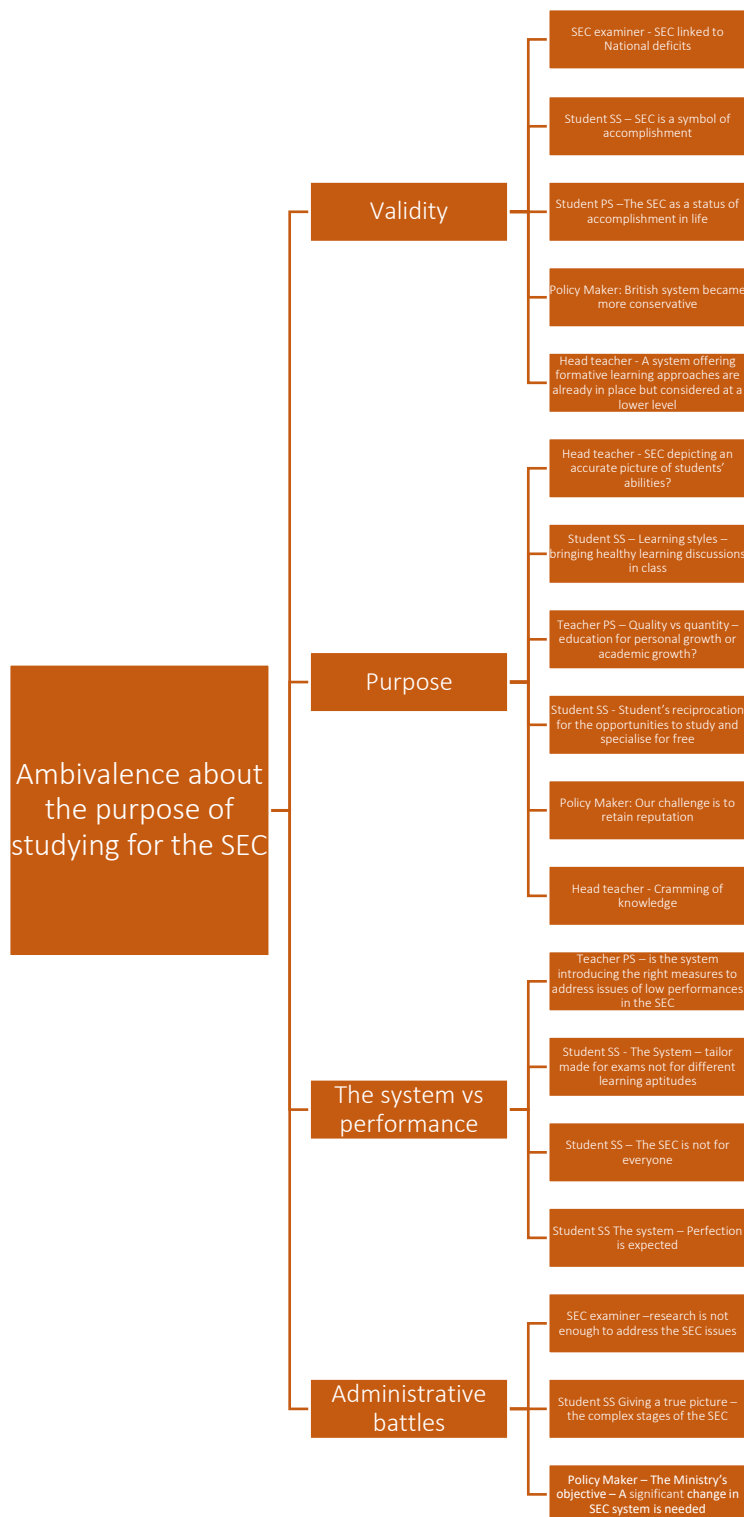


Figure 3-11 Example of pattern coding

This method helped me organise a large number of data entries (codes=1,473) extracted from the interviews into manageable thematic groups of data for analysis (appendices 11 and 12). However, besides from the practical aspect of data management, this method has also granted me the opportunity to keep fundamentally aligned to an interpretivist-constructionist approach that is central to

this research project. Particularly because through this method I ensured that the results that feature in the analytic write up are driven by the participants' responses by treating the interview analysis process as an interpretivist-constructionist exercise, in order to present analytic findings that represent the participants' voices as much as possible.

3.6 Analytic write-up

The aim of the analytic writeup (chapter 5) was to depict an analytical overview of perceptions, anxieties, mentalities, feelings, professional and personal challenges, pressures, influences, and recommendations to conceptualise what may or may not address the problems within the SEC examination system in the future. The analytic write-up involved a cross-examination of data generated from various sources of information; the analytical results obtained from CDA of policies and from the analysis of in-depth interviews. As James & Angela (2008) argue, the purpose of cross-examining different sources of information is to 'deepen and to widen understanding' of a particular problem from various sources of information in relation to my second research question. This final stage of the analysis lead me to a final recommendations chapter (Chapter 7) where propositions were made in relation to the third research question of this study; what is the future of the Maltese education system?

3.7 Limitations

This research took place at a particular moment in time in Maltese education. The results from this research were based on an education narrative that began in the past and continues today. As such it has to be recognised that the narratives presented in this research are part of a constant evolutionary process. This means that the topics and areas of knowledge examined in this research are subject to change as part of this evolutionary process which was beyond the control of the researcher. A recent example of this is the set of implications for educational policies and practices driven by the Covid pandemic (2019).

For this reason, it is important to recognise that results of this research depicted *snapshots* of drivers that influence the underlying educational philosophies and practices of the Maltese education system. Moreover, the depictions that resulted from the study analysis are subject to change and dependent on situations and circumstances that impact the operations and attitudes of people who experience education in Malta during a given moment.

This study also has methodological limitations which are discussed in this section. This study set out to examine in-depth information from policies, and the life experiences of those living through Malta's mainstream examination system and was successful in achieving this. Silverman (2000) explains that the purpose of qualitative

research is about achieving rich and in-depth answers about specific research problems. Therefore, it is not feasible to achieve rich qualitative data from a large sample of policy documents and research participants. Consequently, this study could not capture a full depiction of issues that emanate from all Maltese education policies and practices. However, the selection of policy documents identified for the analysis were identified as the most important ones during the current 10-year reform strategy (2014-2024), and the selection of participants was similarly purposive. Therefore, it is envisaged that the results achieved from the in-depth research could serve as initial findings for other future research projects of similar nature. Moreover, the methodological framework could also be adopted for other areas of similar research enquiries.

3.7.1 Value of small-scale qualitative research

The study is interpretative in nature which means that it enquires into the meaning and implications of curricular reforms proposed for Malta's secondary education from the viewpoints of education stakeholders. Whilst reviewing the available data, such as examination analysis, reports and other Maltese-based educational research studies about elements that challenge pupils' performance in the SEC examinations, this study also gains authentic insights into the stakeholders' experiences when going through the processes of the SEC examination in Malta. Therefore, this study revolves around a framework of knowledge that is informed by these two distinctive types of knowledge: factual and experiential.

Facts and beliefs, in broad terms, are distinct from each other and can also be opposing. The study positions itself in a vulnerable position within the discourse of this epistemological paradigm consisting of concerns that are interpretivist in nature. This research journey is a multi-discursive one, because its position stands between addressing gaps in current formal Maltese educational settings and attempting to learn about curricular reforms in light of the implications of curricular reform and teaching practice. This study deliberately distinguishes the complexities found in Maltese secondary school education. The multidiscursive approach involves the human condition as an essential component for this study to achieve its objectives. This study recognises that there is no one singular reality to this paradigm. Therefore, a multidiscursive approach helps to establish the critical factors that underpin challenges and implications of curricular reform.

The study acknowledges the limits and potentials of the available knowledge, and ensures that the direction of this educational research is non-prejudicial but ethical about curricular issues in compulsory secondary school education in Malta. Thus, I draw on Lincoln & Guba's (1985) four key areas; credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. In this section I shall be discussing the steps that were taken at various stages of this research to ensure rigour.

3.7.1.1 Credibility:

Lincoln & Guba argue that “it is not possible to understand any phenomenon without reference to the context in which it is embedded” (1985, p. 302). Thus, A holistic view of the curricular problems in Malta’s secondary education was an essential step towards understanding problems at the core of this research. This was achieved through an examination of what can contribute towards the general understanding of the status of valuable and inclusive education during this specific educational process from key policies and interviews with stakeholders. Pring describes the process of achieving the truth as the “picture theory of meaning” (Pring, 2000, p.75). Moreover, this approach did not only motivate the study to research aspects that involve the participants’ own experiential issues but also accentuating truthful observations that are free from bias by interweaving different sources of knowledge, facts and experiences, together. Pring sets out fundamental concepts that are important for this study in order to achieve truthful observations. Pring states:

“Theories of truth have implications for what we mean by the ‘objectivity’ of statements and enquiries. There is a ‘logical geography’ in which these different concepts have their inter-connected places and provide an indispensable framework of intelligibility for research’ (Pring, 2000, p.59).

Policy analysis and interviews are interpretative in nature. The rhetoric of education policy is often contradictory, particularly when policy makers refer to various internationally-recognised educational standards in reports (such as PIRLS and PISA) and practices (such as 21st Century skills) as proxies of quality. However, it is clear that policies fail to explain how such standards and practices can be achieved in real-life circumstances. The implications of this is that although many might agree in principle to such objectives presented at policy level, misunderstandings and disagreements arise during reform implementation phases. This controversy unveiled the context of the analysis.

3.7.1.2 Dependability:

Lincoln & Guba (1985) also place emphasis on the rigour of data analysis and the dependability of the methods of analysis used for research. Interviews analysis can be even less objectively verifiable than policy analysis; however, I applied a particular interpretative lens which has been developed from the literature review and analysis of the policy. This approach was applied to help me achieve an authentic picture of problems addressed in this research from a qualitative perspective. Furthermore, to help me achieve in-depth understanding of issues where quantitative and positivist data tend to be limiting.

This interpretative approach cannot be considered as ‘objectively verifiable’ as one would expect in research studies that are positivist in nature. Pring (2000) argues that to achieve an authentic viewpoint, one needs to frame knowledge within a correct vision of the truth about the life experiences that can shape a researcher’s observations. “... all observations are theory laden... what we observe depends upon

concepts and beliefs which we bring to those observations” (Pring, 2000, p.77). Thus, as Pring (2000) argues, an interpretative research approach was applied in this study to achieve an in-depth and ‘authentic’ view about issues that underpin this study. Thus, authentic observations were achieved when views about the status of one SEC examination process, were inclusive experiential types of data.

As explained in detail earlier in the methodology chapter, a multidiscursive approach, that included the analysis of policy and interviews, lead towards the pursuit of working with the two distinctive types of data and to learn how this data can help establish meanings about the implications of the SEC process towards current curricular developments. A multidiscursive study approach, that by definition suggests that learning takes place by “...knowledge and understanding being slowly constructed by individual's prior experience and idiosyncratic version of reality...” (Woolland & Pritchard, 2010, p.5), drove this research towards exploring factors that help to understand how pupil-dependent and independent factors contribute towards the development and challenges of reforming Malta’s secondary education system.

Research approaches that focus on the experiential and emotional aspects of social sciences has been criticised in the past because it appears to work outside traditional research methodologies. As for Adorno and Horkheimer, who question intensely the main driver towards how social sciences should be ‘looked at’, whether views should be based on human experience or pre-determined critical theories. Both approaches were considered because the SEC process seems to be administered by the positivist characteristics of calculability but strives towards achieving constructive objectives, as stated in the MATSEC vision statement, “To create a user friendly examination environment” (MATSEC, 2015). This statement was specifically highlighted in the MATSEC vision in an exam report in 2015, in which it also caught the researcher’s attention as the report calls out for further studies that are different in nature that can elicit subjective interdependencies and to explain the lack of student performance in certain study areas. “Why is this happening?... Low expectations? Other reasons? Only systematic qualitative research, which is beyond the scope of this report, can answer these questions” (MATSEC, 2015). Therefore, this research builds on data revealed in statistical examination reports and explores the more complex aspects of the human and social worlds than would otherwise be possible from a purely quantitative approach which has been the predominate focus in research about curricular problems in the SEC to date.

3.7.1.3 Confirmability:

My positions as a lecturer, a professional in the field of education and also a Maltese citizen could be considered as problematic due to personal attachments and a level of bias due to my own personal experiences in sitting the SEC and as an educator. Thus, mitigation measures were taken to limit bias and other issues that could hinder or influence participants’ responses and/or my interpretation of data.

Guba and Lincoln (1985) argue that “an inquiry audit cannot be conducted without a residue of records stemming from the inquiry” (1985, p.319). In other words, taking in-depth consideration of what might impact the quality of the data and analytical stages. In the research analysis phases there was on-going reflection to reduce how my professional background in education and experience obtained in previous professional endeavours and personal experiences could help/distract from the wider scopes of the study. To achieve significant results, a reflexive approach provides means to position this study in a direction that is not informed by personal experiential pre-judgements but driven by data. Pillow states, “to be reflexive, then, not only contributes to producing knowledge that aids in understanding and gaining insights into the workings of our social world but provides insight on how knowledge is produced” (Pillow, 2003, p.178).

As previously mentioned, I had the opportunity to personally see problem and potentials in Maltese secondary schools first-hand, from a professional standpoint, and also by working on various experimental interventions in secondary schools for large number of students in the past. However, it was still not clear enough to claim how best to be responsive towards curricular challenges and students’ learning in their secondary education. Hence, I needed to investigate problems from their roots in order to qualify this.

Initially I formalised the distinction between myself as a practitioner and myself as a researcher. First stages of the research helped me assess ideological conceptions that underpin this study. As Pillow (2003) defines the concept of reflexivity in research, I asked myself what knowledge can be explored in this field of study and how knowledge can help this research to become possible. This reflexive stage in the study was essential to identify myself as a researcher by establishing the potentials and limits that knowledge itself that might present in this research, without relying on my own personal judgements of problematic situations. Subsequently, I worked with a small group of participants to put into practice what addresses concerns raised and facts investigated in the literature review in the form of qualitative interviews. Although ‘objectivity’ is never really possible because of the interpretative nature of this research, I used strict protocols and honest self-reflection to minimise obvious bias.

3.7.1.4 Transferability

Guba and Lincoln (1985) also outline the role of the researcher to ensure quality of results from data analysis for other future application. “it is his or her responsibility to provide the *data base* that makes-transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers.” (1985, p.316) Thus, a number of stages were introduced in this study to reflect on my interpretations of the data. The following stages were introduced specifically so I as a researcher can enter this study with a clear mind. In the reflexive stage I acknowledged my own pre-existing frustrations with the curriculum and the system both as a professional and as a student. To reduce bias, I developed a clear set of interview questions (section 3.5.4) fundamentally based on the field of enquiry of this research. In other words, research questions were

developed from a series of issues that emerged from the literature review. I also entered interviews with an open mind set and a desire to learn something new about the potentials and the current challenges that education stakeholders face in Malta's secondary education. I listened attentively to the participants and I also asked follow up questions based upon their experiences and their responses. After each interview I reflected on the data and wrote my own reflections of the interview before entering any new interview with the same desire to learn something new. During the interview analysis process, I shared my analytical steps with supervisors to ensure credibility and rigour of the analytical process.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework of this research study, particularly the philosophical approach to research, the rationale for methods used for data collection and data analysis and the practical/ethical considerations needed and limitations to be observed in the two stages of data collection and analysis. It was discussed how the policy discourse analysis and interview analysis, gave me the opportunity to go beyond statistical reports and to further understand the complex nature of reform and resistance in Maltese education, particularly what is halting reforms from happening. I have also outlined why I considered an interpretative study approach as an 'alternative view-point' for factors that lead to this problem. In this chapter I presented the design of a specific qualitative study that has at its core an interpretivist-constructionist position.

The next chapter focuses on the first stage of the empirical phase of the study; a discourse analysis of three policy documents published by the Maltese Ministry of education.

Chapter 4 Discourse Analysis

4.1 Introduction

In this discourse analysis three texts: a strategy; a reform; and a policy text, are treated as rich sites of information that involve various actors (anonymously) from various fields of education. Education policy texts often bring together voices of different actors from various social practices in an attempt to ameliorate a situation in a particular field of education (Mulderrig 2011). This chapter shall focus on the analysis of different voices represented in three key strategic policy documents;

1. Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014 - 2024 (2014)
2. My Journey: Achieving through different paths (2016)
3. A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools – Route to Quality Inclusion (2019)

These policy documents were chosen as they represent a moment in time (7 years) in the Maltese education history in attempting to reform the SEC examination system. Furthermore, these three policy documents are articulated by the Ministry's 'belief' of how the Maltese education system should 'modernize' within a ten-year timeline by introducing ways of providing a valuable, relevant and effective education for all. However, this objective seems to be characterised by a system of unresolved issues, ideological clashes and contestations that keep re-surfacing within the Maltese education community, producing a sense of uncertainty amongst education stakeholders about the future of Maltese education. This study takes place 6 years through the launch of the Ministry's education strategy which is designed to reach fruition in 2024.

This chapter will present a depiction of different modes of address adopted by policy makers that embody the initiation of change in the Maltese education system. A common characteristic found in the chosen policies is in the textual approach which the Ministry employs to invoke the idea of change. The three documents 'hail' the reader (Althusser, 1970) as a stakeholder using words such as 'us' and 'together' as a 'personalised' (Mulderrig, 2011) mode of address. Fairclough (2000) argues that such a mode of address gives a "sense of broad unity" (Fairclough, 2000, p.22). Other policy makers, such as education policy makers under Tony Blair's government, have historically used similar textual approaches systematically as a discursive technique to address wide audiences for certain political ends. Fairclough (2000) refers to this discursive technique as a 'new way of politics' (referring mainly to Blair's government policy making techniques), in which a strategic educational vision responds to a 'global economical situation'. Whilst the 'Nation' is called upon by the Government to come together and take action to ameliorate particular situations in education.

Mulderrig (2011) also argues that the use of specific words such as 'us', 'we' and 'our' in policies have semantic implications, meaning that the mode of address can shift between three categories:

- A collective address, when policy makers address the general public as one collective entity;
- An exclusive address, referring solely to the originator of the policy, in this case the Ministry of education;
- An indecisive address, when the policy maker leaves its address open-ended.

Thus, this is problematic when it cannot be established who the actors are and what is being addressed; leaving gaps of specificity on who/what is involved to achieve the key objectives of change published in policy documents. Furthermore, such indeterminacy can possibly present itself as a factor that motivates ‘weaknesses’ and tensions between authorities and education stakeholders resulting to lack of uncertainty about the future of Maltese education.

In the following sections, I will explore why certain desired objectives are so important for Maltese policy makers and how policy makers (explicitly and/or implicitly) allocate roles and responsibilities in these documents to bring change in the Maltese education.

4.2 The structure of the analysis

Each of the three key policy documents published by Malta’s ministry of education, formally suggests ways on how to effect change in Maltese education by highlighting the following objectives one at a time:

1. **‘Relevance’**: A strategic vision to provide structures/practices within the Maltese education system to be relevant with today’s learning realities.
2. **‘Parity’**: Providing students with an education that is comparable and competitive between different education types (vocational and academic) and in-line with other international standards.
3. **‘Valuable inclusivity’**: Adopting ‘valuable’ inclusive education structures and approaches in schools for a more effective and efficient education system.

These objectives shall be explored one by one in the analysis and the following questions are considered as the basis of enquiry:

1. How are key objectives of change presented in the Ministry’s policy documents?
2. Who are the actors addressed in the process of tackling unresolved objectives of change?
3. Who/what might be excluded from this process?

This analysis will not attempt to assess or evaluate practical issues of implementing the Ministry’s objectives set in these documents, but rather explore how these

objectives are constructed by education policymakers as critical drivers towards modernising the SEC and the Maltese education system. This analysis shall consist of an examination of 'ideological discursive formations' (Fairclough, 1993) between strategy, reform and policy in relation to the three questions mentioned above.



Figure 4-1

Primary data analysis Roadmap

Figure 4-1 shows how key policy documents were analysed one at a time and how each analysis shall consist of the following sections:

1. Background: An introductory section about the policy document in light of the over-arching drivers that motivate the desired objectives found in the document;
2. Key Themes: A section enlisting the key themes that emerged from a first reading of each policy document and how themes relate to the key objective of the policy document;
3. Analysis of each theme: An in-depth analysis of discourse formulations found in the policy document;
4. Discussion: A discussion of general findings from the analysis of each document and a summary of topics that require further analysis.

Textual and semiotic procedures of analysis were employed to convey the ideological positions and interests. Thus, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used as a discursive analytical tool to establish a sense of voice (Fairclough, 1993) found in the key documents. In order to do so, an analysis of texts based on Fairclough's (1993) dialectic-relational approach drove the analysis to establish how particular issues remain unresolved, which might be symptomatic of a broader inability to implement change in the SEC and the Maltese education system.

The findings from this analysis can help explain why the three objectives mentioned above are so important for the Ministry of education and will uncover the ways in which the policy makers construct the Ministry's objectives in specific policies.

4.3 Framework for the Education Strategy in Malta (2014)

4.3.1 Background

As outlined in chapter three, the Malta's National Curriculum framework (NCF, 2012) policy reported that in recent years the Maltese education system has not always been able to provide a "...culturally appropriate and responsive quality education for all" (2012; p.38). This concern was highlighted in response to the Ministry's plan to improve issues of students' disengagement with education – the *Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School leaving in Malta (2014)*. This policy stated that all stakeholders should work together to make Maltese education "meaningful, engaging and relevant to students" (MEDE 2014). Thus, as can be seen in figure 4-2, the students' performances in the SEC examinations are seen as a reflection of students' disengagement with current mainstream education practices.

The number and percentage of students who got grades 1-5 in the SEC exams in May 2013

Subject	Number of students who made the grade out of a total of 4835	Percentage of students of made the grade out of a total of 4835
Maltese	2,665	55.1%
English	2,887	59.7%
Maths	2,457	50.8%
Physics	2,318	47.9%

Figure 4-2 'A Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta' (MEDE, 2014)

The 'language of numbers' is presented as a statistical 'wake-up call' by the Ministry calling for 'everyone's' contribution to bring change to current education processes and practices:

"These figures should not discourage educators, but rather serve as a wake-up call for us all to put our heads together, review present practices, plan together and monitor progress for results" (MEDE 2014, p.8).

The term 'wake-up call' suggests how current policy makers believe that past educators and education ministers in Malta have not responded to the rapid changes that a progressive world brings with it. Thus, the appeal for a 'wake-up call' shows how the current Ministry of education sees deficits in the Maltese education system as a result of dereliction of duty from previous administrations. This also gives the idea that current authorities are taking action now because previous education authorities 'slept' when change was required, and symbolizes a political resentment between current and past authorities for being incapable whilst duty required action. Policy makers see 'relevance' as a key desired objective in a ten-year education reform plan in Malta.

Although this strategy symbolizes a starting-point in the Ministry's journey aiming to bring change in Maltese education, I argue that the language of numbers is used rhetorically to establish causes of current 'failures' in the Maltese education system. Thus, in this analysis I shall be examining the ways in which the Ministry documents create a narrative of Maltese education and generate ideas rhetorically about the need for change. This analysis will help me unpack specific themes that re-emerge whenever policy makers attempt to introduce changes in the current SEC and Maltese education system.

4.3.2 Key Themes

In this relatively short (8 pages) ten-year strategic document, policy makers address 'deficit' issues in the current Maltese education system as a key objective through a number of 'beliefs', 'values', and a 'course of action'. On the first page of the ten-year 2014-2024 strategy, the Ministry states that at the core of its strategy lies a

‘deficit’ that current education structures in Malta are not catering for today’s learning realities.

“It is unacceptable that half of our fifth formers are leaving secondary school without the skills and qualifications expected of them after at least 12 years of schooling” (MEDE, 2014, p.6).

This stage adopted Fairclough’s (2010) first stage of a dialectical-relational approach, which involves an inductive analysis of the policy. This analysis consisted of an initial analytic description of key areas promoted in the policy, then an interpretation of these areas into a number of textual themes. From this stage of analysis, it has clearly emerged how policy makers attempt to address key learning deficits in Maltese education by addressing the following four key themes.

This tension is evident in various discourse formulations located in this policy document relating to the following key themes: These themes shall be explored one by one in the following sections:

1. Value-oriented learning;
2. Competitiveness;
3. Constraints;
4. Consultation.

Malta’s Ministry of education voices concerns in its published documents about how the Maltese education system needs to change in order to address issues of ‘deficits’ in the Maltese education system.

4.3.3 Analysis of each theme

4.3.3.1 Value-oriented learning

In this document the Ministry states that it will focus its powers in providing an education that motivates:

“...our students develop their personal and social potential and acquire the appropriate knowledge, key skills, competences and attitudes through a value-oriented formation including equity, social justice, diversity, and inclusivity” (2014; p.2).

The policy maker gives a sense of inclusivity to the reader by referring to the Ministry’s objectives as being of value for everyone’s child. This shows how in this policy the policy makers address the general public and not only people who are directly involved in education. Moreover, policy makers present issues of ‘relevance’ in Maltese education through a ‘deficit discourse’ (Valencia, 1998) and address readers using a collective mode address to come together and take action. In the 2014 Education Strategy, we can understand how the Ministry uses value-oriented learning as a strategic goal to close the gap of deficit between education and social and economic realities.

In the objective that makes up the Ministry’s vision to provide a relevant education to all students and targets are outlined clearly as part of the Ministry’s beliefs and values. Moreover, in this case, an exclusive mode of address is used by the policy maker to demonstrate how the Ministry of Education is on a mission to eradicate challenges (challenges that the Ministry possibly see as what is motivating this mission in the first place) including lack of *‘creativity, critical literacy, entrepreneurship and innovation’* offered by the current education system.

“... the Ministry seeks to improve students’ learning experiences by encouraging creativity, critical literacy, entrepreneurship and innovation at all levels” (2014; p.3).

These challenges also link to latest quantitative TIMMS (2016) and PIRLS (2016) international reports on the Maltese education. This is significant because it shows how the idea of ‘value’ in Maltese education is driven by international benchmarks. Furthermore, this unveils the Ministry preoccupations as the Ministry’s four targets to build a more relevant education system are entirely adopted from international ‘targets’. Figure 4-3 presents how these targets outline the Ministry’s preoccupations in the form of a ‘deficit discourse’.

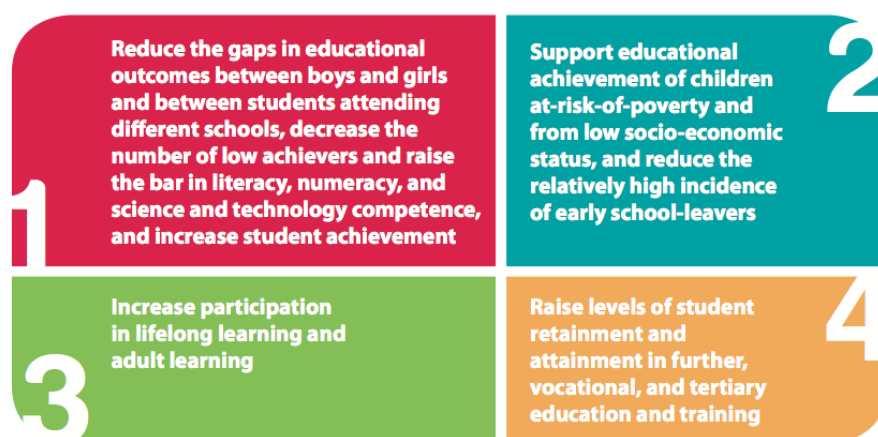


Figure 4-3 'Framework for the Education Strategy in Malta' (MEDE, 2014)

Figure 4-3 targets feature a broad range of objectives, mainly students' academic achievement, students' support in low-income factions of society, providing students with long-term utility in education and limiting students' drop-out rates to conform with European Union (EU) standards. These objectives outline where the Ministry believes Malta's education weak points are.

The following excerpt shows how the mode of address used in this policy can be linked to Mulderrig's (2011) argument of how politicians use 'deficit' discourse in policies as a political move to "manufacture consent" (2011, p.562) in order to legitimize an authoritative action.

"The Ministry positions itself at the forefront to provide present and future generations with the necessary skills and talents for employability and citizenship in the 21st century" (2014; p.2).

The Ministry in this document clearly claims 'exclusive' responsibility in making Maltese education more relevant for students by making it more valuable for the '*present and future generations*'. The word 'forefront' however, signifies a form of a journey scenario (a ten-year strategy) involving a long-term investment by the Ministry in order to reduce the gaps of deficit mentioned in its four targets. The use of 'deficit' discourse also implies that policy makers seek everyone's approval to rethink the Maltese education system both physically and culturally.

4.3.3.2 Competitiveness

In specific parts of this strategy, policy makers also address the reader in a 'unifying discourse' (Fairclough, 2000) asking for everyone's contribution and call for action. Fairclough (2000) suggests that policy makers use this mode of address to invite readers to come together and take the necessary steps to 'safeguard' particular common goals of national interest. In this document, this mode of address is often used specifically to outline issues of competitiveness between Maltese education with other global counterparts (although no other country or competitive field is

mentioned). The Maltese education is portrayed in this strategy as a situation that requires a nation-wide intervention, and the nation is called upon by the Ministry of education to come together in the journey towards reforming the Maltese education system.

“If we do not keep up with what is happening in the rest of the world, we will be putting our nation at risk and the future of our people will be jeopardised if we allow other nations to overtake us and if we do not catch up with other nations who are ahead of us because of the skills and talents of their people” (2014; p.3).

This linguistic style suggests that education and students in Malta are put at a ‘constant risk’ due to ever-changing circumstances/challenges presented by the global economy. The word ‘we’ is used more than once, and so is ‘us’ and ‘our’, and these words are used in a ‘unifying’ sense to give the general public a sense of ownership to the Ministry’s appeal (Mulderigg, 2011) on Malta’s competitive role in the global scenario. It should also be noted how a change in tone of voice can also occur when policy makers use a unifying mode of address, as in the above excerpt. Policy makers impose ‘fear’ on the reader about what is/can be at stake if the Maltese education system does not provide an education that is relevant and competitive as in other International education frameworks. Here I argue that policy makers embody ‘fear’ as a particular language type for political purposes. Fairclough (2000) refers to this language type as ‘new politics’ in which a strategic vision in education is formed on the premise of a ‘global socio and economic situation’. Moreover, policy makers depict ‘fear’ of the nation’s future as being ‘dependent’ on how Malta as a nation will be able to live up to the challenges of providing valuable education that is relevant and competitive. The policy maker embodies once again a deficit discourse and depicts a negative picture to the reader through the use of words such as ‘jeopardise’ and ‘risk’. Mostly, the reader is made aware of the implications if Malta does not follow the Ministry’s objective in sustaining its international attractiveness. Thus, this discourse is designed by policy makers to empower the Ministry of Education.

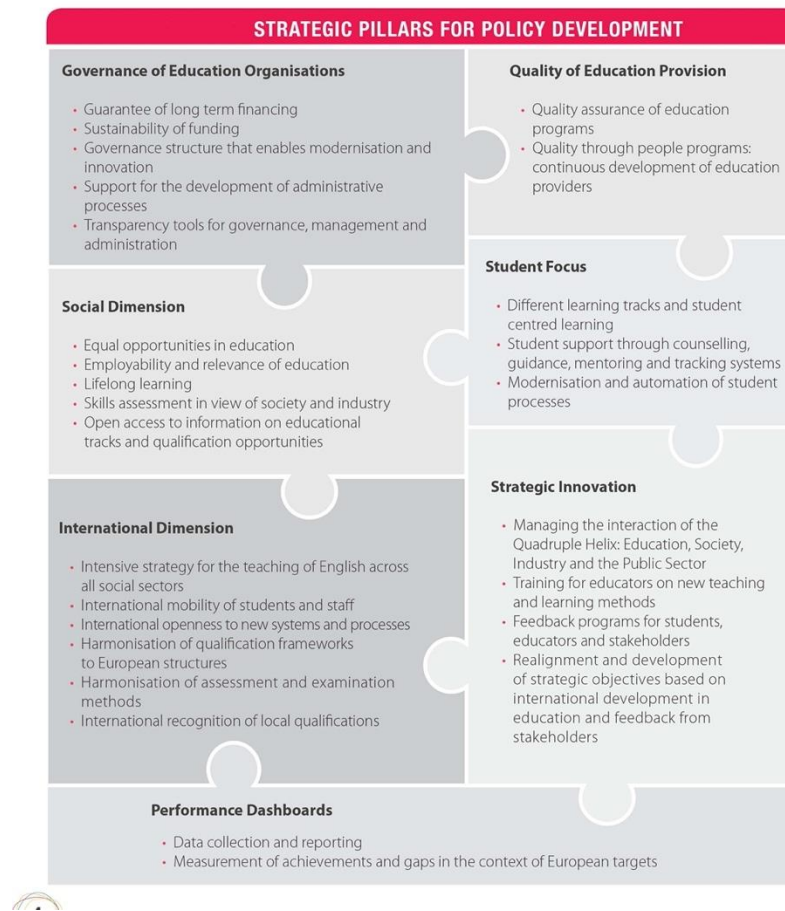


Figure 4-4 'Framework for the Education Strategy in Malta' (MEDE, 2014)

Following the Ministry's 'unifying' appeal to all Maltese people, policy makers refer to seven strategic pillars as the strategic foundations (in the form of a jigsaw schematisation) for future Maltese policies in Education to mitigate the risks (provided in figure 4-4) that 'can' be created by the global economy. This form of schematisation calls for unity between the seven pillars that is also representative of the collective unity that the Ministry calls upon the Maltese society to address specific deficits in education. Moreover, policy makers also 'certify' these strategic objectives as 'internally recognised' to reassure the reader that targets are not designed 'off the cuff' but '*derived from European policy and international initiatives in the education sector*'. However, it is not specified which particular EU standards the following strategic pillars were derived from. The following are short descriptions about the objective of each pillar:

- 1) Governance: to ensure policy focus on the Ministry's role as a 'guarantor' of means in the process of modernising the Maltese education system.
- 2) Quality: to ensure policy focus on sustaining the Ministry's objectives to make Maltese education as relevant to today's socio and economical needs.

- 3) Social: to ensure future policies to focus on links between education, employment and the industry.
- 4) Student: to ensure future policies to focus on the individual learning needs of the students.
- 5) International: to ensure focus of future policies on compatibility between Maltese education and other International education quality frameworks.
- 6) Innovation: to ensure focus of future policies on the development and implementation of 'new/alternative' education practices based on public consultation.
- 7) Performance: to ensure focus of future policies based on the 'achievement gaps' of students in Maltese education compared with other European

The policy maker also uses the word 'strategy' in isolation without referring to who are/can be the main contributors in implementing the strategic objectives set by the Ministry.

"One of the main objectives of this strategy is to improve the quality and effectiveness of our country and to develop a society which is competent, resourceful, critically conscious, and competitive in a global economy driven by information, knowledge and innovation" (2014; p.5).

This shows how in this case policy makers apply a rhetorical process as a strategy to masquerade as accountability, leaving open-ended queries particularly on who and what will be done to address issues of competitiveness in Maltese education. It is similarly vague how the policymakers do not specify any specific global competitors. By not specifying the type of education achievements and by which country, it becomes harder to argue about Malta's achievements in relation to the rest of the world. However, policy makers then refer to the words 'our country', once again bringing a sense of unity in making 'our country' better by making education more relevant facing the challenges of the global economy and not just in education. Furthermore, policy makers also refer to 'a society' in isolation as a growing entity on its own terms that needs intervention to keep itself updated with global competitiveness, but with no reference to which aspects of society require intervention in education, who will be called upon to implement interventions and how this objective will/can be achieved.

4.3.3.3 Constraints

The underlying constraints of the Ministry to reach its desired objectives are also implied in this strategy, and these constraints revolve around issues previously analysed in this chapter. However, there is no clear reference to how constraints will be addressed in future implementation processes. In this document the policy maker presents specific drivers that generate constraints within the Maltese education system using an 'exclusive' form of discourse. The Ministry of education is referred

to as an 'initiator' of a process to 'update' current system particular the school syllabi amidst all constraints.

"In the next ten years, the Ministry will carefully update the existing learning programmes and modes of assessment in both general and vocational and training education" (2014; p.5).

The Ministry is presented as an exclusive entity and shall be spearheading curricular developments in Maltese education to make the educational delivery more 'relevant'. It is also mentioned that this process shall involve some level of 'carefulness'. However, up to this point in the strategy document, it cannot be identified what careful measures will be/are being taken to ensure that the updating process of the programmes and assessment procedures will address the above-mentioned issues.

"We will strive to have a certification system (at all levels) that adds value to employability, mobility and higher standards of transparency" (2014; p.5).

An 'exclusive' discourse is also evident because it can be identified how the word 'we' is used in a different mode of address from how it was used in previous sections of this document. The voice of the policy maker in the 'battle against constraints' merges with the Ministry's voice. 'We' is expressed in an exclusive mode of address, as the Ministry/policy maker's role is established in the development of a new certification system (possibly to replace the current SEC examination system) to diminish constraints in the Maltese education system. The reader identifies how policy makers/Ministry refer to the Maltese education system for the first time as a 'certification system' potentially to link directly to the needs and requirements of the industry. I argue that the use of the word 'strive' in this context divulge the Ministry/policy maker's challenges to modernise the Maltese education system in a utilitarian sense and the main priority is economically driven.

"The biggest constraint on our economic growth and prosperity is our inability to equitably provide alternative learning tracks that are relevant and of high quality" (2014; p.6).

The constraint of not introducing systems of alternative learning in Maltese mainstream education is clearly identified by the policy maker/Ministry as a 'National failing'. This constraint is approached with high priority in the Ministry's agenda and here the Ministry links education specifically with Malta's economic growth. I also argue that the policy makers' voice is also over-shadowed by the Ministry's political vision stating the risks of Malta's *economic growth* and *prosperity* if alternative measures of learning and assessment are not introduced in the current education frameworks. The National character comes out clearly when the policy maker/Ministry re-introduces the idea of what is at stake for the Nation if 'our' education is not made relevant to the needs of industry. However, it is left ambiguous regarding who and what constraints the policy maker/Ministry is referring to when

attempts of providing 'equitable' and 'relevant' education through *alternative learning tracks* are being challenged.

"At the moment half of our jobs are being taken up by people coming from overseas, either because our people lack the right skills or because they refuse to work in the jobs available... It is unacceptable that half of our fifth formers are leaving secondary school without the skills and qualifications expected of them after at least 12 years of schooling" (2014; p.6).

Once again, this objective is presented in a deficit form of discourse focusing on social and economic circumstances. However, with no reference to any statistics or real-life examples. Thus, the textual approach used by the policy maker induces 'fear', and used as a strategy to highlight how the current education system is failing to give students the 'right' abilities to work. In response, policy makers/Ministry promote the idea to the reader of a 'Malta first' policy stating that the Maltese people are losing out on work opportunities (no reference to specific skills sets or industry requirements). Furthermore, an exclusive form of discourse is also used by the policy maker/Ministry to stir 'fear' amongst readers, referring to job opportunities taken up by *people coming from overseas* as a potential controversial issue created by gaps between Maltese education and industry requirements. Therefore, this language approach evokes a version of nationalism characterised by exclusiveness.

The Ministry/policy maker refers back to the point of entry of this study, particularly how the Ministry of education focuses on the end of compulsory education ('our' fifth formers) as a reflection of how the Maltese education system is a 'National failing'. As reviewed in previous chapters, the Ministry considers fifth form education in Malta as a complex and critical stage to achieve its targets. However, Mulderrig (2011) also argues that a familial mode of address in policy can be used strategically for "hiding through abstraction" (2011, p.567). In other words, using inclusivity as a form of language to evade from complex matters that embody the end of compulsory education. Thus, in this excerpt, the word 'our' is used once again in a collective sense. But, here I argue that it is used rhetorically in a familial mode of address to call out for everyone's contribution (without any direct address to any stakeholders) to ameliorate better job creation opportunities for *'our fifth formers'*.

4.3.3.4 Consultation

In a specific section in the strategy document entitled '*On Target through National Engagement*', the policy document emphasises the importance of inclusivity amongst education stakeholders and the industry. Historically in Malta, as reviewed in chapter 2, links between the Ministry and education stakeholders were not always effective. Particularly when radical changes were introduced to mainstream education, such as the introduction of comprehensive education (1972 – 1981). In this document, consultation is presented by the policy maker as a key objective in the form of an 'inclusive' type of discourse. However, it can also be noted how policy makers mobilize the sense of the words such as 'Strategy', 'we' and 'Ministry' in an

exclusive mode of address which makes it difficult for the reader to establish his/her role in the consultation process.

“This Strategy will seek to build more effective synergies between education, the economy and civil society and between the educational resources in Malta and those at European level” (2014; p.7).

The policy maker refers to the ‘Strategy’ as an active participant in the journey towards achieving effective engagement between education, *the economy and civil society*. The use of the word ‘build’ acknowledges yet another ‘national failing’ in the current Maltese education system in which such synergies have not taken place in the past. Presumably motivated by the Ministry, the policy maker in this document demonstrates the importance of creating synergies of dialogue to motivate change in the education system. However, there is no reference to how these synergies will take form in practice and who will be actively engaged to lead and document the process. Moreover, the policy maker is once again benchmarking standards with a ‘*European level*’ without drawing upon specific international examples or forms of synergies.

“Together, we want to address specific needs through the active participation of educators, parents and social partners including employers, unions, Local Councils, non-governmental organisations... the professional bodies which act as catalyst for change, will also be actively engaged in this process” (2014; p.7).

The words ‘together’ and ‘we’ are used in a conflicting sense because the reader cannot define whether these words are used in an inclusive or exclusive sense. Knowing that the reader of this strategic document would most probably be one of the education stakeholders, it is not clear who ‘we’ is referring to. In principle, no one could argue against the involvement of all stakeholders including national and *professional* bodies as an effective initiative to help addressing gaps between education and industry. However, there is no reference in the strategy of how this level of communication could be achieved effectively and the decision-making process of such initiative, nor is mentioned how and what level of participation is expected. Thus, the implication of this can be that it is not known to the reader the level/type of participation from all education stakeholders is necessary towards achieving the policy objectives.

As with other parts of the document, the policy maker refers to the Ministry of Education as a leader in the ‘realization of an inclusive discourse’ (Dunne, 2009) using an exclusive mode of address. But once again it cannot be established which measures the Ministry will employ to make the promised consultation process a useful and successful one:

“... the Ministry for Education and Employment will consult all stakeholders on the plan of education for 2014-2024... The successful implementation of the Strategy from 2014 to 2024 will rely heavily on

the active engagement of all stakeholders throughout the process” (2014; p.8).

4.3.4 Discussion

The strategy document revolves around these critical issues without referring to a specific course of action and how the desired objectives of this strategy could be achieved in practice. As a result, these issues are left open-ended. Moreover, the policy maker depicts the Ministry as undergoing some kind of an on-going ‘battle’ using a rhetorical language of conflict to highlight the need for action amongst education authorities and stakeholders. However, from this analysis it is also evident there are fundamental issues when policy makers attempt to define the Ministry’s desired objective. For example, the document refers to ‘relevance’ in education as a globally understood term by linking it to *‘equity, social justice, diversity and industry’*. These objectives are necessarily all globally agreed (UN, 1994) educational goals and therefore difficult to argue against. Thus, the issue at the core is not about getting education stakeholders to agree on the principles of these education goals, it is in establishing who the main actors are and to whom education should be more relevant.

4.3.4.1 Valuable education to whom and for whom?

Historically in Malta, the notion of valuable education keeps resurfacing as a desired objective. This strategy is no different to other attempts in the past. This analysis identifies that policy makers use broad education goals and results from international quantitative statistical reports to describe ‘valuable’ education in Malta. Thus, the notion of ‘value’ is continually raised by policy makers but never defined. This avoidance of definition may explain why the concept continues to be raised and contested. The concept of valuable education provides a platform for further enquiry in the forthcoming face-to-face interviews of this research with students and other education stakeholders. The concept of value shall be explored subjectively by examining individual views regarding what is a valuable education from various points of view in chapter 5, where I also consider how broad education goals impact on an individual’s idea about what is/should be considered as valuable education and for whom.

4.3.4.2 What is the concept of ‘all’ in the Maltese education system?

Another key point that emerged historically in Maltese education and also from the analysis of this strategy is the policy maker’s desired objective to standardize the Maltese education system for ‘all’. This promise shows the Ministry’s intentions to reform Malta’s education system in line with specific targets to cater for everyone. Thus, this strategy document does not necessarily inform how the different objectives stated in this document come together in one single curriculum that caters for all students alike. Miles and Singal argue that: “... thinking more deeply about the

concept of ‘all’ can enable policy makers and practitioners to explore existing opportunities within country contexts...” (2010; p. 12). This shows how ‘all’ rarely means all – a pertinent point in relation to this document.

In the face-to-face interviews, globally accepted standards that feature in this strategy, such as PIRLS (2016) and TIMMS (2016), will be explored in the context of Malta’s current SEC examinations. Interviews with individual students and education stakeholders elicited different perspectives and experiences of how such objectives/standards translate into practice in the current examination system. In addition, the interviews also seek to explore how these various stakeholders perceive how these objectives could possibly improve the future of the Maltese education system.

4.3.4.3 How will active engagement with all stakeholders be achieved?

This analysis has identified that active engagement with different learning stakeholders is key objective in establishing the future of the Maltese education system. However, past attempts to reform the Maltese education system and communication with stakeholders has been challenging. In this strategy document, whilst policy makers establish who the key stakeholders are, namely national and *professional* bodies, no plan of action is outlined on how the Ministry will establish the proposed engagement. This represents a broader tendency in the language used in the three educational policies analysed in this research, that is to enthuse about principles but avoid articulating specific implementation strategies.

The following section focuses on the analysis of the second key document published by the Ministry of Education entitled; *My Journey: Achieving through different paths* (MEDE, 2016). In this document policy makers explain the Ministry’s reform procedure and how it is set to change the current SEC examination system.

4.4 My Journey: Achieving through different paths (2016)

4.4.1 Background

My Journey: Achieving through different paths (MEDE, 2016) is a sixteen-page reform policy document published by the Ministry of Education. This reform policy document follows the *Framework for the Education Strategy in Malta (2014)*. As quoted below, the aim of this policy is to implement changes in the Maltese education system in line with the desired objectives set in the 2014 strategy policy.

“In 2014 the Ministry published its framework for the education strategy for Malta covering the years from that of publication to 2024. Two years later the

evolved State secondary school system is being launched with the aim of implementing it in the first year of secondary schooling in 2019-2020 with the first students' cohort reaching the end of their secondary school cycle scholastic in year 2021-2022 in alignment with other national initiatives in the field." (MEDE, 2016, p.10).

Figure 4-5 shows the timeline plan extracted from the My Journey policy showing how this policy is situated in a timeline of interventions that are led by the Ministry of education in order to reform the Maltese education system.

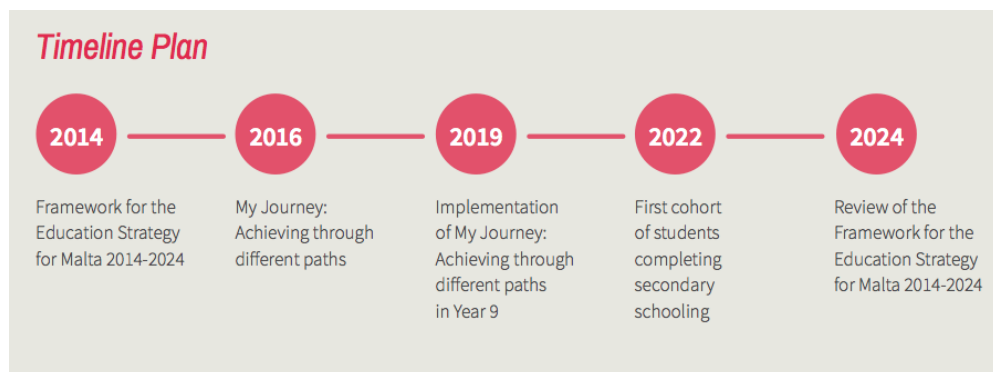


Figure 4-5 'My Journey: Achieving through different paths' (MEDE, 2016, p.14).

In this document, policy makers claim that issues relating to parity of esteem between types of education (vocational, applied and academic) lie at the core of current 'failures' in Maltese education. Thus, in *My Journey* (MEDE, 2016), policy makers propose to introduce new alternative routes of education to address this problem in Malta.

"The new system builds on the current one but ambitiously moves forward in democratising academic, vocational and applied learning for all students within a framework of parity of esteem" (MEDE, 2016, p.11).

The reform implementation strategy outlined in the *My Journey* (MEDE, 2016) policy brought various debates and concerns from the general public (discussed in more detail in the next chapter section 5.4 Visions of a new SEC). These concerns were mainly ideological in nature regarding how the objectives set in this policy translate into real education circumstances. These concerns became public in 2017, when the proposed changes set out in *My Journey* (MEDE, 2016) were taken on-board by the MATSEC Board which was asked to reform the SEC examination system to cater for a wider spectrum of student participation.

This step by the Ministry of Education provoked controversy amongst the general public which centred on the idea of modernisation. This controversy was recently the

subject of a radio interview (PBS, 2018) between the Director General of Curriculum Mr Stephen Cachia and a Maltese language academic Dr Adrian Grima, and focused, in particular, on the future of one of the SEC core examinations, the Maltese Language examination. It was clear from this interview that the Ministry's objective to introduce alternative systems of assessment to the current SEC core examinations has created concerns amongst academics about the value of the new qualification. This was also interpreted by Grima as a quick fix solution to help more students move up in the education system. Cachia, who was representing the Ministry during the interview, asserted that the current core SEC examinations represent what Banks (1955) refers to as "... the aristocratic conception of the secondary school as a training ground for the intellectual élite" (1955; p.6). He explains how the Ministry's vision is to eliminate such distinctions because he argued how this is discriminatory against students with different types of learning abilities (not just intellectual) and the solution is opening new pathways to help more students perform in education. He also explains how the Minister's appeal and response to this was two-fold; firstly, to develop alternative examinations to the current core SEC examinations, secondly for schools and teachers to observe the values of inclusive education resulting in increased access for students to progress to post-secondary education. Although Grima was in favour of developing structures encouraging different types of education in Malta, he argued that the idea of bringing more versions of the same SEC examinations would be confusing for students, damaging the historical and cultural aspects of Malta. Moreover, Grima felt that the Ministry's drive to introduce alternative types of assessment in the SEC is also political in attempt to enable students to short cut the standards expected by the current curriculum and not fail examinations. For him this reduces the value of the qualification.

From this interview it can be noted how the current proposed reforms published in the *My Journey* (MEDE, 2016) policy represent national concern regarding how the newly proposed system of education will impact education provision and attainment in Malta. The following section is the analysis of this policy document. Similar to the analysis of the 2014 Strategy policy document, I shall be looking for discourse formulations to identify the key actors addressed in the process of implementing reform in Maltese education and the core issues keeping this reform from happening.

4.4.2 Key Themes

The *My Journey* policy document is mainly aimed at teachers and school administrators explaining reforms involving the introduction of new and alternative streams of learning and assessment particularly in high stake examinations, the SEC. This document embodies a 'commercial' tone and the objectives of *My Journey* (MEDE, 2016) lead to tension amongst education stakeholders about how the reform could be effectively implemented. It is clear in this policy that the Ministry uses various discourse formulations to convince stakeholders about the importance of the policy objectives and what is at stake if this does not happen. Discourse formulations located in this policy document relating to the following key themes:

1. 'Breaking up' from the past;
2. Reaching 'new heights';
3. 'Equity' and 'Parity';
4. Towards a new 'mind shift'.

These themes shall be analysed further in the following sections.

4.4.3 Analysis of each theme

4.4.3.1 'Breaking up' from the past

Malta's education system has traditionally experienced differences of 'parity of esteem' between academic and vocational routes. Whilst there have been attempts to bridge these routes, the ideological ties between these two types of education streams has been historically problematic. In the *My Journey* (MEDE, 2016) policy document, policy makers use history as a form of discourse, not only to pay homage to past historic education settings in Malta but also referring to the past as an active actor in the process of reforming a new Maltese education system.

"Our past and present experiences have helped identify areas of strength and limitations of standing practices, suggesting what should be sustained or improved, as well as where prevention or intervention are necessary to equitably promote values which help achieve the targets..." (2016; p.2)

In this document, the policy maker calls history to 'consciousness' and gives the reader a sense of ownership about the past and uses it as an important milestone towards achieving new heights for the future of Maltese education. In doing so, the policy makers suggest that the present is out-dated, belonging to the past and not in the Ministry's plans for the future. Although the document hails the past with respect (almost in admiration), it is also evident how the policy makers want to move on from it, to achieve new targets in Maltese education through making education more relevant towards today's realities (the same targets stipulated in the Education Strategy of 2014). Moreover, the policy maker gives the reader a clear picture of what the past represents to the process of reforming the Maltese education system for the future.

"Malta has accrued a very strong tradition in general academic provision in compulsory and post-compulsory schooling... It learns from the past, but it is not a proposal for bringing back the previous, highly contested selective schooling system" (2016; p.2).

In this document, policy makers also assert a direct sense of the need of a 'break up' from the past. The policy maker uses a personal tone to present the Ministry's appeal whilst also showing awareness of their concerns regarding the strong ties between

Maltese education stakeholders and the current system. As reviewed in the context and literature review chapter (chapter two), education in Malta has been historically characterised by ideological tensions between the value of alternative/vocational education routes and mainstream academic routes. The choice of an alternative route to the academic route was perceived by Maltese society and the education system as a second-tier opportunity, mainly for students who come from lower social economic backgrounds. However, this document shows how this perception is still present today in both Maltese society and the education system as both past and present education structures are presented by the policy maker to outline deficits in the current system, identifying it to be a “*highly contested selective schooling system*” (2016; p.12), that needs to be reformed. However, the policy maker detaches personal associations with these statements and refers to the document as ‘it’. This also suggests that potentially there can be conflicts between the proposed ways pushed forward by the Ministry and the education stakeholders.

“Evidence from the current secondary school system shows that one-size does not fit all and it emerges as marginalising learners who struggle and are deemed to have failed the current provision of general education curriculum” (2016; p.4).

“This evolution is both inclusive and comprehensive, and challenges the current compulsory one-size-fits-all schooling system” (2016; p.6).

In this document, the policy makers reassure the reader of the importance of ‘breaking up’ from past education structures as an essential step towards providing an education that addresses the needs for everyone today. To achieve this desired objective, a political ‘unifying’ tone of language is also used here, as in other education policy documents. The use of words such as ‘marginalising’, ‘struggle’ and ‘deemed’ amplify the Ministry’s concerns and what the ministry sees as a ‘failure’ in Malta’s current education structure and imply a sense of urgency for changes to happen.

It is clear that the policy makers’ focus is to legitimize the need of for a unified system that abolishes segregation and the policy maker use comparisons as a form of language to seek approval from education stakeholders to ‘break up’ Maltese education from its past.

“The new system builds on the current one but ambitiously moves forward in democratising academic, vocational and applied learning for all students within a framework of parity of esteem” (2016; p.11).

4.4.3.2 Reaching ‘new heights’

In this document, the language of numbers is used as a form of discourse by policymakers. To contextualise particular areas of the Ministry’s preoccupations, the document presents statistical data:

“... the early school leaving rate (19.8%) remains the second highest in the EU (against an EU average of 11.0%), the tertiary educational attainment rate (27.8%) is still low against the EU average of 38.7%, and participation of low-skilled adults in lifelong learning is rather low” (2016; p.4).

This policy links local and international numerical statistics to four key objectives set in Malta’s ten-year education strategy; **1) to improve students’ achievement gaps, 2) to provide students with better support in low-income factions of society, 3) to provide students with a long-term utility in education; 4) to limit students’ drop-out rates to conform with EU standards.** Policymakers in this document show that the way towards achieving these objectives in Maltese education is by:

“...close[ing] the gap between the world of education and the rest of the world” (2014; p.3).

This section explores what the Ministry defines as a ‘gap’ between Maltese education and the ‘world’. Particularly, focusing upon why ‘parity of esteem’ between traditional and alternative learning routes is considered as an important step by the Ministry to achieve ‘new heights’ in Maltese education and mitigating this ‘gap’. In this document, a language of numbers refers to statistical comparisons with national and international data. Quiring (2018) argues that when statistics are used in policies to encourage people to take action it is often used rhetorically. He also suggests that in order to understand the rhetorical function of communicating statistics in policy one also needs to draw attention to the social context in the which those statistics are placed. The focus of *My Journey* is on students’ attainment performances particularly in high stakes examinations in Malta. In a section of *My Journey* policy entitled ‘*No Business is as Usual*’, policymakers focus on specific statistics to introduce the Ministry’s preoccupations and why this is a problem. Therefore, statistics uncover the Ministry’s main social preoccupation as it features prominently in other Ministry’s policy documents such as the previously analysed policy; *Framework for the Education Strategy in Malta* (2014) but not the social context in the which those statistics are placed. Policy makers use this statistic as a ‘benchmark’ and students’ attainment results are a high priority for the Ministry to achieve ‘parity of esteem’ with other international (mainly EU) standards.

“Our 15-year olds’ performance on PISA 2009+ tests is markedly lower than the EU average in all subjects” (2014; p.5).

“...there are arguably undeniable findings about educational systems in general and our local system in particular that we are determined to continue acting upon” (2014; p.5).

The policy maker focuses on statistics and particular desired objectives of the Ministry to reach specific targets set by international benchmarks. The policy maker also adopts a ‘commercial’ tone in this document, which is outlined below. Figure 4-6 shows a logo that features in this document.



Figure 4-6 'My Journey: Achieving through different paths' (MEDE, 2016)

The use of a visual logo is not commonly found in Maltese education policies. The use of a logo embodies a commercial approach that policy makers choose to adopt in this policy to communicate with education stakeholders. The '*My Journey*' logo, in an 'abstract form', represents the several educational routes that secondary school students can opt for in the form of an abstract representation. However, there is no reference to what type of education route each colour represents. The 'scribble effect' visually exemplifies what the Ministry sees as non-coherent education routes that currently characterize Malta's education system. Scribbles are connected with an arrow, suggesting the Ministry's aims for the proposed system to define the future of Maltese education. Moreover, the use of words such as 'performance', 'complacent' and 'business' also support a commercial linguistic approach. For example, the phrase '*we can no longer act complacently*' (2014; p.5) suggests the need of urgency that the Ministry's wants to take a leading role in the journey towards reaching 'new heights' in Maltese education by solving matters by bringing Maltese education in-line with international statistics. This also indicates the Ministry's commitments to reach 'new heights' in education by focusing mainly on the 'gap' between Maltese education and the industry.

"... we can no longer act complacently with such issues and hence business in education should not be as usual" (2014, p.5).

4.4.3.3 'Equity' and 'Parity'

Traditionally in Maltese education, aspiration has been used politically as a form of discourse (Anderson & Holloway, 2018) to address diverse audiences with the idea that 'we are all in it together'. In this case, the need of minimising the education attainment 'gaps' between students in high and low-income factions of society is also used politically by policy makers to address education stakeholders who are unsatisfied with the current education system.

In '*My Journey*' (2016), the policy maker uses the word 'equity' as a form of 'aspiring discourse' and the words education and qualification are interrelated. In this policy

the Ministry's objective in providing an 'equitable solution' in education for all is determined by the aim of facilitating learning opportunities for a wide spectrum of students with multiple learning abilities. The aim of minimising 'gaps' of students' education attainment is also a Ministry's priority to bring Maltese education in-line with international standards. Particularly sections two and three entitled: *'Towards an Inclusive and Comprehensive Secondary School'* and *'Equitable Learning Programmes'*, in which the term 'Towards' is also representing the Ministry's 'own' aspiration in finding a solution to the 'Maltese failure' to reach International benchmark statistics mentioned above.

"The Ministry for Education and Employment is proposing an equitable quality learning provision in secondary schools that respects all students' multiple intelligences and provides different learning programmes and different modes of learning assessments" (2014; p.6).

In this document, policy makers refer to the Ministry's claims that the current Maltese education system is 'failing' to provide students with a relevant education, highlighting that the current structure is an unfair 'one size fits all' system. The policy maker presents the Ministry's idea of a 'fair' education for all should focus on students' attainment results in the terminal (SEC) examinations. In doing so the Ministry promises a new 'qualification system' shifting from a knowledge-recall system that currently characterizes the SEC into a system that supports different cognitive abilities (Gardner, 1983). However, the policy makers fail to communicate in this document *how* these new alternative qualification system will address students with different cognitive abilities. Furthermore, it is evident that the Ministry's focus of 'reaching new heights' in Maltese education is mainly driven by students' achievement in the SEC. As reviewed in chapter three (SEC overview), the current education system, any SEC examination is considered equivalent to Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) level three and this contributes positively towards students' progression to post-secondary education.

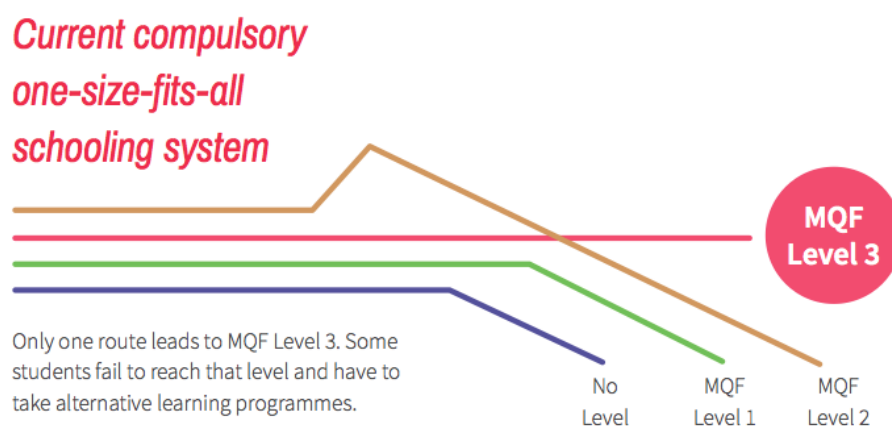


Figure 4-7

'My Journey: Achieving through different paths' (MEDE, 2016)

Figure 4-7 shows a visual diagram of how levels in the current qualification system work. It also shows how current SEC structures already offer different types of attainment routes. However, the diagram also shows how different attainment routes do not offer students an ‘equal’ level of attainment. Every colour represents a different type of education route (traditional/vocational) and at which level each route enables students to terminate their studies. However, there is also no mention in the document regarding what type of education route each colour represents. Presumably the red-coloured route is the traditional academic route because it is symbolically represented as a straight line, without any ‘detours’ for students to achieve a level three certification. This also suggests how this diagram is used critically in this policy. This diagram outlines the current disadvantages for students who have to go through an un-equal structure of different levels of attainment in the current education system.

“It aims to extend and widen the learning experience through learning programmes that lead to qualifications at MQF Level 3... All compulsory and optional subjects lead up to EQF/MQF Level 3 as opposed to the current provision where there is no parity of esteem...” (2014; p.6).

Although this policy promises to ‘*widen the learning experience*’ of the student in compulsory education, the ways in which the Ministry intends to achieve this promise are not articulated. It is however explained how a newly proposed qualification system will align the level of attainment (level three) equally for all different alternative learning routes. Figure 4-8 shows a diagram of how different learning routes will give the students the opportunity to achieve the same attainment at level three notwithstanding the type of education route. However, it is not explained in the policy how this equitable quality learning system would in fact translate in practice.

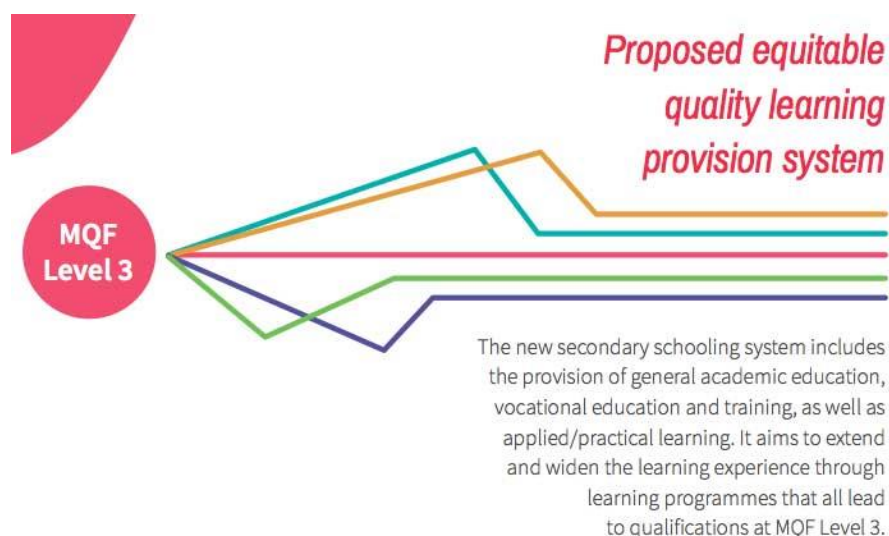


Figure 4-8

‘My Journey: Achieving through different paths’ (MEDE, 2016)

4.4.3.4 Towards a new ‘mind shift’

In *My Journey* (MEDE, 2016) policy makers refer several times to how Maltese education is currently facing significant threats. Policy makers emphasize how a ‘technocratic’ model of education in which one system is designed to cater for all students alike is currently driving these threats. As reviewed in the context and literature review (chapter 2), in the past the Ministry of Education has outlined how introducing alternative type of SEC subjects (mainly VET) was a positive step towards mitigating Maltese ‘failings’ in education. However, teachers, parents and institutions have also explained how the change from the traditional mainstream education system to the introduction of alternative SEC examination subjects is a challenge that requires a change in culture amongst all stakeholders.

“Teachers need support to depart from technocratic models which risk reducing them as mere administrators of heavily loaded syllabi with prescribed knowledge and content, and increasingly become empowered facilitators and specialists for learning skills, attitudes and values” (2014; p.10).

The policy makers’ response to this challenge is in using ‘holistic’ forms of language (Stables & Scott, 2002) encouraging education stakeholders to adopt a change in culture. Instruction is given to teachers and school administrators about how all education stakeholders should adopt this ‘unified new direction’. In *My Journey* (MEDE, 2016), policy makers state that a ‘unified new direction’ should have no ‘middle ground’ between current and future learning structures. Hence a complete new mind-shift is key towards implementing the phases of the Ministry’s proposed reform. As shown in figure 4-9, policy makers call upon characteristics of past (current) education practices once again to legitimize how a mind-shift amongst all stakeholders is necessary for Maltese education to move forward. Teachers are asked to re-set their teaching practices based on new principles of education.

CURRENT	PROPOSED
One-Size-Fits-All System	Inclusive and comprehensive equitable quality system
Traditional academic education as mainstream education	Traditional academic education, vocational training and applied learning as mainstream education with parity of esteem
Vocational subjects offered to relatively academically high-achieving students only	Vocational subjects offered to all students as part of the options exercise including key competences and behavioural skills
Only a selection of two or three vocational subjects are made available to selected students	All optional areas from the academic, vocational and applied learning programmes are made available to all students including key competences and behavioural skills
Generally alternative and applied learning is rarely accredited beyond MFQ Level 1 and thus there is no parity of esteem between academic and vocational education, with low-achieving students being channelled towards the alternative and applied learning programmes	Applied learning is comparable and equivalent to the academic and vocational education and accredited up to MQF Level 3 and is not available only to low-achieving students
Teaching prescribed syllabuses for summative testing	Teaching towards learning outcomes
Teaching prevails learning	The emphasis is on learning and acquiring the right sectoral and behavioural skills
High-stakes, standardised and summative examinations in general education	Different modes of assessment with a balanced approach towards assessment of, for and as learning, including in general education
No progression from the alternative and applied learning to the current mainstream education that could easily lead to dead-ends	A comprehensive system offering a flexible time-table that allows the option for learning programmes from more than one domain, and progression to post-compulsory and/or work is seamless and with no dead-ends
Secondary schools working in isolation from the community	All secondary schools to develop partnerships with post-compulsory educational institutions, vocational institutions and industry to provide quality learning in all three-routes – increased possibility for apprenticeships and work-based learning
Standardised number of student population in classes	Different student class population to reflect learners' needs and type of programme
Initial teacher training, in-service training and continuous professional development related to the areas of academic education	Initial teacher training, in-service training and continuous professional development related to the areas of academic, vocational, and applied learning will be provided
Learning outcomes, learning programmes and assessment programmes mainly for subjects in the general education	Learning outcomes for all learning programmes in all three learning domains
Career guidance inclined to promote the traditional/ academic route and the professions	Career guidance facilitate a seamless progression for the students in furthering their academic, vocational and applied learning or towards the world of work. Guidance related to current economic sectors and job openings will be available in all schools.
School facilities designed with the teaching of academic subjects in traditional classrooms in mind	School facilities and resources redesigned to facilitate quality learning in the academic, vocational and applied learning

Figure 4-9 My Journey: Achieving through different paths' (MEDE, 2016)

In figure 4-9, policy makers show the proposed steps for an effective mind-shift from past education practices using a two-way (before and after) chart. These consist of specific characteristics that featured/s in current education systems and proposed new characteristics of the envisaged future of Maltese education. This features a comparative discourse approach by comparing past education 'failings' to potential future desired objectives. Due to its size and resources, historically Maltese

education policy makers in various circumstances draw comparisons between Maltese education structures with other international education structures (Mayo, 2013), comparing education performances in different types of education in Malta and drawing comparisons with education standards set by the EU and/or beyond. In this case, policy makers focus on the need of a new mind-set for Maltese teachers and institutions based on comparisons between the current and a proposed future of education. This particularly focuses on the need to introduce vocational and applied education structures as alternative routes to the current mainstream academic route. Figure 4-9 clearly demonstrates how policy makers 'label' the current education system as a 'one size fits all' system with particular focus of lack of 'parity of esteem' between different types of education, learning styles and types of assessment.

The first column on the left-hand side of figure 4-9, policy makers outline characteristics of current education in Malta. In the column on the right, the policy proposes a number of benefits envisaged by the introduction of the new system. However, there is a clear sense of vague agency about who are the targeted beneficiaries of the new system, what action needs to be taken and by who to reach these goals. The policy uses open mode of address such as "all secondary schools to develop...", "teaching towards..." and "career guidance to facilitate..." and removes itself from the specificities of who (which area, which professional) needs to be engaged in this reform to achieve the envisaged targets. This mode of address makes it difficult for those who need to implement this reform to establish a practical way forward to achieve these targets.

Moreover, the policy maker uses terms such as 'traditional classrooms', 'selective education', 'no parity of esteem', 'summative assessment', 'dead-ends' and 'isolation'. These terms are generally used in education to voice specific 'failures' in particular education practices. Policy makers, use these terms and depict a negative image of current education in Malta to emphasize on the need of change. Conversely, this image is then contrasted with as an opposing image on the right-hand side column, using terms such as 'inclusive', 'comprehensive' and 'equitable'. These terms are generally accepted terms by most education stakeholders and are characteristically used by policy makers to legitimize change in education but not necessarily to facilitate implementation processes.

4.4.4 Discussion

This proposed policy captures the mission to implement Ministry's vision for the Maltese education in the coming years. Policy makers embody an 'inclusive' mode of address throughout this policy, using words such as we, us and together implying how teamwork amongst stakeholders is necessary to move on towards the next stages of the Ministry's objective. The objective is to reform Malta's mainstream education system by achieving 'parity of esteem' on different levels and types of

education within the system. Thus, I argue that an inclusive mode of address used in this policy can be considered as a form of “managerialization” (Mulderigg, 2011, p.570), used by policy makers to bring a sense of collaboration amongst stakeholders and to introduce a wider-range of actors to participate in this reform, notwithstanding the past, historic and ideological clashes between types of education in Malta.

The Ministry’s plan is to achieve ‘parity’ within the Maltese education system by providing students at secondary schools with an education that is comparable and competitive between different vocational, academic and applied education, bringing them in-line with other international standards and improve rates of student retention. However, through this policy the Ministry seems to want different things categorised under one issue, that of achieving parity of esteem. The objectives of achieving National inclusivity, international competitiveness and students’ results and retention are not the same thing and cannot be put under one umbrella as the policy suggests. One can argue that these objectives are different in nature and can be hard and possibly contradictory in certain cases when one tries to implement educational structures to achieve these objectives.

It is evident how the Ministry also connects ‘parity of esteem’ with the final terminal examination system in which policy makers particularly refer to what the Ministry considers as ‘failings’ by the past and current Maltese education system. However, in the later stages of this study the notion of ‘failings’ will be examined further – particularly in relation to students’ preparation for the SEC examinations. The Ministry’s motivation to reform Malta’s mainstream education system is also driven by political objectives (mainly statistical) that address gaps in the Maltese education system outlined in international reports such as the PISA (2018) report. Moreover, this analysis also shows how policy makers carefully address issues of ‘parity of esteem’ of education in Malta by using specific discourse formulations such as holistic and collaborative types of language to address wide audiences to come together for a cultural reform in education.

In this policy, the Ministry claims that issues relating to ‘parity of esteem’ lie at the core of current problems in Maltese education system. One of the underlying concerns given by policy makers is Malta’s connection to past education systems set by colonial practices which are unfit for today’s education in Malta. But it is evident that these still have a significant presence on current education policymaking as policy makers make no distinction in this document between the past and the present education systems, and this signifies the Ministry’s views on how Malta currently operates an out-dated system that is incompatible with today’s educational needs. Furthermore, the policy makers make it evident that Maltese education needs a hard-divorce from its past in order for it to progress towards the future.

However, this document also shows how the Ministry’s motivations to improve the Maltese education system are particularly ‘personalised’. Focusing on the improvement of students’ performances in SEC examinations. In this document, policy makers articulate the Ministry’s views on what has and currently is ‘failing’

students in the Maltese education system. Local and international statistics are often used as reference points to legitimize proposed reform, however policy makers use widely acknowledged terms, such as 'inclusion' and 'equity' in education as solutions to mitigate 'failures' within the system. This policy embodies the word 'My' in 'My Journey' and is used as a gesture to show how this policy also 'speaks' from the students' position in the road towards 'ameliorating' their educational experiences. In *My Journey* (MEDE, 2016) policy makers show the Ministry's mission for Maltese education to welcome and see the progression of a wide spectrum of students from compulsory education to post-secondary education. However, I argue that it fails to define how the policy objectives could be translated into practice, and this runs the risk of increasing gaps between policy rhetoric and education realities in Malta.

Tee (2008) argues that 'rhetoric-reality gaps' (2008; p.598) in education are related to the particular type of view policy makers choose in order to describe particular 'realities' within an educational context. In the case of this document, policy makers depict 'real' situations in Maltese education from a 'personalised' view based upon quantitative reports, statistics, comparisons with international education structures, past/present 'failures', industry requirements and people's culture. However, the 'reality' depicted by policy makers to describe problems and challenges that underpin this policy do not include any personal views from education stakeholders or experiences of current situations in Maltese education system. I argue that policy makers' depictions of particular 'realities' in current Maltese education are detached from day-to-day experiences lived in such situations by various education stakeholders. Yet an understanding of such is fundamental towards the understanding of current education structures and the future development of Maltese education.

In the next section, language formulations used in *A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools* (MEDE, 2019) shall be analysed. This is the latest policy published by the Ministry of education and it is published mid-way into its ten-year strategy to reform Malta's educational system.

4.5 Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools – Route to Quality Inclusion (MEDE, 2019)

4.5.1 Background

Since 2014, the Ministry of Education has been voicing clear messages regarding inclusive education approaches that should be adopted in schools. This is outlined in publications, education policy documents and other initiatives published by the Ministry of Education such as the *Special Needs and Inclusive Education in Malta* (MEDE, 2015) .

In 2015, the Ministry of Education launched this external audit report on measures and adoption of inclusive education approaches in Maltese mainstream education. This report highlights the educational challenges due to social shifts in Malta because of its fast economic growth, (NSO, 2018) particularly in catering for the integration of the increasing numbers of migrant children in schools. It outlines the core of these challenges which lie in issues of misconception regarding the concept and function of inclusive education approaches in schools. This report calls for the need to;

“Develop conceptual clarity to ensure that all stakeholders understand inclusive education as an approach for all learners” (2015; p.94).

Since this report, the principles of inclusive education have become more prominent in the Ministry’s proposals to modernise the Maltese education system. Figure 4-10 presents the increasing number of terms related to inclusive education, i.e. inclusive, inclusivity, inclusion and inclusiveness, in strategic policy documents published by the Ministry since 2014. Objectives set by the Ministry translate into pluralist learning concepts about the importance of personalized education practices to reform Malta’s National terminal examination system (SEC).

2014	2017	2019
Framework Strategy 2014-2024	My Journey Reform	A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools
8 pages	11 pages	24 pages
3 matches	37 matches	140 matches

Figure 4-10 Frequency of terms related to Inclusivity in the three policy documents

The concerns implied in this document echo the Ministry's preoccupations that feature in the other two policies examined in sections 4.3 and 4.4. These preoccupations relate to how the Ministry is concerned regarding current education practices and culture in Malta which are fully focused on preparing students for the SEC terminal examinations. In 2019, the Ministry of Education published '*A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools – Route to Quality Inclusion*' (MEDE, 2019). This policy is another responsive action by the Ministry to mitigate its concerns, where it proposes to introduce an inclusive education (IE) system "where everyone is valued, accepted and encouraged to thrive" (2018; p.4).

Whilst this document shares similar IE principles to other international education structures (UNESCO, 2001), the Ministry's objectives in the IE policy also link to the objectives set in its ten-year strategy:

"... is committed in consolidating the four broad goals established in the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2014... These policy documents compliment the new secondary education reform My Journey: Achieving through different paths" (2019; p. 5).

This policy demonstrates how the Ministry of Education attempts to widen the concept of IE in schools as a pluralistic vision that offers educational access for 'all possible forms' of diversity. The Ministry's approach of introducing IE in schools can also be linked to other International IE approaches. Ainscow (2005) explains that whilst in some countries IE is seen as an education approach to cater for students with physical and mental disabilities, Internationally, IE is increasingly being seen as a wider reform in education and introduced by policy makers to encourage education systems to "*...welcome diversity in all its forms amongst all learners*" (2005; p.109). Ainscow (2005) also outlines that widening the concept of IE in an education system can present issues of clarity in the definitions of IE amongst education stakeholders. As previously explained in this section, in Malta issues of clarity in the definitions about IE amongst education stakeholders has also been outlined in the 2015 special needs and inclusive education in Malta report. Paradoxically, in the 2019 IE policy it is stated that the Ministry's aim is to:

"...create clarity around the concept of inclusion by widening the spectrum of concerns and discourses to all possible forms of diversity" (2019; p. 13).

This shows how despite that 4 years earlier the need was raised to clarify the terms that embody inclusive education in Malta, clarity was still not achieved. Therefore, reasserting a wish to achieve clarity of the concept of inclusion through a formal policy. This shall be the point of entry of the following analysis. Discourse formulations used in the IE 2019 policy shall be subject for enquiry to establish 'levers of change' (Ainscow, 2015) set by policy makers in Maltese education. Particularly how policy makers use principles of IE as a contemporary form of language associated with progress, how these principles are at the core of this key policy and how the

Ministry sees these principles as a way forward towards the future of Maltese education.

4.5.2 Key Themes

This policy is a twenty-nine-page document launched by the Ministry of Education specifically addresses teachers and heads of schools to introduce the necessary IE structures to ‘cater’ for a wide diversity of student population. As indicated previously, this stage adopts Fairclough’s (2010) inductive analysis of the policy documents. This stage helped me develop initial analytic descriptions of key areas promoted in the policy. Following this was an interpretation of these areas into two overarching textual themes. From the initial analysis, it clearly emerged how policy makers attempt to address key learning deficits in this policy by addressing issues relating to ‘valuable inclusivity’, ‘progress’ and the interpretations around these two desired objectives.

This section shall analyse the following themes to understand further the Ministry’s pluralistic vision that is proposed in this document and its role in the Ministry’s ten-year strategy:

1. Conceiving ‘valuable inclusivity’ in Maltese Education;
2. Making way for progress.

4.5.3 Analysis of each theme

4.5.3.1 Conceiving valuable inclusivity in Maltese education

Connections between local and international education structures feature historically in policy documents published by the Ministry and this policy is no different. Background/context section of this policy refers to a report published from the Council of the European Union (EU, 2017) defining the underlying philosophy driving the introduction of ‘valuable’ IE strategies in Maltese education. Moreover, the EU philosophy on IE is to be adopted by school teachers and school administrators in Malta:

“Inclusive Education is, therefore, defined in accordance to the conclusion of the Council of the European Union (2017, p3) as a philosophy, process and implementation that should cover all aspects of education” (2019; p.11).

The report from the EU Council (2017) focuses particularly on the EU targets of limiting numbers of early student dropouts “... *to achieve the Europe 2020 headline*

target of reducing the rate of early school leaving” (2017; p.2). As analysed in previous policy documents, policy makers consider EU targets as critical drivers in the development of Maltese educational reform and this policy is no different with regards to IE in Maltese education. However, the Ministry’s objectives to reach EU targets are contrasted by the challenges faced by teachers and school administrators in Malta who are experiencing a growth in more diverse class populations. Figure 4-11 outlines the areas that the Ministry of Education intends to extend regarding inclusivity in schools. Figure 4-11 also shows how the Ministry attempts to reduce the complexity of each broad social area through the use of a colour wheel in different colour segments. This can also be associated with a form of ‘cataloguing’ or the ‘selling’ of the idea of achieving ‘valuable inclusivity’ in the Maltese education system.



Figure 4-11 ‘A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools – Route to Quality Inclusion’ (MEDE, 2019)

Policy makers also include in the IE policy a short profile of every area that features in the diversity wheel, describing the type of students who ‘should fall’ under every area. This shows consciousness that the policy makers are aware of the anxieties that teachers experience in order to make clear what is included in IE, as this has previously not worked before, to achieve a reasonable balance in class consisting of diverse teaching scenarios. Barbara (1999) explains that the ‘fear’ (1999, p.134) experienced by teachers initially comes from the contentious meaning and definitions that underpin various forms of diversity. Such definitions are also commonly used in this IE policy 10 years after:

“... intellectual disability... multiple learning abilities... ethnic minorities... asylum seekers... various religious beliefs... risk of disaffection... risk of poverty and different sexual orientations...”
(2019; p.26)

In this IE policy, policy makers use these definitions specifically to exemplify the wide range of diverse students that the Ministry wants to address when introducing IE in schools. Policy makers also show how the Ministry is committed to ‘widen the spectrum of diversity’ by ensuring every student an equal right to education. Policy makers use a bold form of language to legitimize the need of introducing effective IE systems in Maltese education. Also making reference to internationally agreed frameworks of IE such as the ‘universal learning framework’ as agreed by most Nations in *“The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action”* (1994). This leads the reader to understand that current education structures in Malta are not equipped to cater for today’s learning need in Malta and ‘failing’ to provide students with an ‘effective’ education for all. The following excerpt outlines the underlying philosophy driving this policy based on EU principles. Moreover, it is also important to note how policy makers outline this philosophy by using bold type, highlighted in light blue colour and in quotation marks.

“Available and accessible to all learners of all ages, including those facing challenges, such as those with special needs or who have a disability, those originating from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, migrant backgrounds or geographically depressed areas or war-torn zones, regardless of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion of belief, disability, age or sexual orientation.”

(2019; p11)

As previously noted, this policy is aimed at education front-liners such as school teachers, parents and administrators as they have the forefront role of implementing IE in schools. The use of quotation marks suggest that this philosophy is directly and personally addressed to the teacher and school administrator. In this policy the roles of school administrators and teachers to introduce IE systems in schools are stated, but policy makers distance themselves when outlining the steps required to provide education within the policy’s objectives.

“The policy adopts a whole school approach philosophy to provide a planned and systematic way of how schools are to develop conducive learning environments for all learners” (2019; p.11).

Policy makers refer to ‘the policy’ as having an active role in adopting IE structures in schools and this denotes how the responsibility falls on schools to implement new IE structures effectively. This outlines the policy makers’ awareness of challenges and sense of liability that school teachers and administrators experience when the objectives of this policy will be introduced. To counterbalance the sense of liability by teachers and administrators, policy makers call out for a collective action so other education stakeholders can share the weight of responsibilities.

“This will bring together all educators and practitioners, learners, families and community members who create colleges and schools that are conducive to learning, thereby giving all learners the education, they need” (2019; p.11).

It is evident that the Ministry of Education and policy makers in Malta are cautious about the underlying challenges to introduce new IE measures in Maltese schools. In this policy, the Ministry of Education hails the need to introduce new IE measures in Maltese schools by calling for everyone’s support and to join in a ‘process of change’ to implement the policy objectives. In the policy foreword by the Minister of Education, Bartolo sends an open invitation to all education stakeholders and to join in an “aspiring venture” (2019; p.4) to introduce IE measures in mainstream education settings.

‘Aspiring venture’ is a call for action, also commonly used in commercial endeavors when new initiatives are to be launched for new business proposals. However, as stated in the previous analysis of *‘My Journey policy’* (2016), such terms also are commonly found in education policies previously published by the Maltese Ministry. This shows how much the Ministry of Education links the idea of ‘valuable inclusivity’ in Maltese education to industry and employment sectors.

“We encourage you to join us in this aspiring venture as we seek a more inclusive education system where everyone is valued, accepted and encouraged to thrive” (2019; p.4).

The Ministry promises ‘valuable inclusivity’ in its opening message of this policy. To sustain this promise, the Ministry invites ‘the reader’ to join in a ‘process of change’ to make Maltese education more ‘valuable’ for all students. The policy maker makes use of words such as ‘thrive’, which suggests that this promise requires a period of time and the collaboration of all stakeholders is necessary to achieve to widen the spectrum of diversity in Maltese education. The ministry’s approach to achieve ‘valuable inclusivity’ in Maltese schools links to one of Ainsclow’s (2005) definitions of achieving ‘valuable inclusivity’ in education. Ainsclow states that achieving ‘valuable inclusivity’ in education is about developing on-going processes in education settings to explore and find ways of facilitating access to education for all students. The Minister’s foreword shows a similar approach, in which the title of this policy, *“Route to Quality Inclusion”* (MEDE, 2019), implies the start of an on-going process in Maltese education to widen its spectrum of diversity and achieve ‘valuable inclusivity’ in schools. However, the reader is uncertain whether the Ministry will be leading this initiative as started in previous policies.

Ainsclow (2005) also states that the idea of achieving ‘valuable inclusivity’ in an educational system is also dependent on ways of “identification and removal of barriers” (2005; p.118) in educational settings. The policy maker in this policy presents the idea of ‘removing barriers’ in the Maltese education system using a ‘deficit’ discourse. Particularly by pointing at how the current education system does

not seem to provide adequate structures to cater for a wide spectrum of diverse students. Policy makers suggest introducing:

“...alternative educational routes to eliminate barriers within learning environments” (2019; p.14).

Similar to other policies published by the Ministry, policy makers use ‘failings’ in this policy to legitimize the need of change by introducing new initiatives in Maltese education. This language approach is also commonly used in education policies such as in ‘*My Journey policy*’ (2016). In a section of this policy entitled ‘Principles’, policy makers outline what are widely considered by education stakeholders as barriers within the Maltese education system. The use of words such as:

“eradicate discrimination”, “exclusionary practices”, “right”, “excluded”, “recognised”, “conducive learning environment”, “ability-labelling”, “learner centred approach”, “means of engagement”, “differentiated curriculum”, “flexible curriculum”, “inclusive learning-friendly environment” (2019; p15)

suggest how specific areas of concern in Maltese education keep re-emerging in policies published by the Ministry of Education. In this policy, it is evident how policy makers’ idea of ‘removing barriers’ is linked to ‘valuable inclusivity’ in the Maltese education system and goes beyond helping students with particular physical or learning disabilities to integrate equally with other students in Maltese schools. The idea of achieving ‘valuable inclusivity’ in Maltese education addresses areas of concern that relate to students’ disengagement with current mainstream education practices. Previously, in the analysis of ‘*My Journey Policy*’ (2016), similar areas of concern have also emerged, particularly in the students’ journey towards their SEC examinations. Policy makers in this policy also consider this stage as a critical learning stage towards providing all students with a ‘valuable inclusive’ education.

4.5.3.2 Making way for progress

As identified in the context and literature review chapter (chapter 2), policy makers have characteristically branded past and current Maltese education as a segregated system. A system that embodies a ‘one-size fits all’ approach for all students alike. Furthermore, there have been several attempts by the Ministry in the past to diminish segregation in schools through initiatives that conform to the principles of IE. However, clearly there are tensions between the notion of parity (a ‘unified’ system), and the apparent similarity of a ‘one size’ system. In this policy, IE principles and objectives are formalised, and policy makers present the idea of inclusivity in schools as a ‘vision of progress’ that require a drastic reform in current physical structures and culture in Maltese education.

“To achieve this vision, it is necessary to clearly define and reshape all educational services to respond to the diversity of needs of all learners in our school community” (2009; p.13).

In the previous section entitled 'Conceiving valuable inclusivity in Maltese education' it emerged clearly how Malta's Ministry of Education is inviting all stakeholders to contribute towards changing the current Maltese education system. Furthermore, policy makers symbolically mark the beginning of 'making progress' in Maltese education using emancipation as a form of language to encourage collaboration amongst schools, teachers and administrators to achieve the objectives of valuable inclusivity. Dunne (2009), argues that policy makers use emancipation in language as a 'neo-liberal' type of discourse to introduce new ideas in traditional educational settings. In this policy, policy makers promote an idea of 'progress' in education policy by introducing IE structures in mainstream education by giving more power to the schools. The main attraction of this policy is the Ministry's desire to change Malta's education system in order to be responsive to the 'needs of all learners' (2019; p.13). My aim is to unpack assumptions that embody this desire, particularly on how inclusion in this policy is used as a form of neo-liberal language that represents the road towards 'progress' in Maltese education. Here, I shall focus on a particular section of the IE policy entitled "Policy Aims and Goals". In this section, policy makers propose that the Maltese education community should:

"... nurture a collaborative culture among all educators, practitioners, learners, parents and members of the community to increase the 'sense of belonging' in all colleges and schools..." (2009; p.13)

Words such as *'nurture, foster, ensure, promote, create, focus, co-construct, discover and assume'* show how policy makers use emancipation as a form of language to empower education professionals with an active role in implementing the policy. In this policy, education professionals are asked to be direct contributors to 'change' Maltese education characterised by traditional education practices into more 'collaborative' learning environments. Furthermore, policy makers show how this policy also connects to the ten-year strategy by claiming the need of alternative learning structures in schools, proposed as a key objective in 'My Journey Policy' (2016).

"To consider alternative educational routes to eliminate barriers within learning environments" (2019; p.14).

Conversely, the policy makers' use of the word 'consider', suggests how emancipation of power in schools is also conditional on forms of accountability that before this policy might not have been formally addressed. Thus, neoliberalism also places a form of 'burden' on individual stakeholders in a context of performance, measures and surveillance. A change in mode of address is also evident here, and unlike in the other policies previously analysed in this study, policy makers do not make use of words such as 'us' 'we' and 'you'. This change in mode of address is also indicative that policy makers are aware of barriers between the system (in this case the schools, teachers and administrators) and Malta's education authorities. Although this change in mode of address reflects this awareness, policy makers also

disclaim accountability of such empowerment. Instead, it is made clear to the reader about the responsibilities that schools need to carry with such a shift in culture.

“Fulfill the responsibility that college/school resources have to be utilised exhaustively to support learners...” (2019; p.15).

Furthermore, policy makers establish benchmarks to achieve the Ministry’s ‘vision’. Figure 4-12 consists of an illustrated symbolic diagram that shows four elements (people) representing a collaborative working environment in Maltese education.

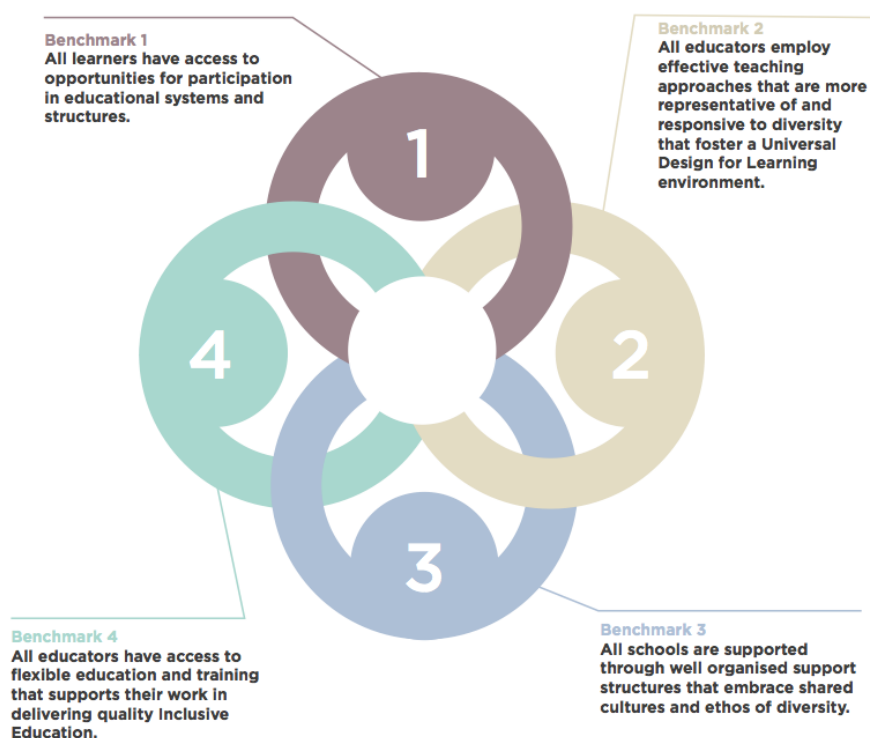


Figure 4-12 ‘A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools – Route to Quality Inclusion’ (MEDE, 2019)

This diagram consists of a ‘bird’s eye view’ illustration of four different elements representing key actors that are at the centre of the policy’s vision of change. Moreover, every element is connected symbolically and the illustration shows how collaboration is central to the future of Maltese education. Conversely, the use of the term ‘benchmarks’ implies comparison with the intent to improve or ameliorate particular situation mainly improvement of performances and/or processes between actors and/or systems. But in this case, policy makers do not present any criteria or classification methods as guidelines for the stakeholders to establish what needs to change.

In the benchmarks provided (figure 4-12), policy makers make emphasis on the right of every student to have open access to education. Furthermore, policy makers also refer to ‘*education systems and structures*’ as the targeted frameworks in which benchmarks are to be established and implemented to sustain the policy objectives.

In subsequent sections each benchmark is collapsed into sub headings. These subheadings refer to education structures as collaborative workspaces, using terms such as *'school communities and specialized centres'* (2009; p.17). In each subheading policy makers give open-targeted instructions on what is required to improve Malta's school system.

“Physical infrastructure of educational institutions are modified to be fully accessible and properly equipped to enhance opportunities for all learners, but above all to be built or modified on the principles of universal design” (2019, p:17).

Once again, policy makers use aspirational language to legitimize the need of the desired objectives set by the Ministry. Policy makers also use globally accepted education frameworks, such as the *'principles of universal design'*, for schools and teachers to adopt in mainstream education. Referencing of such frameworks also show how policy makers, similar to other policies published by the Ministry, show commitment to 'internationally recognised' objectives to achieve consensus amongst stakeholder about the need of a 'better' education system.

In other benchmarks, policy makers focus on the need for professional educators to implement teaching practices to *'foster the principles of universal learning design'* (2019; p.18). In the subheadings provided, policy makers show that the term *'all educators'* refers to various stakeholders and every stakeholder should have an active and collaborative role in fostering the principles of universal learning. Other stakeholders mentioned by policy makers to sustain this benchmark include; parents, multidisciplinary professionals, heads of departments, curriculum designers, assessment boards, school psychologists and occupational therapists. This suggests that policy makers seek to encourage collaborative learning environments within the classroom space. Moreover, ensuring that all aspects of child's needs are covered including extended learning spaces such as student homes and child therapy.

Whilst contributions of various education stakeholders are given a priority, in these descriptions policy makers also use prominently the term 'ensure'. This implies again how neo-liberalism brings accountability and conforming of 'international standards and targets' in educational practices. However, policy makers do not make it clear who (teacher/ school administrator/Ministry/parent/child therapist) is accountable to ensure and sustain an education that serves 'the needs for all'.

4.5.4 Discussion

The term 'value' in this policy is once again a critical driving factor in Maltese education policy making. Policy makers use this term to legitimise the need to introduce the Ministry's objectives to bring change in Maltese schools. As previously identified (chapter two, terms such as 'quality' and 'value' have characteristically featured in past education policy documents and initiatives. These terms have historically been problematic to conceive and implement in practice and this created

tensions between education stakeholders and the authorities. In the case of this analysis it has emerged that policy makers are aware of a history of ideological clashes between education stakeholders and authorities. This is also known from reports as it resulted that underlying causes of conflicts between stakeholders and authorities can be caused by misconceptions of the concept and function of 'valuable inclusivity' in schools. As a result, this misconception might be causing hesitance amongst teaching professionals and school administrators to commit to provide 'valuable' education for all as outlined in the policy. Notwithstanding the increase of wide diverse student population experienced in the Maltese classrooms today.

It is also evident how policy makers use these terms again in a quantitative and rhetorical manner, in similar ways to other previous policies to introduce certain education initiatives. As discussed in sections 4.3 and 4.4, particularly in the section dedicated to the analysis of *'Framework for the Education Strategy in Malta'* (2014), Malta is currently undergoing a ten-year reform process and this policy also has an important role in this process bringing together the principles, context and philosophy of 'valuable inclusivity' in Maltese education. Furthermore, as we are currently two-thirds into the Ministry's ten-year strategy time frame to implement the change that the Ministry promised, it is also important to outline how this policy focuses on the terms and conditions of implementing the Ministry's objectives. This reflects how policy makers are aware of the time constraints that the Ministry imposed as there is an evident shift in the mode of address used by policy makers in Ministerial policies preceding the 2019 IE policy. In the analysis of the previous policies it has emerged how the policy makers' focus was on the Ministry's role in providing the necessary support of resources and facilities for schools to implement change. In this 2019 IE policy the focus shifts to accountability of schools to implement the Ministry's desired objectives.

Notwithstanding the policy makers' shift in mode of address, in the 2019 IE policy the use of globally agreed terms and principles such as 'universal learning framework' are still used as universal benchmarks of 'quality'. This also indicates that there are still gaps of consensus between 'vision' and 'implementation' amongst stakeholders. Much can be learnt from the education stakeholders' direct experiences to understand further how the Ministry's objectives can be interpreted in practice and implemented in real life context.

4.6 General findings from the analysis of the three policy documents

In this section I intended to depict a 'portrait of unresolvable situations' in Maltese education. These situations are taking place during a timeline when Malta's education authorities are introducing new policies and initiatives in attempt to reform the Maltese education system. From the analysis it is clear that the Ministry's idea of 'modernising' in Maltese education focuses on widening the concept of education amongst stakeholders.

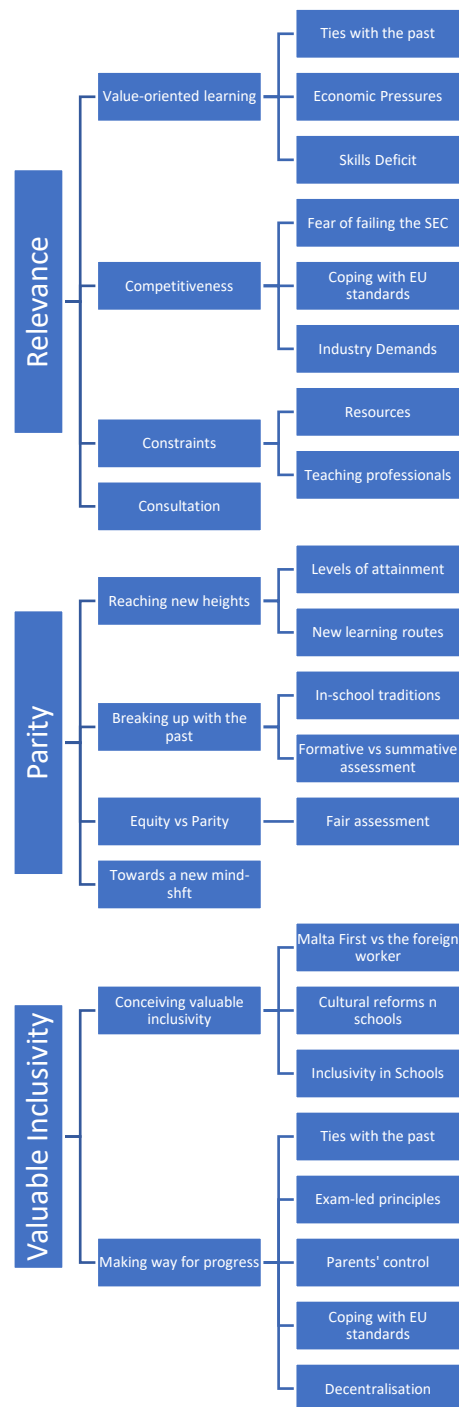


Figure 4-13 Codes generated from Policy Analysis

Figure 4-13 shows a diagram of themes and codes that were worked out from the policy analysis of three policies published by the Ministry of Education. There are three main themes that capture critical factors that can drive ideological tensions amongst stakeholders when attempts of change are being introduced by the Ministry. **Valuable Inclusivity, Parity and Relevance.**

Although the policies analysed in this chapter form part the Ministry's strategy to reform the Maltese education system, this analysis shows how the three policies embody different rhetorical features for various political and ideological ends. From the analysis of the ten-year education strategy document, it has emerged how the Ministry of Education employs a rhetoric of conflict to highlight the Ministry's objective to take action, by addressing failings within the Maltese education system. In the case of *My Journey: Achieving through different paths* (2016), policy makers embody a commercial tone in the policy employing a rhetoric of 'persuasiveness' (Mulderrig, 2011) to encourage stakeholders to agree with the implementation strategy and measures that the Ministry proposes to introduce. Policy makers make it clear how contribution from all stakeholders is required, working together in order to move on from the past and blurring borders between types of educational provision. Conversely, the *Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools – Route to Quality Inclusion* (2019) embodies a 'neo-liberalist' mode of address, showing how the Ministry of Education is ready to give frontline staff more freedom, to be autonomous whilst being accountable in the day-to-day running of schools.

This chapter has revealed how policy makers have mobilised issues of policy and practice in several ways in attempt to widen the concept of education amongst education stakeholders. However, two-thirds through the ten-year strategy, this analysis also outlines how modes of address in these three policies shift from conservative to a more progressive rhetoric. This was identified clearly from the different analysis of each policy, particularly the different ways in which policy makers frame factors that drive 'failings' within the current Maltese education system. White and Lowenthal (2009), argue that policy making in education tends to use progressive modes of address to 'glorify' the idea of change. On the other hand, they argue that concepts such as 'accountability', 'school choice', 'standards' and 'measure' are concepts that are mostly 'borrowed' from past times. This analysis has outlined how similar concepts (shown in figure 5-13) were targeted in the Ministry's policies to legitimise the need to 'modernize' the Maltese education system using both conservative and progressive modes of address at the same time. Thus, showing how policy makers systematically employ progressive modes of address to tackle conservative operational and ideological issues within the Maltese education system. I argue that this particular rhetoric of reform used by policy makers creates a paradox of identity in the language used in Maltese education policy, thus, making it hard for education stakeholders to identify with the Ministry's movement, objectives and ideology in bringing change within the Maltese education system.

To get a broader understanding of the complexities between issues of policy and practice in the Maltese education system, the following chapter shall explore various perspectives derived from face-to-face interviews. These shall explore different views of what constitutes the idea of 'modernizing' the Maltese education system and the implications of it from various personal perspectives.

Chapter 5 Interviews

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores experiences of living with the SEC from points of view of several stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, a headteacher, a policymaker, and SEC administrator), during the period in which students are preparing for the SEC examinations. As presented in chapter three, this preparation stage occurs at the secondary school level, between years nine and eleven of the Maltese education system. During these three years, curricular priorities focus on preparing students for the SEC examinations.

Chapter 5 discussed the Ministry of Education's recent attempts to reform the Maltese education system by introducing measures focused on SEC National examination system. This chapter focuses on two points in time in Maltese education: **the current period**, characterized by the current SEC examination system; and **the future of Maltese education**, characterised by the new reforms which have been delayed by two years, at the time of writing.

This chapter sets out the range of education stakeholders experiences during the preparation phases of the current SEC, and their views about the proposed SEC reforms. This enables a deeper understanding of the critical factors that affect students' participation and performance in the SEC examinations. The rationale for selection of interview participants can be found in section 4.5.4.2 of this thesis entitled Recruiting Participants.

The participants involved in the interviews included:

- A policymaker whose role is to oversee the operations and education policy of Malta's education system;
- A SEC administrator responsible for SEC curricula and assessment within the SEC system;
- A headteacher of a state secondary school in Malta who intends to implement the SEC reforms in the coming 2020 scholastic year;
- A mother (parent 1) of two children, both at the same state secondary school but at different levels. Her older child is about to undertake the SEC examinations (current system) and another child who will start the SEC preparation phase in the new system proposed in the reform;
- A father (parent 2) of two children who attend a private secondary school. Their elder child has just completed her SEC examinations last scholastic year and qualified for a vocational post-secondary institution. The parents are currently preparing their younger child who will also be sitting for his SEC examinations in the coming scholastic year (under the current system);
- An English language teacher (teacher 1) from a state secondary school who has many years of experience teaching English language in various schools

and at various levels. She has experienced several reforms during her teaching career;

- A Mathematics teacher (teacher 2) in a private secondary school. He teaches students who are preparing for the SEC Maths exam at years ten and eleven.
- A student (student 1) who is currently attending a state secondary school at year ten and achieves high grades;
- Another student (student 2) who is currently attending a state secondary school at year ten and achieves low grades;
- A student (student 3) who attends a private secondary school in year ten and achieves high grades.

5.1.1 Interview questions

In the previous policy documental analysis (chapter 5), key policies published by the Ministry of Education were analysed, identifying themes which noted conflicts and unresolved issues relating to the reform of the Maltese education system. However, the policy review does not include the experiences of those living with the SEC examinations and its preparation. Whilst these policies clearly identify the Ministry's vision to reform the Maltese education system and what is expected from schools and stakeholders in order to achieve such a vision, we still do not know how the Ministry's reform might impact schools and teaching practice. Thus, a number of interview questions were drawn up to understand further the effects of this examination system in schools from personal accounts.

My aim is to learn from personal accounts about the challenges of Maltese education today and/or establish which notions require further study. The questions focused on the final preparatory stages for the SEC examinations. As reviewed in chapter 4, this stage in the Maltese education is considered as a very critical stage for all education stakeholders but for different reasons. Therefore, this stage in Maltese education embodies a pressure point for the whole system characterised by different priorities on how education should be delivered, practiced, taught and assessed. I wanted to learn from first-hand experiences why this stage is so important and what are the key challenges. I also wanted to learn from who experiences education day by day about what should change in the current system. The questions I posed during the interviews are listed below:

Pupils' questions

- a. Tell us about when you start preparing for the SEC exam at school and what happens during this time.
- b. Tell us about what you think the good things and the bad things are during preparation for the SEC examinations.
- c. Tell us about the best experiences you ever had when learning this subject at school and why.
- d. If you had the power to change things in the SEC examinations, tell us what would you change in the SEC examinations and how would you do it?

- e. Tell us why you think that achieving a pass in the SEC examinations is important for you, for the people who are important to you, for your future and for the country that you live in.

Adult Learning Stakeholders' questions (parent, teacher, school administrator, SEC examination official, education policymaker):

- a. Tell us what you think about the current SEC examinations and whether it adequately addresses the pupils' needs of today.
- b. How well prepared do you think pupils are to complete these examinations; what are the good things and what can/should be improved?
- c. What do you think should change in the SEC examinations and how would you do it?
- d. Do you think that achieving a pass in the SEC examinations is important? Why?
- e. Do you agree that this examination gives a fair opportunity for pupils to show what they have learnt? Can you propose anything different?
- f. Tell us how you feel about the future changes that are proposed to happen in the SEC examinations and how you think it will affect the pupils, the teaching, the schools, and the country.

All interview participants gave their contributions voluntarily, every participant was provided with a participant information sheet, a consent form to participate and students were given an assent form to complete (Chapter 4). Students', parents', headteacher and teachers' interviews took place in schools whilst interviews with the SEC administrator and the education policymaker interviews took place at their work offices.

5.1.2 Interview analysis process

The interview analysis involved two cycles (Saldaña, 2009). Figure 6-1 shows a systematic workflow of the two cycles and a sample of descriptive codes generated from the interviews. In the first cycle, a total of ten interviews were examined. The first cycle involved reading all transcripts that were generated from interviews to get an overview of responses. This was followed by a breaking down of the data into descriptive codes, in which codes were extracted as verbatim from interview responses. The second cycle consisted of a pattern coding (Saldaña, 2009 p.152) exercise in which codes generated in the first cycle were categorized and developed into analytic themes (meta-codes) and finally as major themes. This cycle focused on the identification of abstract ideas (relevance, purpose, problem-solving, etc...) that characterize in categories the experiences from the participants of the current SEC examination system and core underpinning issues that could be holding back the implementation of the SEC reform.

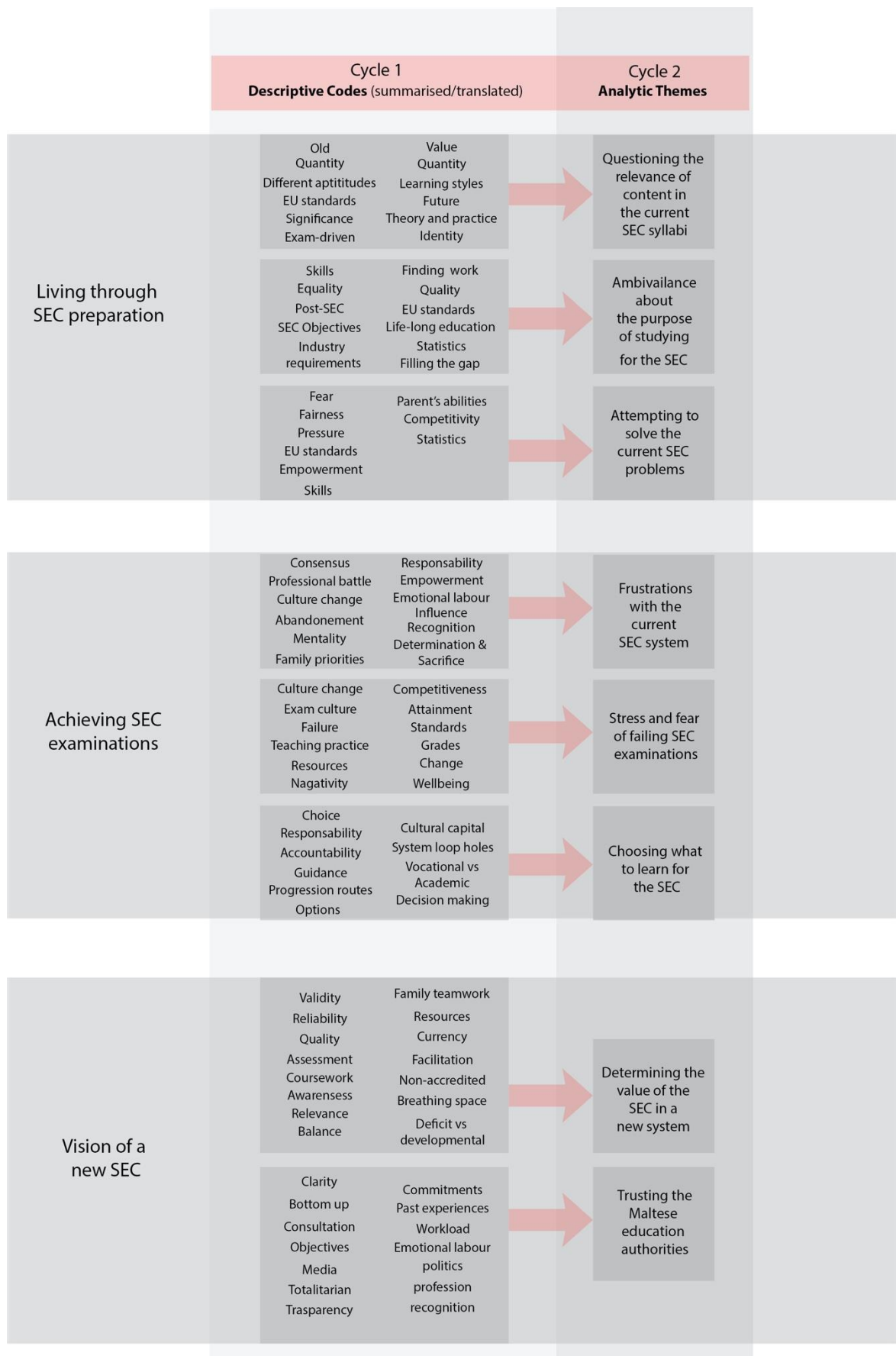


Figure 5-1

Diagram of descriptive codes and analytic themes

Thus, as shown in figure 6-1, major themes and sub-themes were identified through a 2-cycle process of analysis from the participants' interviews. These are:

Living through SEC preparation

- Questioning the relevance of content in the current SEC syllabi
- The purpose of studying for the SEC
- Solving the current SEC problems

Achieving SEC examinations

- Frustrations with the current SEC system
- Stress and fear of failing SEC examinations
- Choosing what to learn for the SEC

The vision of a new SEC

- Value of the SEC and the new system
- Trust in the Maltese education authorities

Finally, my aim is to depict an analytical overview of perceptions, anxieties, mentalities, feelings, professional and personal challenges, pressures, influences, and recommendations to conceptualise what may or may not address these problems in the future.

5.2 Living through SEC preparation

During the interviews, participants particularly students, teachers, and parents clearly showed how the challenges to provide valuable education for all students are still present today in schools when they were asked to give their feedback about their experiences whilst living through the SEC preparatory phase. I extracted one key quote from the participants' interviews when asked about their experience during the SEC preparation phases. Here I will show the connection between the participants' responses and the subthemes shown in figure 6.1.

"The syllabus features much more content than we can handle. The syllabus is vast, you cannot expect that the work of two years will be done in one year. You can only handle things up to a certain point in one year. So, you cannot expect to fit in all the content of a two-year syllabus in one year and expect me to learn it" (Student 1)

"When preparing for the SEC they [the teachers] specifically tell you to study certain things because they will feature in the exam but nothing else. But they will not focus on the fact that certain students are not understanding what is being covered" (Student 2)

These responses from two participants show how relevance of content and the purpose of what students need to study for the SEC are an issue. The need for more relevance of study content is quite a concern, not only from the students' point of view but also from other participants. This issue will be discussed in a dedicated section 6.2.1 to shed light on aspects of the current SEC that participants felt as non-relevant.

"The syllabus needs to target more the every-day life [of the student] and certain details should be removed or else include them on a just-to-know basis. Not everything in the curriculum should be learnt by heart. The curriculum is too vast" (Parent 1)

"It is not easy for him [the child] and us [the parents] because there is too much content. We just finished the mid-yearly school examinations and we're already working towards the final-year examinations. Certain subjects like physics and Maths have a vast syllabus and you need to cover many topics" (Parent2)

When parents were asked about their experiences whilst helping their children to prepare for the SEC, two critical factors emerged; relevance of content and the amount of content that students need to study. Parents questioned about the purpose why students need to learn such a vast syllabus when most probably it won't be used in life except for during examinations. This is also considered in this study as a critical factor that seems to create controversy amongst stakeholders about the purposes of the SEC exams. Whether in fact they are intended to help students to learn or for other purposes. This controversy will be central to the analysis in section 6.2.2.

"You know when there are exams there is always the backwash effect so obviously teachers in Form 5 are a bit like coaching, it is not just learning and teaching, so most of the learning and teaching we will presume has been taken place in the previous years" (Teacher 1)

"When students prepare for the SEC exams, they ask me: 'oh, why didn't we cover this? Will we be covering it later?' Perhaps I wanted to teach you something else that you will be experiencing later on in life. So, you have to cope with the SEC syllabus and certain things you end up avoiding to teach them because you can cover up to a certain point if you are following the syllabus. So that for me it is a problem" (Teacher 2)

From the teachers' responses here above, it is shown how difficult it is in their view to explain/persuade students to learn things during the SEC preparation phases that are not necessarily related to the SEC syllabus. It is clear that there is a sense of utility that unless a teacher is strictly covering SEC related material, particularly the material that will most likely feature in SEC exams, then there is no need to learn it. It is also clear how this situation impacts

teachers from a pedagogical stand-point, particularly in providing students what they believe is the right curricular diet for their students' future. This issue will be central to the analysis of the participants' responses in section 6.2.3.

"The SEC looks only at knowledge, so we do not look at skills and students in Malta suffer from skills. The teacher is geared to teach knowledge and there is cramming of knowledge to cover what is expected in the syllabus and teachers need to be fast to complete the content required in the syllabus" (Headteacher)

"Surely the current system is not allowing us to look at all the skills that we [society] expect our students to have. That is a deficiency in the system, but on the other hand, the current system is reliable, in the sense that everyone is preparing for the same exams, so therefore there is less subjectivity. You win some and you lose some" (SEC Administrator)

From the above responses, students and parents show that the current system has its drawbacks, particularly because they feel that; **there is too much content to be covered; limitations of teaching specifically for the exam; relevance of syllabus to the students' everyday life**. The teachers and headteacher are preoccupied with the **relevance** of content in the SEC, however, they also question the SEC, the **purpose** of teaching students all the content that features in the SEC syllabus, and their role in it as professional teachers. Mainly whether preparing students for the SEC is more about expedience rather than it is about pedagogy. On the other hand, the SEC administrator admits that although content-wise the SEC has its problems, for him there are no alternatives to the traditional structures that characterize the examination system because the current structure reassures people about the validity of what they are learning.

This reveals tensions between students, parents, and teachers' desires to explore and learn/teach new things which are not merely prescribed by the limits of the SEC examinations. This crystallizes a fundamental tension regarding the very nature of education and the challenges to provide valuable education for all students. Thus, factors and views that emerged from the interviews relating to the current SEC content warrant the following analysis to understand underlying factors that drive the ideals and preoccupations about: relevance in the SEC, particularly how students engage and identify with content that is expected to be covered during the SEC preparation; the purpose of learning it and what is being done to improve this educational experience. These three themes clearly define the participants' ideas and challenges when living through the SEC preparation phases in present-day Maltese education.

5.2.1 Questioning the relevance of content in the current SEC syllabi

Chapter 3 noted the promise to provide valuable education for all which has been an objective in Maltese education for a long period of time. This was further strengthened in 1999 when the National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) was established particularly to address the challenges of providing a curriculum that is relevant for all students in all schools in Malta.

It is pertinent to initially outline the stages that characterise the life experience of stakeholders whilst preparing for the SEC. The SEC preparatory phase takes up the three-years of secondary school education in Malta. During years of the SEC preparation (year 9 - 11), students are expected to study a total number of ten subjects in school. This includes two examinations during the scholastic year, a half-yearly examination, and an end-of-year examination for every subject. Some subjects, mainly science subjects may also have course work as part of the assessment in preparation for the SEC. In the final year of the SEC, preparation students do not have any examinations apart from the SEC terminal examinations. Thus, the relevance of content and the workload on students and schools is enormous and a major challenge. The workload also creates a conflict between priorities of quantity and quality which might be driving teachers and students to opt for rote-learning and traditional teaching methods to make sure that students cover what is required to pass SEC examinations.

Since the NMC, other initiatives also recognized the challenges in developing a curriculum intended to be relevant for all students, mainly the National Curriculum Framework (2012) which

“aims to increase flexibility and thus increase the relevance of the teaching process to meet the individual needs of learners” (2012; p.6).

However, it is clear in the interviews that although the Ministry’s objective is to provide a relevant education curriculum for all learners there are different interpretations of relevance. In the interviews, participants were asked to give feedback about their experiences when preparing for the SEC examinations. Responses from students show clearly that although various attempts, such as the National Curriculum Framework (MEDE, 2012), were made to provide relevant education for all students, in the current system this objective is still a concern.

“For example, in Maths, the teacher is aware of how vast and difficult the syllabus is, even though my class is considered the best class in our year, there are things in the syllabus that expect a certain high level, so the teacher needs to make sure in managing to keep up with the workload and at the same time to make sure that the students are understanding the content correctly” (Student 1)

“Well, while I do sort of think that, you know, that all subjects in the SEC are necessary, but for example, foreigners can come to the Maltese University and they don't need to speak Maltese so then at the same time why do we have to speak it? why do we have to have

Maltese as a compulsory qualification? but then why do we have to have English and why do we have to have Math? So, it does make sense and it is ultimately fair but it's easier to think it's not fair” (Student 2)

It is clear from students 1’s response that the problem of the SEC preparation is in the amount of content that students need to learn from the examination. This situation brings pragmatic challenges that can drive teachers to opt for tactical teaching approaches to make sure that what is required by the SEC is covered for every student. During the interviews, student participants explained how in their view the principal issue during the SEC preparation is that content can be very taxing on them with very limited opportunity to explore other things that they thought were relevant but are not prescribed in the SEC syllabus. This is, perhaps a key factor in why some students think that the course content does not deliver what they expect. Student 1 explains how teachers do their utmost to instil awareness of other topics that fall beyond the remit of the syllabus the SEC. In a separate response, he also blames the syllabus for not being “thought with us in mind”. Mainly because of time constraints which do not make it possible for teachers to distribute the syllabus requirements amongst all students. He complains that high-level work is expected, whilst at the same time he refers to the high volume of work that features in the SEC curriculum. Student 2 identifies that the current educational system is tailor-made for the SEC exam requirements. She describes her day-to-day lessons as a logical and systematic learning procedure in which lessons are directly focused on the requirements of the SEC examinations, as prescribed by the SEC syllabi. But for her, this is also discriminatory against students with different learning abilities. The student explains how her lessons during the preparatory stage are determined by time restrictions and the aim is always to complete exercises in class and at home in preparation for the SEC. This is a significant issue because studies show that a single approach of teaching for a wide range of students abilities is ineffective (Gardner, 2011), and clearly certain teaching pedagogies for the SEC are not developed to target different learning aptitudes, particularly when lessons are tailor-made to make sure that the syllabus required by the SEC is covered. Thus, a cynical meta-discourse is raised by Students 1 and 2 about how the SEC can be a discriminatory educational experience for students, where many agree that the current SEC motivates exam-specific teaching methods that are ineffective for students with a wide range of learning abilities, but clearly still teachers and students try to bend over backwards to facilitate for the system because there is no alternative. This results into a state of dissonance for students because although they might feel that strategic studying for exams is not the right way to learn, they accept the need to learn things that way to be able to progress.

Discrimination as a result of current content in the SEC was also an issue raised by Student 3. But his response had a different outcome. He felt that in general Maltese students need to make an effort to identify how the SEC-related content could be relevant for them. In his introductory feedback, he explains how he is an English native speaker and does not practise the Maltese language at home, whilst in the above quote he claims that one of the main challenges that he experiences in the SEC

preparation phase is the studying and learning of the Maltese language as a compulsory SEC subject. He explains how for him learning the Maltese language for the SEC is “hard but it’s definitely necessary” because to complete this phase and to qualify for his preferred post-secondary institution he also needs to achieve a pass in this SEC core examination. However, he also raises questions at how in several cases it can be challenging for students to make responsible judgments about what they are studying and why they are studying it. Which limits students from having any say to what they are studying. He explains that in his case his bigger challenge in the SEC experience was how he had to come to terms with why it is compulsory for all students to achieve the SEC Maltese language examination to progress to post-secondary education whilst “foreigners can come to the Maltese University and they don’t even need to speak Maltese”. This implies how students might ask whether they are being ‘unfairly’ treated when following the mainstream secondary school educational system and perhaps question why they have to study and pass from certain subjects. However, his appeal to the students is to make efforts in seeking ways how to overcome this hurdle by taking a responsible approach in their education.

“I would sort of advertise as "Ok you've done these 3 years of senior school and 11 years of that but it's like putting that altogether into one paper" it is just a combination of all the skills you've already learnt.” (Student 3)

This shows how students can also try to establish their own rationalisation of complexities that embody the current SEC curriculum. It is clear here that student 3 takes an arbitrary position between what he sees that the students complain about the current SEC and how he thinks that the current curriculum can also have its benefits.

“I would say that sometimes it just makes people more stressed rather than just to do more studying and more work for it, which I believe the goal is.” (Student 3)

In this case, student 3 puts his own priorities aside to reconcile himself to the requirements imposed on him by the current SEC curriculum, something that students 1 and 2 did not show in their responses. So the system offers limited opportunities for students to rationalize what they are learning for the SEC and why they are learning and this maintains the status quo.

5.2.2 Ambivalence about the purpose of studying for the SEC

The purpose of teaching and learning content that features in the SEC was also contested particularly by the headteacher and the parents who participated in the interviews. Whilst the headteachers’ views mainly acknowledge that there are issues in the current SEC that are pedagogic in nature, the parents’ views underlined issues and preoccupations about the value of what the students are expected to learn in the current SEC. The headteacher states:

“They do not have time to encourage students. Teachers do not have time. If I am learning Maths and I have an equation to solve, why should I not apply problem mathematical skills in a context? Why shouldn’t we approach our teaching in such a manner? Why can’t we discuss problems in class?” (Headteacher)

The headteacher is of the view that the the SEC should give opportunity to students to apply knowledge learnt in class to real-life circumstances. In his view learning for the SEC is very exam-oriented, which is not necessarily contributing to the policy objectives that students should achieve the expected life-skills (NCF, 2012) at their age. Thus, although students are getting prepared well for to study content that features in SEC examinations, students lack appreciation of the content covered by their teachers because teachers during the SEC preparations tend to push for exams without focusing on other educational priorities. This preoccupation echoes in the parents’ feedback as well, arguing that the purpose of what students need to study for the SEC is not clear enough.

“In my opinion, students are asked to study too many things for the Maltese exam, too many figures of speech, etc... Where and when will you be using all of that in your every-day life? I accept if students study all of that for a more advanced level exam because students will need to go into so much detail. You still need to know certain things such as similes etc... small things, but for me all that poetry and detail are irrelevant” (Parent 1)

“Children question many things; I mean certain things [that feature in the SEC] they understand why they are important to learn. If you learn to write an essay in Maltese and English, you will be using those skills when you write emails because even if you go to work you will need to correspond with other people, so you need to write. But there are other subjects, such as Religion, for example, I have nothing against Religion, but certain things are not relevant for students that age. And you start asking yourself if only they could learn something more practical rather than this subject” (Parent 2)

Both parents in the interviews agree that the current SEC has its limitations and argue that there are aspects of the current curriculum considered as purposeless. Parent 1 explains how in her view the problem lies in prioritising between pushing her child to learn for exams or to learn for life. This creates a binary opposition for the parent between whether learning should be for life as opposed to learning for the SEC. She explains how in her view the amount of detail expected in the SEC examinations can be irrelevant. She struggles to understand the purpose of certain syllabi particularly the Maltese Language SEC syllabus and the study of Maltese poetry.

Parent 1 also argues for a reduction in the SEC syllabus and in some cases to eliminate content that is not directly related to the students’ lives. She explicitly mentions cases

such as Maltese language poetry and how it should be eliminated from the SEC exam. She argues that in her view “all that poetry and detail is irrelevant.” This shows that idea of learning for the SEC in this particular subject has a short shelf-life for the students because for her, in the current SEC curriculum, there is not enough content which is relatable to students’ lives and this could be another factor that influences students’ low performances in the SEC exams. Although the parents’ views suggest the importance of humanist education, the idea of removing Maltese language poetry from students’ education is contradicting that objective.

Parent 1’s suggestions fit into a model of education for growth-promoting purposes (Dewey, 1997).

“Curriculum should be more about the everyday life... Less irrelevant material... Syllabus is too vast, too much detail that is irrelevant today”
(Parent 1)

But, as Aloni (1997) explains, education for growth-purposes cannot be detached from the arts because it has an integral role in “providing life-affirming pedagogical environment” (1997, p.92) for students. The parents’ suggestions reveal a significant observation about whether the SEC system allows enough opportunity for arts-based content for teachers, students and parents to acknowledge that the arts as an integral element of students’ personal growth. Parent 2 explains how his children are very inquisitive about what they learn and how important it is that content, and such an attitude can contribute positively towards understanding the things they learn in school and at home. But it can also be a negative thing because in his interview he also suggests that not all SEC syllabi allow space for criticality to take place. He claims that in certain subjects like Religion some topics are irrelevant to young students, implying that in particular subjects, students are expected to learn things by heart for no other reason than it can feature in examinations. This reveals how for parent 2 education in such instances can be less about content and more about teaching and examination styles ie. rote learning. This indicates students’ alienation from the current SEC curriculum and alienation is resulting in a lack of student engagement particularly in certain subjects, during preparation for the SEC. Such disenchantment may be the cause of high dropout rates and low success rates in the SEC.

5.2.3 Attempting to solve current SEC problems

As argued above, learning for the SEC in secondary schools brings conflicting ideas regarding the relevance and purpose of content. Particularly because exams are given a lot of importance in schools and the students’ lives and this is overshadowing other life priorities. For example, alternative hands-on, teaching, and learning practices, were suggested by the interview participants, mainly by the parents, when they were asked about what would they like to have more of in the SEC. Parents believed that other forms of teaching and learning experiences are lacking in the current SEC.

“I think, if I could introduce something in the curriculum it would be more sports. I think sports should be a priority because children need to re-charge. Sports can help you to relax so then students find more will to study because they feel physically better” (Parent 01)

“You need to teach students in ways that are more approachable for the students. Like more hands-on, as to be more flexible towards the needs of the individual student. If a student learns more by seeing or touching and experimenting, then you need to change the teaching methods in ways to be compatible with the learning style of the student. That is how we can see a difference” (Parent 02)

The above responses from the parents reveal how a binary is being created between the priorities given cerebral work of the SEC, and the vital, practical work for life wished by the parents. Parent 2 argues about the idea of how teaching for the SEC should cater to more learning abilities in schools, asking why there cannot be more hands-on pedagogies, whilst in his interview he criticises the SEC for not leaving many opportunities for non-traditional teaching practices. Parent 01 argues that sports should be given priority in the curriculum. However, the parent’s concern is not only educational as her response shows how she believes that the current SEC does not leave much space for students to indulge in recreation and this impacts negatively on the students’ performance. Mainly because sport/recreation is good in itself and sport/recreation provides necessary respite for students to improve exam performance. This shows how in the parent’s view the current SEC examination system still determines a traditional academic style of teaching and assessment, reducing opportunities for teachers to diversify content in their teaching and to introduce different pedagogies in classes for students with various learning abilities. They also argue that there is too little space for students to disengage from on-going learning routines and prepare themselves better, mentally, for their exams.

This shows that parents are against rote learning determined by the assessment, and how students are overburdened with content because of the SEC. This highlights how the method of assessment is dictating the mode of learning. Although an exam-first mentality in Malta could mean that everything relatable to the SEC is taught traditionally, some participants noted aspects of SEC preparation in which teaching involves more progressive elements:

“When you're teaching the students, teachers need to go on more function, in fact even the exam, the current SEC, when they have a literature exercise, what I do is usually I start by giving them a presentation then we discuss about the First World War. So, I see what they knew about it, we do a brainstorming activity. I show them some video clips, for example, I showed them a video clip from media about the war, that sometimes they use even during filming and there was like how it was built, then I found some footage, some raw footage from the actual war” (Teacher1)

“Ultimately SEC is the goal, at the end of the day students need to pass from it to progress, so you cannot really deviate from the syllabus”
(Teacher 2)

The English language (teacher 1) teacher admits in her interview that preparing students for the SEC examinations is a difficult stage and requires hard work and contributions from students and parents (this will be discussed further in the sections focusing on attainment) to make this preparatory stage a successful one for the students. But as she explains in the above excerpt, in her case her lessons can employ less teacher-centred approaches and more discussion-based teaching and using embedded teaching methods and encouraging interactivity and alternative tools of teaching to motivate interest in the class. This reveals how despite the ‘straitjacketing’ of rote-learning in schools determined by the SEC exams, certain teachers find ways how to teach using alternative methods. However, it is also clear that this is not the norm and not always possible during the SEC preparation as claimed by teacher 2. Therefore, these pockets of non-rote learning can be considered as the exception, despite the strictures of the SEC. Teacher 2 (Maths) explains how in his case the current SEC makes his subject pre-determined by the SEC examinations. It is important to outline how different SEC subjects can determine how much teachers can/cannot introduce alternative initiatives to address different learning preferences in their class, as some SEC subjects have more flexibility to introduce alternative teaching methods and others less. However, the headteacher argues that despite operational issues that keep schools and teachers from implementing alternatives in the standard timetable, it is possible to make provision outside the regular school day:

“The fact that I’ve timetabled Performing Arts [non recognised SEC subject] after-school hours means that this does not have a place in our school? Is it less important than other subjects? No, I am not saying that. I am saying that under the current system, the school’s timetable cannot accommodate such subjects in it. So, we created an after-school initiative to make it happen for the students”
(Headteacher)

In his interview, the headmaster explains how his school organises several yearly events for the students such as mathematics competitions, performing arts activities, amongst other events and these are very popular with the students. Furthermore, he also explains that such activities give students opportunities to learn things about themselves which daytime school education cannot really address because of the strict schedules and timelines to prepare students for the SEC examinations. However, he makes it clear that these activities take place out of school hours and such educational initiatives are not accredited and not officially recognised by the SEC examination board. The headteacher argues for the importance of such projects and how they can contribute positively towards the educational growth of the students. This shows that giving students a more individualised education experience can be possible, but that it cannot be accommodated in the formal curriculum. Thus,

although the headteacher recognizes the importance of such initiatives in his students' learning experiences, he, together with students, teachers, and parents want an education that goes beyond the requirements of the SEC. But, to do so they need to work around/against the system and outside the strictures of the SEC syllabi. This also shows how the current SEC can drive schools to introduce a subversion of the formal curriculum by fitting in alternative education initiatives that are over and above the current workload and after hours.

5.3 Achieving SEC examinations

In the Maltese education system, the idea of success in compulsory education is dependent on the students' attainment of SEC qualifications (MEDE, 2014). One of the main objectives of the Maltese education system is to improve the quality of students' achievement and widen students' participation in the SEC to reduce dropout rates and mitigate the negative social and political effects of poor academic progress (Cedefop, 2017). As identified (chapter three) the current SEC system strives to achieve the ideals of the Maltese education system set by the Education Act (1988), to provide equal opportunities for students, and maximise opportunities for all students to achieve better results. In the interviews, participants were asked to comment on whether they feel that the current SEC examination system is in-line with these objectives and ideals. Although the principle of inclusion was not controversial, participants exhibited different understandings and different emphases when articulating how this principle is implemented during the preparation stages of the SEC. These differences can mainly be identified around three areas: **issues of injustice amongst students and teachers who are experiencing the SEC on day-to-day basis; stress and fear caused to students, parents, and teachers by the system and the examinations; and the limitations for students to gain autonomy of their own education.**

5.3.1 Frustrations with the current SEC system

As identified in chapter 3, determination to improve attainment results in the SEC has characteristically unveiled issues that are critical towards the provision of inclusive education for all students set by the Education Act (1988). These issues have been identified by the policymaker, headteacher, teachers, and students who participated during the interviews when asked about what they would change from the current system if they had the power to do so. Several injustices created by the current system were discussed and issues included: **ties with traditional educational mentalities; access and provision of resources for all students in schools with different learning abilities and disabilities; and family contributions at home that can provide adequate support for students.**

The current education system in Malta has strong ties with its past (Chapter 2), with education attainment being characterised by the students' abilities to recall information in school exams (Sultana, 1999). This emerges from how previously the

students' in-school examination outcomes determined how students were streamed into different classes from as early as their primary school age. This tradition shaped the way the Maltese education system is formally structured today, perpetuating disadvantage between students who perform well in exams and those who do not. The Ministry desires to move on from this to provide a type of education that reaches students more holistically and the need for Malta's education system to break away from its past was also echoed in the policy maker's responses during the interviews.

"I think ingrained at the end of the day is our cultural baggage and this is coming from an English system that the exam is the ideal goal standard of assessment" (Policymaker)

This desired objective has brought several challenges, particularly in schools and homes when students go through the SEC preparation stage. The policymaker explains that the key to implementing inclusive principles of education in secondary schools is finding ways to convince teachers to break away from traditional views that link student attainment with exam results only. In Malta exam results are monitored and assessed by MATSEC (the examination board that administers all SEC examinations). Similar to the UK system where GCSE exams are also administered by one examining body, OFSTED. In the case of secondary state schools, this system has created selective school structures that segregate students depending upon grades attained in their previous school examinations that prepare students for the SEC examinations. This is confirmed by the policymaker; whilst he argues that such an exam-determined system is not justified enough and creates an 'elitist' type of education in which not every student can have an 'equal' opportunity to perform, he claims:

"Supposedly we have eradicated streaming in schools but de facto we created streaming again but in another way. As soon as students go into a secondary school and get into tracks it's like we are once again labelling children in which students will really find hard to change" (policy-maker)

The policymaker refers to a current system called the tracking system that echoes a past mentality which in his view clearly constitutes a form of injustice towards students. The tracking system is a student classification system that state schools adopted in recent years but the phrase "de facto" used by the policymaker suggests the Ministry's dissociation with such a system. This reveals how streaming has been discontinued as policy, but state schools have clung onto a version of 'elitist classification' as an instrument to cope with the pressures of preparing students for SEC examinations. Thus, it inevitably limits the opportunities of those who are not in the 'top-class track'. His feedback also shows how, in his view, time should have taught us how to abolish such ways by insisting how such a system did not enable a wide participation of students. The policymaker argues that the teachers' drive to improve students' success rates in the SEC examinations has re-introduced a student classification system in which the National education policy had set out to abolish. This reveals a dissonance between policy and practice which in this instance schools

are inadvertently contradicting inclusive education principles initially established by the Education Act 1988. Contrary to the principles of inclusive education, such systems establish an 'elitist' situation in which a minority of students make it to post-secondary education. This is indicative of a broader 'blame mentality' which functions to defer responsibility onto others. In the policymakers' own words, schools are once again "labelling children" which he argues makes it difficult for students to detach from their tracks. Thus, students who follow the lower tracks have their fate sealed because it is very difficult to progress to pass SEC examinations with equal opportunities than others in the higher tracks.

For the headteacher, the resistance to progress comes from the mentality of teachers which is also indicative of a broader 'blame mentality'. He argues that:

"There are teachers that need to depart from the mindset that everything should be goal-driven and summative. Teachers need to adapt to qualitative teaching processes. This mind-set has not been achieved yet and I think that the whole generation of teachers needs to address this issue. I mean that teachers are still too traditional in that sense. I mean if you ask for a change, he [or she] is still going to feel the same way" (Headteacher)

The head teacher's view outlines an ongoing conflict in Malta's current education system. In fact, fear of not reaching/improving expected student SEC results overshadows the will to introduce inclusive teaching practices in schools. It is also clear that although inclusivity in Maltese education is generally agreed in principle at a policy level, in practice education teachers are still opting for traditional frameworks, such as the establishment of an internal hierarchy (as shown in the quotes below), because for the teachers, this can be a safer and a known option. Thus, whilst school structures such as the tracking system are contradicting the objectives and principles of inclusive education that the Ministry strives for, questions remain unanswered, mainly about how such traditional frameworks are helping teachers to cope with every-day running of schools. However, on the other hand, the teacher participants and the SEC administrator outline the frustration that they feel from their part and why traditional frameworks are still being considered as a way forward:

"We live on the front line, we don't live with policies, and it was mentioned in a consultation meeting regarding SEC, because I kept insisting to take part, they look at the assessment part, but we are not looking at the bigger picture, even logistics are a problem, so we were saying problems like schools they don't have the facilities to teach as we are expected to teach" (Teacher 1)

"If the pass rate is usually let's say 90% and the following year is only 60%, for the sake of the argument, then what happened? What didn't happen? [referring to school authorities asking for justifications] It is very difficult to find only one factor but is it always the teacher's fault

that students do not pass their exams? Or the students are not that good? Or the students decide that they do not want to work? So, exam results bring pressure on us” (Teacher 2)

“The report that examiners write [subject yearly report] is not enough to show us why the SEC objectives are not being reached by the students. But the thing is that critique [from teachers] need to be constructive and not negative. Unfortunately, it is very easy to say that something is not good and stopping at that. That is the problem that we have here [in Malta]. From our side [SEC] we want to do more detailed research to see where the problems are by asking schools to give us detailed responses. But to do so it is a huge strain on the resources, and our resources are an issue. To publish one report is already a big stretch of our resources” (SEC administrator)

Teacher 1 shows frustration that policies do not represent her reality and the realities experienced in schools, and she is clearly frustrated about her lack of voice and influence in policymaking. For her, although authorities prioritise assessment over other priorities in education that could perhaps be more beneficial for students’ learning. Therefore, a key factor why teachers opt for the known and tested traditional teaching approaches is because it feels safer for them to do so. This is also echoed in teacher 2’s response as he argues why it is the teachers are held responsible when students do not pass their SEC examinations. Teacher 2’ response is also indicative of a broader ‘blame mentality’ which reveals defensive responses and makes innovation risky. He clearly shows how teachers get pressured from above to justify why students do not achieve the expected SEC results at the end of their education. This shows how authorities use students’ SEC results as a proxy of quality and teachers feel they are held into account if student pass rates are not obtained. It is also clear that not knowing what is causing students’ low performances in the SEC is forcing the system to put students’ SEC results before other educational priorities, creating a laborious situation in schools that teachers feel are being posed unjustly on them. This translates into a situation in which teachers take measures in their own hands, so to speak, to be able to find practical ways to work under such conditions.

As highlighted in this chapter, teachers, students, and parents agree that inclusive teaching systems such as student-specific teaching approaches and more space for class discussion in secondary schools should be considered as a way forward to improve students’ interests and engagement with SEC content, but such mechanisms clearly go against the selective processes and classification system such as the tracking system. The above quotes show that from a teacher’s perspective, although the will to change the current system might be there, the lack of information about what causes students’ low performances might still not be convincing teachers enough to make certain leaps in their teaching practice, and given the culture of blame, this is often regarded as too risky. This also leads to the head teacher’s frustration for not having enough power to motivate teachers to move on from traditional teaching methods and to influence necessary changes in schools such as

abolishing selective processes in the system and adopting inclusive teaching practices on a day-to-day basis.

This point about frustration towards the current SEC system was also raised by the SEC administrator. He clearly agrees that lack of information available on students' performances is frustrating from an examining body perspective. He explains that SEC objectives are not currently being met by the students and also explains that in an ideal world, in-depth studies would reveal specific lacunae about student performances.

Other issues were also identified from the student participants who feel short-changed by the current system. Interviews with students unveil how the current system's inability to provide equal and effective learning opportunities for all students to perform in the SEC examinations can also create frustration.

"I know that I might sound too negative but I would like to be in a school where everything is in order when you look at the teacher you can follow, if you have a question you can feel free to ask, and they can repeat if needs be" (Student 2)

"I'd rather say it's more worry that people are scared of it, it's just this is something you have to do well and everything is riding on it there's sort of that mentality about the SEC and I just don't think that it's clear enough what's actually there, you know? It's just an exam rather than a trial, if you see what I mean" (Student 3)

Frustrations from student participants were focused more on the impacts of the SEC exams as they feel that exams are not thought of with them in mind. Student 2 admits that she needs a very specific approach in school to learn as she believes that a different approach could help her do well in the SEC. However, her school's priorities to teach for the SEC examinations does not enable her to learn in her preferred way. She explains how in her view some factors can impact students' attention in class such as distractions and time constraints, particularly in cases where students, just like herself, need repetition to process words just like other students. The students' feedback shows another dimension of the SEC in which the current system creates a culture of docility (Foucault, 1975) amongst students in which they are expected to be receptive to the syllabi, standards, and outcomes dictated by the SEC system. The system, therefore from the point of view of the student, does not always cater for the needs of individual students with diverse learning abilities. On the contrary, the system expects homogeneity that opposes the principle of individuality, and this clearly frustrates students on various levels: how students can perceive the SEC as a journey that is a necessary evil; how the SEC is clearly not allowing much space for students to experience learning in their preferred learning styles; and how the SEC is too explicit about what is expected from the students to show in their examinations (these inferences will be discussed in further detail in the following section focusing on fear of failure). This shows that whilst the education system ostensibly strives to

provide equal education opportunities for all, the students are aware of the oppressive power exercised by the SEC and those who are obliged to comply with it.

Student 3 pleads to everyone to see the SEC as “just an exam rather than a trial”. The word ‘trial’ has negative connotations and it was extracted from the interview with student 3 at verbatim and it shows how lack of clear objectives in the SEC brings a mentality that can put students in an unjust position to prove their innocence (worthiness). “Trial” is a strong word used here in the student’s vocabulary which can give us a sense of how the SEC can also be perceived by students as a judicial experience. He also admits how this is generally coming from the perception that SEC is very important on various levels that push students to identify with it on need-to-pass basis.

5.3.2 Stress and fear of failing SEC examinations

Other issue discussed in the interviews related to stress and fear of failure during the preparation phases for the SEC. Attainment in the SEC context can become a priority at the expense of students’ well-being. Freeman and Lewis (2016) argue that in high-stakes education settings students’ experiences can be hampered by the idea that “assessment must always be a competitive process, with learners pitted against one another” (2016, p.8). This was also echoed in the responses shared by students, parents, and teachers during their interviews with me, as they explained what makes the SEC so significant for them whilst also teachers and parents clearly explain why passing from SEC examinations can be so stressful for the students and for themselves.

“It is very important because for me the SEC is the first step to what I want to achieve in life. It is the first step towards becoming who you want to become in life, so it is very important” (Student 1)

“Yes, a lot, because many people do not look at your skills, they look at the exams [SEC exams] that you pass from when you look for a job, etc... I have many cousins and they all had job interviews and also many other people that I know and they all say the same thing, that people look at your qualifications only” (Student 2)

“They are very important and I think that puts a lot of pressure on me because they are important and rightly so. But sometimes I feel that while the atmosphere is good and it needs to be that way sometimes it can be overhyped if that’s the right word. You know this big looming presence that you are going to get to eventually” (Student 3)

For students 1, 2, and 3, experiencing the SEC is also about ‘managing milestones’. For them the SEC clearly marks a very important milestone in their education because it symbolizes the notion that one’s qualification can significantly impact one’s own

identity. For student 1 the SEC represents a rite of passage, whilst for student 2, in her opinion and that of her close family, the SEC is necessary for post-secondary education and career prospects. However, neither students 1 and 2 refer to stress or stress-related experiences. This shows how stress might be self-fabricated by the students themselves whilst preparing for the examinations because of cultural issues that embody the SEC experience. On the other hand, Student 3 explains how the SEC, “rightly so”, puts a lot of pressure on him. This implies that for students, pressures brought by the SEC can be accepted and/or even tolerated knowing the high stakes nature of the exams, however, student 3 is concerned about the mentality of schools, teachers, and parents during this period rather than the SEC per se. For him, the SEC preparation phase brings on a level of stress which can/should be avoided “this big looming presence that you are going to get to eventually”. Particularly referring to yearly school examinations as a catalyst of stress, in which students continuously, year after year, are being examined in their schools by their teachers on rote learning to benchmark their abilities and to pre-test their abilities before the SEC exams. Student 3 explains how for him this phase can be “overhyped”.

In the following sections, it will be shown how parents and teachers in their interviews argued how stress is an inevitable component of the current SEC system. This tends to happen when teachers and parents experience stress when they fear failure, and when stress is used as an indicator of progress. Thus, as a result, teachers and parents push for students’ examination results using quantitative measures to push students towards attaining as many SEC examinations as possible. Such as expecting students to attend to after school private lessons to ensure they get well-prepared for the SEC examinations. This can be linked to Freeman and Lewis’ (2016) argument that fear of failure (2016, p.8) is a common perception found in learning settings that are led by assessment.

“Here [the school] it is emphasised that the teacher has to work. No chance of slackening because parents will start... you know... Here in Malta, the mentality is that even if children achieve 90’s and 100’s [out of 100 marks in pre-SEC school examinations] [they] still go to private lessons. We [referring to the Maltese society] want our children to be the best” (Teacher 2)

Teacher 2 shows that although he has the students’ best interests at heart, his response shows a cynical reaction towards the current SEC. He claims how the system gives a false idea about achievement in which in his opinion this motivates unnecessary pressures on everyone, particularly the parents. His response suggests that parents are agents of governance in their insistence on good results even though they may be frustrated by the system themselves. In his view, the false idea comes from a culture in which parents are afraid that their children achieve less than the “best”. Although the teacher does not specify what the “best” means, it is implied that for him society might be posing unrealistic targets that also lead to unnecessary stress on the teachers and the students. For teacher 2 stress comes from a culture of parents expecting more work from teachers and their children, because they believe that more work limits the possibilities of having their child failing the SEC

examinations. Often exercising control by sending their children for private lessons regardless of their SEC preparation achievements at school. From the teacher's perspective, this unveils how pressure is multi-faceted and not just top-down. A form of helplessness from his part as the parents' 'fear' of children's failure in the SEC undermines his professional voice in the classroom.

However, from the parents' perspective, such fear can be a result of other external factors too.

"My fear is, for example, my daughter's friend goes to a church school [her daughter goes to a state school] and I speak with her mother occasionally about what our children are doing at school, and she is of the same age as my child, and for example, she tells me that she covered this and that in school which I know that my daughter didn't do, so that worries me" (Parent 1)

"Many schools put on pressure. They put on pressure on us [parents] especially in secondary schools as they give them [students] a lot of work. Obviously, every teacher wants their students to do well in the SEC, but parents on the other hand panic" (Parent 2)

As argued above by the parent participants, the SEC represents a number of fears and generates a number of inequalities which can significantly impact on the students' achievements in SEC examinations. For parent 1 fear of failure is characterised by comparisons between her child's work and that of her peers. Since the SEC is a National examination, therefore every student is asked to sit for the same exams, the SEC motivates a perception of an unequal playing field or 'structural inequalities' produced by a plural school system. For parent 2, parents can be the object of governance from the school and thus pressure on students can be bi-directional between parents and schools. Parent 2 feels that parents become responsible for the heavy amount of work given to the students by the schools. Parents can link their children's progress during the preparation for the SEC to several factors that are not necessarily within the control of students themselves. These factors include how students are expected to be 'fully committed' to the yearly school examination requirements for the SEC; parents feel that their children should not be disadvantaged by the type of school that their child goes to; all students should equally cover the same content as any other student; and quantity of work that students are asked to do is indicative of progress during their preparation for the SEC.

Whilst responses from teachers 1 and 2 show that pressures and stress can be led by the system's objectives and the parents' competitive mentalities, the above statements from the parents also show helplessness. This sense of helplessness can translate into two opposing reactions; a form of resistance towards oppressive requirements presented by the SEC or full-commitment and/or continuous self-regulation by the SEC participants to conform to the requirements stated by the SEC. It is also evident that system is absolving itself from its responsibility to safeguard

students' interests and well-being and as a result, SEC participants are deemed to find practical ways to cope with this situation notwithstanding the resources that they have. This can also present significant pressures on parents and teachers who want to make this journey an effective one for their students/children. Thus, as described by the responses from the different participants, in the current situation stakeholders might be shifting responsibilities to one another as a result of helpless cause in finding effective way-forward for students to attain SEC examinations and to limit as much as they can probability of failure. This whole process is part of the emotional impact and bargaining that stakeholders need to do in order to 'survive' the SEC examinations. But it is also evident that not every teacher, student, and family can afford/commit to such demands as many stakeholders might not have the opportunity/resources to realistically live up to the objectives of the SEC.

5.3.3 Choosing what to learn for the SEC

One issue of inequality in attaining SEC examinations amongst students is an effect of how the system is structured and results from a lack of opportunities for students to become autonomous in their own education. The inequality was recognised by one of the parents who participated in the interviews and underpinned some of the responses about the nature of choice and autonomy during the SEC preparatory phase.

Parent 2, argued that entrusting students with decision-making powers in secondary school can contribute positively towards students' performances during their SEC preparation phases.

"If a secondary school student has the opportunity to choose their own optional subjects, then I see a certain value, meaning that he or she can choose subjects that they like. So, if you have a girl [student] that chooses Art or graphical communication for example, then a decision has been made where she is in control of what she wants to study, what makes sense for her, according to the competencies that they have" (Parent 2)

This contribution highlights the parental beliefs' that students' maturity and autonomy are an essential part of education because students need to be independently capable to make mature choices about their own educational futures. However, the word 'if' indicates how this possibility might not be as achievable in the current SEC examination system. The phrase 'in control' is also significant because it tells us how the current system can provide students with awareness about subjects they can choose to learn. However, the parents' contributions show no distinction in students' exam choices based on their learning for personal preferences or based on their competences. Both types of choices can be considered as equally important for students on their own merits, however, they may not necessarily always be linked together. Thus, this outlines the need for more critical awareness amongst parents

to know more about the factors that lead students to make more effective choices about their own optional subjects.

Student participants, responding to a question about whether they feel that the SEC gives students equal opportunities to perform, argued that the current SEC system favours students who have clear and defined objectives regarding their educational futures. Issues touched upon by the student participants tended to dwell on: **Time** - the short time they have to make a decision and the length of time they will have to live with that decision; **Autonomy** - an awareness of some that they are not necessarily equipped to make the 'right choice'; **Fairness** - a sense that there is an unequal playing field on which some are given better support than others. They recognised how currently the system makes it difficult or easy for students to choose their preferred SEC subjects at the beginning of their journeys.

"My choice of subjects was an easy one. My options are sciences, Biology, and Chemistry. I wanted these subjects because I wish to pursue my career as a veterinarian. In this school we really have nothing to grumble about we should not complain... teachers help us make the right decisions... good teachers... teachers support us all the time" (Student 1)

"I am in this school because I want to learn engineering. I would have changed my subjects because before I thought that it was unfair that we had to make a choice so early and I made a mistake, I chose the wrong subjects, I chose design and textiles instead. I found a good school that gives me all I need to pass exams but nothing more than that, but if I can learn here, I will have more chances to progress to another school" (Student 2)

"So, the subjects I chose are physics, computing, and history. History is my favourite because I really enjoy the subject and the way it falls into place, sort of how everything develops, and computing I chose it more because of a job thing, I would like to get into that field and physics because you have to choose physics and biology and I don't really connect with Biology in the same way as I do with Physics" (Student 3)

This reveals the significance of early goal-orientation and the process of planning to achieve that goal. Student 1's decision was quite straight forward because the 'academic route' was clearly mapped out for him. This stage, however, could be much more difficult for other students who do not have a clear vision about their educational futures. Therefore creating a divide between students who have the cultural capital to know about their future learning and career aspirations and those who are not clear about what is next to come, as in the case of another participant, student 2.

Student 2 asserts that this stage brings added pressure on making the right decisions about the type of subjects students would prefer to study in the following years as students are not allowed to change their subject choices. Thus, pressure can mount because of different types of subject requirements for different progression routes. Students recognise this stage as a point of no return for the SEC and beyond. This is not merely a rational or technical stage, as described by student 2 this stage requires a process of weighing in the pros and cons of making a 'right choice'. Thus, Student 2, in contrast with Parent 2's view above, feels that this stage comes very early in one's preparation for the SEC. This shows how autonomy is not a simple concept that can be adopted identically for all participants alike following the SEC. It is a problematic concept that students need to reflect on, negotiate with, and rationalise for a period of time, in which some students might not feel prepared for it at a given moment. Thus, freedom of choice needs to be granted at a time when a student is ready to take on board such a responsibility and this also depends on the context of the student's situation.

This issue can be similar to other education settings (such as the UK system) where students need to opt for vocational or academic pathways depending on their career aspirations during secondary schooling. Thus, the challenge revolves around two main limitations, firstly, not everyone feels that students are prepared to make such decisions at this stage; secondly, it is difficult for students to make such decisions because without the right support the system makes it complicated. Student 1 refers to teacher support as an important factor that supports students' abilities to be good decision-makers of their own learning futures because it was so for him. Student 1 highlights the importance of the support provided by his teachers. This also implies that without the right input, this stage can be a very challenging phase for students to traverse and can also result in students' making wrong choices for themselves as argued by student 2. However, although student 1's assertion can be considered as a positive one, it is also based on his full trust of knowledge and support given by his teachers. From student 1's response, he clearly links his sense of making the right subject choices for himself with the support he gets from his teachers. However, he does not refer to other sources that might have inspired, influenced, or informed his decision-making process. This clearly shows that for him his teachers' support is considered as 'absolute right', thus in this case the teachers' support is not necessarily creating a dynamic interaction with the student about what they want to learn and why they want to learn it, but students' satisfaction of making the right decision might be stopping at a level of reassurance that their choices will conform to his career aspirations. Thus, relates to issues of agency, power and control. Despite the illusion of giving students the opportunity to freely choose their preferred subjects, there is a culture of dependency on teachers' support and a sense of absolute faith in the teachers' judgement rather than students building confidence to make their own informed judgements.

On the other hand, student 3's response outlines a conflict for students between choosing preferred subjects for personal enrichment and/or making subject choices based on utility. The student feels personally connected with History but this subject does not fall under the subject-specific route of his career aspirations as he feels

‘bound’ to study science subjects, Physics and Biology because these subjects lead to an academic route as prescribed by the Matriculation certificate (the certificate required to enter an academic post-secondary route) and History does not. This also reveals that although inequality in the current system can be recognised by stakeholders from lack of opportunities within the system that pushes for students to be self-authors (Magolda, 2014) of their own educational journeys, there are clear issues that challenge this idea when students have the opportunity to choose what they want to learn in the SEC examinations. As Magolda (2014) asserts, a key factor in giving students authorship of their own education is in the students’ ability to shift from “authority-dependence to self-authorship” (2014, p.26). But she also explains that for students to achieve such a shift, dynamic interactions need to take place between external factors provided within the education system and the students’ internal voices. Therefore, this also leads us to understand that the way to improve students’ opportunities to become authors of their own education is not only a question of introducing new policy measures that support this idea, but it also involves the design and implementation of systems in schools to give students opportunities in making dynamic interactions with skilled professionals and to learn how to make critical decisions about their educational futures.

The stakeholders’ views about the Ministry’s vision and reforms will be at the centre of the following section of this chapter. The following section will also focus on the stakeholders’ hopes for the future, particularly their vision for a better educational future and how their vision contrast or accommodate issues of the present. The reforms proposed by the Ministry are seen by some stakeholders as an opportunity to mitigate issues that are created by the current SEC system (covered so far in this chapter). However, two-thirds through the Ministry’s ten-year strategy, the reforms have yet to be implemented in mainstream education. I argue that the discursive conflict created by the proposed new system is one of the factors that is holding back the modernization of the system. Thus, by the end of this chapter, I will be able to provide a discussion of the key issues raised by stakeholders, including common criticisms of the system; the ways in which people collude with and resist the system; emotional investment and coping strategies.

5.4 Vision of a new SEC

As discussed Malta’s education system is designed to prepare students for the SEC examinations at the end of their compulsory education (chapter 3). Moreover, the SEC is founded epistemologically on factual recall and content rather than skills, and participants during the interviews felt that this does not enable all students to perform well. Thus, the Ministry’s vision is to push towards introducing new curricular and assessment reforms to make the system more inclusive for students by introducing critical changes in the current SEC syllabi. In practice, this means that the main objective of the SEC is to change from exam-specific structures by introducing the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF) in SEC subject curricula. Attard Tonna (2016), Head of the LOF project explains that:

“The LOF has a strong focus on pedagogy and assessment; it promotes learner-centred learning and favours models of assessment which give clear and continuous feedback of one’s progress” (2016; p.171).

Chapter four explored how the introduction of SEC vocational education training (VET) subjects enabled this LOF system to work in mainstream education and was considered by policymakers as a first step towards reaching the Ministry’s objective to push towards introducing new curricular and assessment reforms. However, it was also acknowledged that problems emerged in the Maltese education community when the LOF was proposed to be incorporated in the SEC core and academic subject curricula. Thus, the journey towards implementing the LOF holistically in the current education system is still problematic. During the interviews, the policymaker expressed what in his view is stopping the Ministry’s vision from being implemented.

“The changes in the SEC have already been agreed because the changes in the SEC curriculum and the LOF were agreed upon by a review board. All stakeholders were represented in this review board including the union. This agreement is also mentioned in the core sectoral agreement between the Ministry and the union but since the proposed changes create huge ripple effects the union is challenging us in saying we are not ready, we are not prepared.” (Policy Maker)

During his interview, the policymaker explained why he thinks that it is important to implement the Ministry’s vision because for him the current “exam is not a fair opportunity for all”. He notes that this situation is unacceptable, making it very clear that the system needs a ‘big’ change “we need to let students know that there are other alternative routes that one can take”, particularly regarding how “students are currently being assessed at the end of their compulsory education and how this is trickling down to early years of a student’s education”. However such options are still not available to the student because of lack of agreement about the proposed reform. The policymaker admits that in an ‘ideal world’, “students pass their SEC examinations”, but he clearly shows in the above quote that there are forces that are also political in nature that are stopping this change from passing. The policymaker outlines the tension between policy and practice, particularly in trying to implement the new reform in the SEC as he clearly feels betrayed by how new measures were agreed upon on paper but then halted at the implementation stage. It is also evident that the policymaker feels helpless about bringing change in the Maltese education system as he uses the words “huge ripple effect” suggesting that the challenges are difficult to contain from his position unless everyone is ready to make compromises.

The interviews also unveil the divide between policy and practice in Malta, particularly between the point of view of the teachers, headteachers, and the authorities about how the new vision will impact the every-day lives in class and the value/credibility of the new system. It is clear from the interviews that the Ministry’s objective to reform SEC syllabi and examinations creates anxieties amongst education front-liners that are motivated by ‘fear’ of how the reform might impact

teachers in real-life. During the interviews, participants have also expressed their views about the proposed reforms from the Ministry. They explained:

“I hear in staff rooms if you could speak to some teachers that have their own children that will be going through this reform and see how unhappy they are about it” (Teacher 1)

“This reform cannot give a clear picture of what the students have learnt. The way the coursework is proposed, or at least how they [the SEC administration] have explained it, I don’t agree with it” (Teacher 2)

“The system that we have today is less valid but more reliable, the new proposed system [LOF-based] is more or it should be more valid but most probably less reliable” (SEC administrator)

“I’m saying this with no reservation whatsoever! How things stand, the reform objectives will not be met. Because, you will have students trapped in a system, a system where teachers are trying to teach in different ways and parents expecting schools to teach their children in the same ways they did. That is the situation” (Headteacher)

“You know what is worrying me about the new system? Let me tell you, I can see how the current system is structured. The new system, I don’t know what is going to happen, let me tell you, even they [authorities/policymakers] do not know what is going to happen” (Parent 1)

“I think that with the way how certain things are going to change, I fear that we will lose the currency of the currency of the SEC grades” (Parent 2)

Unfortunately, not much response was given by students about the proposed new reform. As student 1 explains that he is “not sure about what is going on... we need to know about reform changes...” and his appeal was that “we need to be part of the reform process”. Student 2 claims that she is “not paying attention to current SEC changes”. Feedback from the students suggests how authorities may be failing students in consulting with them about the proposed changes, and/or effectively communicate information about the Ministry’s vision, or even measures proposed are simply not attractive to students. This is significant as it highlights points that were discussed in the previous section of this chapter that focused on students’ autonomy in the SEC, particularly issues regarding how the current system is not helping enough students to reflect and to make their own learning choices. It also speaks to how students are not seeing the relevance of their own education and the SEC. Thus, it is clear that lack of effective communication between policymakers and students is another unresolved issue in which at the proposal stage the new reform has still not been addressed.

Teacher 2, parent 2, and the SEC administrator's concerns revolve around issues of value in the SEC implied by the new reform, in particular, how the introduction of formative teaching and assessment systems, such as coursework, will positively or negatively affect the value of students' work; as explained in chapter four, for students following most subjects in the current SEC system, the value of their performances is determined by one terminal SEC examination per subject at the end of compulsory education. In principle, the LOF reform sets out to ease pressures on students by shifting from single terminal examinations per subject and instead introducing three-course work assignments and one formal examination each year for every subject during the three-year period of secondary schools. Responses from the three participants show how subjectivity played a part in the teaching and assessment of knowledge in various ways and styles. Subjective teaching and assessment can also introduce variables in ways that create anxieties amongst teachers, parents, and the exam board. Consequently, notions of objectivity clash with notions of subjectivity in formal learning settings, and this can add to the tensions which are contributing to the lack of progress of the reform. In an opinion article on the Times of Malta (2019) entitled Where is 'My Journey' going? several issues about the reform were outlined:

"Will teachers be sufficiently and effectively trained to teach the core and optional subjects in this new 'applied' way? Are the teaching resources, syllabi and assessment tools tried, tested and ready to use? How is the Learning Outcomes Framework, that is meant to be the gold standard of inclusion and differentiation, going to fit into the 'applied' learning outcomes of the core subjects?... The government needs to provide a lot more detail to set students', parents' and employers' minds at rest that 'My Journey' will not take them for a ride, but actually open new pathways to learning and engagement in society" (*Times of Malta*, 2019).

This quote cannot account for all current preoccupations and debates on the future of the Maltese education system. However, it can clearly be noted that that current proposed reforms present a National concern that warrants further communication between education institutions to clarify uncertainties and misconceptions about the new reform.

The responses from teacher 1, parent 1, and the headteacher provide evidence of such preoccupations. Their responses focus on anxieties about how the changes implied by the reform will affect them personally and the people that they are close to. Teacher 1 argues how teachers have not been given any time to familiarise themselves with the proposed changes. This suggests from the teacher's perspective, that the idea of change embodies preoccupation with how the administration is attempting to bring on change. The head teacher's concerns about the reform are more culturally driven. His views come particularly from his belief that the parents' idea of a good education is still tied with past education systems and for him, this is misaligned with the objectives of the new reform. As a result, the headteacher argues that "students [get] trapped in a system", which implies how repercussions on the

students are negative and can be long-term. These views are significant because although the previous sections of this chapter (sections 6.2 and 6.3) discussed how participants agree that change is needed in the current system, clearly participants also show that not everyone is ready to move on. It is clear that not everyone is ready to introduce change because change is also seen as a risk and in the case of changing the national examination system, the risks are also high. Thus, there are clear issues between the rhetoric of change that comes from the education authorities and the process of change that is expected from the school front-liners. In the section on trust issues (below) between education professionals and system administrators, this tension will be discussed from a number of personal perspectives in more detail.

At the time of writing, the Ministry's strategy has reached two thirds of its timeline. However, teachers, parents, headteacher, the SEC administrator and policymaker during the interviews pointed to two unresolved matters that resurface when attempts are made to introduce change in the SEC; **the value of the new measures proposed by the new reform** and **misalignment of ideals between the rhetoric of change and the process of change**. Both matters will be discussed separately in the following two sections.

5.4.1 Determining the value of the SEC in a new system

In the previous sections of this chapter which focused on content and achievement in the SEC (sections 6.2 and 6.3), it was discussed how priorities between policy and teaching practice clearly clash particularly when students' learning opportunities are driven by a traditional exam-led system. As a side-effect, the system has introduced initiatives in the past to help more students' progress in the SEC, such as differentiated paper examinations, the tracking system, and private tuition to limit the number of student dropouts and failures in SEC examinations. However, the policymaker considers such measures to be deficit-led approaches which have negative impacts on the value of the students' education. He explained that the Ministry's vision is now to "move away from a 'deficit' approach" and "we should work on a developmental approach" instead:

"If I had to start all over again from scratch, I would have tried to send a better message about how we should work with a developmental approach and not through a deficit model. But I can understand where this is coming from and it will take a bit of time to change it" (Policymaker)

Thus, for the policymaker, a developmental approach would bring more value to the education system because:

"Let's say I am giving you value for the work that you are already doing in class. We are not trying to put any more responsibility on anyone. All the work that the students are already doing during their 3-year preparation for the SEC can be given value" (Policymaker)

The policymaker argues that past initiatives introduced by schools such as the tracking system were also a way of correlating students' learning achievement with their performances in examinations, as the Ministry's long-time objective is to provide valuable education that caters for all students by advocating for a continuous assessment approach. However, it was also discussed how this objective might constitute vague and aspirational rhetoric with no concrete evidence of how it should translate in real-life educational practice. That objective also features today in the Ministry's new vision and themed as universal education entitlement for all students. The policymaker argues that initiatives to mitigate student dropout such as the tracking system serve more the principles of the 'deficit model' and as reviewed in chapter two (section 2.5) Malta has still not progressed in this regard. Thus, a regressive approach has proven to be ineffective. On the contrary, the policy maker's goal is that the "SEC system can also have a developmental approach" by introducing a continuous assessment approach through the LOF, "the new system will introduce a learning outcome approach... questions in the examinations [SEC] need to be linked to the learning outcomes not like before". This reveals the policymaker's wish for a conceptual shift from a 'regressive' to a 'progressive' model of education in Malta. But the above quote also shows how in the view of the policymaker it will take time to move away from deficit-led approaches.

As discussed in the previous section, the participants' responses, particularly teacher 2, parent 2, and the SEC administrator embody a sense of reservation in adopting a developmental-approach system. They seem to agree that the wish to move on from the traditional knowledge-centric syllabi system will also come at a price. The following quotes explain from the three participants' views, why they think the new reforms might have a negative impact on the value of the SEC system.

"We do not know what the currency of grades achieved in the new system are [unlike] everyone knows the value of grades achieved in the current examination system" (Teacher 2)

"The value of the SEC, until this day, in the current system if you achieve a grade 1 [highest achievable grade] we know its value and we know how much you have to work to achieve it. I do not know whether the new reform will give a good picture of what my children will learn" (Parent 2)

"Course work in the system reduces reliability because there are other variables of assessment that needs to be accounted for. You need to admit that it is hard for the teacher to wear the hat of an assessor and of a teacher at the same time" (SEC administrator)

Cumming & Smith (2009) argue that education assessment in the 21st century is characterised by a binary opposition of two important perspectives. Firstly the growing pressures from various education stakeholders for assessment transparency and education accountability. Secondly an ever-increasing demand for alternative

modes of assessment that go beyond traditional paper-based modes of assessment (2009; p.2). This reflects key tension amongst education stakeholders in Malta to move away from deficit-led educational models and what be another cause that is holding back educational reform. Traditionally, the Maltese education system has linked the idea of value in examinations with a form of 'objective' assessment. This means that the 'scientific' positivist foundation for the SEC is justified by notions of objectivity of assessment. Even if stakeholders do not necessarily agree with the processes of preparing students for objective and summative examinations, this system clearly persuades stakeholders that objective and summative assessment is valuable because it subjects everyone to exactly the same, repeatable, generalizable examination. Thus, finding alternative methods to this model is also challenging in proving that value in the 'new' assessment process will not be compromised. Particularly because one-time examinations are standardized and characteristically driven by a notion of objectivity which can be a safer option of assessment as it limits variables and margins of 'error' of measuring students' abilities. Thus, the LOF formative approach proposed in the new reform (as opposed to objective and summative assessments) in a formal education setting can be perceived as undermining this (flawed) notion of objective and equal opportunity. For the SEC administrator the LOF replaces the 'hygiene' of standardised assessment and introduces more variables in the assessment processes. As described in the SEC administrator's response, the new system will undermine the value of the current examination and for him the value of the grades achieved in formative assessments is questionable.

This concern is also echoed in parent 2's response as he explains how for him, traditionally the SEC examinations managed to build a reputation that in his opinion is commonly known and agreed upon by education stakeholders and the general Maltese public. He is concerned about the value of the SEC achieved in the new system unlike the existing reputable value of grades achieved in the current examination system. In other parts of his interview, he explains how new measures proposed in the new reform (referring to LOF) are "traditionally associated with other measures introduced in the past to compensate for students' underachievement in exams", revealing a fundamental tension around issues of parity between the current exam-led system and the LOF.

The SEC Administrator also confides his inner struggles on how the reform will significantly impact the current assessment models. He argues that whilst the current system might not be considered by all stakeholders as an 'adequate' system for all students, for him "today's system is less valid but more reliable" whereas "the new system should be more valid but less reliable". This concern echoes Cummings and Smith's (2009) binary opposition concerns in assessment in which "value of assessment [should be] to enhance learning compared with assessment of learning" (2009; p.73). In other words, assessment *for* learning rather than *of* learning. A debate which is clearly bringing issues of reliability and validity amongst education stakeholders when discussing the current SEC and the proposed reform. Issues of reliability brings us back to the idea of risk when changes are proposed to the National examination system. However, the administrator's response also shows a

lack of confidence to embrace validity as a valuable part of the assessment process, and instead choosing what is known to be a safe and reliable system. He explains that currently students are prepared for the same summative examination and thus it limits the risk variables in the assessment process. In another part of the interview, the SEC Administrator explains how “new assessment focuses on coursework” and “methods [of assessment] can include visits, debates, projects, and presentations”. However, he envisages that the new system will also bring with it the risk of introducing new assessment variables that for him could influence the credibility of the whole assessment. He explains how “we need to be very careful”, showing how the SEC Administrator, like teacher 2 and parent 2, is cautious and possibly also protective about reforming the current examinations and the idea of introducing subjectivity in modes of assessment. This reveals another binary perception between subjectivity and objectivity in the assessment process. It can be argued that subjectivity in standardized assessment is also present, but the process is not transparent to the end-user. This also clearly shows that for him the idea of giving more students entitlement to perform well in the SEC might be taking away from the SEC’s entitlement of retaining its credibility. In another part of his interview, he explains how “coursework cannot be seen [by stakeholders] as an ‘easier’ option to pass” the SEC, because for him “coursework reduces reliability”, thus for him lacks the intensity and high stakes of a terminal examination - qualities which the Maltese education community has traditionally, culturally and systematically considered as proxies for value. The administrator states that “our job is to keep control”, showing a defensive, protective and precautionary state, and a resistance to risking the credibility and the reliability that the SEC has striven for.

From the responses given by the teacher, parent, SEC examiner, and policymaker, it is clear that there is some resistance to the reforms; their perception of loss clearly outweighs the idea of gain that the authorities believe is right for the future of Maltese education. Thus, it presents a contrast of ideals for the future of education. This is significant because it creates anxieties that embody a sense of threat or loss amongst stakeholders characterised by fears to commit to the unknown, despite the supposed benefits. This reveals clear indications of mistrust between education professionals and the measures that are set to change the current SEC examination system. The above views recall the saying ‘better the devil you know’ which embody an emotional impediment for the teacher, parent and SEC administrator to agree with change because they lack trust in the value of the new system which, for them is still unknown; they fear that it will diminish the value that the current system enjoys.

5.4.2 Trusting the Maltese education authorities

As explained in chapter 2, the Maltese education system is currently and has traditionally been led by the Ministry of Education. One of the objectives of this reform is to start the process for schools through the LOF to become autonomous by managing their own processes of developing course content and assessment:

“[reform] intended to eventually lead to more curricular autonomy of colleges and schools, so as to better address the learning needs of their students” (LOF, 2016).

But it emerged clearly from the interviews that there are underlying issues that are holding back schools from achieving more curricular and assessment autonomy. When participants were asked how they feel about the new reforms, particularly the teachers, headteacher and policymaker showed that there are issues between the Ministry’s drive for change and the schools’ willingness to reform. These issues seem to revolve around: **matters of communication between the educational authorities and schools; emotional labour amongst school teachers; and political influence in the Ministry.** These issues will be discussed in this final section of this chapter.

The policymaker argued in his interview how the Ministry’s idea of the future in Maltese education should look towards ‘freeing schools’ from a centralised system. For him, this is because:

“We currently have in our responsibility lifelong learning and research, so we have to handle policy on students’ lifelong learning education and at the same time the limited research that we can do as a department plus operations. Now there is a whole debate about whether we should be involved in operations or focus on policy only, that’s an interesting debate” (Policymaker)

The policymaker agrees on granting more ‘powers’ to schools should be the way forward and he explains how his department’s vision is to eventually move away from the operational role to focus on policymaking. But he explains how ‘debates’ are on the agenda and this signifies how empowering schools with such responsibilities can be in the Ministry’s vision, but not necessarily something to be taken as final. This move implies empowering schools with more/full autonomy to run school operations and curriculum development, thus also requires a specific strategy and will from all stakeholders particularly the teachers to accept more accountability.

Front-line educators agree that the objectives set by the Ministry will bring about change in schools that they might not feel prepared for. Participants explained how the reform might affect their profession and indicated how the challenges of reforming the SEC are not necessarily only operational in nature but also ideological.

“I agree in principle with the reform and how the SEC is being rethought from scratch. But it is not enough to say that ‘we [the Ministry] want to introduce the idea of ownership in schools’, this cannot be imposed from the top. It should be the other way around [bottom up] and the purpose of re-thinking the SEC is for schools to take more ownership of what to teach. But the message is not clear enough” (Headteacher)

“I think that we're just at the beginning now. I feel like at the precipice, what's going to happen? Well, the unknown always terrifies people, you know, because it's like we don't know what's going to happen so they [the Ministry] try to reassure us” (Teacher 1)

“I see the Maltese education system as one big experiment. We are always trying new things and hoping for the best. But from time to time, we always want to introduce changes or even go back to things that we used to do in the past. Unfortunately, in this big experiment, there are political agendas. If government A, they introduce certain things, if government B then everything needs to change (Teacher 2).

In the above, it is apparent that there are issues of communication from both viewpoints of the headteacher and the teaching professionals. As discussed in chapter two, issues of communication between education stakeholders and education authorities are historically fraught in Malta. The headteacher reveals an interesting interpretation of the power relationship between schools and education authorities. He proposes the idea that ownership should not be imposed on schools by the Ministry. Instead, he explains how schools are ready to take ownership of what schools set out to teach without the intervention of education authorities. The headteacher explains how in his view, the reform proposed by the Ministry of Education requires more than just changes in the SEC syllabus. Although he agrees with the reforms in principle, he argues that the Ministry's top-down approach was wrong as measures seem to be imposed on the school, and disagreed with how the authorities communicated this reform. It suggests that the Ministry might not have given education stakeholders a 'full picture' of what needed to be implemented and how the promises set in the reform could be maintained, which has created issues of mistrust between what is being informed by the Ministry about the reforms and the stakeholders.

In another part of the interview, the headteacher asserts, “how things are at the moment, the objectives will not be met.” Thus, it highlights the misalignment between the Ministry's rhetoric and the process of change in which the ways that the SEC is expected to reform from both the Ministry and the front-liners' viewpoints are not necessarily ready to be taken on board by everyone. For example, the headteacher also explains that teachers' mentalities are still not set for the objectives of this reform because “the phenomenal omen about extra work that teachers have to do.” Here the head teacher implies that it is not within his remit to convince teachers to change their mentalities. I argue that this is stimulating a culture of avoidance by blaming other stakeholders about who is responsible for implementing the objectives of the proposed reform.

The ability to communicate the meaning and the purposes of the Ministry's reform to the teachers is a key factor that is generating issues of mistrust. This featured clearly in the interview with teacher 1. She explains her struggles in understanding the outcomes and objectives of the Ministry's measures to reform the Maltese education system as she is unsure about the meaning of educational objectives set

in policies. In another part of her interview, she also shows her disapproval of how authorities are trying to 'sell' the idea of change by stating how in her view the Ministry's communication is characteristically "deceiving... [using] glossy politics misguiding parents". For her new initiatives are "fait accompli initiatives from authorities" with "no clear pathway of progression" which raises her suspicions about power and scope of the changes proposed in the reforms. This reveals a sense of dissatisfaction and helplessness of how in her view policymakers communicate their agenda. Although the teacher seems to admit that there have been attempts by authorities to reassure teachers that things are under control, it is implied that the Ministry's inability to communicate well its vision brings fear amongst the teaching community.

It is also important to outline the use of the word 'experiment' that is used by teacher 2. This connotes a sense of irony about how changes and/or reforms in the Maltese education system can be perceived by teachers as forms of non-finalised exercises. It can be argued that 'experiments' tend to test theory and result in solutions, however, it is clear that not everyone is willing to be part of an experimental exercise even though in principle everyone agrees that a change is needed. This suggestion can also create anxiety for educators who need to invest more effort and commitment for uncertain outcomes. Teacher 2 claims that changes are on-going, implying that attempts to reform the Maltese education system may be unrealistic which could bring more helplessness, distress, and emotional labour in the teaching community. It is also clear how the emotional impact of change in Maltese education requires more research, as it is evident how the policy objectives to bring change in schools is overwhelming the school community. Furthermore, research is an area that falls under the policy maker's department. In his interview, he clearly explained that his department is not coping with the workload. He suggests that research provided by his department is not substantial enough for the needs of the Maltese education system as the Ministry's areas of management are too broad and resources need to focus on both policy and operations of schools. This also shows that the lack of resources for research brings a sense of helplessness from both the Ministry and the teaching community, perhaps even because stakeholders may know where the problems in the education system are, and a resistance to 'experimentation' is not allowing further exploration in this field to identify potential solutions.

It was also discussed how the Ministry's political agenda is also a significant issue from a teacher's point of view. From teacher 2's perspective, since the current education system is still driven by the Ministry of Education, the political agenda overshadows other priorities in Maltese education. He argues that the Maltese education system is in a state of continuous change and experimentation because of "political agendas". The statement reveals another perceived binary between political reform and 'genuine' reform. But it also implies how the idea of reforming the Maltese education system is more politically driven rather than 'genuinely' focused on the needs of the students and the schools to provide education. Teacher 2's attitude to the initiation of so-called educational reforms by political leaders and non-educationalists, which overwork students, teachers, schools, and parents, is

cynical: “probably we are doing this only for statistics... so the Minister of Education looks like he is effective”.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has captured modes of thought which emerged during interviews with participants about their current experiences in the SEC and about how they see the future of the SEC. Participants’ thoughts included: **a desire for more self-empowerment, for more trust in leadership, appeals to lessen the fear of failure, less political influence, more effective guidance, and the need for more self-management.** These modes of thought reveal complex forms of power that contribute to a state of flux in the Maltese education system today. Forms of power that are characterised by awareness of educational labour and responsibility for students’ success by various stakeholders. However, these interviews also revealed that power relationship between different stakeholders is complex and problematic. Participants seem to contradict themselves in relation to the idea of change. The desire for change was clearly important for every participant, but participants also show resistance to change particularly when they do not understand the logic of the implementation of change.

Chapter 4 (policy analysis) and chapter 5 (interviews) revealed that although the Maltese education system proclaims its principles of inclusivity and value for all, it is also dependent upon compliance from stakeholders. Instead, teacher, head teacher, and parents showed how to cope with the current system they are reproducing individualistic ways for students to succeed in the SEC. This links with Foucault’s ideas about power and governmentality which will be central to the following chapter dedicated to the discussion of findings of chapters six and seven.

Chapter 6 Discussion of findings

6.1 Introduction

The policy discourse analysis and interviews with key stakeholders focused on creating a portrait of current drives and experiences in Maltese education. These occur at a point in time when Malta's education authorities have recently introduced and/or are attempting to introduce new strategies and initiatives to reform. However, concerns raised by the stakeholders about students' education, particularly in preparation for the SEC examinations have halted the implementation of this reform. Thus, this study seeks to understand the key drivers on the stakeholders' concerns. Two forms of information were analysed to conceptualize issues at the centre of policy and discussion between education authorities and stakeholders in two stages. The first stage involved a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of three key educational policies. Adopting Fairclough's (1992) dialectical-relational approach of analysis to help depict a 'portrait' of how key concepts of education performances in Malta have become consolidated and mobilised in educational policy. The three policies were:

4. Framework for the Education Strategy in Malta (2014);
5. My Journey: Achieving through different paths (2016);
6. A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools – Route to Quality Inclusion (2019).

As discussed in the Methodology chapter (chapter 3), these 3 documents represent an important ten-year timeline in contemporary Maltese education. These three policies represent a top-down view of how Maltese education, particularly the Maltese secondary education, should change to address current challenges. Chapter four, explains how these policies embody the Ministry's idea of 'modernising' the Maltese education system. The modernisation that emerged from the policy analysis was characterized by the introduction of new systems and measures to widen the concept of education amongst stakeholders. The second stage of analysis involved ten in-depth interviews with different education stakeholders. Participants included a policy maker, two teachers, three students, two parents, a school head teacher and a SEC exams administrator. This stage highlights the different perspectives from the stakeholder groups regarding the current education system and what they think could work in the future.

Figure 6-1 presents diagrammatically analytic themes generated from the analysis (chapters five and six). On the left-hand side of the diagram are main themes were identified in the policy analysis, whereas themes on the right-hand side arose from the analysis of the in-depth interviews. The analytic themes presented in figure 6-1 depict recurring 'topics' (listed in the middle section of the diagram) in the Maltese education system that bridge the emergent perspectives from the two sources of information and will be at the core of the discussion of findings in this chapter. Any statements presented here in this section under each theme are not personal views but channelled from the interviews and the policy analysis. Bringing together the themes from policy with themes from the interviews and key concepts about

Valuable and inclusive education covered in chapter 2 (context and literature review) enables the generation of new insights into the research questions: notions of practice and theory constructed by the Maltese education system (RQ 2); and the future of secondary education in Malta (RQ 3).

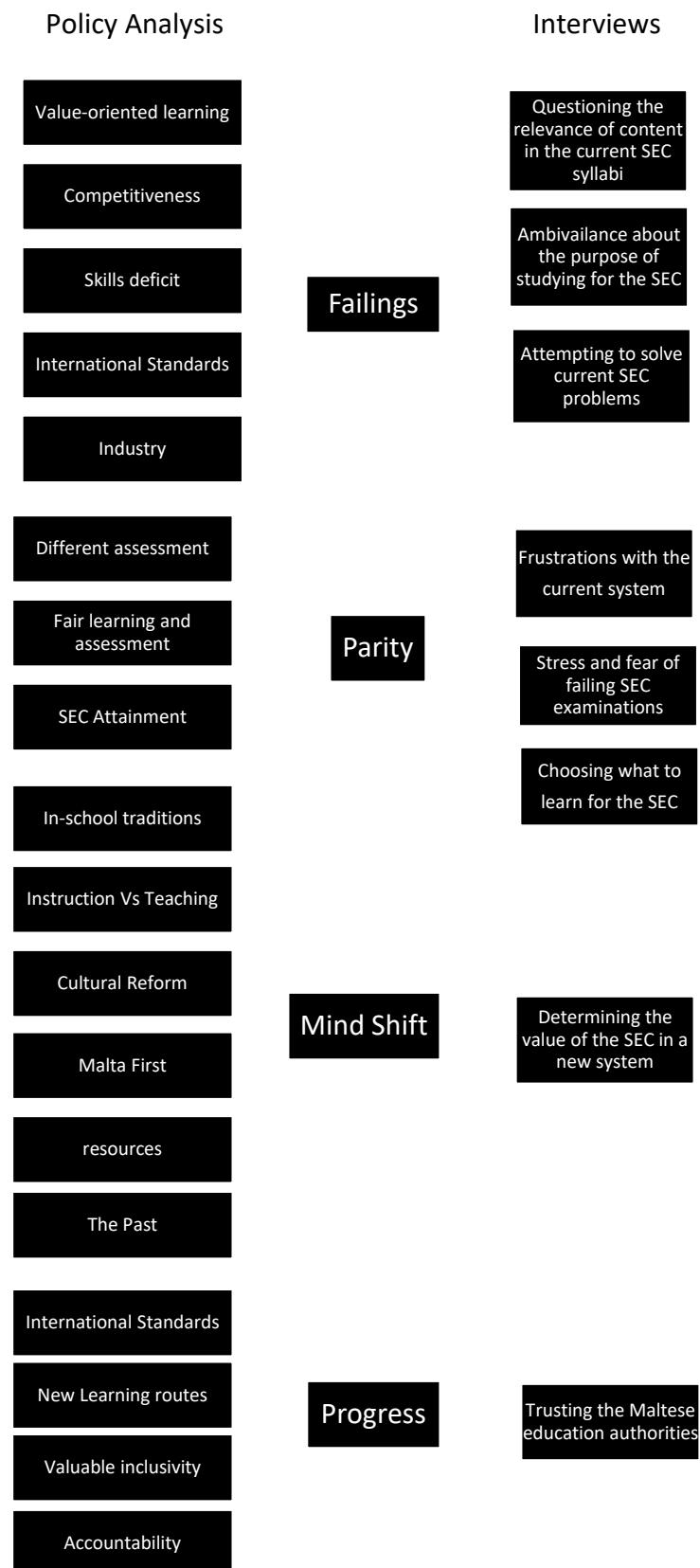


Figure 6-1 Analytic themes and topics (centre) generated from policy analysis and interviews with participants

6.2 Failings

There is a sense from both policy and interviews that the Maltese educational system is failing in addressing deficits in the system. Although there is consensus that changes in the current Maltese education system are required, factors leading to this assertion are not the same from a policy making perspective and the interviews. Given the diagram in figure 6-1, the expectation from a policy making point of view is that Maltese education should be of value, competitive, skills-oriented, of high standards and compatible with the demands of the industry and international standards. On the other hand, the interviews show that participants are more concerned about relevance of content that students need to study, particularly for their SEC examinations, the purpose of studying that content and finding ways of coping with problems created by the current education system. This reveals a significant challenging opposition in relation to the underpinning issues relating to interpretation and implementation of a valuable and inclusive education for all. As reviewed in chapter 2, the objectives of valuable and inclusive education have been characteristically challenging in driving the idea of change in the Maltese secondary education. Particularly because of the underlying tensions between focusing education structures to promote the principles of human capital as opposed to promoting education to enhance students' life experiences. Here in this section, I shall draw on the elements synthesised as 'failings' to critically reflect on how these elements embody the idea of change and its implication in the Maltese secondary education.

From the analysis of the Framework for the Education Strategy in Malta (2014) policy document (chapter 4) it was identified that the Ministry's 10-year strategy to change the Maltese education system is driven by the Ministry's 'belief' about how the Maltese education system 'should modernize' for social and economic prosperity. The Ministry's 'belief' idea embodies Butler's (1954) concept of value expectancy in education, particularly how the idea of value can be in conflict between concepts of free-choice education (Ryan & Deci, 1986) and the utilitarian aspect of education based on human capital. The strategy clearly explains that the key to modernization is to provide a valuable education for all students by addressing particular failings in the education system outlined in figure 6-1 on the left hand side under the theme 'failings'. I argue that these failures contribute largely to the policy makers' idea of valuable education in Malta. In which the idea of 'value' for the policy makers is constituted as anything which addresses the failures in the current education system.

As shown in figure 4-9 (pg. 96), from the analysis of the strategy policy published by the Ministry, the 2014 document outlines what is perceived to be wrong with Maltese education and concludes that specific remedies are required. In the strategy policy, this objective is addressed as value-oriented learning and it is clear that the Ministry identified a lack of cultural and social capital in today's education in a Bourdieusian (1993) way. However, the policy does not articulate a specific strategy on how to implement this desired objective. Instead lack of cultural and social capital is primarily linked with the results published by International quantitative reports

(TIMMS 2016, PIRLS 2016) about students' performances in Maltese education. This demonstrates how targets of value in education are driven by international statistics, particularly EU policies. Furthermore, this represents a conflict between the desire to conform with international standards but does not necessarily address the multi-faceted issues of cultural capital that challenge educational institutions from providing cultural and social capital in Maltese education. The desire to conform to international-based statistics is driven by the large number of early school leavers in Malta and the international comparisons of student performances. This has demonstrated a significant issue for Malta and is clearly influencing decision-making and policy in Maltese education, and this notion of international parity is clearly idealized as a proxy for quality and value in education. In the interviews, however, this does not feature as significant from a participants' point of view. This reveals a binary conflict between education authorities and education front-liners, whether the new reform should focus on achieving international parity or address pedagogical concerns.

In the interviews, participants focused on pedagogic aspects, mainly the relevance of content that students are expected to study and the purpose of studying it. Thus, a tension lies in the experiential aspect of value as described by Butler (1954). Particularly the relationship between the student, the school, the teacher, curricula and their household environment. Such concerns amongst pupils were also outlined seventeen years ago in a study by Cutajar, who identified a problem of pupils' lack of identification with content, specifically in the SEC Maltese Language examination, which went beyond pupils' lack of language skills. Although this study was published 17 years ago, the results from the interview analysis show that nothing has really changed in this regard as participants claimed that they still cannot understand the relevance of what students need to study for their SEC examinations. This links with Cutajar's results which show how pupils' performance in the SEC Maltese Language examination could in theory improve if pupils and learning stakeholders could identify the importance of what they are learning. Sultana (1999), for example, suggests that since its introduction, the Maltese independent education system has continued to seek to define and understand the milestones that characterize pupils' educational development in terms of quality, standards and equitable education.

“A stratified and selective state school system which practices intra and inter school streaming from primary school onwards, and which is intent on channelling students to different educational spaces offering different curricular diets, creating a hierarchical system of prestige for both teachers and taught” (Sultana, 1999, p.146)

It is clear that interview participants, particularly teachers, parents and students feel helpless to find alternative ways of progressing in the current education system. This state of helplessness can be discussed in light of Gardner's (2011) theory of multiple intelligences and learning styles. Interviews with students reveal the gap between one of the Ministry's objectives, i.e. to increase relevance of teaching and learning to reach the needs of individual learners (NCF, 2012) and what the current situation truly brings to the lives of those who experience the SEC preparation phases.

Students claimed that there are several challenges in the current system to reach their ideals of valuable education, particularly in certain subject areas where learning feels redundant. This translates into a situation where students and parents find remedial ways to cope with the situation, such as attending private lessons which are over and above their school hours (and school fees) and teachers opting for rote-learning strategies to help students succeed in examinations. This reveals a form of docile acceptance particularly by students, where success is more achievable for those who can afford private tuition and for who can adapt to rote-learning strategies to memorize content for examinations. Moreover, the result from this issue is behavioural in nature. As reviewed in chapter 2, Piaget (1950) argues how achievement needs to be a harmonisation of two important aspects in education; the effective life and the cognitive life. Here it is clear that from the students', teachers' and the parents' point of view, the current SEC curricula focus more on the cognitive aspect and does not leave much opportunity for life-effective education. As a result, the front-line stakeholders need to opt for rote-learning methods to cope with the cognitive demands of the curriculum. What is revealed here is not a mismatch of goals, but a mismatch of understanding and implementation of structures to address current curricular failings in the Maltese secondary education; on both sides there is a sense that the education system is failing, but a difference in belief about the nature of this failure. Clearly, this shows the need to examine the impacts of rote-learning for examinations in light of the purpose of education in Malta from a policy perspective but also from the wider pedagogic perspectives.

Parents and the headteacher also argued that a substantial part of the current curriculum is pointless (see the discussion on pgs.117-118). Reasons attributed for this assertion are the unrealistic amount of content that students need to learn for certain subjects and the redundancy of certain topics that students are expected to learn. This also reveals another binary opposition between experiential aspect of valuable and inclusive education and internal conflicts. Particularly from students, and different perspectives on the function of education, about whether to opt for teaching and learning that is specific for examinations, or for life (as stipulated in the life-long learning objectives presented in the Ministry's 10-year strategy discussed in chapter 4). As a result, to cope with the situation various interventions are self-initiated, outside the strictures of the formal education system. Such self-initiated interventions take place in class, at home and also by school administrations in order to seek a balance between the demands of the exam-led system and providing an educational experience that can be valuable for all students. This also reveals how the current system is failing students in not providing them with a healthy educational 'diet' that rewards students with a valuable educational for long-term life experiences. For example, to cope with a one-size fits all system and to satisfy the requirements of formal examinations, state secondary schools have self-introduced a tracking system that segregates students depending on their school exam achievements with little or no opportunities of progression for students in the lower tracks. This reveals another significant opposition when attempts are made to address the system's failure to provide a fair and inclusive education for all students.

I argue that in principle, there may be a high degree of accord between the language and stated principles of policy and stakeholders, but this is falling apart when it comes to implementation. The tracking system is one example of this. The tracking system in schools clearly goes against the principles of inclusive education as set in Malta's 1988 education legislation (chapter 2) because it segregates students depending on the school examination performances. However, even though policy is clearly against such initiatives, the tracking system is accepted by the teachers as an instrument that helps them coping with the pressures of preparing students for the SEC examinations. In fact, from the analysis of the My Journey (2016) policy (chapter 4) it was revealed how the Ministry's objective is to reform the Maltese education system to address the deficits created by the system. However, no interview participant, except for the policy maker, was against the tracking system, presumably because they believe that in such a situation it is necessary to make certain sacrifices as a way to cope in a system that they feel that is failing. This also outlines the gap between the principles set in policy and the realities stakeholders can experience in schools.

6.3 Parity

'Parity' is identified in both policy and interview analysis chapters as a desire to promote fairness of the educational processes, to enable students much more flexibility in order to achieve rather than the one size fits all academic approach. From a policy perspective, to achieve this objective, students are to receive an education that is equivalent to other international education systems, which the Ministry proposes to bring about with a new educational system that aims to bring parity between academic, vocational and applied type of education. On the other hand, interviews reveal a different facet of how objectives of parity in Maltese education could be achieved through a 'fairer' system for all that puts the student at the centre of the system with less pressure on them. Education stakeholders may use the same word, parity, but they refer to it in different ways. Mainly parity with between different types of learning styles and preferences to help students achieve their full potential in a 'healthy' manner. This conflict embodies Butler's (1954) concept of value achievement in which it is underpinned by Dewey's (1938) argument of how education should embody both the effective and the cognitive life aspirations in curricula. In this section I shall look into more detail at how 'parity' is acknowledged as a key factor towards achieving a valuable education from both policy and stakeholders stand points, but understood differently.

The policy analysis reveals that lack of parity in the Maltese education system is making it less competitive with other international education systems. In the Ministry's policies a number of deficits are mentioned as a result of lack of relevance in subject curricula, however, policy makers make particular reference to lack of compatibility between employment demands and content that students need to study for their SEC exams. This is presented by policy makers as a nation-wide problem which translates into parity issues amongst Maltese graduates. There is particular reference to how the current SEC system is unable to address specific skills

on-demand by various industries, thus not enabling Maltese students to be competitive with foreign nationals (MEDE 2014, p.5). This shows how valuable education from a policy perspective is also linked to the efficacy of a system in 'producing' students for the world of work. And where the system does not live up to this objective, policy refers to it as failure towards the commitment of providing an equitable education for all. From a policy perspective, the road towards delivering its mandate, the Maltese education system needs to be on a par with international student retention statistics and to provide "opportunities to increase relevance of learning to the labour market" (2014; p.5). However, interviews show that, for some stakeholders, achieving parity in Maltese education is not only about strategies to increase student retention and preparation for the job world. Although the idea of parity from both policy and personal views similarly link with achievement of SEC examinations, the interviews revealed how this idea of parity, is characterized by failures in the system that prevents students from reaching their full potential.

Interviews reveal other aspects of parity amongst participants. Although achievement of SEC examinations is also undoubtedly a priority for all the participants, the struggles and fears of not being competitive enough during students' preparation for these examinations come from various aspects. And this creates an unequal situation between those students who can deal with the pressures created by the SEC exams and those students that cannot. A study by Camilleri et al. (2019) confirms the participants' sense of pressure and stress in Malta have an adverse effect on students' performances in the SEC. Interviews also confirm how in the eyes of participants, particularly students, exams are not necessarily a bad thing, but the competitive mentality around the exams can make the experience an unhealthy one. As established in Camilleri's study, the pressure is mainly a product of how traditionally the Maltese education system asserts idea that passes in SEC examinations determine students' future, which contradicts the stated principles of parity in education in the Ministry's policy (MEDE, 2016). This unveils a notional match between the principles of 'a level playing field for all' by preparing everyone for the same examinations, but a mismatch in implementation because in practice this system does not really provide a 'fair' opportunity for everyone.

All interview participants explained how in their view secondary education in Malta is an unequal playing field for students because of 'structural inequalities' that are produced by a one-size fits all school system that promotes selectivity as opposed to diversity. Their experiences also show how the notion of 'competitive mentalities' in this setting is multi-dimensional. This translates into a number of competitive mentalities that have come to represent the idea of valuable education amongst stakeholders but impose challenges on the objectives of achieving parity. These are: **the competitive mentality of parents who insist that their children should or have to be valued as 'equal' as anyone else; the competitive mentality of schools that want to qualify amongst the 'best' institutions to register with the highest student SEC exam success rates; the competitive mentality of teachers who feel accountable and responsible for students' performances in their exams; the competitive mentality of the exam boards that have to prove their subjects' validity by differentiating students by their abilities to perform for an exam; the**

competitive mentality of students who believe that their futures are determined by the number of SEC examination passes; and, finally, the competitive mentality of policy makers who are on a mission to make sure that the Maltese education system does not differ much from other international systems. Therefore, I argue that this situation presents a fundamental contradiction between comprehensive and selective approaches in which parity entails competition. Whilst everyone believes and agrees the same principles of comprehensive parity in education as argued by Dewey (1938), the problem arises from practising such principles in a culture that is still too reliant on the idea of selectivity in education.

This shows how competitive mentalities, particularly during the SEC preparatory phase, create conflicting responses towards achieving a state of comprehensive parity as prescribed and often referred to in the education policies. These mentalities embody a sense of a competitive classification amongst education stakeholders which can be self-fabricated. Thus, stress and fear can also be self-fabricated by those who want to gain the best possible outcomes from the SEC examinations whilst excluding much room for other priorities as argued by Dewey (1938) in life and in education.

6.4 Mind Shift

The analysis of policy and interviews revealed that the current tensions holding back the implementation processes to modernise the Maltese education system are characterised by an idea of mind-shift. The ideals of mind-shift from a policy perspective are characterised by the Ministry's drive to bring an attitudinal shift amongst stakeholders. Particularly from teachers and parents to break away from past ways and methods in mainstream secondary education. Clearly, the Ministry's drive is to change a culture of education which is embodied by the principles of an exam-led system. This type of culture of education embodies Butler's third frame suggesting how the idea of value in education also needs to be tied with its processes. It is also clear how in policy the drive is to move away instructive educational processes and to move on towards the ideals of a Vygotsky (1986)-constructive type of education. Both policy and interviews revealed how constructive type of education is more connected with the principles of comprehensive education as opposed to instruction in the selective exam-led systems. However, the analysis clearly shows how the move towards comprehensive/constructive type of education in formal secondary education is underpinned by issues that require a particular mind-shift by all stakeholders in which not everyone might be ready to do so. Such ideals are significant because, as discussed in chapter 2, matters of mind-shift in Maltese education have also been historically problematic when policy makers tried to introduce comprehensive education in the Maltese secondary education system in the past. As discussed at the end of the policy analysis (chapter 4), the analysis unveils how education authorities in Malta tend to tackle issues relating to the provision of valuable and inclusive education by introducing novel additions into the system. However, it is clear that this approach is still not encouraging people within the

education community to take the necessary leaps needed to modernize Maltese education. There continues, therefore, to be a resistance to change.

As reviewed in chapter 2, the introduction of comprehensive education in Malta between 1972 and 1981 was a case in point. The introduction of comprehensive education in Malta was motivated by the idea of an education system that should be 'valuable' and 'equal' for all Maltese pupils alike (Barbara, 1996). Which also links with the principles of the My Journey (2016) policy. However, the introduction of this education system brought an ongoing ideological tension between traditionalist and progressive mentalities about how the principles of comprehensive education should translate into practice (Zammit Mangion, 1992). Marmarà, (2001) explains that these tensions eventually led to the eradication of this system in 1981 because the principles of comprehensive and equitable education were not agreed upon, mainly by parents, who fought to revert to a one-size fits all system. Marmarà also explains how parents were clearly more comfortable to cope with the challenges created by the traditional selective system rather than shifting to a new one. After several attempts to modernize the Maltese education system in more than 20 years, the Ministry of Education has once again relaunched its vision to implement an education strategy that can make Maltese education valuable and inclusive for all students (MEDE, 2016). However, as discussed in chapter 2 section 2.5, the Ministry's strategy is also challenged by clashes of ideologies amongst stakeholders.

From the policy analysis (chapter 4), various consultation initiatives were outlined by the policy makers on the three policy documents that were analysed. This shows how from a policy making perspective, the Ministry shows commitment to involve stakeholders, particularly those who experience education day by day, to address the challenges that the reform brings with it. However, interviews show otherwise, as participants, particularly students, parents and teaching professionals made it clear that they do not feel they have a voice in the Ministry's vision for the future and policy making processes. Therefore, it can be argued that although consultation processes were organized they were poorly executed. As a result, school communities feel alienated from policy.

Clearly there is frustration about lack of voice and influence in policymaking (as revealed in the discussion with the state school teachers, head teacher, students and the SEC administrator on pgs. 128-130). For a successful implementation of an organisational reform more stakeholders need to feel part of change (Yilmaz & Kılıçoğlu, 2013). This reveals a sense of divide or an 'us' vs 'them' mentality between education authorities and those who experience education on daily basis. This mentality was clearly presented by teachers who explicitly showed their frustration for not having enough opportunity to voice their concerns to the Ministry about the proposed reforms (p.129). It is also evident that not knowing what is causing students' low performances in the SEC is forcing school authorities and teachers to put students' SEC results as a priority above other educational experiences. This also indicates contradictions between some of the key qualitative objectives about education set in the Ministry's policies and the pressures on schools to cope with quantitative issues such as student retention.

6.5 Progress

The Ministry's rhetoric in the three policies analysed (chapter 4) are also characterized by the idea of progress in the Maltese education system. However, the policy analysis revealed gaps of information in the policies which create uncertainty for teaching professionals, parents and students who are still unaware of how proposed changes will impact them directly or indirectly. The interviews reveal the frustrations of teachers, parents and students because they feel that the Ministry's policies do not represent their own ideals of progress and realities experienced in school and at home. This explains why lack of voice and influence in policymaking, particularly by those stakeholders who are not part of the system's administration, is still an issue. Yılmaz & Kılıçoğlu (2013) identify education and communication as critical elements towards an effective implementation of an organisational reform in education. They explain how the "logic of change", particularly what is meant by failing to provide a valuable and inclusive education, needs to be clearly outlined by policy makers to limit disagreements and misunderstandings amongst stakeholders. In this section I will use 'logic of change' as a conceptual frame whilst I will argue that lack of awareness of this concept vis a vis the proposed reform is stopping progress from happening.

The policy analysis chapter, particularly in the analysis of My Journey (2016) policy, revealed the Ministry's concept of progress connects with the principles of comprehensive education. The policy refers to current system characterized by 'traditional classrooms', 'selective education', 'no parity of esteem', 'summative assessment', 'dead-ends' and 'isolation', which clearly frames the Ministry's 'logic' that processes in the current education system, particularly in secondary education, are old and outdated. The policy proposes a new system characterized by 'inclusive', 'comprehensive' and 'equitable' practices. Whilst widely acknowledged terms, such as 'inclusion', 'comprehensive' and 'equity' in education are continuously used as the solutions for the lack of conformity with international standards, local and international statistics are often used as reference points to legitimize the need to introduce the proposed reform. This reveals how the idea of 'progressiveness' as a desired objective for the Ministry of education to change the Maltese education system is often opposed with conservatism. Whilst in policy the interpretation of progressiveness may seem more straightforward, future-facing and growth-oriented, the interviews reveal quite a conflicted mindset about progress.

A case in point is the Ministry's objective towards achieving progress in Maltese education set in the Ministry's policy is to broaden participation in education. The strategy policy (MEDE, 2014) promises the involvement of a number of stakeholders in its policies that are not necessarily directly involved in Maltese education. The Ministry does not only refer to educators, parents and students as sole contributors in education but refers to other social partners such as employers, unions and NGO's and other professional bodies and institutions, as potential partners in the education system. Although policies outline how the involvement of other partners in students'

education may have many positive outcomes, the policies fail to provide information about the ways in which such alliances may affect stakeholders individually. This reveals how there are key issues of communication between administration and teaching professionals that trigger conflicted mindsets about progress. I argue that this is also impeding effective implementation of reform in Maltese education.

This also explains why all participants (including the policymaker) expressed their concerns about how the new reform can be logically implemented in terms of: assessment; content provision; administration; resources and quality assurance, specifically for SEC examinations. Although participants during the interviews felt that the current system does not enable all students to perform well, the participants also felt that Ministry's vision of progress, i.e. pushing towards introducing new curricular and assessment reforms with critical changes to the current SEC syllabi is still not clear how it will be implemented. Therefore, progress is held back by the discursive conflicts about how the reform will affect stakeholders at schools and homes.

Discursive conflicts between education authorities and teaching professionals are also creating issues of trust in the Maltese education system. It was argued in the interviews, particularly by students, parents, teachers and the head teacher, that it is not enough that stakeholders learn from policies what change will entail. Therefore, on one hand the Ministry of Education drives the idea of progress in the Maltese education system by widening participation and reforming the exam-led system. On the other hand, whilst stakeholders are not arguing that change is not needed, there is reluctance to commit to new reforms because they still cannot understand the logic behind them and their role in them. During interviews, participants revealed their current experiences and how they see the future of the Maltese education system showing a desire for more self-empowerment, for more trust from leadership, appeals to lessen the fear of failure, less political influence, more effective guidance and the need for more self-management. This revealed another bottleneck situation in which the authorities, professionals, students and parents might feel the need for change but they also resist it at the same time. Clearly issues of trust are mainly created by contradictions between education authorities and professionals. Although both parties desire change, they are also resisting it because of conflicts between the authorities' drive to achieve political reform in education and the professionals' plea for more power and freedom. This contributes to a state of flux in the Maltese education system today that prevents progress from taking place. This also reveals the need for more research focusing on issues of power and governance in the Maltese education system.

This shows how the key issue is not necessarily about reaching agreements in principle but to provide adequate channels of communication so everyone can understand and agree to logical implementation of the proposed reforms. This key issue can be addressed with more communication and education about the logic of change in the proposed reform by determining the impacts of the SEC in the new system.

6.6 Conclusions

In this chapter a number of themes from both sets of data analysis (policy and interview) have been discussed in light of four key 'topics' and concepts about valuable and inclusive education reviewed in chapter 2. These topics bridged the emergent perspectives from the two sources of information, the policy analysis and interviews with participants with various concepts about the principles of achieving valuable and inclusive education reviewed in chapter 2. From this discussion it is clear how different notions of what constitutes valuable and inclusive education creates a collision of language and perspective. It also highlights the gap between principles set in policy and the realities that education stakeholders can experience in the every-day life in schools. Moreover, this reveals how the concept and the objectives of achieving valuable and inclusive education in Malta is problematic and multifaceted. The results of this analysis revealed a distinct divide between both sources of information. This divide is characterised by binary oppositions. Mainly by the Ministry's ambition to solve deficits created by the current education system and the participants' idea of change is based on "pedagogic knowledges" (Rose, 1999, p.53) which informs their aspirations to provide students a 'healthy' educational diet that can reward students with valuable and long-term learning experiences. This stark contrast is significant because both aspects capture the essences and the motivations that drive the idea of change in the Maltese education system from various perspectives.

The following new insights have been generated in this thesis to help me present a series of recommendations. These recommendations aim to help in facilitating further the process of education reform implementation.

Chapter 7 Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusions

In this research I set out to explore and to understand why the Maltese education system is unable to reform. Despite the recognition of the need to change by the general public in Malta as well as politicians and educators, the Maltese education system still struggles to bring change to address the high numbers of early school leavers. This thesis has revealed repeated attempts by the Ministry of Education to introduce reform and despite these attempts early school leaving (ESL) rates remain high. Moreover, it has revealed that although in principle the idea of change in the Maltese education is agreed upon by many, the implementation of change is a problem.

To examine what was impeding reform in Maltese education, I set out to ask three main questions. Firstly, I critically reviewed the main characteristics that have shaped the Maltese education system. Here I reviewed key literature and historic events since Malta's independence to understand the principles of policy and education practice that drive the Maltese education system today. Secondly, I wanted to understand how currently these principles are constructed by the system. To answer this question, I looked for key essences that describe tensions between policy and practice from a selection of key policy documents and from different educational experiences. I finally wanted to learn about the idea of future for the Maltese secondary education system, particularly how this is promoted in policy and how the idea of future in Maltese education could be conceived by who experiences education at face value.

Here I will be explaining the fundamental tensions that came out from history, policy analysis and interviews. Mainly the predominant notions of value and inclusivity and their significance towards the process of reforming the Maltese education system. These key terms have been at stake in the Maltese education debate for a long time and it is clear that that the understanding of value and inclusivity is misaligned and therefore making it difficult to effect change in the Maltese education system.

RQ 1 What main characteristics have shaped the Maltese education system?

Historically the Maltese education system has struggled to communicate to education stakeholders what is meant by valuable and inclusive education. These two terms keep resurfacing as problematic in every initiative/policy/reform that the Ministry has wanted to adopt since Malta's independence. However, it is clear that problems created by the implementation of a valuable and inclusive structures of education are deeply rooted in conservative ideologies.

The utilitarian dimension of education. Policy makers have tried to find balance between the educational needs of the individual student and the needs of the Nation, such as industry demands and international statistics. This resulted in on-going changes in Maltese education to achieve a valuable and inclusive education for all,

but without much significant impact. Initiatives in the past, such as the National Minimum Curriculum and the Learning Outcome Framework, brought significant changes in policy with the idea to instil more awareness of value and inclusivity. Other initiatives, such as the introduction of Comprehensive Education, which although policy-wise was considered to be a major game-changer in making the Maltese education system more equitable, did not convince stakeholders sufficiently that it is the way to go, resulting in failure to move away from conservative education practices.

A competitive culture and attitude in education. Historically, education in Malta has tried to provide students valuable and equal opportunities. However, it fails to establish a system that welcomes this principle because of a common belief amongst stakeholders, particularly teachers, students and parents, that school exam results are expected to be comparable with or better than others. The persistence of competitiveness impacts on the possibilities to reform Maltese education. This was evident in reforms which tried to introduce systems to reduce focus on terminal examinations by introducing formative teaching and assessment procedures. This change has been historically controversial because the idea of ‘good education’, is tied to competitive attitudes. Particularly when comparisons of exam results are drawn to justify teaching, homework, learning abilities and performances. To reform Maltese education in the ways the Ministry is currently proposing also means reducing competitive attitudes. However, it is clear that not everyone is ready to make such a shift.

Lack of dialogue. Historically, the Ministry’s drive to achieve an effective education system has created a significant communication gap with those who experience education on daily basis. This created a lack of trust between authorities and education front-liners which kept re-surfacing when education reforms were introduced by the Ministry. Unless effective channels of communication are established to create space for debate for all stakeholders to share their views on change, reform in Maltese education will continue being a controversial site of disagreements.

RQ 2: How are contemporary notions of educational standards, value and experiences constructed by the Maltese education system today?

The interviews conducted in this research clearly show that the objective of providing a valuable and inclusive education in Malta is still a terrain of controversy and disagreement. As a result, policy objectives promoted by the Ministry to reform education whilst agreed upon on paper fail at implementation phases.

Addressing failings. It is clear that proposed reforms set out to address various failings in the system such as relevance of content and poor student performance. These issues kept resurfacing in both the policy analysis and interviews. It is clear that policy makers and stakeholders share a common belief that the current education system has its flaws and should change its purpose. However, it is also clear that

there is a stark difference between the Ministry's prioritisation of a system that delivers results in-line with international standards and the pedagogical priorities of those who experience and deliver education on a daily basis. I argue that the Ministry needs to stop trying to seduce stakeholders to agree to what the Ministry believes how a valuable and inclusive education should be. Unfortunately, teachers and parents will carry on arguing that although the current exam-led system has its limitations, it would be better to keep it rather than introducing a new system whereby parents and teachers cannot see how its logic and how it acknowledges achievement.

Achieving parity. The Ministry policies also instil the importance of fair learning and assessment for all, yet there is no clear direction of how this could be implemented. The Ministry mobilises issues of parity of esteem to communicate the need to reform the current exam-driven system, referring to a history of low student performances that can be agreed upon by many that need to change. However, as discussed above, the history of Maltese education also shows how competitive attitudes amongst stakeholders are strongly rooted in the parents, students and teachers' sense of achievement and from the qualitative data collection it is still evident this remains the case. This, then, proves to be a major cultural challenge for the Ministry to reform the system unless stakeholders are willing to change their competitive mentalities. I argue that such a change in culture may take a long time to happen. However, a more transparent approach by the Ministry in policy making and implementation can help ensuring all stakeholders to feel part of the reform. Therefore, there should be a long-term strategy to more explicitly explain what is meant by parity of esteem to young people, parents and teachers. This would include examining what the Ministry's vision is, how it could be achieved and how it is translated into day to day educational practices of course development, teaching pedagogies, homework and assessment. All education stakeholders should have opportunity to participate in this debate rather than have parity of esteem mobilised by policy makers to sell the idea of the need of reform.

RQ 3. What is the future of secondary education in Malta?

The Ministry uses the idea of progress rhetorically in policy to promote the future of Maltese secondary education and yet it is unclear what is meant by 'progress' in real-life practice. Particularly, what are the pedagogical implications of progress communicated by the Ministry? This is making it hard for everyone to identify with the idea of progress in schools and take the necessary leap to implement the necessary changes in schools.

Tone of voice. Qualitative Interviews revealed a complex mindset from the participants about progressiveness and how this should be featured in the future of education in Malta. The idea of progress is often opposed by traditionalist comparisons which reveals how the idea of progress is positioned with a betrayal of the past which not everyone is willing to do, at least up to this point. This particularly happens when the Ministry insists through policy how the education system is out-

dated and failing to progress would make the Maltese education redundant. I argue that this tone of voice has its drawbacks because it suggests that current teaching practices are also redundant. Therefore, by implication, the work of teachers, parents and students' work at home and the SEC are redundant. This tone of voice increases conflicts which result in a lack of trust between school front-liners and authorities which can only be solved through dialogue and collaborative implementation processes.

Political rhetoric: Policy links progress to broad terms such as growth, widening participation and employment. This makes the idea of progress from the Ministry sound like a political reform rather than an educational one to those who experience secondary education every day. This creates mixed-messages amongst stakeholders about the purposes of the proposed reform and unless concrete discussion and explanation of the purpose of the new reform are in place it will be hard to be agreed upon and implemented.

Reform as a disempowering exercise: Although it is stated in policy that consultancy with education stakeholders is a central aspect in the development of the proposed reform, teachers, students and parents feel that they are alienated from this process. Therefore, implementation of reform is seen as a disempowering exercise to those who experience secondary education every day. If consultation with stakeholders is not addressed critically by authorities, I argue that the future of Maltese education will still be characterised by issues of mistrust between those who propose change and those who need to implement it.

7.2 My Contribution:

This is the first time that qualitative research has explored underpinning tensions of educational reform in Malta by exploring how and why education reforms in Malta seem to be agreed upon in principle but not in practice. What came to light through this research is that the debate on reforming Malta's secondary education does not stop at solving statistical failings such as problems of ESL; instead it revealed how multifaceted are the issues, and how deeply rooted are the traditions that characterise the Maltese secondary education system. Value and inclusivity are particularly problematic ideas. One might have expected that the main reason why the Maltese education system is unable to reform comes from resistance by education stakeholders to agree to proposals brought forward by education authorities. But my contribution through this research shows how the inability to reform the Maltese secondary education is not that simple. For example, one of the key factors that creates impediments to reform is failure of effective communication between education authorities and education front-liners. Another key factor is the different understanding of key terms that characterise the principles of change such as value and inclusivity. This incoherence has made it difficult for policy to be implemented in Malta's secondary education in the past and also in the present.

In the absence of data that describes the experiential factors that lead to high rates of early school leavers in Malta this study claims a stance about the need towards a shift in mentality and in attitude on how policy and curricular matters should be addressed by policy makers and other educational stakeholders. This research designed, developed and provided an academic platform for different top-down and down-up voices from various perspectives expressing multi-discursively what the challenges of curricular reform are in policy and in practice. This study has shown how a multi-discursive research approach can connect policy with people, that facilitates a better work flow between policy and teaching practice.

7.3 Recommendations:

The Ministry:

1. In this research it was identified how conservation of traditional education principles are still considered by education front-liners as the 'safest' option compared to the progressive type of education promoted through policy. The Ministry of Education needs to provide teachers, school head teachers, parents and students more opportunities to identify the benefits of the system that they are proposing.
2. The study identified trust issues between education authorities and those who experience education on daily basis. This issue can only be addressed if the Ministry provides effective mechanisms to enable dialogue amongst stakeholders. The Ministry needs to ensure that opportunities for discussion are truly at the centre of the consultation strategy promoted in policy.
3. This study has also outlined how difference of opinion about what constitutes a valuable and inclusive education in practice is halting the reform. The Ministry needs to create space for dialogue to debate about these principles and how they can realistically be achieved in schools and at home.
4. It was established in this research how the Ministry wants to introduce progressive measures in education but without any significant shifts in the system's hierarchical order. One simply cannot announce the need for progressiveness in schools without empowering schools and professionals with curricular powers. The Ministry needs to empower schools and education professionals with curricular decision-making powers if education in Malta is truly to become progressive as communicated through policy.

Schools

1. In this research it was identified how effective dialogue amongst stakeholders needs to be central to the debate on change in Maltese education. Schools need to have an active role in coordinating space for such a debate to take place so that teachers, parents and students can have an active voice in the debate.
2. It is evident from this research how teachers, students and parents feel mis/non-informed about the benefits and processes of formative teaching

and assessment. Therefore, schools should coordinate training opportunities for all education front-liners. Training needs to be attractive and feasible so participants can join.

3. Clearly, the policy objectives cannot be implemented unless curriculum changes as well. It is not enough to employ education professionals and experts to develop syllabi in-line with the policy objectives. Schools need to have an active role in this process so syllabi could be developed for a realistic implementation within the needs, limits and resources that schools can cater for.

Teachers

1. This research established how hard it is for teachers to commit to change, even though many agree change is needed. Teachers need to take on any training opportunity to learn how their practice could change and adapt to current educational needs.
2. It is clear that secondary education in Malta suffers from lack of learning engagement because teaching methods are perceived by students as traditional, safe and conservative. This might suit the learning preferences of some but not of many. Teachers need to advocate for change and to encourage more student engagement. In order to do so teachers need to be open to a liberal teaching philosophy.
3. Interviews with teachers revealed a sense of pride towards their students' achievements. Although this is not a bad thing, achievement should not focus only at a level of exam attainment. Teachers should also celebrate other types of achievement such students' growth in personality and artistic accomplishments.
4. It was established in this research how opportunities for teachers to voice pedagogical opinions are limited. Teachers need to take every opportunity to voice pedagogic/curricular concerns and ideas during dialogue sessions with education authorities. Any change in the system cannot be effective unless the implications of change are understood by who will be spearheading change. In this case teachers cannot act passively and wait till change happens. There should be active involvement from the teachers as to be part of the developmental processes.

Parents and students

1. This research has revealed how parents and students do not have enough voice in education policy. However, they cannot sit and wait for things to happen. Parents and students should actively engage in discussion with their teachers and school administrators to communicate their views and how they are coping with the demands of the system.
2. It is clear that from the parents and students' viewpoint, value in education is understood very differently from those who propose change in education. The idea of value in education from parents and students seems to focus on

ability of achieving positive SEC exam results. Parents and students need to be open to other forms of value in education, such as; critical thinking, cultural appreciation, artistic skills, sports and growth in personality. This will encourage policy makers to understand the wider scopes of education.

3. It is also clear how parents and students have competitive attitudes. These attitudes can also override other learning priorities of education as discussed above. Competition can be healthy but not at the expense of eliminating other fundamental principles of education, such as; cultural and social wellbeing.

SEC

1. As the idea of empowering schools is clearly on the agenda of policy, SEC needs to provide mechanisms of standardisation. This should not mean that SEC should employ teachers to do the work (as is currently the case) but to provide mechanisms to standardise course content and assessment processes that could be developed by the schools for the schools.
2. It is clear that the SEC has a gatekeeping role regarding validity of SEC examination processes. The role of the SEC should change from assessment watchdog to a consultant, helping schools developing content and type of assessment in light of the learning outcomes framework.
3. It is also evident from this research that there are a lot of transparency issues when it comes to content development and assessment. SEC should provide channels of communication for consultation with schools regarding effective assessment without imposing how assessment should happen.

Future research

1. Researching past and current issues of quality, standards, principles and practices in the Maltese secondary education has clearly provided foundations for further debate about how secondary education could change towards a better future. It would be worth using the methodological framework of this study as a basis for other future studies focusing on specific areas in Maltese education such as specific schools, problematic households or even specific levels of education.

Myself as a researcher

1. It is important to use results from this research in publications to increase awareness about the need of more dialogue and debate about the future of Maltese secondary education.
2. As discussed in the methodology chapter of this thesis, interpretative studies about the Maltese education system are limited in Malta. Therefore, the results revealed in this study from perceptions of who experiences education in Malta on daily basis should be shared with Maltese Education Authorities

to understand in more depth why the proposed reform fails to be implemented.

3. A post-doctoral research project could also potentially emerge from this study focusing on identifying more key areas within Maltese education system that require closer engagement with education stakeholders.

7.4 Reflective Postscript

Through this study I unveiled a portrait of factors that drive the idea of progress and change in Maltese secondary education and how these actually hold back progress. It is clear that we are stuck in a repetitive cycle of announcements about reform, and the failure to implement reform. Unless we do things differently it seems unlikely that progress will take place.

As I was finishing this thesis, yet another example that crystalises this problem appeared: a consultation document entitled 'Early Leaving from Education and Training - The Way Forward 2020 – 2030 (MEDE 2021). It represents, again, a political agenda driven by obsession to reduce ESL numbers even though it is known that arguments around the causes of ESL are deeply rooted, complex and multifaceted. Despite this, a 'new' strategy will be in force (post-dated from 2020) to ensure that numbers of ESL are reduced and in-line with European standards as stated by the Minister during the launch. It also represents a tendency to continually issue policy regardless of successful implementation – this new strategy appears just two-thirds into the ten-year education strategy that was previously published by the Ministry in 2014, and analysed in this research. It could be argued that policy in Malta is fetishized in the absence of results.

My fear is that the drive to solve the problem of ESL will once again overshadow the need to recognize and understand the root causes of this problem.

This study is a step towards recognizing deeply-rooted problems caused by the ideals of progress and change when efforts are made by stakeholders to make education better in Malta. A good place to start this journey is in establishing a good framework for dialogue and consultation for all stakeholders, and this study outlines how this framework can be achieved.

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Appendix 1 Adult Participant Agreement Form

Version: 2
Ethics ID number: 26353
Date: 16 August 2019



Adult Participant Agreement Form

Full title of Project: **'Quality, standards, principles and practices: An investigation into ideological conflicts in Maltese education'**

Name, position and contact details of researcher: Ian Attard, Doctorate Degree in Education at Bournemouth University, Media Senior Lecturer and Coordinator at MCAST Institute for the Creative Arts. Email: iattard@bournemouth.ac.uk

Name, position and contact details of supervisor: Dr Mark Readman, Faculty of Media & Communication. Email: mreadman@bournemouth.ac.uk

To be completed prior to data collection activity

Section A: Agreement to participate in the study

You should only agree to participate in the study if you agree with all of the statements in this table and accept that participating will involve the listed activities.

I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet (v2) and have been given access to the BU Research Participant Privacy Notice which sets out how we collect and use personal information (https://www1.bournemouth.ac.uk/about/governance/access-information/data-protection-privacy).	
I have had an opportunity to ask questions.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can stop participating in research activities at any time without giving a reason and I am free to decline to answer any particular question(s).	
I understand that taking part in the research will include the following activity/activities as part of the research: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• being audio recorded during the project	
I understand that, if I withdraw from the study, I will also be able to withdraw my data from further use in the study except where my data has been anonymised (as I cannot be identified) or it will be harmful to the project to have my data removed.	
I understand that my data may be used in an anonymised form by the research team to support other research projects in the future, including future publications, reports or presentations.	
	Initial box to agree
I consent to take part in the project on the basis set out above (Section A)	

Appendix 2 Participant Agreement Form for Children



Participant Agreement Form for Children

Research title: 'Quality, standards, principles and practices: An investigation into ideological conflicts in Maltese education'

Name of researcher: Ian Attard Email: iattard@bournemouth.ac.uk

Please tick the boxes you agree with:

☐

I am happy to take part in the research.

☐

I understand that I do not have to take part in this research, and I can change my mind and stop taking part at any time before the research activities at the school are completed.

☐

If I am in being interviewed, I am happy for the researchers record the discussion, and I understand that the recording will only be kept until it's no longer needed.



to

☐

I understand that my name will not be used in any of the research reports.



Your name

Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

Signature

Name of Researcher

Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

Signature

Thank you 😊

Appendix 3 Parent/Guardian Agreement Form

Version: 2
Ethics ID number: 26353
Date: 16 August 2019



Parent/Guardian Agreement Form

Full title of Project: **'Quality, standards, principles and practices: An investigation into ideological conflicts in Maltese education'**

Name, position and contact details of researcher: Ian Attard, Doctorate Degree in Education at Bournemouth University, Media Senior Lecturer and Coordinator at MCAST Institute for the Creative Arts. Email: iattard@bournemouth.ac.uk

Name, position and contact details of supervisor: Dr Mark Readman, Faculty of Media & Communication. Email: mreadman@bournemouth.ac.uk

To be completed prior to data collection activity

Agreement to participate in the study

You should only agree to participate in the study if you agree with all of the statements in this table and accept that participating will involve the listed activities.

I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet (v2) and have been given access to the BU Research Participant Privacy Notice which sets out how we collect and use personal information (https://www1.bournemouth.ac.uk/about/governance/access-information/data-protection-privacy).	
I have had an opportunity to ask questions.	
I understand that my child's/legal ward's participation is voluntary. I can stop my child's / legal ward's participation in research activities at any time without giving a reason and my child/legal ward is free to decline to answer any particular question(s).	
I understand that my child's/legal ward's involvement in the research will include the following activity/activities as part of the research: <ul style="list-style-type: none">being audio recorded during the project	
I understand that if my child/legal ward withdraws from the study, I will be able to withdraw my child's/legal ward's data from further use in the study except where my child's/legal ward's data has been anonymised (as my child/legal ward cannot be identified) or it will be harmful to the project to have my child's/legal ward's data removed.	
I understand that my child's/legal ward's data may be used in an anonymised form by the research team to support other research projects in the future, including future publications, reports or presentations.	
	Initial box to agree
I consent my child/legal ward to take part in the project on the basis set out above	

Appendix 4 Adult Participant Information Sheet

Version: 02
Ethics ID number: 26353
Date: 16th August 2019



Adult Participant Information Sheet

Research project:

'Quality, standards, principles and practices: An investigation into ideological conflicts in Maltese education'

Introduction

We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. If there is anything that is unclear, or if you would like more information, please do not hesitate to make contact with one of our team. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to participate.

The research is being carried out by Ian Attard, currently reading for a Doctorate Degree in Education at Bournemouth University, UK, supervised by Dr Mark Readman, Faculty of Media & Communication.

What is the purpose of the project?

This project is exploratory, and I'm keen to understand from pupils' and learning stakeholders' views about the idea of what impacts pupils' performances in the SEC examination today. This project is part of a bigger research that is seeking to understand the nature of Maltese pupils' poor performance in formal examinations and why this is happening. Through this project I would like to know more about: 1) The nature of education performances in a Maltese formal learning settings today; 2) Main perceptions of pupils and learning stakeholders about the preparation phases for the SEC examination; 3) Personal views about the dominant forms of measuring education performances in the Maltese formal learning settings by pupils and learning stakeholders; 4) The current relationships between education performance results and the Maltese education policymaking.

☐

Why have I been chosen?

We are asking you to take part because of your professional role in Maltese education; your experiences and thoughts will be invaluable for this study.

Do I have to take part?

No, – it is up to you to decide to join the study.

If you agree that you can take part, we will then ask you to sign an Agreement Form.

You will be given a copy of this information sheet and the signed agreement/assent forms to keep for your records.

You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time, without giving a reason. Once the interview has been completed, you may still be able to withdraw your data up to the point where the data is anonymised (when you can no longer be identified).

What would taking part involve?

☐

Appendix 5 Child Participant Information Sheet

Version: 02
Ethics ID number: 26353
Date: 16th August 2019



Child Participant Information Sheet

Invitation

From recent reports we know that in the past recent years there hasn't been much improvement in the SEC Maltese Language examination pass rates. We would like to talk to you, parents/guardians, teachers and other decision makers to learn about what might be the main challenges for you whilst preparing for the SEC Maltese Language examination so we can try and help things to get better.

Why have I been chosen?

You are being invited to take part because you are a form four student who is currently studying for the SEC examinations. Your experiences and thoughts about this subject and examination are very important for this study.

Do I have to take part?

No, – it is up to you to decide to join the study.

If you agree that you can take part, we will then ask you to sign an Assent Form.

You will be given a copy of this information sheet and the signed assent forms to keep for your records.

You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time, without giving a reason. Once the interview has been completed, you may still be able to withdraw your data up to the point where the data is anonymised (when you can no longer be identified).

What do I have to do?

If you decide to take part I'll ask you to meet with me at your own school and at your convenience on one occasion for an interview that can last up to one hour. The interview will be audio recorded for research purposes and the questions/points are:

- About your preparation for the SEC exam at school;
- The aspects of this preparation that you feel is really good or not;
- The best experiences you ever had when learning any subject in the SEC and why;
- What things would you change in the SEC and why;
- Why do you think that achieving a pass in the SEC examination is important for you, for the people who are important to you, for your future and for the country that you live in.

What are the advantages and possible disadvantages or risks of taking part?

There shouldn't be any disadvantages or risks to you, and although I can't guarantee any benefits, I hope it might be useful/interesting for you to engage in an interesting interview discussion about your experiences preparing for the SEC examination.

Appendix 6 Parent Participant Information Sheet

Version: 02
Ethics ID number: 26353
Date: 16th August 2019



Parent Participant Information Sheet

Research project:

'Quality, standards, principles and practices: An investigation into ideological conflicts in Maltese education'

Introduction

We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. If there is anything that is unclear, or if you would like more information, please do not hesitate to make contact with one of our team. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to participate.

The research is being carried out by Ian Attard, currently reading for a Doctorate Degree in Education at Bournemouth University, UK, supervised by Dr Mark Readman, Faculty of Media & Communication.

What is the purpose of the project?

This project is exploratory, and I'm keen to understand from pupils' and learning stakeholders' views about the idea of what impacts pupils' performances in the SEC examination today. This project is part of a bigger research that is seeking to understand the nature of Maltese pupils' poor performance in formal examinations and why this is happening.

Why have I been chosen?

We are asking you to take part because of your role as a parent; your experiences and thoughts will be invaluable for this study.

Do I have to take part?

No, – it is up to you to decide to join the study.

If you agree that you can take part, we will then ask you to sign an Agreement Form.

You will be given a copy of this information sheet and the signed agreement form to keep for your records.

You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time, without giving a reason. Once the interview has been completed, you may still be able to withdraw your data up to the point where the data is anonymised (when you can no longer be identified).

What would taking part involve?

The study involves asking questions about the idea of what impacts pupils' performances in the SEC examinations today. The questions I will ask you are:

- a. What do you think about the current SEC examination and whether it adequately addresses the pupils' needs today?

Appendix 7 Parent/Legal Guardian Information Sheet

Version: 02
Ethics ID number: 26353
Date: 16th August 2019



Parent/ Legal Guardian Information Sheet

Research project:

'Quality, standards, principles and practices: An investigation into ideological conflicts in Maltese education'

Introduction

We would like to invite your child/legal ward to take part in a research project. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. If there is anything that is unclear, or if you would like more information, please do not hesitate to make contact with one of our team. Take time to decide whether or not you want your child/legal ward to take part.

The research is being carried out by Ian Attard, currently reading for a Doctorate Degree in Education at Bournemouth University, UK, supervised by Dr Mark Readman, Faculty of Media & Communication.

What is the purpose of the project?

This project is exploratory, and I'm keen to understand from pupils' and adult learning stakeholders' (a parent, a teacher, a school administrator, a SEC examination official and an education policy maker) views about the idea of what impacts pupils' performances in the SEC examination today. This project is part of a bigger research that is seeking to understand what might be the key issues that motivate Maltese pupils' poor performance in formal examinations and why this is happening. Through this project I would like to know more about: 1) the preparation phases for the SEC examinations; 2) assessment processes in the SEC examinations.

Why has your child/ legal ward been chosen?

We are asking your child/legal ward to take part in this study because of his/her current experience in preparation for the SEC examinations; their experiences and thoughts will be invaluable for this study.

Does my child/ legal ward have to take part?

No, – it is up to you and your child to decide to join the study.

We will explain the study and go through this information with your child/legal ward. If you agree that your child can take part, we will then ask you to sign an Agreement Form. If your child/legal ward is able to understand the research and is also happy to take part, he/she will be asked to sign an assent form with you, if they want to.

You will be given a copy of this information sheet and the signed agreement/assent forms to keep for your records.

You and your child/legal ward are free to withdraw from this research project at any time, without giving a reason. Once the interview has been completed, you and/or your child/legal ward may still

Appendix 8 Research Proposal

'Quality, standards, principles and practices: An investigation into ideological conflicts in Maltese education'

Research Proposal

Background:

This research study focuses on the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC), Malta's National formal examination system that operates as a gateway for pupils to progress from secondary to post-secondary education. In 2015, The Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC) Examinations Board called out for further studies that aim to research further into the nature of poor performance in the SEC examinations;

"Why is this happening? Is it because of the boys' low esteem? Low expectations? Other reasons? Only systematic qualitative research, which is beyond the scope of this report, can answer these questions." (MATSEC, 2015).

MATSEC's call for action triggers specific research methods aimed at exploring subjective experiences and developing an understanding of the factors influencing pupils' poor performance in the SEC examinations. Since experiences are complex and subjective in nature, there is opportunity to view the problem from multiple perceptions (Dixon-Woods et al. 2006) and from varied types of sources that can provide the basis of new and reflective understanding of this problem.

The SEC Core examinations will be seen as a case study in this research because in recent years (MATSEC 2015, 2016, 2017) examination statistic reports show that there has been minimal improvement in performance amongst pupils who sit for the (SEC) Core examinations. The SEC core subjects within the SEC examination system and pupils' poor performance in these examinations create a substantial amount of debate within the Maltese learning community (Bezzina, 1991; Sultana, 1992; Cutajar et al., 2013) on how these subjects should be taught, developed, managed and examined. To this effect, this study sees pupils' poor performance in these specific subjects as a problem that warrants a case study to systematically understand why this is still happening in light of current education policy developments that are currently taking place to bring change to the current examination system. The objective is to go beyond the scope of the examiners' statistical reports and National surveys and to learn about the nature of this problem from the experiential views of the pupils and other learning stakeholders (parents/teachers/examiners) and try to establish what motivates poor examination performances in the SEC examinations. This case study research seeks to answer the following research question;

How are notions of practice and theory constructed by the Maltese education system?

The objective of this research question is to collate from first-hand perspectives about how the dynamics between theory and practice of Maltese education impacts upon pupils' performances today. In order to answer this research question the following shall be explored:

- The nature of education performances in a Maltese formal learning setting today;
- Perceptions of pupils and learning stakeholders about the preparation phases for the SEC Core examinations;
- Personal views about the dominant forms of measuring education performances in the Maltese formal learning settings by students and learning stakeholders;
- The current relationships between education performance results and the Maltese education policymaking.

This study applies a specific methodological framework that looks at the problem from various perspectives through a qualitative and systematic research.

Appendix 9 BU Ethics confirmation email

Dear Ian,

Thank you for applying for Bournemouth University [ethics](#) approval.

Following the review of your Research [Ethics](#) Submission by two members of the BU Research [Ethics](#) Panels, I am pleased to inform you that you have been granted approval to conduct this research. The approval is made with the following condition:

- The personal storage device to be used is password protected and meets BU [information security policies](#), data protection requirements and any other stipulations made by the MEDE REC.

Should you need to make any modifications to your project e.g. request an extension, increase of planned recruitment of participants, requests for [Amendments](#) should be made via the online [ethics](#) checklist.  requests will be considered by the Panel Chair and approved by Chair's Action. Changes cannot be implemented until relevant approvals are in place.

I have approved your checklist online and have attached it alongside the final versions of your amended documents. Please note I have changed the versions to version 1, given these documents have not yet been used.

If you have any further questions, please get in touch and best of luck with your research.

Best wishes



Bournemouth University
M402, Melbury House, 1 – 3 Oxford Road, Bournemouth, BH8 8ES

T: (01202 9)61073

To keep up to date on Clinical Governance @ BU – visit the [clinical governance website](#)
To keep up to date on Research [Ethics](#) @ BU – visit the [research ethics website](#)

Appendix 10 MREC Ethics confirmation letter

DIPARTIMENT GHALL-KURRIKULU, TAGHLIM
TUL IL-HAJJA U IMPJEGABILITA'
FLORIANA FRN 1810



DEPARTMENT FOR THE CURRICULUM, LIFELONG
LEARNING AND EMPLOYABILITY (DCLE)
FLORIANA FRN 1810

Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability

Tel: 25982743

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY

Date: 3rd September 2019

Ref: R07-2019 003

To: Head of School
From: Director

Title of Research Study: *Communication as Education: An exploratory study of factors influencing pupils' Performances in the Malta's SEC examinations.*

The Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability would like to inform that approval is granted to **Ian Attard** to conduct the research in State Schools according to the official rules and regulations, subject to approval from the Ethics Committee of the respective Higher Educational Institution.

The researcher is committed to comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research. The researcher will be sending letters with clear information about the research, as well as consent forms to all data subjects and their parents/guardians when minors are involved. Consent forms should be signed in all cases particularly for the participation of minors in research.

For further details about our policy for research in schools, kindly visit www.research.gov.mt.

Thank you for your attention and cooperation.

Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability

Director
Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability
Great Siege Road | Floriana | VLT 2000



MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

MINISTERU GHALL-EDUKAZZJONI U X-XOGHOL
MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Appendix 11 Sample of Coding stage 01

Independent School – Student High achiever

Transcript	Codes	Themes
<p>Interviewer: Can you give a bit of background about who you are as a student? #00:00:22-8#</p> <p>Interviewee: So, the subjects I chosen are physics, computing and History, History is my favourite because I really enjoy the subject and the way it falls into place sort of, How everything develops and computing I chose it more because of a job thing, I would like to get into that field and physics because you have to choose physics and biology and I don't really connect with Biology in the same way as I do with Physics #00:00:58-2#</p> <p>Interviewee: I think I want to further my education a few steps and then go to work. At post-secondary school I would like to stay into the sixth form at St. Martin's and then University probably in Malta but maybe abroad, I'm not sure yet. I would like to specialise in Physics and computing #00:01:50-9#</p>	<p>History is my favourite subject</p> <p>I chose computing because of a job thing</p> <p>you have to choose physics</p> <p>I want to further my education a few steps</p> <p>I would like to specialise in Physics and computing</p>	Objectives
<p>Interviewer: I am interested in hearing about preparation for the SEC, Particularly for the SEC Core exams.</p> <p>Interviewee: As you said they are very important and I think that puts a lot of pressure on me, because they are important and rightly so, But sometimes I feel that while the atmosphere is good and it needs to be that way sometimes it can be overhyped if that s the right word, You know this big looming presence that you are going to get to eventually but in reality of course I haven't got to there yet but from how I see it is something that they have been building us up and we will have the abilities to face, As for specifics with me, English I'm ok with because my father is English and I've spoken the language throughout my life but the opposite is true for Maltese language, I've always struggled with that, I am using that as an example there will be specific subjects that for every individual have even more weight besides because they have a particular deficiency in that area, In terms of hype I would say at home, not personally, but I have heard from other people that their parents put a lot of pressure on the exam results, test results and especially the</p>	<p>they are very important</p> <p>puts a lot of pressure on me, because they are important and rightly so</p> <p>sometimes it can be overhyped</p> <p>this big looming presence that you are going to get to eventually</p> <p>something that they have been building us up and we will have the abilities to face</p> <p>English I'm ok with because my father is English</p> <p>but the opposite is true for Maltese language</p>	Pressure

Appendix 12 Sample of Coding Stage 02

Second cycle

Themes	Major Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Communication & Outreach <input type="checkbox"/> *Accountability <input type="checkbox"/> Decision Making <input type="checkbox"/> Fairness <input type="checkbox"/> *Student Learning Styles <input type="checkbox"/> Self-confidence <input type="checkbox"/> Growth <input type="checkbox"/> *Recognition <input type="checkbox"/> Relationships <input type="checkbox"/> Consultation <input type="checkbox"/> Power and Control <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional vs Professional labour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Empowerment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Investment <input type="checkbox"/> *Student Learning Styles <input type="checkbox"/> The SEC Reform <input type="checkbox"/> Unclear Directions <input type="checkbox"/> *Summative vs Formative <input type="checkbox"/> Change <input type="checkbox"/> Way Forward 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Assessment <input type="checkbox"/> Purpose <input type="checkbox"/> Relevance <input type="checkbox"/> *Recognition <input type="checkbox"/> Standards and Credibility <input type="checkbox"/> Competitiveness <input type="checkbox"/> Fair System <input type="checkbox"/> Significance <input type="checkbox"/> Perceptions <input type="checkbox"/> *Summative vs Formative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Value
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Alternative Teaching Methods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Pedagogy

Appendix 13 Policy maker interview confirmation email

25/02/2021, 15:08

RE: [EXTERNAL] - Ian Attard - Doctorate research interview

Mon 03/02/2020 08:49

To: Ian Attard <iattard@bournemouth.ac.uk>

Cc: [REDACTED]

Dear Ian

Thanks for your email. Yes of course. Please liaise with [REDACTED] to find a day and time for the interview

Best regards

[REDACTED]
Office of the Director General
Department for Curriculum, Lifelong Learning & Employability

[REDACTED]
www.education.gov.mt | www.publicservice.gov.mt

MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Kindly consider your environmental responsibility before printing this e-mail

GREAT SIEGE ROAD, FLORIANA, MALTA

From: Ian Attard <iattard@bournemouth.ac.uk>

Sent: Monday, 03 February 2020 07:10

To: [REDACTED]

Subject: [EXTERNAL] - Ian Attard - Doctorate research interview

Dear [REDACTED]

Good morning, how are you?

Hope all is well. As you might know I am currently reading for my Doctorate degree at Bournemouth University, UK.

I would like to kindly invite you to help me carry out my final research for my Doctorate study.

My project is exploratory, and I am keen to understand your views about the idea of what impacts students' performances in high stakes examinations today. This project is part of a bigger research that is seeking to understand the nature of Maltese students' poor performance in formal examinations, particularly at the end of compulsory education, and why this is happening. Through this project I would like to know more about:

- 1) The nature of education performances in a formal learning setting today;
- 2) Main perceptions about the exam preparation phases during the end of compulsory education;
- 3) Personal views about current dominant forms of measuring education performances in Malta and the future of Maltese education ;
- 4) The current relationships between education performance results and the Maltese education policy making.

My study is qualitative in nature and requires an interview with you. The interview will be fully anonymous.

The interview can be a maximum of 45minutes in duration. This will ideally be done at your office and at your convenience perhaps on one occasion only. The interview will be audio recorded for research purposes only, further ethical information and consent forms will be sent to you including an information sheet and approval form.

I will be very happy to discuss this in more detail with you and/or any of your assisting colleagues to ensure a smooth process and gain the best possible outcomes from this opportunity.

Thank you and hope to hear from you soon.

Wishing you a good day,

Ian

99019645

Ian Attard

EdD Doctorate Researcher
Bournemouth University (UK)

Appendix 14 SEC Administrator interview confirmation email

25/02/2021, 15:09

Re: Ian Attard - Doctorate research interview

Wed 05/02/2020 09:56

To: Ian Attard <iattard@bournemouth.ac.uk>

Dear Ian,

I would be happy to help. Can you propose some dates please?

Regards

MATSEC Support Unit

On Mon, 3 Feb 2020 at 08:55, Ian Attard <iattard@bournemouth.ac.uk> wrote:

Good morning.

Please allow me to introduce myself, my name is Ian Attard, I lecture media at MCAST and currently reading for a Doctorate degree at Bournemouth University, UK.

I would like to kindly invite you to help me carry out my final research for my Doctorate study.

My project is exploratory, and I am keen to understand your views about the idea of what impacts students' performances in high stakes examinations today. This project is part of a bigger research that is seeking to understand the nature of Maltese students' poor performance in formal examinations, particularly at the end of their compulsory education, and why this is happening. Through this project I would like to know more about:

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Thank you and hope to hear from you soon.

Good day,

Ian

99019645

Ian Attard

EdD Doctorate Researcher
Bournemouth University (UK)