

## PROFILES OF EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS

### WORLD-WIDE

# Educational Assessment in Malta\*

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### Introduction

Education in Malta [1] came into its own in the post-war era, when compulsory schooling was introduced in 1946. Prior to that, educational provision had generally lagged behind when compared to developments in the UK and mainland Europe. An educational structure had gradually evolved by the middle of the 19th century, with a Director of Elementary Schools being appointed in 1844. Pedagogy was taught at the University, a model school for the training of teachers was established, and a number of influential reports were commissioned by the British (e.g. the Storks Report of 1865 and the Keenan Report of 1880) with a view to facilitating educational development. But as has been argued in detail elsewhere (Sultana, 1992), the local conservative power blocs were not persuaded that their interests were best served by the extension of an elementary education to all.

Important expansion of the educational services took place following the 1924 Compulsory School Attendance Act, but the law in fact applied only to those who actually began attending primary school and who, on admittance, were compelled to persevere till they were 14 years of age. It was not until 1947 that mass elementary schooling came into its own, a century after it had been established in most European countries, through the passing of the Compulsory Education Ordinance. Secondary schooling for all was introduced, initially on the British tripartite model, in 1970, and educational expansion in Malta is currently taking place in the post-secondary and higher education sector, which now caters for 60% and 16% respectively of each age cohort.

Key features identifying the Maltese educational system and closely related to the issue of assessment can be presented systematically as follows.

\*This article draws on a more detailed account of Malta's secondary-level assessment which appeared in Sultana (1998).

- An overwhelming reliance on the UK for educational models, policy-making strategies, textbooks and expertise. There have been occasional attempts to search for inspiration from mainland Europe, particularly during the post-war and post-independence periods, as well as presently, given the political and psychological pull that a unifying Europe exerts on a country that has close economic and cultural affinities with the continent.
- A centralised state education system, plagued by a heavy-handed bureaucracy that is constrained by early 20th century civil service rules (Darmanin, 1990; Farrugia, 1992; Fenech, 1994). National Minimum Curricula and a Teachers' Code of Ethics, for instance, were issued by the Minister of Education in 1988 without much consultation with teachers or parents (Wain, 1991). The tradition of top-down policy-making has, over the past two decades, been challenged by an intensification of the rhetoric of popular and direct democracy, the devolution of power to local authorities, and an emphasis on dialogue and participation with the grass roots through school councils (Sultana, 1994a).
- A stratified and selective state school system which practises 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. Such practices tend to direct the best material and human resources to the highest achievers instead of those most in need (Sultana, 1992; Farrugia, 1995), and contribute to a culture of competitive achievement that exalts testing and examination above the needs and development of the child (Sammut, 1995; Mansueto 1997).
- Extensive educational services that have had to expand at a very rapid rate as Malta has integrated itself into the modern world economy in a relatively short time-scale. The rapid expansion has put a severe strain on local human and material resources, to the extent that important and promising innovations have tended to fizzle out due to the inability of the country to match widening provision with increased and continued resourcing. Because of these dynamics, depth has often to be sacrificed for breadth (Sultana, 1997a).
- A strong private school system, catering for close to 30% of students (i.e. 24,000 pupils), and consisting of independent and Catholic church schools. The latter are heavily subsidised by the state, following an agreement in 1991 whereby expenses of church schools were to be met by the government in return for the transfer of the church's land property to the state. Policies adopted in private schools severely constrain the latitude of the state education sector in developing its own educational vision, and have generally contributed to the intensification of inter- and intra-school streaming, selection and channelling strategies (Sultana, 1995).

#### *The Assessment System in Malta: an overview*

While compulsory schooling commences at age 5 in Malta (see Fig. 1), over 90% of all 3-year-old children are in kindergartens, where the emphasis is on structured play. Pupils start being formally assessed at the end of the fourth year of primary

schooling, at age 8. From this point till the end of the first cycle at age 11, tests in five core subjects—Maltese, mathematics, English, religion and social studies—are set by each school for the mid-year examination, and centrally by the Education Division for the final year examinations. Some private schools use profiling systems, with grades obtained throughout the year contributing to an end-of-year examination mark. Both profiling and continuous assessment are becoming increasingly attractive to a larger number of educators and state school administrators, whether centrally or in schools (Mifsud, 1991), with parents lobbying through the Association of School Councils in favour of such practices. Results of end-of-year examinations are used to stream pupils from Year 4 till Year 6, and then to distribute students to prestigious grammar-type junior lyceums, or to area secondaries. Pupils who obtain below an average 15% across all subjects are channelled to ‘girls’ schools’ or ‘boys’ schools’ (also known as ‘opportunity schools’), which offer a remedial primary curriculum.

Assessment at the secondary school level follows a similar pattern, with mid-year examinations being set by each school, and final examinations by the central authorities. In theory, secondaries do not practise intra-school streaming, but many do in fact organise their students in ability groups. The least achieving are channelled towards vocational schools at the end of the third form, at age 14 (Rotin, 1997). Some private schools are known also to advise unsuccessful students to transfer to the state school system (Mifsud, 1994). Mobility between types of schools is possible in principle, but few such movements take place in reality, and students tend to remain in the track to which they have been allocated. Formal assessment at the primary and secondary level is therefore rather more summative than formative in scope, though examination results are also used as a basis for discussion of progress with children and their parents, through written reports and orally at Parents’ Day meetings.

Access to most non-manual occupations in Malta is regulated by certificates obtained at the end of secondary and post-secondary schools. Such certification has traditionally been awarded by a body outside the school proper. While heads of schools have, for instance, provided a ‘School Leaving Certificate’ to those finishing their final compulsory year of schooling, testifying to the progress of a student during his or her school career, such a practice carries little weight in the labour market, and is not at all recognised by gatekeepers to post-compulsory education. The more achieving students following technical/vocational options in trade schools sit for local trade and journeymen’s examinations set by appropriate boards established principally by the 1952 Industrial Training Act. Following a recent reform of the trade school sector, vocational students are being offered a more general and broadly based curriculum. The strategy to weaken the differentiation between general and vocational students has not succeeded in attracting the latter to sit for the ‘academic’-type examinations generally attempted by the former.

Sixty per cent of students proceed to post-compulsory education and training at the end of fifth form studies on basis of the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC), which will be described in detail below. The majority go to the Junior College or to a private sixth form in order to prepare for the Matriculation, which gives them

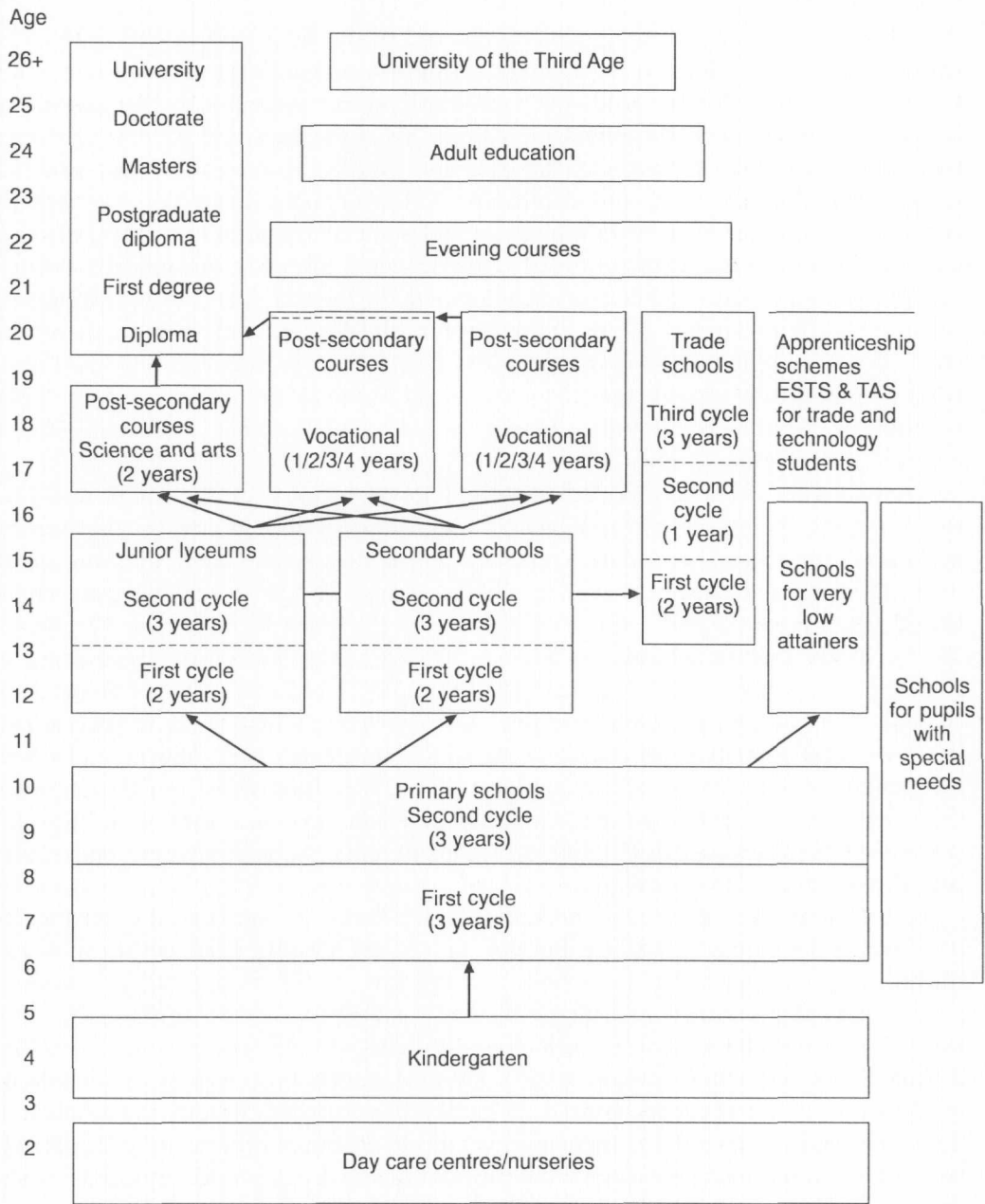


FIG. 1. The state system of education in Malta (note: the size of the boxes does not represent the number of students in the sector/at the level). This figure is reproduced courtesy of P. Attard.

access to the University. The rest go to a number of vocationally oriented schools, among them technical institutes which prepare students for examinations run by the City and Guilds of London Institute and which award them an Ordinary and then Advanced Technicians' Diploma (OTD and HTD). Sixteen per cent of each age

cohort goes to university, most commonly through the sixth form track. There is only one university in Malta. It presently caters for close to 7000 students, and offers most disciplines within a modular unit system. Students have to obtain a number of credits for units taught each year, and proceed up to the end of 3-, 4- or 5-year degrees, when they graduate after sitting for a final examination which, in some cases, is synoptic. Dissertations are a required component of most honours degrees, and multi-modal assessment strategies including student presentation, field projects and the keeping of portfolios and reflective diaries—are encouraged in some faculties.

## **Secondary School Examinations**

### *Evolution of the Examination System*

In the 19th and up to the middle of the 20th century, the Malta Matriculation (i.e. 'maturity') examination regulated entry to the University of Malta. Students had to sit a number of subjects in one session, and had the possibility of resitting failed subjects in later preparatory sessions. At the end of the 19th century, English School Certificate Examinations run by Oxford and London Universities were also introduced. These new credentials could be used to access government posts such as teaching, as well as occupations in private industry. However, the Matriculation remained compulsory for access to the University until the 1950s, when the British examination system adopted the General Certificate of Education (GCE) at 'Ordinary' (O) and 'Advanced' (A) levels (Zammit Mangion, 1992). The British reform was adopted wholesale in Malta, so that the Matriculation examinations were phased out with the exception of a few subjects such as Maltese and religion, and later Italian and Arabic. Maltese students sat for either the Oxford or London University examinations, although in the 1960s science students began sitting for examinations set by a new UK examining board, the Associated Examining Board (AEB).

This almost total dependence on British examinations and certificates can be explained in a number of ways. First, Malta did not have the personnel and the wherewithal to compete with the expertise available to the GCE Boards, in terms of test design, setting of papers, marking and the evaluative research that ensures high standards. Added to that, emigration as well as study abroad began to feature highly in post-war Malta, when an estimated 137,000 left the Maltese Islands between 1946 and 1974 (Attard, 1994). GCE O and A levels provided international currency which Malta Matriculation examinations could then never hope to match. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the setting and marking of papers in far away England gave GCE examinations a legitimacy which local examinations could not have, not only because of a prevalent colonial mentality, but also because distance assuaged fears regarding the leakage of papers prior to exam sessions, or regarding preferential marking in a micro-state context where everybody knows everybody else, and most people seem to be related to each other.

This does not mean, of course, that GCEs were perceived by the public in a totally

positive light. In the first instance, these examinations have represented a veritable financial burden on families and the state, with each student sitting for between eight and 10 subjects at O level, paying well over a third, and in many cases over a half, of a family's monthly income. GCEs also exercised a substantial drain on the foreign currency that had to be paid, a sum that Zammit Mangion (1992, p. 354) calculates as being close to £1.5 million annually. In addition to this, strong nationalistic feelings in post-independence Malta, together with a Labour government policy to wind down privileged relations with the UK, led to frequent criticisms of cultural imperialism in the educational sector, with the GCE examinations being the most tangible proof of the island's dependence on its previous colonial masters.

For a long time, however, the ability of the GCE examinations to respond to concerns about standards, international recognition and 'fair play' meant that the negative aspects associated with having foreign external examinations which were not sensitive to local realities or cultural sensibilities and aspirations were, at the end of the day, endured. The UK GCEs had such a strong legitimacy locally that, as Zammit Mangion (1992, p. 354) points out, no government was willing to tamper with them in any way, to the extent that the Maltese 'never fully exploited the facilities which the English examining boards would have been ready to provide to tailor their examinations (even through "special papers") to Maltese needs'.

#### *Changes in the UK Examination System and Maltese Reactions*

The situation might well have continued in this manner had there not been a reform in the UK examination system in the 1980s, which saw a merging of the GCE examination with the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) through the introduction of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). The CSE had been developed in the UK to cater for students with low academic ability, so that the top grade of a CSE examination was equivalent to the lowest GCE O level pass mark. The CSE had never been adopted in Malta, and therefore the earlier reforms in the UK had not had any repercussions on the local education system. However, the GCSE was predicated on a new set of criteria that were not quite consonant with educational policy and practice in Malta. GCSE thus shifted from 'norm' to 'criterion' referenced testing; it introduced coursework and teacher assessment as part of the examination system; it reformed syllabuses and curricula to make them more responsive to perceived UK needs; and it ensured that each student would leave school with some kind of record of achievement (Broadfoot, 1986, 1989). Together with other assessment initiatives which included records of achievement, graded assessments and modular accreditation systems, the GCSE represented a manifestation of a 'growing consensus that quite new principles need[ed] to be enshrined in certification procedures. The traditional examination emphasised recall of knowledge, external assessment, the ranking of pupils one against another and, perhaps most important of all, the provision of information suitable for selection' (Broadfoot, 1989, p. 85).

After studying the new examination system, the Maltese Department of Edu-

cation decided not to adopt the GCSE mode, especially since UK examining boards opted to continue offering GCE examinations to overseas students and centres. For one thing, the new examinations were tailor-made to respond to British needs, and the weighting given to oral assessments and to coursework required extensive collaboration between local teachers and English examining boards, a difficult and complex new challenge to respond to given the culture of centralisation that then prevailed. The fact that Malta could not accommodate UK reforms, however, did highlight the need for the island to develop its own system of examinations, one which reflected local education developments that included the promulgation of a new Education Act in 1988 and a National Minimum Curriculum for the various levels of education in subsequent years. In fact, in 1988 a board was set up informally at the University, with representatives from academic staff and the Department of Education, and was given the task by the Rector to devise a different examination system, based on the International Baccalaureate philosophy. The board worked in parallel with the official Matriculation Board, until a year later when the two boards were amalgamated to form a Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate Examinations (MATSEC) Board, which was charged with the task of developing an examination system which would, in due course, replace the foreign GCEs at both O and A levels, and which reflected the shift in educational philosophy. The new examinations were therefore to:

- privilege achievement rather than selection (a trend more generally promoted, for instance, by postponing streaming to the later years of the primary school, and diminishing the exclusive selective nature of the junior lyceums, Malta's academic secondary schools);
- give more importance to subjects that did not make up the core 'academic' curriculum;
- cater for a wider ability range of students (while the GCEs catered for about 20% of students, the new examinations were to cater for 80%); and
- widen access to post-secondary and tertiary education to bring Malta on a par with European levels.

### *The Present Examination System*

The MATSEC Board set up in 1989 is now responsible for two exams, the Secondary Education Certificate Examination (SEC) aimed at 16-year-old students at the end of their compulsory schooling cycle in the fifth form, and the Matriculation examination, catering for sixth form students. The Board, made up of representatives from the University, the Education Division, the Private Schools' Association and the Malta Union of Teachers, is backed up by a Support Unit. Key personnel are the co-ordinators of the academic and administrative divisions of the Support Unit, the Principal Test Construction Officer and the Principal Subject Area Officers for Arts and Science. The latter are directly responsible for the Subject Panels, which devise syllabuses, set papers and mark scripts. A brief overview of the

most salient details relevant to the two examinations are presented below. A more detailed account of the mechanics of the system is available in Sultana (1998).

### *The SEC Examination*

Presently, and since June 1992, secondary school students have the option to sit for either the new SEC examinations put into place by the MATSEC Board, or the GCE (foreign) examinations, which have been allowed to continue as an alternative credentialling route. While the UK GCSE has not been adopted locally, it would be fair to say that the 'spirit of GCSE' (Brown & Wilde, 1988) has been very much behind local initiatives, with a brochure advertising the SEC examination practically quoting GCSE documents when claiming that its philosophy is to reward candidates on the basis of 'what they know, what they understand, and what they are able to produce' (SEC Brochure, n.d., Matsec Board, University of Malta, p. 5). The GCSE has also been influential in terms of syllabuses set and the structure of operations. This is understandable given that Malta does not have the human or material resources to carry out all the preparatory research and the constant evaluation of the system to ensure progress from year to year. Such progress can only be ensured by looking closely at a dynamic system and adapting it to local needs.

As with the GCSE, the SEC examinations differ from the previous GCE examinations. They give access to post-secondary courses and are intended to certify all students finishing the 5-year secondary education course. Thus, while previously only about 20% of the total number of students in each age cohort used to sit for GCEs, the new SEC examination caters for about 80% of the cohort, and (theoretically) includes students from trade schools, who generally tended to finish 11 years of schooling without any formal credentialling since they were not prepared for GCEs and were therefore automatically excluded from the university track (Sultana, 1992, 1994b).

Like the GCSE, the new examination grades students on a wider range of attainment (1–7), with the higher grades (1–5) being necessary for students to be eligible for sixth form, post-secondary and university entrance. Initially the intention had been to have one 'graded' paper for each subject, with questions becoming increasingly difficult to cater for the higher ability student. The 'new format' SEC examination opted, however, for two 2-hour papers in each subject, with Paper 1 being common to all students, falling within the ability range of all candidates, and in most cases including an aural/oral/practical/coursework component. Paper 2 entails a choice to reflect different abilities. Teachers, given their knowledge of students, are expected to be in a position to advise students whether to attempt Paper 2A or 2B.

The SEC examination is considered to facilitate a mode of teaching which develops students' ability to 'recall information, to present knowledge in an organised manner, to use verbal and practical skills effectively, to investigate material, to use initiative in problem solving, to apply skills, knowledge and understanding, and to undertake curricular projects' (SEC brochure, n.d., Matsec Board, University of Malta, p. 6). The change in the philosophy and approach to examinations can be



seen in the importance that the SEC gives to a practical component—project work and oral assessments in scientific and language studies respectively—and in the inclusion of coursework as part of the total SEC examination assessment, contributing up to 15% of the total marks. The change is also signalled by the fact that teachers are responsible for assessing their own students on all three new dimensions, though their assessment is moderated by a Markers' Panel appointed by the University.

#### *The Matriculation Certificate Examination*

The examination relevant to students completing their sixth form studies also features strongly in the reforms, reflecting a new conceptualisation of education such that 'requirements for entry into the University [have been] adapted to conform with the new pattern of education that is being generally adopted in Europe and elsewhere at the post-secondary pre-tertiary level ... This pattern requires all students to show competence in a language, a human studies subject, a science subject and possibly a technology or applied arts subject, as well as evidence of aptitude to integrate the different subjects in as personal and creative a fashion as possible' (*MATSEC Board Newsletter*, no. 37, October 1994). This reflects Malta's current educational policy, as evident in the 1988 National Minimum Curricula, which is based on the premise that individuals are more likely to develop into mature persons if their studies comprise subjects chosen from both science and humanities.

The key to the reforms at the Matriculation level is an understanding of the shift from English-type to a continental European/international baccalaureate-type examination. The former has prevailed in Malta up to the present, and consists of 'specialisation in depth', where pupils study three or four subjects drawn from one of three groups, namely the humanities, the sciences and the social sciences (cf. Husén *et al.*, 1992, p. 237). These types of A levels had been introduced in Malta in the late 1950s and, as in the UK, were regarded as standards of excellence, the foundation of university degree courses and the best means for selection for higher education (Muscat, 1995). The English answer to the broader continental curriculum consisted in the introduction, in 1989, of Advanced Supplementary examinations. These were to be taken in conjunction with A levels, and required half the teaching and study time though retaining the same level of difficulty and attainment. Students could replace one of their A levels by two or more Advanced Supplementary subjects. This innovation was never imported to Malta, and, as Muscat (1995) points out, the only effort to broaden the sixth form curriculum has been through the introduction of the inter-disciplinary systems of knowledge.

The examination reforms at this level now propose a further broadening by adopting a system akin to the international baccalaureate. Subjects at the Matriculation Certificate examination are taken at two levels, advanced and intermediate, in order to allow a certain degree of specialisation in any one of the four areas in which the subjects have been grouped, even though the examination is to be considered as one whole. Candidates are required to take two subjects at advanced level and three at intermediate level, together with systems of knowledge, which was introduced in 1989 in order to extend students' cultural capital and to bring in an interdisciplinary

approach to learning. The advanced level Matriculation is equivalent to previous A level examinations, while the intermediate Matriculation requires about a third of the study time estimated to be necessary to reach advanced level after the attainment of the SEC. The overall grade is based on performance in the examination as a whole.

#### *Local and International Recognition*

The new local examination system has had to prove itself both at the local and the international level. Despite initial problems, and despite the lack of sufficiently qualified staff to monitor and evaluate the new system, it does seem as if the 'indigenisation' of examinations has been a successful project, with the number of pupils opting to take foreign-based examinations steadily decreasing. Errors that have been committed in administering the system, while heavily criticised by the public, have not quite jeopardised the MATSEC examinations' credibility. That credibility has been reinforced by studies which show that students sitting for both local and foreign examinations in the same subject tend to do as well or as badly in both, which suggests that Maltese examinations are pegged at the same standard as the UK-based ones. In addition, parents and students are reassured about the validity of the new examinations since the certificates awarded locally 'do the trick', i.e. they do give students access to further education and to employment. Given equivalence agreements with the Council of Europe, UNESCO and similar organisations, local credentials also give access to foreign universities, an important consideration since many students go abroad for postgraduate studies. Despite the fact that the new examinations have achieved a fair degree of credibility and recognition, it is relevant to point out a number of challenges they have to address. In this context, I will single out those features that are, to a greater or lesser extent, dictated by the small scale of the island of Malta.

#### **Examinations in Small States**

'Scale' tends to be one of the crucial variables that influence social action (or stasis), and hence tends to determine which course of action, from a range of strategies and alternatives that are available, one in fact does 'choose' (Farrugia, 1991; Bray & Packer, 1993). Small social units like Malta tend to be characterised by high visibility, accessibility, under-resourcing, role overload and limited research capability. The fact that citizens generally know each other—not only because they are often related in some way or other, but also because social interaction cannot be avoided—affects the extent of credibility that examinations have with the public. Parents, students and teachers are more apt publicly to criticise and denounce mistakes committed by people they know, and by education authorities that are as accessible as they are visible. Tight community networks allow citizens to communicate their ideas, requests and complaints to the appropriate officials quickly and often personally, with individuals or groups gaining advantage over others depending on the strength of the personal or work-related links they have with those running the examinations. Like most small states, Malta has very restricted bases of

human and material resources, but it has to provide the same *range* of educational services that are offered in much larger countries drawing, however, on a population base that is far from being proportionally similar. The demands on financial and human resources are therefore relatively more acute in small states, and this has implications for the quality of the service offered, as well as for the extent of implementation of the planned innovations. Intimately related to the resourcing challenge is that of role overload, or what is often referred to in the literature on small states as 'multifunctionality' of personnel. Demands related to the examination system increase, but often the human and financial resource base is not broadened to take this increase into account. As a result, personnel end up concentrating on maintenance rather than evaluation. The key concern is to put the system in place and to keep it going, with little time, energy or resources left to carry out evaluative research in order to spot problems, monitor progress and improve overall performance.

### **Conclusion**

Malta is the only small state in the Commonwealth that has indigenised its secondary and post-secondary level examination system. It has not opted to follow the example of the Caribbean Examinations Council or the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment and develop regional examination systems. This is largely due to the fact that geographical and cultural distances between it and Cyprus and Gibraltar, for instance, make such a venture complex and unlikely to prosper. Despite the constraints that size imposes, and the apparent lack of alternatives available to small island groups, Malta has succeeded in setting up a promising and independent examination structure which has set into motion synergies positively affecting various aspects of the local education system. The new examinations have given Maltese policy-makers the opportunity to be more autonomous in establishing an organic and holistic vision for educational practice on the islands; they have encouraged the development of curricula and textbooks that take local culture and realities into account; they have expanded the professional roles of teachers, who are partners in the assessment of their own students; and they are likely to modify the traditional and deeply engrained pedagogical culture of magisterial lesson delivery. They have effectively put a stop to a massive annual haemorrhage of foreign currency that Malta could ill-afford to service. They have, moreover, achieved credibility among parents, teachers, students and employers, and are exchangeable on the world market of credentials.

On the basis of these achievements, and in part in reaction to them, a number of developments in the assessment field can be ascertained. There is an increasing awareness that the MATSEC structure needs to be more thoroughly monitored and evaluated, and indeed, a research team of postgraduate students is looking closely at several aspects of the secondary and post-secondary examinations. A new emphasis on 'what is learnt' rather than 'what is taught', and therefore on outcomes rather than provision (Wain *et al.*, 1995), has led to an interest in profiling and portfolio-type assessment strategies, and in comparing levels of achievement in different areas

of the curriculum with those obtained in other countries, particularly through participating in International Association for Educational Assessment studies. The projected reform of the 16-plus education sector has, as one of its main goals, the establishment of a parity of esteem between the vocational and general tracks. There is, therefore, the intention of setting up a system of Malta Vocational Qualifications, which have comparability with academic qualifications, and which can lead directly to tertiary-level studies (Ministry of Education, 1997). Increasingly, too, employers are putting pressure on the education system to provide profiles of competencies ('what one can do'), rather than general certification ('what one knows') (see Sultana, 1997b). Workers who wish to access higher levels of education and to improve their promotion prospects are also asking for systems that give academic credit to prior experiential learning. It would therefore be correct to say that the series of changes and reforms that have marked the assessment field in Malta over the past decade are far from over, and that further developments can be expected over the next few years.

### Note

- [1] Malta is made up of a group of small islands, two of which are inhabited. The larger island, Malta, has a population of around 349,000, while Gozo's population is around 29,000. The archipelago covers a surface area of about 316 square kilometres, and lies 93 kilometres to the south of Sicily and 290 kilometres to the north of the African coast. Malta's position in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea and its natural harbours have invited a number of colonial powers—the Carthaginians, the Romans the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Normans, the various houses of Spain, the French and finally the British—to take possession of the islands. Malta obtained its political independence from Great Britain in 1964, and was declared a republic 10 years later.

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