

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALTA

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The legacy

'[The] shared history of permeability to globalisation forces, of domination and peripheralisation is therefore bound to have had an impact on the form, pace, and direction of the region's educational development...' (Sultana, 1999:15).

Development in the peripheral island state of Malta is a clear case study of the persistent impact of external agents and the subservient role of local institutions as 'policy-takers' in the wake of exogenous initiatives. A country with hardly any commercially exploitable resources and without presenting any physical obstacle to sea-based invasions, Malta and its people have had no geographical, economic or cultural hinterland to which to retreat and from which to entertain notions of self-reliance and national identity (Busuttil, 1973; Spiteri, 1997). Colonial penetration has been deep, total and millennial: the Maltese cannot envisage a time when they were not located within the economic and political circuitry of a larger, regional power. Benevolent dictatorship or fiscal sponsorship has been typically preferred in relation to the dangerous risks of 'going it alone'. Indeed, the island's economic psyche as a rentier state revolves perennially - and nervously - around the injection of outside finance - foreign direct investment; tourist currency; and, more recently, the titillating promise of European Union Structure and Cohesion Funds (Vella, 1994; Baldacchino, 1998).

The demographic basis for such a condition is not difficult to consider. Malta today is the second most densely populated state in the world, beaten only by Singapore. Almost 400,000 citizens seek to survive on a semi-desert rock formation of just 315 square kilometres which is bereft of natural water supplies, has a poor topsoil and equally poor contiguous fishing grounds. That the Maltese survive, and survive rather well, bears testimony to their ingrained, historically learnt ability to tap the external. The external agent, in turn, has been able - at times willingly, at other times begrudgingly - to somehow meet these expectations.

Malta's economic and political history for many centuries has been a question of extracting value from foreign sources for local use and consumption. The building of its Baroque capital city, Valletta, from scratch with European funds after 1566 - an antecedent to the EU Structural Policy? - was a wise move capitalising on an upbeat Christian Europe thankful to Malta for halting and

defeating a massive Turkish invasion force. The Knights of St John - in their own way, a medieval, theocratic version of the European Union - transferred largesse from their European lands, and from their own, or delegated, corsairing sprees, to Malta for two and a half centuries (Mallia Milanese, 1992: 125). Britain, the last colonising power, was soon obliged to purchase the loyalty of the Maltese by effectively subsidising the local economy, from the 1830s to 1979 (Baldacchino, 1988). It has been essentially big government, playing host to foreign investment in manufacturing and the deployment of tourism industry, along with mass emigration, which have collectively enabled the Maltese to propel their externally dependent fortress economy into a 'post cold war' era where strategic location can no longer be cashed in.

Impact on education

The relationship between this legacy and educational development is an intimate one. The very foundation of what is today the University of Malta in 1592 - the oldest tertiary education institution in the British Commonwealth outside Britain - is to be understood as part of the building of Valletta and the attraction of foreign funding for this noble cause (Maxwell, 1980). Schooling under the British was mainly in the interest of co-optative acculturation, as well as a means of recruiting literate workers into the lower echelons of the burgeoning civil service (Pirota, 1997). The initiative to develop adult literacy skills has been very closely tied to the acceptability of the Maltese as settlers to countries which had been targeted as potential destinations for Maltese emigrants (Zammit Marmarà, 1997; Vancell, 1997). The bitter and long drawn out 'language question' - concerning the supremacy of either the Italian or the English language - was a front for the attempted ascendancy of a particular, new economic middle class over a traditional, clerico-professional bourgeoisie (Frendo, 1979; Pirota, 1997). And the emergence of technical, vocational education in the early 1970s was also closely matched to the perceived exigencies of the foreign manufacturing investor (Sultana, 1992). Note that, in all these debates, the arguments for or against anything local were not a priority and any gains for Maltese identity and language were typically unintended or secondary consequences.

Another effect of these developments is that education has become widely recognised as a key instrument for occupational, if not also social, mobility in Malta. One reason for this is because the quantity and quality of certification has become a legitimate instrument for sifting job applicants, even where the aptitude being certified may not be even remotely related to the job in question.¹ A second, less obvious, explanation is because the interaction with fellow students and other

peers may - in a small social universe where it is fairly easy for people to know each other or to know someone else who does - foster those social networks which may eventually translate into informants, contacts, gatekeepers and patrons - all useful tools for landing a desirable job.²

Focus on the university

Higher education in Malta is almost the exclusive responsibility of the University of Malta. Apart from a vocational Institute for Tourism Studies,³ all tertiary and various post-secondary education programmes,⁴ not to mention other initiatives,⁵ operate under the aegis of the *Alma Mater*. This is a situation which has come about rather abruptly over the last decade and represents a sea change in the role which the University of Malta has been expected to play in the national context.

Where a university is financed by public funds, it must always somehow justify its funding through its contribution to the economic, social and cultural life of the nation. All the more so in a small jurisdiction where the University enjoys a practical monopoly in higher education and where the institution can easily tower head and shoulders as much in political prioritisation as in social prestige.

Compulsory primary education was only introduced in Malta in 1946; secondary education was extended to all as from 1970. State education was free, being paid for by indirect taxation, and this exemption from fees was extended to the University of Malta as from 1970.

The 16-year spell of a Labour Government propelled a series of radical reforms which sought to orient the educational institution more closely to the needs of the economic infrastructure. Tertiary education was envisaged as requiring a rupture beyond the high status, traditional professions, solidly protected and reproduced on campus; and more explicitly vocational courses were launched, with new faculties of education, health care, dentistry, engineering and business established.

Reforms and counter-reforms

Most notable of these reforms was the so-called 'student-worker scheme' at University, and its equivalent 'pupil-worker' scheme at post-secondary level. Both of these entailed a system of 5½ months of study and 5½ months of work during each year of full-time tertiary education. Students were sponsored by their employer - entry to University was also conditional on clinching such a 'patron'

- and received a salary, thus ensuring that no one would dismiss tertiary education because of financial hardship. In return, undergraduates entered into a contract to work for their sponsor for a set number of years after their graduation. This sponsorship system was meant to ensure the availability of jobs to graduates, dispelling the spectre of graduate unemployment, while obliging all undergraduates to spend time at work, thus discouraging elitism and fostering a respect for all types of work, manual or otherwise.

Parallel to these reforms, a Technician Apprenticeship Scheme (TAS) was also piloted in 1981. The idea was to extend the education-work partnership to vocational, post-secondary education. A combination of theory-oriented learning and hands-on practice over a number of years was meant to produce a crop of technically qualified journeymen.⁶ An Extended Skills Training Scheme (ESTS) followed suit in 1990, providing a similar arrangement but at a lower, craft level of academic and technical competence.

The student worker and pupil worker schemes met vicious criticism: they clamped down savagely on access to University education reduced the academic content of courses; introduced a rigid and mechanical form of graduate manpower planning which was difficult to work in any context, let alone in a small and open labour market which depends to a large measure on flexibility. Postgraduate degrees were effectively embargoed; entry to other courses was restricted by means of a *numerus clausus*; the Faculty of Theology was forcefully privatised and the non-vocational Faculties of Science and the Humanities were closed down. An ebb of just 1,680 students enrolled at University was reached in 1984. This represented an abysmally low rate of participation by the 18-24 age cohort in tertiary education in Malta, compared to other countries.⁷

Nevertheless, these reforms did usher in a change of perspective - and perhaps of culture - which survived the re-foundation of the University by the Nationalist Government when this returned to power in 1987. The concept of 'waged students' and the financial independence which it generated amongst a growing cohort of post-16-year-olds was also politically and economically difficult to contain. The end result is that, the student-worker and pupil-worker sponsorship scheme became, after 1987, a stipend. The fiscal handout remained while the obligations to rope in an eventual employer and work for part of the year with the same were summarily dispensed with. The stipend was transformed from a payment for labour into an incentive to encourage post-secondary and tertiary education.

The incentive appears to have worked: along with the lifting of the *numerus clausus*; the re-foundation and re-integration of the Faculties of Science, Humanities and Theology; the number of students enrolling for tertiary education shot up dramatically.⁸ The options available for further study also increased: over

60 different degree and diploma courses are now being offered, from 10 Faculties and 18 other Institutes and Centres ; the student population had grown to 6,500 by 1996. While there were only 250 graduating students in 1988, there were 1,250 in 1995.

Of course, the increase in the student population has also meant that the number of stipend beneficiaries has expanded to suit, with significant strains on the public purse. Successive governments have sought to somehow manage this issue, while fully cognisant that the stipend was also a form of national investment in human capital, a social benefit and an instrument of financial independence for youth.⁹

Implications of expansion

The very rapid increase in student enrolment in higher education carries a series of other implications. The first effects have already been felt on the campus itself. The lack of lecturing space, limited library facilities and resources, the demand for more lecturing staff, the expansion of curricula ... these have already met with some response in terms of recruitment, new and upgraded facilities and classrooms, new departments and institutes to cater for new disciplinary and interdisciplinary areas of knowledge and research.

A second, more serious, wave of effects are now being felt by the world of work. The student boom is now being translated into a boom of graduate labour supply. The change in the quantity and quality of the graduate 'product' has been having significant effects on the small local labour market. Herewith are the most salient ones, as emergent from empirical research:¹⁰

The spectre of graduate un- and under-employment. Whereas there was not a single unemployed graduate in summer 1993, more recent years have seen a few scores of graduates registering for work. The issue is a complex one, since graduates would tend to be looking for job opportunities which match fairly closely to their education, especially if they have pursued vocational courses such as education, management, accountancy or law. Furthermore, various graduates - particularly from Engineering and Science courses - who do land jobs nevertheless complain that their current duties are essentially routine and/or administrative and therefore unchallenging, even frustrating and de-skilling. In reaction to these complaints, employers are quick to point out that graduates tend to have entertain unrealistic and grossly inflated expectations about the nature and content of work. Essentially, employers argue, it is up to the graduate employees to prove their salt by adding value to their existing employment and increasing the element of enterprise and challenge therein.

Conflicting interpretations of the importance of being a graduate. Indeed, employers consistently insist that simply having a degree is no automatic passport to a good job and a good salary. While graduates may assign a lot of discretionary value to their paper certificate *per se*, employers are more on the look out for such attributes as motivation, experience, leadership, flexibility, discipline, perseverance, and the ability to deploy analytic, social and communicative skills. When graduates are employed, it is either because there is no choice - as in the case of warrant holding posts - or else because their qualification is taken to represent a command of the essentially non-academic criteria outlined above.

Some graduates are more equal than others. The increase in the nation's graduate stock has not been distributed equally. In spite of policies enacted to render the route to tertiary education blind to internal societal differentiation, there remains evidence that the equalisation of tertiary education opportunities has not occurred.¹¹ First of all, the fashionable, upper middle class areas of Attard, Balzan and Lija have the highest relative concentration of graduates in the population; in sharp contrast, the declining working class towns along the southern rim of the Grand Harbour, traditional sites for port services and ship-repair, enjoy a graduate density which is a staggering 20 times less. Turning to gender, the male to female student ratio has now stabilised at a rough 1:1; but female students remain concentrated in the faculties of education, arts and health care; and various female graduates claim that their gender has been an obstacle towards the pursuit of desirable jobs. Finally, a distinct inter-generational transfer exists in relation to certain graduate professionals, as is the case with graduates from the Faculty of Laws. One third of sampled Law graduates have at least one parent or one elder sibling who is already in the profession. Access to higher education, it seems, is clinched not only on the basis of achieved but also ascribed criteria.

The relative disregard for self-employment. In certain courses, such as Law, Dentistry, Pharmacy, Accountancy and Medicine, it has been fairly common to find graduates taking up private practice as self-employed individuals or as members of some partnership. Apparently, the attraction of such an employment status may be dwindling, given the greater competition in the job market which reduces the likelihood of sustainable self-employment. This in turn, increases the pressure on major employers, particularly the state, to open up employment opportunities for graduates. It is a pity that the percentage of self-employed graduates is much less than that for the whole Maltese working population, suggesting that higher education is stifling, rather than fostering, those entrepreneurship skills which become even more crucial in an open and liberalising economy. Sampled graduate workers from all faculties complain that the University of Malta's weakest contribution to their occupational competence has been in the area of the development of creativity and initiative.

Merit versus seniority. A much larger number of graduates seeking employment increases the likelihood that such graduates land super-ordinate jobs; this means that non-graduates who would have otherwise gone up the ranks and obtained promotion mainly on the basis of competence plus seniority have suddenly found their career paths thwarted, or at least challenged, by typically younger and less experienced but more qualified individuals. So far, the tension has not escalated, because many of those who have to decide the balance between these two criteria of selectivity are themselves not graduates. Once those responsible for selection and recruitment become themselves graduates, they are likely to assign a different, higher weighting to academic credentials.

More hands-on education. Sampled graduate workers claim that their own independent work while at University - assignments, dissertations, research work and seminar presentations - proved to have their greatest contribution to their working lives. Lectures, lecture notes, tests and examinations scored least. Such statements indicate the value of practical oriented learning and confirms the importance of such pragmatic pursuits as practicums, placements, extra-curricular credits, site visits and case studies in one's university education. The value of such activities increases when one notes the fiercer competition for jobs in the graduate labour market and how the lack of work experience translates as the major obstacle to young graduates seeking employment.

Conclusion

The magnitude and the rapidity of the shifts and changes undergone recently in the field of higher education in Malta, laid out over the smorgasbord of a small and sensitive labour market, carry crucial implications for those involved, whether on the demand or supply side. Clearly, the number, nature and profile of jobs in the local Maltese economy is substantially a techno-economic given and not an issue at the discretion of local policy makers. This enhances the importance of a generalist educational programme which postpones, as much as possible, the early channelling of individuals into hard-and-fast, specialist, narrow, job-related competences. It also highlights the importance of flexibility as a key component for a survival strategy.

The opening up of Central and Eastern European economies to foreign investment is attracting foreign capital which could have otherwise considered Malta for its manufacturing location. Furthermore, the need to rein in the state's burgeoning budget deficit to sustainable levels, the liberalisation of the hitherto protected domestic market and the streamlining of the public and parastatal sectors

via the privatisation of management and/or of assets, are collectively likely to usher in a period of high structural unemployment. Ironically, it may be to selective emigration and/or to self-employment that the Maltese labour force may have to turn in the near future as a response to these consequences of painful restructuring. Higher education, then, must bear a major responsibility to equip individuals with the skills and cultural orientations necessary to take up such options and manage them successfully.

Notes

1. This relates to the phenomenon of 'qualification inflation' (Mallia, 1994; also Cáchia, 1994), whereby 'individuals may be asked to attain qualifications which are above the demands made by the task' (Rizzo, 1994).

2. See Baldacchino (1993). The importance of education for occupational mobility in Malta was empirically deduced by Boswell (1982).

3. The University of Malta *did* attempt to take over the ITS in the early 1990s, but without success. Nevertheless, ITS does not grant degrees and its students have to proceed to the University of Malta for a topping up final year course to qualify for a University of Malta degree.

4. Other exceptions here relate to higher degrees awarded by foreign universities like Maastricht (The Netherlands) or Henley (Brunel University, UK) and which are run by private educational organisations, often in collusion with University of Malta staff!

5. These include the National Swimming Pool Complex, a score of research centres and institutes, a subsidiary University of the Third Age -U3A- and, for some time, the building of a massive hospital.

6. Yes, many of those who benefit from these schemes are men. The very low relative number of females who follow vocational courses in Malta - unless they are related to either health care, pre-school education or secretarial work - remains a moot issue. Female participation in the Technician Apprenticeship Scheme amounted to less than 4% of the total participation in 1994/1995 (Ramboll Report, 1996- Main Report, Table 6.7 & Annex IV, p.5).

7. According to the 1985 National Census, only 3,500 Maltese had a University degree or better (COS, 1986, p.79). This amounts to a paltry 1% of the Maltese population.

8. The number of graduates had shot up to 19,000 by 1995 (Abela, 1998: 52) and is still rising. The University of Malta has projected a student population of 8,000 in 1999/2000 and of 8,285 in 2000/2001.

9. The short-lived Labour Government (1996-1998) cut down on the value of stipends, introduced a fixed value irrespective of the course or year being followed, and introduced a loan scheme supported by the local banks; the re-elected Nationalist Government (elected in 1998) extended the stipend to all post-secondary and tertiary students, but maintained the fixed nature of the stipend. The Student Stipend Scheme Commission (1999) has also recommended that stipends would *not* be revised in line with inflation for at least 5 years and has hinted at the introduction of fees, even if notional ones. Government has not as yet committed itself on these sore points.

10. The research consisted in two sets of semi-structured, fact-to-face interviews held in summer 1993. The first was with a stratified random sample of workers who had graduated from the University of Malta between 1986 and 1992. The second was with the respective employers, personnel managers and/or heads of department of the sampled graduates. For full details of the survey results and the methodology deployed, consult Baldacchino *et al.* (1997).

11. Sultana (1995) argues that some 25% of University students come from what may be broadly defined as working class backgrounds, even though that sector represents some 56% of the total Maltese occupational cluster.

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