

'Do we really value education?' Dean of Education asks



UOM's Dean of the Faculty of Education Professor **SANDRO CARUANA** speaks to **Joanna Demarco** about salary increases, home-schooling, longer obligatory school hours, and how changes in the education system need to work hand-in-hand with quality.

The decline in teachers is an issue currently under discussion. How has the number of teachers declined?

It's a complex issue. If you see the number of students who are interested in teaching today compared to the numbers we used to have in the past, then yes, there is a drop. If one compares current figures to those of the past two or three years the drop in numbers is not huge; however if one compares these figures to a more distant past then yes, the drop is significant. However that is only part of the puzzle, as there are certain subjects where generally we do have a good amount of applicants, and others where we are clearly facing problems.

We have had problems to encourage students to become teachers in certain areas, for example Design & Technology and Computing, but more recently even in the Sciences and Maths. Some of these are areas where the teaching profession finds it very hard to compete with the market out there. If you have somebody who graduates in these areas, they can generally find jobs, probably with a lesser degree than the teaching qualification actually gives you, and yet earn a much better salary. Overall, the faculty has been producing a good number of teachers over the past years, so it is quite obvious that there are also problems elsewhere. I refer to deployment and the fact that there are a number of teachers who may be resigning from their jobs, for example.

When the Faculty raised the Initial Teacher Education degree to Master's level, by introducing the Master in Teaching & Learning (MTL) through a reform initiated in 2013, it was partly due to the fact that there were a number of graduates who just weren't finding jobs as teachers. Now this has changed over a short span of time, which is worrying in its own right. When we undertook this reform we had lengthy discussions with the ministry, the union, heads from different schools in the different sectors, etc and we found support from all those involved, as they agreed that the country needs to invest in quality educators.

The global number of qualified teachers we have here as compared to the number of students we have in schools is low when compared to EU standards... I think one of the things which need to be seen to better is the deployment of teachers.

There is an outcry that salary needs to be raised for teachers.

When we're talking about an increased salary, by how much is it expected to rise?

It would be unfair of me to answer that question, because I am not the employer and not the union, so it would not be right for me to say I want teachers to earn this much and just give you a figure. Teachers are not highly paid in most EU states, which is a shame. Whenever I attend meetings or conferences the emphasis that education is important is constantly harked upon. But between what is said and actually done, people do not walk the talk when it comes to education. They do not actually say look, we believe education is important, let's really invest in it. This is not only Malta I'm talking about, I'd like to be clear about this. But yes, the salaries are an issue. We fully support the fact that teachers need a significant raise in their salary, there are no two ways about it.

At the moment a teacher's salary, even by local standards, is poor, I think teachers find it hard to raise a family with their salaries.

What is more problematic is the prospects of salary increase throughout their career, which is very limited. So you might spend ten years at a school doing your job well, and you would not be rewarded significantly for this. You have to become either an assistant head or take on a managerial role, which means moving out of the classroom, which is a shame. I would prefer if there were a way to have increments while allowing teachers to remain in the classroom, especially teachers who want to remain in the classroom and who are good teachers.

I think the salary should rise because ultimately we need to give importance to education and because teachers are important in society. One must keep in mind the role that the teacher plays: today teachers may be with children for a longer period of time than their parents are. It is a huge responsibility, so salaries, conditions and prospects should be improved. If the standards are lowered, there is a ripple effect on our entire education system and on society as a whole.

What do you think about training for supply teachers?

This is a situation which I understand that the employer has to deal with. Unfortunately, in education supply does not always match demand and that's a problem, that's an issue.



Sandro Caruana

So schools sometimes have to engage supply teachers, some of whom may have never set foot in the faculty. The faculty always believes that there is a specific route for teaching, and quality education is important. There is a process of becoming-teacher and that's why we hark on the fact of

having a long-term plan, in order to reduce, slowly but surely, the amount of supply teachers in schools. Let's take an analogy: in Law we have a huge backlog of cases in our law courts, as far as I know.

Does anybody ever dream of engaging supply lawyers in order

to reduce the backlog? If in education, for several reasons, we need supply teachers this should also be linked to an adequate plan. If conditions are suitable and as long as full-time students who are becoming teachers are adequately safeguarded, I would not be averse to exploring

whether and how Faculty could contribute.

Home-schooling. What is your opinion on this subject? Do you think parents should have teaching warrants in order to teach their children?

Till now all we know about

home-schooling as a faculty is what appeared in the consultation document of the proposed new education act. I would therefore like to understand better if and how home-schooling will be implemented.

To a certain extent it is an admission that children can be

trained or educated better in their home environment than they could actually be in our school environment, which is not necessarily a positive development.

I definitely believe that one of the most important aspects of schooling is socialization. And home-schooling might actually prevent children from experiencing the reality they will then have to face once they finish school and have to immerse themselves in the real world.

In principle schooling should be carried out by schools, schools that are properly licensed and with a properly-qualified teaching body. Home-schooling can also be elitist, as it only be carried out by people who have the means to do it. Often the man in the street lacks the cultural capital to home-school their child.

Should obligatory school hours increase since parents are working longer hours nowadays?

We have a relatively short school day in Malta compared to abroad but prolonging the hours children spend in schools just for the sake of it doesn't make sense.

In many local high-performing schools, it is known that teachers are under a lot of pressure because of time. They feel they cannot keep up, and have little time to carry out what they have been assigned to do, even though the curriculum has been reduced significantly when compared to the past.

Sometimes in schools we try and fit in everything, the syllabus and extra-curricular activities. When one can't keep up, something has to give. With this in mind, I personally would have no problem to lengthen the school day, but only if it means lessening the pressure on teachers and children and if teachers' work is adequately compensated.

In the past years we've done a lot of work in schools, especially in terms of physical resources and differentiation in education, but we have done less so where assessment is concerned.

Unfortunately we still have the mentality that education is mainly about passing examinations, and this possibly is still the biggest challenge that we have in our education system and is probably the most significant difference when you compare our educational system to others in the EU.

It is immediately apparent when speaking to colleagues abroad that much less pressure is being put on students in order to pass exams. There are also cases

where parents themselves are also a hurdle in this regard, as many oppose the idea of changing a high-stakes examination system which they themselves were brought up in.

That leads me to my next question, people often criticize the Maltese education system as being homework-heavy, exam pressure etc. how do you feel about this criticism?

Yes it is. Look, when a 14-year old child who comes home after the first day of school and tells you that they have to start working on past papers immediately, isn't that enough to understand how heavily exam-oriented our education system is?

And how excessive time and effort is being given not to education but to training students to pass exams? Of course one has to be educated in order to acquire study skills, but sometimes we just do that. That is not what education is all about, that is coaching. And we are very good at that, especially with high-attaining students, but education is not only that.

How can things improve?

In education, things improve very slowly I've learnt, unfortunately. I have been in education for more than 25 years, I have dedicated my whole professional life to this sector. I have no regrets, but I would have liked to see much more change. Having said this, some things have improved for example the very fact that now we are giving more importance to course work. We are slowly realising that it is not just the examination that counts, as work done through the school-year is important too. This move to a more formative system is undoubtedly a step forward.

If you had to explain what education is, how would you explain it?

We see education as a fundamental birth-right through which one helps others one form one's beliefs and attitudes, besides increasing one's knowledge. It is therefore a holistic and a lifelong process. The literal meaning of education is 'to lead' or 'to conduct'. So education involves guiding a person, helping individuals develop to their full potential, whether this person is more academically-oriented, or is more interested in vocational work. This sounds simple but it really is an extremely complex process, which needs to be therefore led by quality educators.