Source: M. Bray and L. Steward (eds) (1998) Examination Systems in Small States: Comparative Perspectives on Policies, Models and Operations. (London: Commonwealth Secretariat).

Chapter 11: Malta

Ronald G. Sultana

Population (1995): 371,000
Population Growth Rate (1960-93): 1.0% per annum
Land Area: 316 square kilometres
GDP per Capita (1995): US$7,200
Year of Independence: 1964
UNDP Human Development Index (1994): 0.887

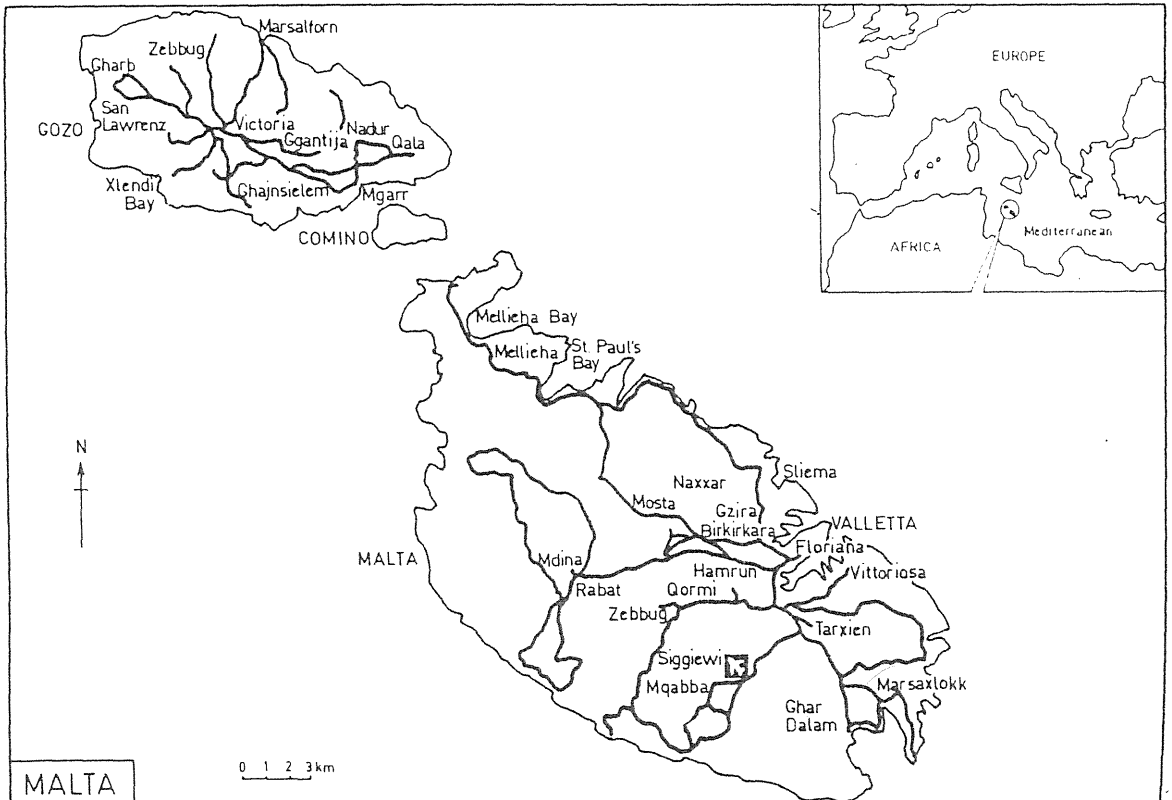
This chapter begins with an overview of features of the Maltese education system which are relevant to discussion of examinations. It then presents in detail the origins and development of the assessment system, its functioning and status, and its impact on teaching and learning. The implications of small size are brought out at various points, but are highlighted towards the end with particular emphasis on issues of visibility, accessibility, resourcing, role overload, and research capacity.

Education in Malta: An Overview

Education in Malta came into its own after World War II. Prior to that, educational provision had generally lagged when compared to developments elsewhere in Europe. An educational structure had gradually evolved by the mid-19th century, with a Director of Elementary Schools being appointed in 1844, pedagogy being taught at the University of Malta, and a number of influential education reports being commissioned by the British colonial authorities. However, the local and traditional power blocs were not persuaded that their interests were best served by the extension of an elementary education to all (Sultana 1992a).

Expansion of educational services followed the 1924 Compulsory School Attendance Act, but the law applied only to those who actually began primary schooling. Many children could not be admitted, and it was not until 1947 that mass elementary schooling came to its own. Secondary schooling for all was introduced in 1970; and significant expansion is currently occurring in higher education, which now caters for 16 per cent of the age cohort.

Key features of the Maltese education system include: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- Strong *reliance on the United Kingdom* for educational models, policy-making strategies, textbooks, and expertise. However, there have been occasional attempts to search for inspiration from mainland Europe, and Malta has applied for admission as a full member of the European Union (Sultana 1995).
- A *centralised state education system*, plagued by a heavy-handed bureaucracy (Farrugia 1992; Fenech 1994). However, the tradition of top-down policy making has over the past two decades been challenged by devolution of power to local authorities and emphasis on dialogue and participation with the grass roots. The shift has led to the setting up of School Councils (Sultana 1994a), and the transfer of more responsibilities to parents, teachers and heads of schools.
- A *stratified and selective state school system*, which practises streaming from the fourth year of primary school, and which distributes students on the basis of an 11-plus examination into academic 'junior lyceums', 'area secondaries' and 'opportunity centres'. Trade schools recruit students for technical education from the latter two sectors at the Form III (14-year old) level. The state school system receives an average of 10 per cent of the total national budget, and, with 4,900 teachers, is the largest employer on the islands (Central Office of Statistics, 1994).
- *Extensive educational services* that have had to expand very rapidly as Malta integrated itself in the modern world economy in a relatively short time scale. The rapid expansion has strained human and material resources to the extent that 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. This has been as true of the examination system as of other sectors.
- A *strong private school system*, catering for nearly 30 per cent of students 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 church land to the state. Policies adopted in private schools severely constrain the latitude of the state education sector in developing its own educational vision. They have contributed to the intensification of inter- and intra-school streaming, selection and channelling strategies, and to a culture of competitive achievement that exalts testing and examination above the needs and development of the child (Cassar 1991; Sammut 1995).

Evolution of the Examination System

The examination system at the secondary (involving Form V students aged 16) and post-secondary (18 year old students who have spent two years studying in Form VI) school levels has recently been reformed. As is often the case, change has brought to the surface many old assumptions and beliefs. The key to understanding this reform is the shift from local external examinations (Matriculation, in the 19th century) to foreign external examinations (General Certificate of Education [GCE] in the mid-20th century) and back to local external ones in 1992.

From the 19th to the mid-20th century, the Malta Matriculation examination regulated entry to the University of Malta. At the end of the 19th century, English School Certificate Examinations run by Oxford and London Universities were also introduced. These credentials could be used to gain government and private employment. However, the Matriculation remained compulsory for access to the University until the 1950s, when the British examination system adopted the GCE at 'Ordinary' and 'Advanced' levels (Zammit Mangion 1992, p.347). The British reform was adopted wholesale in Malta, and Matriculation examinations were phased out with the exception of a few subjects such as Maltese and Religion, and later Italian and Arabic. Most students sat for either the Oxford or London University Examinations, although in the 1960s science students began sitting for examinations set by the newly-formed Associated Examining Board of the UK.

Many factors account for the way in which foreign external examinations came to determine students' occupational and education futures. Not the least was the colonial mentality that 'British is best', or at any rate 'better'. Another factor was the general feeling that only examinations set and marked abroad could be reliable and valid, given patronage and clientele networks that, while prevailing in most Mediterranean countries, have often been thought to be exacerbated in Malta due to the archipelago's small size (Boissevain 1965; Zammit 1984).

The number of students taking the GCE examinations has increased steadily since the introduction of compulsory secondary education for all in 1970, to the extent that around 4,000 attempt their 'O' levels at the June session every year. Table 11.1 shows the increasing investment in credentials at both 'O' and 'A' levels in core subjects between 1969 and 1990.

Other types of examinations are available to Form V students following technical options in trade schools and technical institutes, but these numbers are much smaller. Technical institute students generally sit for examinations run by the City & Guilds of London Institute, while trade-school students

are awarded school-based certificates. Trade schools have also prepared their students for local Trade & Journeymen's examinations set by appropriate Boards established principally by the 1952 Industrial Training Act. Such examinations lead to the award of Wiremen's Licenses, and to licences to operate as off-shore sea-craft pilots. Recently, trade schools have begun to prepare students for the City & Guilds of London Institute examinations at Craft level.

Table 11.1: Numbers of Students Sitting 'O' and 'A' Level Examinations, Summer Session, Malta, 1969-90

	1969	1975	1980	1985	1990
English 'O'	1,749	2,989	2,870	3,273	4,074
Mathematics 'O'	1,214	2,087	2,039	2,348	3,186
Maltese 'O'	1,444	2,164	2,495	2,634	3,160
Physics 'O'	477	637	564	1,419	1,958
English 'A'	163	300	304	243	319
Mathematics 'A'	106	205	242	439	444
Maltese 'A'	358	239	283	223	369
Physics 'A'	125	283	341	373	525

Source: Mallia (1994), pp.76, 79.

Changes in the UK, and their Repercussions on Malta

The historical overview presented above highlighted the dependence of Malta's examination systems on those developed in the UK. The general feeling was that Malta did not have the capacity to compete with the GCE Boards in test design, setting of papers, marking, and the evaluative research that ensured high standards. Added to that, emigration and study abroad began to feature highly in post-war Malta (Attard 1994), and GCE 'O' and 'A' levels provided international currency which Malta Matriculation examinations could never hope to match. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the setting and marking of papers in distant England gave GCE examinations a legitimacy which local examinations could not have. This was partly because of a prevalent colonial mentality, but also because distance assuaged fears regarding the leakage of papers prior to examination sessions, and preferential marking in a context where everybody seemed to know everybody else.

This does not mean, of course, that GCE examinations were perceived by the public in a totally positive light. The examinations were a heavy financial burden both on families and on the state. Each student sitting for eight to ten subjects at 'O' level paid over Lm100, representing well over a third, and in many cases over a half, of a family's monthly income. GCE examinations also drained foreign currency — a sum that Zammit Mangion (1992, p.354) calculated at between Lm0.5 to Lm0.7 million (close to US$2.3 million) per annum. In addition, strong nationalistic feelings in post-independent Malta, together with a Labour government policy to wind down privileged relations with the UK, led to frequent criticisms of cultural imperialism in the education sector, with the GCE examinations being the most tangible indicator 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 of foreign external examinations which were not sensitive to local realities or cultural sensibilities were endured. The UK GCEs had such a strong legitimacy locally that, as Zammit Mangion (1992, p.354) points out, no government felt quite ready to tamper with them. As a result, he noted, 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".

The situation might well have continued 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 England 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 England had not had 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 shifted from norm- to criterion-referenced testing; it introduced course-work 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). New economic realities such as massive youth unemployment meant that most students were obliged to stay on longer at school, rendering the 16-plus examination less important, and making it crucial, for legitimisation purposes, to develop assessment

procedures which were more positive and educational in their orientation.

After studying the new examination system, the Maltese government decided not to adopt the GCSE mode — a decision which was facilitated by the fact that UK examining boards continued to offer GCE examinations to overseas students and centres. The Maltese government noted that the GCSE was tailored to respond to British needs, and that the weighting given to oral assessments and to coursework required extensive collaboration between local teachers and examining boards. This would have been a difficult and complex challenge given the culture of centralisation that then prevailed (Fenech 1994). However, the fact that Malta could not accommodate UK reforms did highlight the desirability of the country developing its own system of examinations. Malta could have continued with the special arrangements made for non-UK candidates; but the changes within the UK stimulated rethinking of patterns and of the relationships between examinations and Malta's 1988 Education Act and a National Minimum Curriculum.

In 1988 a board was set up informally at the University, with representatives from academic staff and the government's Department of Education, and was given the task by the Rector to devise an examination system based on the International Baccalaureate philosophy. The board worked in parallel to the official Matriculation Board, but a year later the two boards were amalgamated to form a Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC) Examinations Board. This body was instructed to develop an examination system which would in due course replace the foreign GCEs at both ordinary and advanced levels, and which would reflect the shift in educational philosophy. The new examinations were therefore to:

- reward achievement rather than selection;
- 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 per cent of students, the new examinations were to cater for 80 per cent);
- widen access to post-secondary and tertiary education to bring Malta on a par with European levels (to the extent that the number of post-compulsory age students rose to 60 per cent, and the number of university students quadrupled between 1987 and 1992).

The Present Examination System

The MATSEC Board set up in 1989 is now responsible for two exami-

nations: the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) Examination, aimed at 16-year old students at the end of their compulsory schooling cycle in Form V, and the Matriculation Examination, catering for Form VI students. Details on the two examinations are presented below.

The Secondary Education Certificate Examination

Since 1992, secondary school students have had the option to sit for either the new local SEC examinations or the foreign GCE examinations which have been allowed to continue as an alternative route. While the UK GCSE was not adopted locally, the 'spirit of GCSE' (cf. Brown & Wilde 1988) has been very much behind local initiatives. Indeed, a brochure advertising the SEC Examination almost quoted GCSE documents when claiming that its philosophy was to reward candidates on the basis of "what they know, what they understand, and what they are able to produce" (p.5). Interviews with members of the various boards and committees associated with the new examination system revealed that the GCSE has been influential, not only in philosophical underpinnings but also in syllabi and structure of operations. As a member of the MATSEC Board pointed out, 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 could be ensured by looking closely at a dynamic system and adapting it to local needs.

As with the GCSE, the SEC Examination differs from the previous GCE examination in that it is not solely meant to give access to post-secondary courses, but is rather intended to give certificates to all students finishing the five-year secondary education course. Thus, while previously only about 20 per cent of students in each age cohort used to sit for GCEs, the SEC Examination caters for about 80 per cent of the cohort. It includes students from trade schools, who previously tended to finish 11 years of schooling without any formal credentials since they were not prepared for GCEs and were therefore automatically excluded from the university track (Sultana 1992a, 1994b).

Like the GCSE, the new examination ranks students on a wider range of attainment (1-7). Initially the intention had been to have one paper for each subject, with questions becoming increasingly difficult to cater for the higher ability student. However, the new format SEC Examination opted for two two-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, and teachers are expected to advise students whether to attempt Paper 2A or 2B. Paper 2A has more demanding

questions than those in Paper 1. It is designed for the more academically able candidates, and it is targeted at those who expect high achievement and who want to proceed to higher education in the subject. Paper 2B has less demanding questions.

Candidates have to indicate which Paper 2 they wish to sit when they register for the SEC Examination, and no change is allowed after the registration period. Candidates sitting for Paper 1 and Paper 2A may qualify for grades 1 to 4. The results of candidates who do not obtain at least a grade 4 remain unclassified (U). Candidates sitting for Paper 1 and Paper 2B may qualify for grades 4 to 7. The results of candidates who do not obtain at least grade 7 remain unclassified (U). Grades 1 to 5 give students access to Form VI, while lower grades enable students to apply for courses in some post-secondary institutions, and employment in a range of occupations.

A key challenge for the MATSEC Board is to contest a view widely held by parents and students that grades 6 and 7 are worthless and equivalent to a failing mark. There have also been criticisms by the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) that the system which requires candidates to declare in advance whether they intend to tackle Paper 2A or 2B creates stress on students, parents and teachers. While the MATSEC Board noted this, it decided that the choice between the two papers should stand, since "it was felt that in the long run candidates were likely to get used to making an evaluation of their own abilities before applying for the examination in order to choose the paper most suitable for them" (Minute 96, meeting of 11 February 1994). In connection with this, Darmanin (1995) has also argued that the choice between papers traps students, as well as their teachers and parents, in making 'dispositional adjustments' according to beliefs about ability. Students labelled poor achievers will tend to self-select — and be channelled by parents and teachers — to the easier paper, irrespective of their real potential. This leads to a closing of options rather than to the intended opening of opportunities. As with many other aspects of the examination reform, research needs to be carried out to evaluate and monitor the educational and social effects that the choice of papers has on students.

The similarity between the SEC and the GCSE has been highlighted, and indeed in this as in other cases (Sultana 1992b), educational innovations carried out in the UK tend to be adopted locally, even though economic and cultural realities do not coincide. That adoption is not automatic or slavishly imitative: rather, different ideological appeals are made to justify and legitimise similar policies and practices. The MATSEC Board has emphasised that the SEC Examination dovetails with the National Minimum Curriculum introduced in Malta in 1988. As the MATSEC Board's brochure

advertising the SEC Examination declares (p.1), the SEC complements the requirements of the National Minimum Curriculum by providing a common assessment system of an impartial standard, supplying examinations appropriate for students with different abilities, and incorporating recent trends in educational thinking.

The 1996 regulations for the SEC Examination stipulate that two sessions will be held: one in May and a supplementary session in September. The range of subjects offered is quite wide. The subjects offered at SEC level are:

> Accounting, Arabic, Art, Biology, Business Studies, Chemistry, Classical Culture and Civilisation, Commerce, Computer Studies, Economics, English Language, Environmental Studies, French, Geography, German, Greek, History, Home Economics, Italian, Latin, Maltese, Mathematics, Physics, Religious Knowledge, Russian, Social Studies, Spanish, Technical Design, and Textiles & Design.

Students sitting for the supplementaries can opt for Paper 2B if in the June session they took Paper 2A and failed. Around 5,000 candidates registered for the SEC Examination in May 1994.

The Matriculation Certificate Examination

The examination relevant to students completing their Form VI studies also features strongly in the reforms. It reflects a new conceptualisation of education so that, in the words of the MATSEC Newsletter (No.37, 1994):

> 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.

The key to understanding the reforms at the Matriculation level is the shift from an English-type to an International Baccalaureate-type examination. The former has long prevailed in Malta, and consists of in-depth specialisation in which pupils study three or four subjects drawn from the humanities, the sciences or 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 the only effort to broaden the Form VI curriculum has been through the introduction of the inter-disciplinary Systems of Knowledge paper (Muscat 1995, p.53).

Table 11.2: Subjects offered in the Matriculation Certificate Examination, Malta, 1996

Group 1:	Maltese, Arabic, English, French, German,* Greek, Italian, Latin, Russian,* Spanish*
Group 2:	Accounting, Economics, Geography, History, Marketing, Philosophy, Religious Knowledge, Sociology
Group 3:	Applied Mathematics (Mechanics), Biology, Chemistry, Environmental Science,** Physics, Pure Mathematics
Group 4:	Art, Computing, Engineering Drawing, Graphical Communication, Home Economics & Human Ecology,* Information Technology, Music

Plus (for all groups): Systems of Knowledge

* offered at Advanced Level only
** offered at Intermediate Level only

The examination reforms at this level now propose a further broadening. Subjects at the Matriculation Certificate Examination are taken at two levels, Advanced and Intermediate. This allows a degree of specialisation in any one of the four areas in which the subjects have been grouped, even though the examination is 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. The Advanced Level Matriculation is equivalent to previous 'A' level examinations. The overall grade (A, B, or C) is based on performance in the examination as a whole, and the certificate indicates a Pass with Distinction or with Merit in

subjects taken at Advanced Level. The grouping of subjects is shown in Table 11.2. About 2,800 candidates registered for the Matriculation Examination at Advanced and Intermediate levels for the May 1994 session.

Mechanics of the System

The MATSEC Board is chaired by the University Rector and accountable to the University Senate. The Board has three members of University academic staff appointed by Senate, three members from the government's Division of Education, and one member nominated by and from the members of the Private Schools' Association. The MUT is represented by a member in an observer's capacity. The Registrar of the University acts as secretary and has an advisory role. The Department of Education's Registrar of Examinations is invited to meetings in order to ensure continuity in policy-making between examinations taken by students at other stages in their education.

At the time it was established, the Board was to mandated to:

- set the policy in connection with these examinations;
- determine and implement measures, ensuring that the new examinations reflected current developments in assessment techniques;
- approve syllabuses;
- ensure validation and accreditation of the examinations, both locally and abroad, and establish links with foreign boards;
- award certificates to successful candidates; and
- be responsible for the financial management of the examinations.

A Support Unit was also set up as an executive body with an Academic and Administrative arm or division. The Unit acts as the Board's main contact point with teachers, prospective candidates and the general public. It includes experts in test-construction techniques and in principles of examining, as well as a sample of experts in the different disciplinary domains to be examined. The Unit also keeps close contact with external examining boards, especially from European countries which are considered educationally in the forefront.

Key personnel in the Support Unit include the Head of the Academic Division, the coordinator of the Administrative Division, the Principal Test Construction Officer, and the Principal Subject Area Officers (Arts and Science). In principle, the role of these respective officers has been very clearly defined, though role overload hampers the carrying out of some of the tasks outlined on paper. For instance, the Head of the Academic Division is responsible for overall monitoring of the examinations and the

coordination of the work of the Principal Test Construction Officer (PTCO) and the two Principal Subject Area Officers and their staffs. The PTCO advises all Panels on matters concerning assessment, thus ensuring that all examinations set by the Board reflect professional norms. The PTCO is expected to train staff, paper-setters and markers in assessment techniques, collect and analyse data concerning the examinations, and initiate appropriate research. The Principal Subject Area Officers on their part are expected to develop curricula and coordinate the academic content of the examination process in the subjects falling under their competence. They direct the Panels for each subject on all matters concerning syllabuses and examinations. They also monitor meetings of Panels, liaise with teachers and personnel in the Division of Education, organise seminars and short programmes, and collate and analyse information on curriculum development in their subjects.

Subject Panels make up the third level of the pyramidal structure. Personnel in the Subject Panels devise syllabuses, set papers, and mark scripts. Separate committees fulfil the three different roles, though a single person can belong to more than one of the three committees or sub-panels. In this way, persons who are debarred from setting and marking papers, for example because they are related to candidates, may still help with devising of syllabuses. All three committees or sub-panels are chaired by the same person in order to ensure coordination.

Staffing Partnerships

Unlike previous examination systems that prevailed in Malta, the Secondary Education Certificate and the Matriculation Certificate place a premium, at least on paper, on a partnership between University, Division of Education (especially the Curriculum Development, Implementation & Review Department), and classroom teachers in both state and private schools. This is reflected in the composition of the MATSEC Board which is chaired by the University Rector and made up of an equal number of representatives from the Division and the University. The attempt to develop partnership is also evident in the fact that responsibility for the Syllabus Panels is generally shared equally by persons from the Division and the University.

These are significant developments given that in most cases, University and Division staff relations have been marked by competition and mutual disregard rather more than collaboration. Matriculation examinations, for instance, were previously set and marked by the head of the respective subject department at University, with no consultation with the officials of the Division of Education. GCE examinations were administered by the Division of Education and the Registrar of Examinations attached to that

Division, with practically no involvement on the part of the University. One way of explaining this mutual exclusion is by noting that small states, by definition, cannot offer a wide range of promotion prospects to positions of great responsibility, since these are limited in number (Farrugia 1991, pp.588-9). In a 'face-to-face society with back-to-back relationships', competition is strong for scarce resources — which include status as well as material rewards. In turn, this competition often leads to claims that territorial expertise has been infringed, and renders collaboration more difficult than in larger social units.

The demands that the new national examinations have made on local staff at all levels has made collaboration essential, and indeed meetings of the MATSEC Board occasionally make reference to Ministerial appeals for strong working relationships between the Division and the University (e.g. Minute 37 of Meeting on 19 Nov. 1991). However, this collaboration has not quite worked as planned. Most of the Education Division personnel interviewed felt that under the aegis of the University, and despite their strong representation on the official bodies of the examinations, all they could do was to "air their views", and that in many cases their opinions were in fact ignored. They generally presented the University as "an empire" dominating most aspects of the new examinations, and resented what was ultimately felt to be an impositional rather than a collaborative structure.

On their part, some University academic staff felt that the Division of Education had never been enthusiastic about local examinations, had never quite identified with them, and had expected the venture to fail. In addition, academic staff criticise the Division of Education for functioning too much as a hierarchical bureaucracy. Because of its bureaucratic features, the University staff who wish to collaborate with practising teachers sometimes find themselves having to work instead with senior education officials, who, they feel, cannot draw on direct contact with students and classrooms when they come to develop syllabuses and set papers.

Teachers have also generally felt that they have not been involved in this partnership with the University on an equal footing. Minutes of a meeting held on 25 July 1994 by a working group nominated by the MUT Council to study the new examinations noted, among other things, the lack of consultation on the part of the MATSEC Board with student bodies, parents' representatives and the teaching profession generally. The group also recommended that the MUT Council "note the arrogance of the University authorities in deciding upon such educational matters affecting the teaching profession and the educational system on the assumption that they are not Union matters" (Minute 5a). Given that the MATSEC examinations are premised on an appreciation of the input that teachers can make in the

assessment of their own pupils, the rifts between the University on the one hand, and the Division of Education and its teachers on the other, present a real obstacle to progress.

Quantity of Staff

The operation of examinations on a national scale has severely strained the staff involved. While positions have been created for the Principal Subject Area Officers for the Arts and the Sciences, most personnel have taken on new responsibilities in addition to ones they already had. This applies also to the members of the MATSEC Board and to teachers in schools.

As has been noted, each subject is administered by separate sub-panels for syllabuses, paper-setting and marking. Paper-setters and markers are difficult to find given the extremely stringent criteria that have to be satisfied in order to ensure reliability, fairness and confidentiality. The criteria stipulate that, given the close networks between people on the islands, paper setters and markers related to or who teach (or give private tutoring to) candidates sitting the examination session in question should be excluded from the task. The difficulty of finding staff fulfilling the criteria is especially acute in relation to subjects which are chosen by small numbers of students, where expertise in the area is occasionally only held by their own teachers.

Candidates sitting for examinations use index numbers, which are translated into office numbers by the MATSEC administrative staff. Though this system slows down the process considerably, it ensures that only personnel at the central office know which number represents which candidate. It thus further ensures the anonymity of candidates, and that candidates do not approach markers to exert pressure and influence grading.

Partly for educational reasons, but also because of limited resources, teachers have responsibilities in assessing their own students. This is to some extent due to the fact that as with the UK GCSE there is an emphasis on developing integrated skills, so that a student "knows, understands and can do" (Brown & Wilde 1991, p.124). There is therefore an emphasis on a practical component and project work in subjects such as the sciences and systems of knowledge, and an oral element in the assessment of language learning, in which teachers assess their own students. Teacher involvement in assessment has been bitterly contested by the Malta Union of Teachers on a number of grounds. While the union has agreed with the educational purpose underpinning the innovation, it has insisted on the need for support staff and qualified technicians in laboratories and workshops to help teachers fulfil the new demands placed upon them.

Quality of Staff

The working group set up by the MATSEC Board in 1991 to study personnel requirements and costings of the new examination system noted immediately that "the present lack of professional expertise in the field of assessment presents a serious threat to the validity and accreditation of the examination". It therefore recommended that "close linkages be established, as a matter of urgency, with a more professionally oriented examination body". The lack of local expertise in the field of assessment led the working group to conclude that it was "advisable to adopt and adapt models developed in other countries, rather than attempt to develop completely indigenous models", noting that access to British expertise and use of UK textbooks indicated that an adaptation of the GCSE-type examination would be the most feasible under the circumstances.

The question regarding the availability of local expertise in the running of the new examination can be addressed by a brief inventory of personnel with the relevant qualifications at the different levels outlined earlier. The MATSEC Board itself has two members from the academic staff with some formal training and many years' experience related to assessment and examinations. The most expert and senior of these two is also the Principal Test Construction Officer in the Academic Division of the Support Unit. The other is the Head of the Academic Division. Both have access to foreign (mainly UK-based) experts, and such contacts have been used formally and informally to resolve challenging situations. In addition, both have drawn on international (and particularly UK) educational literature to adapt practices and policies to the local situation. Specialists in assessment and examination techniques employed by the Division of Education have also been consulted on a regular basis by the MATSEC Board, and have been co-opted as members of different sub-committees.

The Support Unit personnel have been recruited following calls for applications for positions, posts that have thus far included the Head of the Academic Division, the Principal Test Construction Officer and the Principal Subject Area Officers (Arts and Science). The latter are currently registered for part-time doctoral studies.

Seminars for teachers involved in different ways with the new examinations have been organised on a regular basis by the MATSEC Board in collaboration with the Education Division. The 'ripple' strategy was generally adopted, with meetings being organised in different phases with Assistant Directors of Education, Principal Education Officers, Education Officers and Education Assistants; Heads of Schools and Guidance Teachers; Assistant Heads of Schools; and then subject groups for teachers. These are generally information-giving meetings rather than training programmes, and

while the Support Unit seems to have done a good job in using the media to inform the general public about the mechanics of the new examinations as well as the philosophy behind them, they have been less successful, given the administrative work load they have to shoulder, in developing the human resources and skills necessary for the successful implementation of the new examination system.

Indeed, early in the running of both Matriculation and SEC examinations, differences in the number of candidates awarded particular grades among the large-entry subjects were noted (cf. Minute 197, MATSEC Board meeting of 28 Sept. 1992), and the need for greater expertise in educational assessment was registered. The PTCO therefore does meet the Markers' Panels regularly in order to train teachers in the utilisation of set procedures and criteria for grading scripts. However, the general opinion of all those interviewed is that the greatest weakness of the new examinations is the lack of adequately trained personnel, to the extent that no serious monitoring of the system is taking place.

The charge of lack of monitoring is applicable to all levels. Given the shortage of human resources, people involved with the MATSEC examinations have seen their role expand so drastically that they cannot afford time for evaluation. In addition, the number of subjects being offered at the SEC level has increased so quickly that work has multiplied without the concurrent increases in human resources. The administration of the annual exercise is very time consuming, and with so little time between organisation and implementation, that interviewees spoke of "management by crisis", being completely taken up by "coping", and having no time for the academic development of those they should be training. This means that there are no clear lines of responsibility and accountability, since monitoring is practically impossible. Paper setters, for instance, have no clear criteria on how to decide which questions are more and which less difficult, and how to place these in Paper 2A or 2B of the SEC examination. There is also the general feeling that teachers involved in assessing coursework and projects have tended to give very high marks to their own students. The Malta Union of Teachers, while understanding the educational value of teachers' input in the overall assessment exercise, has consistently argued for better training of staff so that tasks are carried out in a more uniform and professional manner.

Local and International Recognition

Despite the lack of formal monitoring of the new examination system and the problems that the shortage of human resources engender, the general impression among all persons interviewed as well as among students, parents

and teachers is that the 'indigenisation' of the examinations at the secondary and post-secondary level has been successful. Students sit for these examinations quite willingly, and the number of pupils opting for foreign-based examinations has steadily decreased. The Division of Education, having unofficially remained sceptical and non-committal vis-à-vis the new examinations, in 1996 officially endorsed and adopted SEC syllabuses.

Criticisms in the press have been levelled against various aspects of the system, but the most strident of these referred to fees that had to be paid rather than to the philosophy or credibility of the examinations. The opposition Labour Party has, through its education spokesperson, generally highlighted the need for more information about the MATSEC examinations to reach the public, and severely criticised administrative mistakes. However, while these mistakes have received some publicity over the media, they have not quite jeopardised the MATSEC examinations' credibility.

That credibility has been reinforced by studies carried out by the PTCO 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 of course suggests that Maltese examinations are pegged at the same standard as the UK-based ones. Indeed, there is some evidence that in some subjects at least, local examinations are of a higher standard than, say, the London-based examinations. A sign of the general acceptance of the public of the local examinations is that there was no protest at all when the University announced in 1996 that only candidates having the new Matriculation Certificate would be eligible for entry to the Faculties.

Despite the public's faith in the new system, generated, as one interviewee suggested, by the fact that the certificates 'do the trick' — that is, give students access to further education and to employment — the very people involved in seeing the reforms through are concerned about the extent to which educational goals are, in fact, being reached. In the words of a Division official, "the public might be reassured, but the educationists are not".

The international recognition of the local examinations has been facilitated by equivalence agreements with the Council of Europe, UNESCO and similar organisations, so that local credentials are generally transferable abroad. Universities retain the right to investigate more carefully what a certificate means in order to ensure equivalence of skills with other candidates embarking on graduate or post-graduate degrees. Arguably, the proof of the reliability of the local examinations is the fact that Maltese students are accepted for graduate and post-graduate studies in universities the world over, and generally give a very good account of themselves.

Costs

The total cost of running the examination system was, according to University Senate reports, close to Lm200,000 (US$545,000) in 1994, and estimated to exceed Lm250,000 in 1995. Fees for sitting examinations represented the only source of finance, and the total value fees was about Lm50,000 less than costs. Shortfalls have so far been covered from the University budget. Initially, students were asked to pay Lm8 per subject, but following protests by students, who took to the streets in great numbers, the Minister of Education agreed to lower the fees (Table 11.3). The reduction of income subsequent to the lowering of fees meant that the financial resources required to support the planned expansion of the pool of human resources were not there.

Table 11.3: SEC and Matriculation Examination Fees, Malta, 1996

Registration fee	Lm3.00
Advanced Matriculation Examination	
per subject	Lm8.00
per practical examination	Lm2.00
Intermediate Matriculation Examination	Lm7.00
Secondary Education Certification Examination	
per subject	Lm5.00

An alternative mode of operation for the MATSEC examinations would entail having the Board function as an autonomous structure, independent of the Ministerial prerogative to set fees, and thus in a position to run the system in a financially self-sufficient manner. This proposal by a member of the MATSEC Board was never adopted, probably because it runs counter to the dominant culture in Malta where the state is expected to take on, or heavily to subsidise, expenses related to social services including education.

Impact on the Education System

There has been, to date, no full-scale evaluation of the effects and impact of the new examinations system on educational practice as a whole. Because the examinations are so new, it is too early for research on, for example, the extent to which students are in fact profiting from the opportunity to get useful credentials. Nevertheless, it is possible to make some initial observations.

Starting with the SEC examination, it seems that there have been

important repercussions on educational practice in schools, with more attention being given to coursework as a legitimate component in the continuous assessment of students. Project and practical applied work has also been valorised in a system which is best described as magisterial in style, with lecturing pedagogy and note-taking being the most common form of pedagogy. Interviews with different members of the MATSEC Board indicated that, given the strength of the examination culture in Malta, where teachers teach — and are expected by students and parents to teach — with examinations in mind, then a change in the mode of assessment has an important 'backwash' effect. There is hope that teachers will be encouraged to use modern and interactive methodologies in the classroom.

Moreover, since syllabuses are set locally, educationists have been able to include elements of Maltese and Mediterranean realities across most subjects. In some areas, such as environmental studies, social studies and history, the subject matter revolves almost totally around Maltese concerns. This is crucial not only for political and ideological reasons, but also for educational ones. Students can more easily relate to the curriculum if it resonates with themes and concerns they encounter in their everyday life, and learning is more likely to happen when there is a connection between schooling and students' frameworks of relevance.

Another positive effect of the SEC examination has been the extension of the range of curriculum subjects offered to students. In principle, the MATSEC Board has to react to curricular initiatives in schools, so that if a new course of studies is offered to students in a particular school, then the latter can ask the Board to prepare an SEC paper in that subject. Previously, schools based their curricula and syllabuses, not to mention teaching strategies, with an eye on GCE requirements. With the new system, schools can be much more proactive in the development of curricula, syllabuses and pedagogy.

While there is still a definite reliance on the UK for textbooks, in the past few years local authors and publishers have invested in production of high quality texts in many curricular areas. Since these texts are tailored to SEC and Matriculation requirements, they prove a valuable resource for teachers and students. More are being published each year, to the extent that they now cover subjects such as sociology and philosophy even though these are peripheral subjects generally chosen by only a few students each year.

It is interesting to note that, once again in connection with the variable of size and its influence on education systems, expertise in a particular subject tends to be concentrated in a small pool of human resources. This to the extent that the MATSEC Board at one stage prudently decided that

books written by members of Syllabus Panels should not be included as textbooks. In a microstate, where expertise in any one area is scarce, it is common to find authors being leaders in their own field in a professional/ teaching capacity as well. That prudence has had to be put aside given, once again, the impossibility of alternative action.

The matriculation examinations will also have an impact on the education system, even though they in fact only came fully into their own in 1997. It is clear, for instance, that attitudes towards the Form VI curriculum and examinations will have to change drastically. As the Head-master of the state sixth form has noted (Muscat 1995, p.53):

> It will no longer profit students to cram A-level studies, by means of private tuition, to take the examination before the end of the course. It will no longer be possible to specialise in three related subjects to the complete exclusion of all else. The broader curriculum will require a broader vision. It will also mean that the culture of 'getting rid' of parts of the curriculum as one goes along will have to stop.

Another repercussion arises from the fact that the new International Baccalaureate-type Matriculation examinations have a wider range of subjects than the previous UK A-level type examinations. This means that fewer hours are spent on subjects taken at the intermediate level, which could have implications for university courses which presume that students have a certain depth and breadth of knowledge in that particular subject matter before they enter university.

Small-State Factors

At various points, this chapter has indicated ways in which Malta's small size has influenced the conceptualisation and implementation of the examination system. Given the centrality of scale as an explanatory variable in this book, it is important to draw together the strands that have been identified in this regard. Of course, causal explanations in the social sciences are always advanced tentatively, and no strong claims are made here that one can positivistically extract 'size' from the complexity of social situations, processes and dynamics in the same way that one can isolate elements in a laboratory. The contention is, however, that scale *tends* to be one of the crucial variables that influences 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. The following remarks focus on visibility, accessibility, resourcing, role overload, and research capacity. None should necessarily be considered problematic or

challenging, given that small size can, in itself and in some circumstances, be a strength.

Visibility

Small social units like Malta tend to be characterised by a high visibility factor, whereby citizens tend to know each other not only because they are related in some way, but also because social interaction often cannot be avoided. People know each other, often on a first name basis; and while this militates against the anomie that is often felt in larger, more impersonal systems, it does create problems when practices developed in states with anonymous relations are imported by contexts characterised by familiarity.

Visibility can be a constraining factor when it comes to education generally, and examinations more specifically, in that it is difficult to legitimise trial or pilot projects, given that these receive attention at a national level. The high visibility of any new policy leads to a situation in which parents whose children have not been included in the pilot project may feel that they are missing out on something. Governments of small states often feel obliged to implement innovations on a nation-wide basis. This stretches scarce resources to such an extent that issues such as monitoring and evaluation are neglected in the pressure to perform the mechanical task of setting up the required structures.

Visibility affects the extent of credibility that examinations have with the public. When the Maltese used to sit for GCE examinations set and marked in England, the general feeling was that such examinations were impeccably administered, even though in reality problems similar to those encountered locally arose. With the GCE examinations, as with most systems, papers were sometimes misplaced, the wrong paper was occasionally sent to students, and so on. However, these errors did not create quite the same furore because they were committed by impersonal authorities in distant Britain. Parents, students and teachers are more inclined to criticise and denounce mistakes committed by people they know, and by education authorities that are as accessible as they are visible.

However, visibility need not always be a disadvantage in a small state. With reference to examinations, for instance, teachers who accept to set and mark papers in contravention of rules — specifying that they must not be related to candidates, and must not have had them as students in the subject over the 12 months preceding the examination — are very quickly caught. So too are other irregularities, such as when a teacher gives short shrift to assessment duties related to coursework.

Accessibility

Visibility and accessibility are closely related dimensions in the formation of open social networks. As Farrugia (1991, p.590) points out:

> People are known to each other so that the state ministers, high government officials, churchmen, influential businessmen, and their functionaries are accessible either formally or unofficially. Individuals who seek a favour or who wish to register grievances can 'arrange' an encounter with the appropriate officials at a christening party, a family wedding or a village function. The community networks allow the average citizens to communicate their ideas, requests and complaints to the appropriate officials quickly and often personally.

The MATSEC Board members frequently find themselves in the position outlined by Farrugia. They have been colleagues with — and, in some cases, even taught by — teachers, heads, and parents who are now their 'clients'. During interviews, Board members reported that they often receive phone calls and letters from these clients, and pressure is exerted directly on them to take one course of action rather than another in the organisation of new examinations. Members also find themselves susceptible to lobbies, especially from the private-school sector, as to which textbooks to choose, or which subjects to add to the curriculum. While accessibility of administrators could enhance direct democratic practices, it could also reach a point where educational leaders feel constrained when making decisions which, while educationally sound, are not popular with teachers and parents. Sometimes, moreover, individuals and/or groups gain advantage over others through personal or work-related links with those running the examinations.

Resourcing

As Bray & Packer (1993, p.237) point out, although most small states have very restricted bases of human and material resources, they have to provide as diverse a set of educational services and facilities as is provided in countries which are much larger. Regardless of its size, Malta has to:

- cater for all the curriculum areas and subjects by setting syllabuses and examination papers;
- draw on a relatively small pool of teachers to develop appropriate curricular material;
- choose paper setters and markers from that limited pool;
- administer the different phases of the examinations on an annual basis;
- publish results;

- monitor the effectiveness, reliability and validity of the examinations;
- cater for the special needs of groups of students;
- handle requests for revisions of papers;
- provide supplementary examination sessions each year; and
- make sure that the public has the correct information about the examinations, through the use of the media and through face-to-face meetings with interested parties.

Compared to larger countries, Malta has to provide the same range of services with a much smaller population base. The demands on financial and human resources are therefore proportionally more acute in small states. This has implications for the quality of the service offered, as well as for the extent of implementation of the planned innovations.

Role Overload

Intimately related to the resourcing challenge is that of role overload, or what is often referred to in the literature on small states as 'multi-functionality' of personnel. This was put to the author very directly by a Principal Subject Area Officer in answer to a question regarding his role. His exasperated response was:

> I administer and handle finance.... I'm a messenger, driver, clerk, secretary... I pay teachers ... and I feel that intellectually I've been flushed down the drain! I have to do everything.... What I *don't* have is a deputy, and time to think about what I'm doing and where it's all going, even though I work Saturdays and Sundays on this!

Most people involved with the MATSEC examinations echoed feelings of frustration that they did not have the opportunity to specialise and to focus on their set tasks in order to do as good a job as they wanted. Demands related to the examination system increased, but often the human and financial resource base was not broadened to take this increase into account.

Research Capacity

One result of poor resourcing and of role overload is that personnel end up concentrating on maintenance rather than evaluation. The key concern is to put the system in place and to keep it going, and little time, energy or resources are left to carry out evaluative research in order to spot problems, monitor progress and improve overall performance. Nothing inherent to small states necessarily renders such evaluative research impractical. In Malta, it is easy to imagine a situation where undergraduate and graduate

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education students, who are required to submit dissertations in partial fulfilment of their degree requirements, can carry out aspects of the research that needs to be done, under the supervision of experienced members of academic staff. Some preliminary research has been carried out in this manner, and has looked at issues of reliability and validity in the setting of papers in subjects such as Mathematics and Physics. Until now, however, the demands have been such that staff have not been able to plan, let alone implement, major evaluative projects.

Conclusions

It is in responding effectively to these challenges that the decision taken in Malta to indigenise the secondary and post-secondary level examination system will pay off in educational terms. Decision-makers in Malta did not 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 Malta and Cyprus and Gibraltar, for instance, would make such a venture complex and unlikely to prosper.

Yet despite the constraints of size, and the apparent lack of alternatives available to small states, Malta has succeeded beyond the hopes and expectations of many in the country in setting up a promising and independent examination structure which has set into motion synergies affecting various aspects of the local education system. The new examinations have given the Maltese policy-makers the opportunity to be more autonomous in establishing an organic vision for educational practice on the islands. They have also encouraged development of curricula and textbooks that take local culture and realities into account; and they have expanded the professional roles of teachers, who are partners in the assessment of their own students. Along with these aspects, the examinations are likely to modify the traditional and deeply engrained pedagogical culture of magisterial lesson delivery. Also important, the examinations have much reduced an annual haemorrhage of foreign currency that Malta could ill-afford. And finally, they have achieved credibility among parents, teachers, students and employers, and are exchangeable on the world market of credentials. All these achievements are no mean feat.