

Editorial: Educating Adults

Compared to half a century ago, the population of the Maltese Islands is very much better educated, with a continuously increasing proportion of adults having benefited from higher secondary and even tertiary education. The dismal scenario of a few decades ago, when less than two per cent of the population had a tertiary education is slowly beginning to show signs of improvement within the general public, with the promise that the worst has passed and that the future will be brighter.

Considering how fundamentally important an education is, for better physical and psychological health, better income, increased life expectancy, and practically any yardstick of social welfare, it is surprising that our efforts have been largely directed at the education of the younger members of society, while ignoring that of older persons. University degrees are rarely given to anyone over 50. The proportion of persons with university degrees in this cohort of individuals is miserably low, and compares badly with that in most countries in Europe.

Why is there so little appreciation of the value of education by the general public? While most parents would do their best to ensure that their children are well educated, they do not seem to bother too much about increasing the educational capital for themselves.

Most are quite capable of looking after their material well-being, but quite unaware of the value of appreciating the less materialistic aspects of human life. I am quite disturbed by the lack of interest in reading among the population, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that one would be hard-put to find a single book on the shelves of most houses.

I would like to see a sociological study which assesses the proportion of the population that have attended a concert over the past year, visited an art gallery, attended a talk about any topic of general

interest, or made any effort to improve one's interest in the arts or other intellectual endeavour.

There is nothing wrong in watching TV (in moderation), except that the fare provided there is often limited, restricted to cheap drama, often parochial and does not pretend to stretch the mind to any degree. It is most unlikely to change the habits of a lifetime or increase the love for art and the humanities. It is unlikely that television will encourage viewers to become more articulate or improve their debating skills, or their respect for the views of others. It is particularly pathetic to see children taking part in shows where they emulate adults in the way they talk or behave.

Financially, most of the population is by all accounts doing quite well. Not only has it become essential to be financially well-off, but one feels the need to be considered better off than anyone else around. And you must exhibit this success for all to see, build palaces, drive expensive European cars, own a boat for leisure activities, and in general indulge in 'conspicuous consumption'. Such affluence is more likely to lead to degeneration of the body than to improve the mind.

It is perhaps relevant to point out that an active brain is a basic requirement for a healthy mental health. One established result of inactivity of the brain is likely to be degeneration, including dementia which has become such a scourge in the population.

The authorities, and that includes universities, governments and education departments, should feel the responsibility to encourage the importance for continued education, and particularly the need to remedy the hiatus in educational achievement which was the norm that the majority of those now aged over 50 experienced in their youth.

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