

The Sustainable Development Goal on Quality Education

By Camilleri¹, M.A., University of Malta, Malta and Camilleri, A.C., University of Bath, U.K.

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Abstract

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are widely regarded as a powerful political vision that address the social, economic and environmental pillars. In this light, this chapter focuses on the fourth SDG on quality education and draws comparisons with Europe's 2020 strategy that is aimed to create the conditions for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth within the European Union (EU) context. A literature review suggests that there is a unifying thread in these action plans for sustainable development. There is an indispensable requirement for an inclusive and equitable quality education that could eradicate poverty in all of its forms and dimensions. Therefore, this research presents a case study on the latest educational policies in Malta. The smallest EU state is pursuing its reforms to reduce early school leaving and promote lifelong learning. At the same time, it is striving to address skills gaps (and mismatches) in its domestic labour market. The findings indicate that with quality education, there may be implications for job creation, competitiveness as well as more social cohesion. Family-friendly measures including better access to childcare, more flexible working schemes and employer incentives can help individuals to return to work. In conclusion, this contribution implies that the pursuit towards continuous improvements in quality education and social inclusion could create a virtuous cycle of productivity outcomes, economic growth and prosperity.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goal, Quality Education, Social Cohesion, Social Inclusion, Social Capital, Europa2020, Malta.

¹ Department of Corporate Communication, Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences, University of Malta, Msida, MSD2080, Malta. Email: mark.a.camilleri@um.edu.mt

Introduction

Education transcends curriculum programmes. It provides opportunities for social mobility as individuals are rewarded according to their own merit. Therefore, interventions in educational policy may play a significant role in shaping key performance indicators for social and economic outcomes. It may appear that little is known about the antecedents, the causal pathways and the relative impacts that different educational interventions have on social outcomes (Gradstein & Justman, 2002). Education can contribute to create a fair and just society for all (OECD, 2008). Recently, the provision of quality education has been recognised as a standalone Sustainable Development Goal (SDG4). This suggests that intergovernmental organisations consider education, training and lifelong learning as high priority areas in their regulatory policies. With better education, there may be implications for job creation, competitiveness and prosperity (OECD, 2012). Academia often attempt to shed light on the link between education and economic growth, poverty, gender equality and health (Vladimirova & Le Blanc, 2016; Gupta & Vegelin, 2016; Gradstein & Justman, 2002; Green, Preston, & Sabates, 2003; Thorbecke & Charumilind, 2002).

This chapter begins by exploring relevant theoretical underpinning and regulatory guidelines surrounding the notion of quality education. Afterwards, it features a case study on educational policy efforts in the Maltese context. The Ministry of Education and Employment in Malta is currently responding to the European Union's (EU 2020) recommendations for reforms in lifelong learning. This contribution posits that Malta is pursuing strategies to reduce early school leaving by setting up a comprehensive monitoring system. Malta is committed to raising awareness on the importance of education and training for all of its citizens. At the same time, this case study suggests that the smallest EU State is striving in its endeavours to address skill gaps in its labour market. It is hoped that this island nation's productivity and competitiveness may be improved even further through the increased participation of women in tertiary education and / or in the job market. The promotion of flexible working arrangements (see Putnam, 1995), the provision and affordability of childcare facilities as well as out-of-school centres can encourage lifelong learning. Such measures and proposals may possibly bring more social cohesion and a better standard of living for all members of society.

Setting the scene of the research problem

The flagship initiatives of the Europe 2020 strategy, including the platform against ‘Poverty and Social Exclusion’ and the ‘Agenda for New Skills and Jobs’, have supported efforts to reach these targets (EU, 2010a). Through its ‘Social Investment Package’, the European Commission has provided guidance to Member States to modernise their welfare systems towards social investment throughout life (EU, 2010b). The Commission has worked together with EU countries through the ‘Social Protection Committee’ by using the Open Method of Co-ordination (social OMC) in the areas of social inclusion, health care and long-term care and pensions (ESF_OMC, 2009; EU, 2010b).

There are millions of Europeans who are still on the side-lines, both from the labour market and from social inclusion and integration (Jackson, 2009). According to EuroStat (2012), these figures are on the rise: 24% of the EU population (over 120 million people), are at risk of poverty or social exclusion—this includes 27% of all children in Europe, 20.5% of those over 65, and 9% of those with a job; Close to 9% of all Europeans live in severe material deprivation—they do not have the resources to own a washing machine, a car, a telephone, to heat their homes or they face unexpected expenses; 17% of Europeans live on less than 60% of their country’s average household income; 10% of Europeans live in households where no one has a job; There are more women (12 million) than men that are living in poverty in the EU (EuroStat, 2012). At the European level, poverty among young adults and families with children had increased. Nowadays, there are also more single-adult and single-family households (OECD, 2011). In this light, the fight against poverty and social exclusion is at the heart of the Europe’s 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (Pasimeni & Pasimeni, 2015; Copeland & Daly, 2012).

Combating poverty was a central component of social cohesion, as a lack of resources can trigger a number of processes of exclusion. This can also happen in the areas of education, employment as well as in different aspects of social life and citizen participation (Copeland & Daly, 2012). The young population has always been recognised as one of the most vulnerable groups in society. This is particularly the case in today’s situation, as the financial and economic crises have had a strong impact on young people (EuroChild, 2012). One out of five children under the age of 17 live in families at risk of poverty, and many of them in families with young parents (EU, 2011). Youth unemployment (young people between the age of 15

and 24) stand at more than double that of the total population. At the beginning of 2010, the youth unemployment rate exceeded 21% (compared to 10% for the general population). There was an increase in more than 32% from the previous year. At the same time, more than one-third of all young people in the EU between the age of 18 and 24 were neither in education, nor in employment. One-fifth of children did not have basic standards of literacy and numeracy. And while the percentage of early school leavers has continuously decreased over the last decade, it was still at about 15% at the end of 2008 (EU, 2011).

In most EU countries, it is evident that there is an equality gap between the rich and the poor. In many cases, the wealthy households are significantly in a much better position than middle-class and poor households. Moreover, unequal results in education are increasingly being tolerated as long as they are proportionate to the different characteristics of pupils at the start of their courses (Souto-Otero & Whitworth, 2006). Under this principle, a notion of ‘objective merit’, typically measured through examination scores, has guided the progress of individuals through several educational systems. Financial help to individuals from less privileged backgrounds is therefore permissible according to this principle. The emphasis of this principle is on access to courses rather than on the structure or quality of these courses (Souto-Otero & Whitworth, 2006). This discourse leads to this case study’s underlying research question:

Focused research question

‘How can quality education reinforce a smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in the European context?’

The provision of quality education for cohesive societies

Green et al. (2003) believed that there is little clarity in policy discussions about what social cohesion meant and how education may have affected it. Whereas, Heyneman (2000) argued that social cohesion had significant economic benefits particularly in western societies where public education has been one of the main contributors to social cohesion. Gradstein and Justman (2000) had reported that uniform schooling reduced redistributive conflict among distinct social groups. They emphasised the central role of human capital as they explained how education contributed to economic growth. Gradstein and Justman (2000) examined the implications of experiencing endogenous growth where education plays the dual role of building human capital and determining social orientation. However, they also held that these

two dimensions may inevitably interact through the adverse effect of social polarisation on the productivity of human capital.

Significant investments have already been made across the globe to raise competencies that help improve social outcomes, since these are known to affect educational and labour market success. For example, the fourth United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG4) and its 10 targets represent an ambitious and universal agenda to develop better skills for better lives. Five of the 10 targets are concerned with improving the quality of education for individual children, young people and adults, and to give them better and more relevant knowledge and skills. During the last few decades; major progress has been made towards increasing access to education at all levels; from school readiness among young children through achieving literacy and numeracy at primary school, increasing enrolment rates in schools particularly for women and girls to equipping young adults with knowledge and skills for decent work and global citizenship (UNSDG4, 2015). However, OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the world's most widely used global metric to measure the quality of learning outcomes, as well as its adult version, the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC); underline that although many countries may experience high attendances at school; only a proportion of the pupils achieve adequate levels of proficiency by the end of lower secondary education. This finding does not augur well for economic, social and sustainable development. Hence, bolder efforts are required to make even greater strides to achieve the sustainable development goal of quality education for all.

The SDG4's targets for inclusive and equitable quality education are restated hereunder (UNSDG4, 2015):

“By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and Goal-4 effective learning outcomes.

By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education

By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university

By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship

By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations

By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy

By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development

Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all

By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries. By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing states" (UNSDG4, 2015).

A relevant literature review suggests that most of the other SDGs are also linked with education (Vladimirova & Le Blanc, 2016) and social cohesion (Gupta & Vegelin, 2016). Notwithstanding, the promotion of quality education had re-emerged as an important policy objective across many countries, particularly during the past decade. For instance, the aims of Europe's 2020 Strategy (that was launched in 2010) were to improve the EU's competitiveness and productivity levels - that underpin a sustainable social market economy (EU, 2010a,b). This strategy identified three priorities as the main pillars: *Smart growth*—developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation; *Sustainable growth*—promoting a more resource efficient, greener and more competitive economy; and *Inclusive growth*—fostering a high-employment economy delivering economic, social and territorial cohesion (Pasimeni & Pasimeni, 2015).

Therefore, this strategy has a strong focus on employment creation, skills and labour market reform. It explicitly targets poverty reduction and exclusion. Moreover, one of the prerogatives

of Europe 2020 is to reduce the share of early school leavers to less than 10%. In a way, these ambitious targets are also consonant with the United Nations very own SDGs. These goals have the potential to become a powerful political vision that can support the urgently needed global transition to a shared and lasting prosperity (Hajer, Nilsson, Raworth, Bakker, Berkhout, de Boer, Rockström, Ludwig & Kok, 2015) Europa 2020 aims to increase the employment rates as it wants to raise the quality of jobs, especially for the disadvantaged groups in society, including; women, young adults and adolescents, disabled individuals and older workers. It is also its intention to integrate migrants in the labour force. This calls for a need to anticipate and manage change by investing in skills and training whilst modernising labour markets and welfare systems. Economic development is closely linked to the capacity to create, retain and attract human capital (Halpern, 2013). It is also correlated to the quality of education, training and life-long learning opportunities (EU, 2006).

At times, educators may feel over-burdened by pressures to meet the criteria that define success, e.g. raising student performance in high-stakes tests, improving the quality of curricula and instruction, and dealing with children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Quality education may become more affordable across the population, and schooling may become a strong leveller of opportunities. Consequently, this may ultimately bring better prospects for upward social mobility (Goldthorpe & Jackson, 2007). ‘A cohesive society works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity for upward mobility’ (OECD, 2011, p. 17). Education may well reduce any inequalities in society by fostering cognitive, interpersonal and emotional skills as well as promoting healthy lifestyles, participatory practices and norms (Jackson, 2009). It is important to realise that certain instruments that reduce opportunity costs of continued education can possibly improve attainment levels (OECD, 2012). Therefore, lowering the cost of schooling may encourage the enrolment in higher education. At the same time, the quality of education needs to receive adequate attention so that increases in educational outcomes effectively translate into better job matching prospects and improved chances in the labour market. This calls for ensuring policy coherence across sectors and stages of education levels as well as fruitful collaborative agreements with business and industry. There is also a need to ensure that educational institutions provide student-centred services. This underlines the importance of taking a holistic approach with all stakeholders.

Policy coherence requires governments to promote strong linkages horizontally (i.e. across the ministries of education, health, family and welfare), vertically (i.e. across central, regional and local levels of government) and dynamically (i.e. across different levels of education) (OECD, 2010, p. 207). Jenson and Saint-Martin (2003) indicated that social investments and employability policies may be tailored to suit individual needs. They made reference to specific measures that provide work–family balance. The authors suggested that governments’ expenditures on childcare services will help to allow women to increase their employment rates. Jenson and Saint-Martin (2003, p. 94) hinted that government may cover the shortfall between income needs and market incomes, by a strategy of ‘making work pay’.

Social inclusion

Social inclusiveness has its roots in human rights, inequality, redistribution, rural development, entitlements and capabilities concepts (Camilleri & :Camilleri, 2016; Gupta & Vegelin, 2016). It aims at empowering the poorest strata in society through investments in human capital and enhancing the opportunities for participation. It is non-discriminatory and is age, gender, caste, sect and creed sensitive in terms of income, assets and employment opportunities (Huang & Quibria, 2013). Education has the potential to bring social inclusion through civic and social engagement (Putnam, 2001). How children are schooled may impact on their sense of belonging within a society. The schooling experience itself impacts social cohesion, as it shapes and transmits common values that underpin social capital and inclusion (OECD, 2012). Green et al. (2003) had clearly distinguished between social capital and societal cohesion. They argued that quality education acts in differential ways on each. Green et al.’s (2003) ‘distributional model’ shed light on the relationship between equality of educational outcomes and the various measures of social cohesion.

Galston (2001) has shown that school-based efforts to form active citizens may not be successful if the children’s families and their local communities do not provide good opportunities for them to engage in civic activities. Charity begins at home. Children can reinforce their values and attitudes by discussing civic matters with their own parents at home. Moreover, Putnam (2001) argued that open classroom environments, classes that require practical involvement in social matters as well as school ethos that promote active citizenship can be conducive to build stronger civic participation from a tender age. These efforts are most

likely to be successful when family and community environments are aligned together with the institutional efforts made by educational leaders. The children's well-being and their social progress are more likely to work when their home and community environments are synchronised with what children experience when they are at school (OECD, 2010). On the other hand, basic cognitive skills, positive attitudes, healthy habits and other personality traits such as patience, self-efficacy and self-confidence can be nurtured in the family environment (Witmer & Sweeney, 1992). Individuals may be better prepared for life when they can enhance their cognitive knowledge as well as their social and emotional skills at home. The family background may help to form the basis for instilling values, attitudes and better active citizenship among children (Deem, Brehony, & Heath, 1995). In addition, quality education may create an inclusive schooling environment that nurtures social cohesive values towards the entire community. This is one of the reasons why education should be organised to increase the participation of all children hailing from diverse backgrounds (Witmer & Sweeney, 1992).

Education can become more inclusive with the most vulnerable groups in society. Educational leaders are entrusted with the formulation of specific policies and measures for social equity in their schools. For instance, gender-sensitive policies and facilities may foster equal access to education for both boys and girls. Efforts to close the gender gap in education may help to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Jacob, 2002). Educational leaders are instrumental in emphasising the delivery of inclusive curricula and teaching practices that foster diversity and enhance positive perceptions of others in schools as well as in society (Ambe, 2006). This applies particularly to the better integration of minorities in education. Countries where inclusion at school is greater are generally also those where trust between different groups in society is stronger. Inclusive schooling systems tend to perform better in terms of learning outcomes than segmented ones (Ainscow, 1997). Given that a significant fraction of children, mostly from disadvantaged households, are deprived of quality home environments and/or access to quality early childhood education, compulsory and remedial education have an important role to play (Currie, 2001). Therefore, education policy may help to address the skills' deficits of children who have missed the opportunity to develop their basic competencies, earlier on in their life. Perhaps, school leadership approaches to the equity issues then becomes one of developing, orchestrating and leading localised school practices that maximise the representation, participation and recognition of disadvantaged groups and individuals (Raffo & Gunter, 2008).

Social equality

Gradstein and Justman's (2002) paper had examined the relationship between social cohesion, education and growth in the context of a dynamic model in which the productivity of economic transactions depended on the social distance between the transacting agents. They reported that the expected individual income decreased as a function of average social distance. These cultural distances are determined by the social orientation of the schooling that parents provide to their children. Parents contribute to their children's material well-being by raising them in line with the mainstream, common culture. In Gradstein and Justman's (2002, p. 15) own words; 'this development carries a psychic cost of diluting the traditional values in which the parents themselves were raised and thus weakening the bond between parent and child'. Gradstein and Justman (2002) went on to claim that education is a socialising force as it instils civic virtues from an early age. Therefore, quality education may facilitate the interaction between members of a society who differ in their backgrounds. As such, education has often played a key role in forging national identities and establishing centralised governments. Interestingly, Gradstein and Justman's (2002) contribution indicated that coercive centralised schooling may result in rapid homogenisation and may possibly yield less welfare than decentralised education. Empirically, Gradstein and Justman's (2002) maintained that the contribution of quality education to growth (and of the determinants of public involvement in education), were conditioned on cultural and religious divisions. They went on to suggest that the size distribution of ethnic groups and also the social distance between them will effect this relationship. In addition, their results implied explicit testable hypotheses regarding the narrowing of ethnic wage differentials from one generation to the next, and the greater likelihood of religious rather than cultural divisions could persist in the steady state. Their analysis indicated that the design and assessment of school reforms should take into account their impact on the socialising role of education, and their effect on scholastic achievement. They concluded that there should be more policies to enhance social cohesion in educational institutions.

Green et al. (2003) posited that education effects societal cohesion through: (i) socialisation, by inculcating through the curriculum and the school ethos the values and attitudes which are conducive to social cohesion; (ii) increasing the level of skill, by allowing better cross-cultural understanding and more effective civic participation; and (iii) through the way it distributes opportunities. Interestingly, Thorbecke and Charumilind's (2002) study had indicated a strong

correlation between skills distribution and income inequality across countries. Moreover, there was a highly negative and significant relationship between educational inequality, income inequality and social cohesion. Green et al. (2003) found that educational inequality exercised a significant effect on social cohesion which was independent of income equality. This surprise finding did not mean that there was no effect through income equality. The co-linearity between education inequality and income inequality, which overshadowed the effect from income inequality, may have obscured any impact educational inequality had through income inequality. However, the strong cross-national correlations between education inequality and income equality (Green et al., 2003; Nickell & Layard, 1998) may have indicated that any relationship between educational equality and social cohesion runs, at least in part, through income equality. Green et al.'s (2003) model has shown that one important way quality education may have influenced social cohesion is through the degree in which it had generated relatively equal educational outcomes amongst different people. This may have affected certain aspects of social cohesion through the way it has stratified society both in income and cultural capital terms.

Previously, Knack and Keefer's (1997) study had shown that trust and civic norms are stronger in nations with higher and more equal incomes, with better-educated and ethnically homogeneous populations. In a similar vein, Green et al.'s (2003) empirical studies had proved that social cohesion and education are highly sensitive to inequality as well. Perhaps more attention may have been placed on the development of shared or cooperative values and on the attenuation of inequalities in educational outcomes. Green et al. (2003) hinted that many Anglophone countries were placing more stress on raising mean levels of achievement rather than reducing inequalities. These indicators may have reaped fruit in terms of economic competitiveness, although many academics had voiced their doubts about this (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003). When it comes to promoting social cohesion, there is clearly a case for prioritising the reduction of inequalities, rather than just raising average levels. Beauchamp-Pryor (2012) maintained that disabled people need to be involved in future policy development. She suggested that barriers such as power sharing and traditional ideologies are increasingly being challenged by disabled voices that want to become more active in society.

It is in the regulatory institutions remit to tackle inequality that polarises their societies. Greater income inequality also stifles upward mobility between generations, making it harder for talented and hard-working people to get the rewards they deserve (Goldthorpe & Jackson,

2007). Generally, social mobility seems to be higher in countries where income inequalities are relatively low. In some other countries mobility tends to be lower with high income inequalities (Jackson, 2009). Processes of social mobility from one generation to the next and from career beginnings to occupational destinations often reflect the dynamics of the occupational structures. By analysing different patterns of such occupational movements, the conditions that affect them, and some of their consequences, one attempts to explain the dynamics of stratification systems.

Case Study: The Formulation of Policy for Quality Education in Malta

Young adolescents who leave education and training prematurely; lack skills and qualifications which are essential for their prospective employment. Similarly, vulnerable groups can possibly face serious, persistent problems in the labour market, particularly during the tougher economic times. Malta has responded to such contentious issues through relevant measures including the provision of training schemes and employer incentives. It has also used the EU's Training Aid Framework which was co-funded through the European Social Fund to strengthen the employability prospects of the Maltese work force. In a nutshell, this programme sponsored students, employees and unemployed individuals to train themselves in areas which were required by business and industry. Recently, the publication of the Europa 2020 report has recommended that Malta ought to take steps to reduce its high rate of early school leaving. The smallest EU member state has committed itself to pursue policy efforts in its education system to match the skills which are duly required for its labour market. On 5 April 2013, the Ministry for Education and Employment has launched an 'Early School Leaving Strategy' which was aimed at reaching the Europe 2020 targets (EU, 2013a). This strategy aims to reduce the number of students who leave school at an early age. Educational leaders had crafted policies to motivate students to pursue their studies at tertiary levels. Even though significant improvements in the early school leaving rates were made in the last 10 years, there is still a major challenge ahead in order to reach the Europa 2020 target of 10%. The ESL rate stood was 22.6% as at 2011; according to the Ministry of Education and Employment (2012). The latest strategy is based on the following main principles:

- Proactive, supportive, timely and accessible measures to tackle ESL by schools and all other structures involved;
- Focus on a multi-stakeholder approach including parents, NGOs and local community groups;

- Development and maintenance of appropriate structures and early warning systems;
- Parity of esteem between academic and vocational pathways;
- Focus on flexible exit and entry points into the education system (EU, 2013b).

This report indicated that some preventative measures against ESL included the implementation of the ‘National Curriculum Framework’; more vocational education and training (VET) opportunities in compulsory education; the strengthening of the existent ‘Validation of Informal’ and ‘Non-formal Learning’ and development of new forms of teaching and learning, such as ‘e-Learning’. It suggested that there will be intervention measures which include the review of existing measures with a focus on school, parent and teacher collaboration; the development of a multi-stakeholder approach to address the needs of particular groups of students at risk of ESL and further strengthening of guidance throughout compulsory education. It reported that compensation measures shall include the review of second chance and re-integration programmes as well as the provision of comprehensive support. The ESL strategy outlined how childcare and out-of-school centres will lead to a reduction in the gender employment gap (EU, 2013b). Social inclusion is both an outcome and a process of improving the terms on which people take part in society (WorldBank, 2013). The inclusivity concept is based on mutual respect, solidarity, promoting equal opportunities and decent living standards (EU, 2013c). As a matter of fact, EU (2010b) has called for social inclusion as reported in Table 1:

Table 1 The European Commission’s Goals for Social Inclusion

- Creating jobs for youth employment and youth centres as means of inclusion, (perhaps through incentives, grants, tax relief et cetera);
- Adopting a cross-sectoral approach when working to improve community cohesion and solidarity and reduce the social exclusion of young people;
- Addressing the interlinkages between e.g. young people’s education and employment and their social inclusion;
- Fostering greater intercultural awareness and competences for all young people and combat prejudice;
- Disseminating information and education activities for young people about their rights; Addressing the issues of homelessness, housing and financial exclusion;
- Promoting access to quality services—e.g. transport, e-inclusion, health, social services; Promoting specific support for young families;

- Engaging young people and youth organisations in the planning, delivery and evaluation of the European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (EU, 2010b).

Malta has and is responding to such European recommendations. In the last decade, some measures were introduced to attract more women employees in the workplace. Moreover, Maltese employers can claim deductions (upon filing of their income tax return) on the construction of a childcare facility or the acquisition of childcare equipment at their work premises. Maltese families may now send their children to childcare centres, free of charge. Recently, this project was being carried out with the close involvement of the private sector. The families who opted to send their children to private childcare facilities were benefiting from an income tax deduction of €2000 on childcare centre fees (EU, 2013b). Since October 2009, the Foundation for Educational Service (FES) has offered an after-school care service. This service aimed to provide an after-school care service within school structures; to bridge the gap between day school and regular working hours of parents in employment or in higher education. The schools and colleges were utilised after their regular schooling hours. This service ran throughout the scholastic year for school children, aged between 3 and 16 years old (EU, 2013b).

The introduction of such incentives were intended to attract inactive women to enter the labour market. So far, these measure were proving to be quite successful as female participation in the workplace has increased from 41.1% in 2011 to 45.4% in 2012. (NSO, 2012). Notwithstanding, the maternity leave has been increased from 14 to 16 weeks in 2012 and further increased from 16 to 18 weeks in 2013. Moreover, the adoption leave has been extended to 18 weeks as from the 1 January 2013. As with maternity leave, employees were entitled to receive their full salary for the first 14 weeks adoption leave. If employees chose to avail themselves of leave beyond the paid 14 weeks, the additional 4 weeks (as from 1 January 2013) is considered as special unpaid leave and payable at a fixed weekly rate equivalent to the maternity leave allowance. Adoption leave may be taken by both the mother or the father and it can also be shared between them. Adoptive parents may also utilise a year of unpaid parental leave for each adopted child and they are given an opportunity to avail themselves of a once-only career break of 5 years unpaid leave for the same purpose. A new concept was also introduced whereby in terms of Legal Notice 503 of 2011, employers cannot force pregnant employees to work overtime (EURES, 2013).

A recent publicity campaign has enticed more women to participate in the labour market. A 13-week TV series promoted the financial independence of women and the greater involvement of men in the sharing of non-remunerated family work. It targeted employers by highlighting the benefits that increased work–life reconciliation measures could have for both employers and their employees. This campaign also included a study which, amongst others, analysed the reason for the low female employment rate in Malta. This campaign entitled, ‘Sharing Work-Life Responsibilities’ aimed to:

- Increase the female employment rate by promoting the benefits of financial independence for women through formal employment and self-employment; sharing of non-remunerated work at home; and a second income for the family, to achieve a better standard of living;
- Decrease the feminisation of poverty through dependence on the State and/or their spouse/partner where financial matters are concerned;
- Promote a change in the workplace mentality by targeting employers on the benefits and win-win solutions that can be achieved through the introduction of various work-life reconciliation measures in their organisations (EU, 2013b).

The Employment and Training Corporation (ETC) has made good use of EU funds to address the challenge of skills mismatches in the labour market (EU, 2013b). Similarly, MCAST has benefited from seven European Social Fund projects (in the period between 2008 and 2015). These projects address the challenge outlined above with a total allocation of over EUR 33 million (EU, 2013b). Three of these ESF projects have recognised skill mismatches between education and the labour market. The project identified current and anticipated educational needs and skill gaps of 10 industrial sectors in Malta. Educational leaders in collaboration with employers continuously strive to address any shortages of the present workforce through the provision of specific training.

A number of existing courses are being re-designed so as to become more relevant to current economic needs. Moreover, ETC has and is undertaking other laudable measures for unemployed persons. Individuals who register for employment benefits are trained to acquire entrepreneurial skills and competences. Through this initiative, unemployed people (and small business owners) are given appropriate training in businesses-related issues and mentoring. Successful participants who have completed this training programme and who have presented

a viable business plan are awarded an enterprise grant of €5000 (EU, 2013b). Interestingly, during 2012, a total of 33 persons applied to receive training and mentoring in this area, and 15 of them were women. Such training programmes were usually aimed at supporting individuals who are interested in enhancing their business management skills. Such a programme is also consistent with Europe's 2020 target to develop and attract (entrepreneurial) talent. Entrepreneurship has also become a key source of growth as this can boost innovation and creativity (OECD, 2007). Similarly, the Ministry of Education and Employment is helping older people and disabled job-seekers with training and work placements in both business and industry. At the moment, there is a growing demand for skills in knowledge-based industries, such as information technology and financial services in Malta. Many training programmes are part-financed by the European Social Funds (ESF). The Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) is also playing a critical role with new, industry-related vocational courses which are relevant to many groups of students. For instance, sustainable tourism, niche manufacturing and aircraft maintenance are just some of the new subjects which are being taught at MCAST, as there are immediate employment opportunities in these fields. The ESF has and is also supporting higher education by offering students the chance to follow postgraduate courses both in Malta and abroad. These projects are supporting Malta's aim of having a third of its workforce that has graduated from university, by 2020 (EU, 2013b).

Discussion

This chapter analysed UN's Sustainable Development Goal on Quality Education (SDG4) and drew comparisons with the European 2020 strategy, in this regard. Whilst the SDGs tackle different issues, ranging from gender inequality to climate change, Europe 2020 targets cover employment; research and development; climate / energy; education; social inclusion and poverty reduction. The latter strategy and its targets are aimed to create the right conditions for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in the European context. This case study indicated that significant improvements in educational policy may translate to positive implications for job creation, social cohesion, economic growth and competitiveness. The findings suggest that continuous professional development and training of employees, life-long learning, and family-friendly measures; including better access to childcare, more flexible working schemes and employer incentives could support job prospects (including women and disabled persons) to return to work and to improve their wellbeing. The reforms in education (including the Early School Leaving strategy, training incentives, child care provision et cetera) ought to be founded

on social principles such as entitlement; diversity; continuum of achievement; student-centred learning; quality assurance; and teacher professional support (NCF, 2012).

A centralised educational leadership has helped to achieve social equity and social inclusion in Malta. This chapter has identified some of the policies and measures which lead to a cohesive society. It posited that well-laid out curricula are capable of successfully developing the full potential of lifelong learners (UNSDG04, 2015). In addition, the government's policies of taxation and redistribution of income may have also helped to counteract inequalities in some segments of the Maltese society. This case study reported how the provision of quality education has introduced certain mechanisms that equip people with the relevant knowledge, skills and competences that they need for today's labour market. Active employment policies are required to help unemployed people find work. The overall objective of the employability programmes is the reintegration of jobseekers and the inactive individuals into the labour market as well as the provision of assistance to employed persons to secure and advance in their job prospects and career progression. This contribution has indicated how educational policies impact on the economic and institutional development the European context.

Implications and Conclusions

The sustainability agenda fosters just, equitable and inclusive societies that require the participation of all countries, stakeholders and people (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2016; UN, 2015). It may appear that there is a unifying thread between the sustainable development goals and the European 2020 strategy. Arguably, these guiding policies are widely regarded as a comprehensive political vision that integrate social, economic and environmental goals that are relevant for both developed and developing countries. Evidently, an indispensable requirement for social cohesion is the eradication of poverty, in all of its forms and dimensions. The pursuit towards continuous improvements in realms of quality education and societal progress can create a virtuous cycle of productivity outcomes and economic growth.

This contribution is not policy prescriptive. It has provided an overview of policy recommendations for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. The author believes that this contribution provides an initial basis for future research that could link the policy areas of quality education, lifelong learning and social cohesion (Camilleri, 2016).

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