

Perceptions of Assessment among Teachers of English in Church Schools

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Abstract: This research paper attempts to create a snapshot of the perceptions of assessment among teachers of English within Church secondary schools. The aim was to bring forth the teachers' opinions about assessment as they experience the myriad changes that are affecting education now. It also seeks to give an overview of what assessment procedures were in place before the reform, and if any changes were made, what were they. Data was collected using an online questionnaire made up of multiple-choice items and items on a 4-point Likert scale. The research found that many teachers still view examinations as being useful in this day and age, but that diversifying continuous assessment is the way forward. However, they do not think that stress will be alleviated with the new proposals being proposed. Teachers in Church schools feel that they are not ready for these changes, nor are their students or their parents. Thus, there is a clear demand for support and professional development sessions to be provided by the Secretariat for Catholic Education (SfCE).

Keywords: assessment, examination reform, church schools, teachers' perceptions

Introduction

The teaching profession is going through waves of change. Some are positive, others less so. Nevertheless, having been in the profession for almost two decades has taught me that this is a dynamic vocation, which may be both an advantage and a disadvantage.

Importance of Topic

The changes which are rippling through the Maltese educational system will affect the following, among others:

- The way syllabi are written: using Learning Outcomes (LOs) rather than being content-based.
- The way teachers plan their lessons: since a learning outcome approach is best carried out using the Understanding by Design model (UbD) as advocated by McTighe and Wiggins (1998).
- The way assessment is carried out: since new changes require more weighting to be given to continuous assessment tasks which will be carried out mainly in class, together with an annual examination.
- The way students perceive their day-to-day learning: as they start appreciating that work carried out in class and other alternative modes, such as project work, presentations, and orals, may have more weighting in unison than the final examination.

This research paper presents an exploratory study carried out among teachers of English working in Church Schools to identify what their perceptions are in the present educational climate.

Research Rationale

I have been a teacher in a Church School for the best part of eighteen years. I eventually moved into the position of Head of Department with the Secretariat for Catholic Education (SfCE). This role gives me the opportunity to help teachers in areas in which they feel they require support, in relation to English. My meetings with small groups of teachers in schools brought to light a number of concerns. These were further amplified when the current assessment reforms were announced. This acted as an incentive to investigate this issue rigorously with the ultimate aim of providing the support required.

Research Questions

The research questions that were central to the building of the questionnaire were:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of assessment?
 - i. Are examinations important?
2. What impression do they have of the current assessment practices?
 - i. Does the current SEC exam need a review?
3. What impression do they have of the proposed changes?
 - i. Will they reduce stress in students?
4. Do they think that Continuous Assessment is the way forward?
 - i. Do they feel stakeholders are ready for this change?

Literature Background

Assessment comes from the Latin word *assidere*, which means “to sit beside another” (Greenstein, 2010, p.1). The best assessment happens when teachers sit beside their students in order to evaluate what they need to do to support their learning. Greenstein’s definition of assessment states that assessment is “the measurement of the outcomes of teaching and learning” (2001, p.169). Crooks claims that assessment, put simply, is “any process that provides information about the thinking, achievement or progress of students” (2001, p.3). Dhindsa, Omar, & Waldrup go on a bit further by maintaining that assessment is not haphazard but “a systematic process” (2007, p.1261) which has an impact on students’ performance (Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2005). This creates a cycle that is outlined in Struyven et al, who state that the way a student thinks about studying will, in turn, affect the way they tackle assignments or tests. The way they perform on these assessments will, in turn, affect their approach to future learning. This cycle is dynamic and is constantly moulded by the student’s experiences of assessment and learning.

Over the years, a shift in teachers’ perception of assessment seems to have taken place. This was partly triggered by the heightened awareness that we should teach what students need to know in the long term, rather than what they are expected to know for the test, exam or task. In other words, we have become more aware that we should teach for life rather than teach to the test. Assessment has gradually moved away from being regarded as just testing, to a wider meaning encompassing different tasks, including project work and other alternative modes. This is reflected in Yao, who posits that participants in his study agreed that the definition of assessment has been broadened to include “bell work, oral queries, classroom activities, quizzes, tests, and projects” (2015, p.53). This is an illustration of the move towards more formative assessment, which, according to Wiliam (2014) was a term first used by Michael Scriven to make a distinction between different types of curriculum evaluation, followed suit by Bloom, who applied the distinction of summative versus formative to classroom tests first in 1969. As cited in Wiliam (2014), in the UK, formative assessment became known as Assessment for Learning (AfL) when the British Assessment Reform Group (Broadfoot et al, 1999) felt that the term formative assessment was too open to interpretation. Eventually, it became defined as “the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there” (Broadfoot et al, 2002, pp.2-3).

In the local context, during the curricular reform of 2012, the Ministry of Education embarked on a project which promoted AfL as:

an integral part of the teaching and learning process, providing students and their parents with continuous, timely and qualitative feedback about children's progress, giving teachers information about their practice, and providing schools and colleges with information about their curriculum planning, learning and teaching. (NCF, 2012, p.41, as cited in Satariano, 2015, p.275)

The project involved teacher support and training and triggered whole-school projects which would modify assessment practices to make them more formative. Soon after, AfL started being implemented more formally in Church Schools and the SfCE offered further training and support to teachers and SMT members. Until then, assessment in Church schools was, by and large, dominated by annual and half-yearly examinations. This is substantiated by the Research Project carried out by the Educational Assessment Focus Group between 2002 and 2003 (Apap et al, 2003). According to this report, the three most popular assessment practices in Secondary and Primary and Secondary Church Schools were annual and half-yearly examinations, class correction of class/home work and classroom-based tests. With the recent changes outlined below, this is set to change.

Moreover, there still seems to be a misconception that continuous assessment and formative assessment are one and the same. This is outlined in Grima and Chetcuti (2003), who describe how teachers perceive the insistent use of classroom tests during the year as formative, even when no systematic feedback is given. This is discussed further below.

Characteristics of Church Schools

Church schools date back to the 13th Century (Vella, 1961 in Cuschieri, 2007) when the Catholic Church was the first institution to offer educational instruction to laypersons. Currently, about 30% of the student population is catered for in Church schools, but this is set to rise to 40% in the near future. Church Schools have to abide by the National Curriculum Framework but are also very proud of their autonomy. Nonetheless, the SfCE is the overarching entity which supports and standardises these schools. In 2009, it reached an agreement on the harmonisation of Church compulsory schooling with that being provided in State schools. This was followed in 2011 by the removal of the 11+ examination, which meant that schools would now be open to all students, regardless of ability.

There are 22 Church Secondary Schools, some of which also cater for primary school-age children and two which also house Sixth Forms. Some religious orders run one school, others run more than one, however, due to the decreasing number of the clergy, some schools have recently moved under the patronage of the Archbishop and the Archdiocese of Malta.

Review of changes in education

Most teachers in active employment today would remember the National Minimum Curriculum being implemented in our schools when it became law in 2000, followed by its review and the launch of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) in 2012 (Ministry of Education, 2015). However, back then, it soon became clear that, in order to match the wave of change in other countries, such as the popularisation of 21st Century Skills in the US, and the eight Key Competences Framework in the EU, our viewpoint of education needed a major shift. The Education 2030 position paper of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), states that children who entered education this year will be young adults in 2030, by which time the world will be different to the one we know today. Therefore, schools need to prepare these children to be ready for jobs that have not yet been created.

Thus, even back in 2012, it became evident that bodies and entities in education needed to put in motion major changes in order to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values which would be crucial for those in their care when they are old enough to step into the world. It is now even more critical that education fosters a sense of agency in our learners so that they are able to take hold of their own future. Moreover, according to the Educators' Guide for Pedagogy and Assessment (2015, p.5), the aim of the Learning Outcomes Framework is "to free schools and learners from centrally-imposed knowledge-centric syllabi and to give them the freedom to develop programmes" which best fit their students' needs. These are changes which would have long-term effects on our teaching, learning, and assessment. The ripples of these changes are what teachers are experiencing in their day-to-day life in the classrooms.

Over and above these changes, MatSEC is in the process of changing the syllabi of all subjects for the sitting of 2023. This will be a major rewrite which will involve all syllabi, including English Language and Literature, being rewritten in terms of Learning Outcomes. Two examination papers will be reduced to one for school candidates, and a portion of the final mark will be allotted to five School-Based Assessments (SBAs) to be carried out in Years 9, 10 and 11. MatSEC will set up a three-year cycle of moderation which will serve to strengthen accountability and help in maintaining standardisation across schools.

Teachers in Malta, in any school sector, are expected to keep abreast with the proposals of the Ministry while managing the curriculum and syllabi of their respective subjects. This is not an easy task. Table i illustrates the main assessment procedures in Church Schools before and after the change.

Table i: Main assessment procedures in Church Schools before and after 2018.

	Before	After
Year 7 and Year 8	All teachers set their own half-yearly and Annual examinations. When a year group is taught by more than one teacher, teachers collaborated to produce one common paper. All schools examined all four skills, including oral and aural skills. Most Church schools had a system of continuous assessment which provided an assessment mark to students and parents twice yearly.	Some Church schools have retained the system illustrated here, while others have adopted the system proposed by the Ministry of Education: the removal of half-yearly examinations to be replaced by a structured system of continuous assessment. This would include tasks which would provide an assessment mark to be reported three times a year.
Year 9	Half-yearly and annual examinations as in Year 7 and 8, together with informal Continuous assessment were in place.	Following a major revision of the SEC syllabus to reflect the rationale of a learning outcomes approach, Year 9s would start following the new syllabus based on LOs. They will also need to produce two tasks (School-Based assessments or SBAs) which need to be based on the guidelines offered in the new syllabus. The tasks will be marked by teachers using materials provided in the syllabus e.g. rating scales. The marks obtained on these tasks will feed into the system at MatSEC as part of students' final mark of their SEC examination. The Annual examinations will be retained, but half-yearly examinations will be abolished.
Year 10 and 11	Most schools start the SEC syllabus in Year 10, to be finished in Year 11. They would have two examinations in Year 10 and one session of Mock SEC examinations in Year 11, usually in January/February. These examinations are all prepared by the teachers who teach the Year group. The students usually leave school at the end of term 2 and sit for their SEC examinations in April/May.	Year 10 students will follow the new syllabus proposed by MatSEC, including two more SBAs as in Year 9. They will only have one session of examinations at the end of the school year. Year 11s will be expected to submit one SBA but will still have their school-based mock examinations. However, these will be held later on in the year. SEC examinations will be held in the schools around June, which means Year 11s will not need to cut their year short.

Methodology

A questionnaire was constructed and piloted with a focus group made up of six teachers of English and English Literature in a Church school. Teachers were very keen to contribute to a discussion about how to improve the questions in the questionnaire. They were also willing to share their views on the current changes and proposals. The focus group was made up of six teachers whose age varied from 35-61. Their qualifications ranged from PGCE to B. Ed. Three also held Master's degrees over and above their first degree.

The research tool, after tweaking, was sent using Google Forms to all secondary Church schools via email. This email was meant to be forwarded to teachers of English and English Literature so that teachers could click on the link and complete the questionnaire. One reminder was sent out about two weeks after the deadline expired, in the hope that more responses would be collected. In total, there were 112 teachers of English and/or English Literature in Church secondary schools as reported by schools by the beginning of scholastic year 2018/2019. Some also act as Librarians, Subject Coordinators, and Heads of Department, while others have lesson loading of another subject, usually another foreign language

Once collected and checked, Google Forms was used to compute the results into charts. SPSS was used to generate Descriptive Statistics and Cross tabulation of results. Chi-Square tests were used to test for significance. The Monte Carlo option was used to calculate a p-value which is more robust when the sample is small, as in this case.

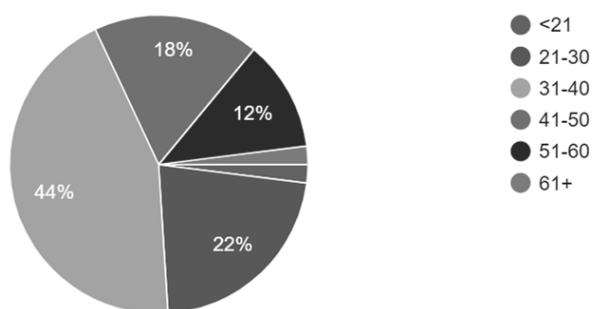
Results

The return rate of responses was somewhat disappointing, with only 50 questionnaires being returned. This is one drawback of an online questionnaire, as although more eco-friendly and easier to administer, it is also harder to follow-up on. However, there seems to be a general perception that the average response rate of online and email surveys ranges between 25%-33%, which makes a response rate of 47% quite acceptable.

Overview of Sample

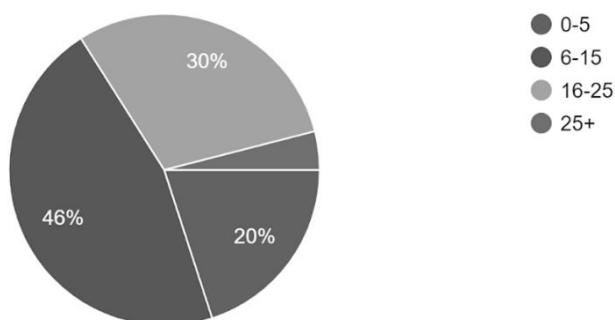
The respondents were all teachers in Church schools, whose age ranged from under 21 to over 61. The majority (44%), however, were between 31 and 40 years of age.

Figure 1: Age range



Only two respondents have been teaching for more than 25 years, but 46% have between 6 and 15 years of teaching experience (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Years of Teaching Experience



In terms of gender, there is a marked preponderance of females who make up 86% of the teaching staff.

The majority of the sample, 52%, graduated with a Bachelor of Education or PGCE, but 38% hold a Master's Degree. One claimed to own a Doctorate. All respondents have a minimum degree qualification (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Highest Qualification

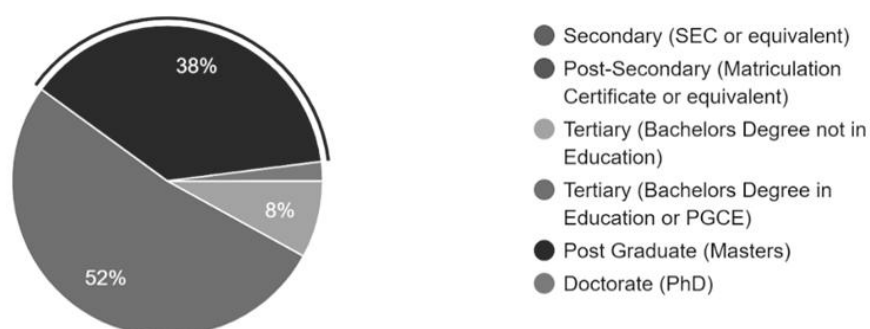


Table ii (below) illustrates how teachers in Church Schools often teach more than one Year group during a given scholastic year. Fifteen teachers were teaching three or more Year groups during the 2018-2019 scholastic year. This has several implications: on one hand, it is healthy for a Year group to be shared between several teachers as this encourages collaboration between educators.

Table ii: Years being taught during scholastic year 2018/2019

	Number of Teachers	Percent
Year 10	2	4.0
Year 10, Year 11	5	10.0
Year 11	5	10.0
Year 7	1	2.0
Year 7, Year 10	1	2.0
Year 7, Year 8	4	8.0
Year 7, Year 8, Year 11	1	2.0
Year 7, Year 8, Year 9	4	8.0
Year 7, Year 8, Year 9, Year 10, Year 11	4	8.0
Year 7, Year 9	2	4.0
Year 7, Year 9, Year 10, Year 11	2	4.0
Year 8	3	6.0
Year 8, Year 9	1	2.0
Year 8, Year 9, Year 10	1	2.0
Year 8, Year 9, Year 10, Year 11	2	4.0
Year 9	5	10.0
Year 9, Year 10	4	8.0
Year 9, Year 10, Year 11	1	2.0
Year 9, Year 11	2	4.0
Total	50	100.0

This is handy when it comes to lesson planning and exam paper setting as it lessens the pressure on each individual teacher. According to Ronfeldt et al (2015), collaboration benefits both teachers and students, as it not only improves student achievement but also teacher practice. Moreover, it increases shared accountability and responsibility.

On the other hand, it also means that teachers of English in Church schools who teach up to 5 different year groups have to prepare up to 5 different schemes of work, be familiar with up to 5 different sets of textbooks and be able to switch frame of mind from teaching Year 7s to teaching Year 11s in the few minutes it takes to move from classroom to classroom. This is demanding, but active collaboration between teachers is key and the SfCE has been attempting to foster the notion of community between educators across schools to promote this collaboration.

Responses

The purpose of the questionnaire was to explore teachers' views on a number of issues related to assessment; in particular, it sought to capture their assessment literacy regarding major concepts and practices related to assessment. Responses on the various items in the questionnaire were cross-tabulated against characteristics such as gender, age group, highest qualifications, and teaching experience. Findings that are significant ($p < 0.05$) are reported.

Item B1:

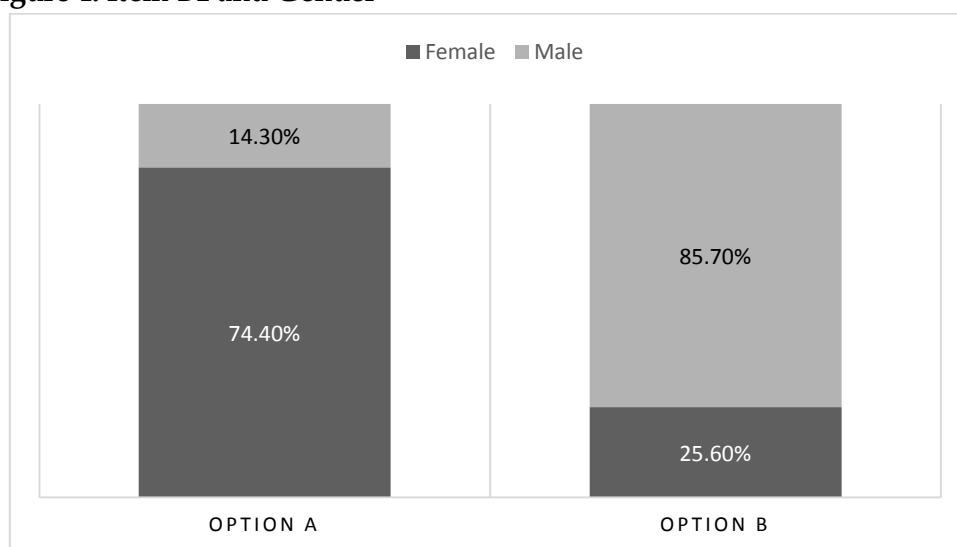
Teachers were asked to choose a definition of assessment from a choice of three statements:

- a) A way to evaluate students' progress.
- b) A means to see who can make it and who cannot.
- c) A tool to inform teaching and learning.

Two thirds of the respondents chose option A, while a third chose B. This shows that the majority of teachers feel they need to know where students are in their learning in order to know how they can help them progress, which is one of the strategies of AfL outlined in the guidelines published by the Institute of Education (2016). The results, however, seem to suggest that assessment is not seen as a tool which informs teaching and learning, but more as a measure of progress.

When responses on this item are analysed more closely, it seems that gender has a bearing on teachers' view of assessment as more females (74.4%) chose Option A and more males (85.7%) chose Option B ($P=.004$). This suggests that males are more likely to see assessment as a means of selection - *a means to see who can make it and who can't* (Option B).

Figure 4: Item B1 and Gender



Item B2:

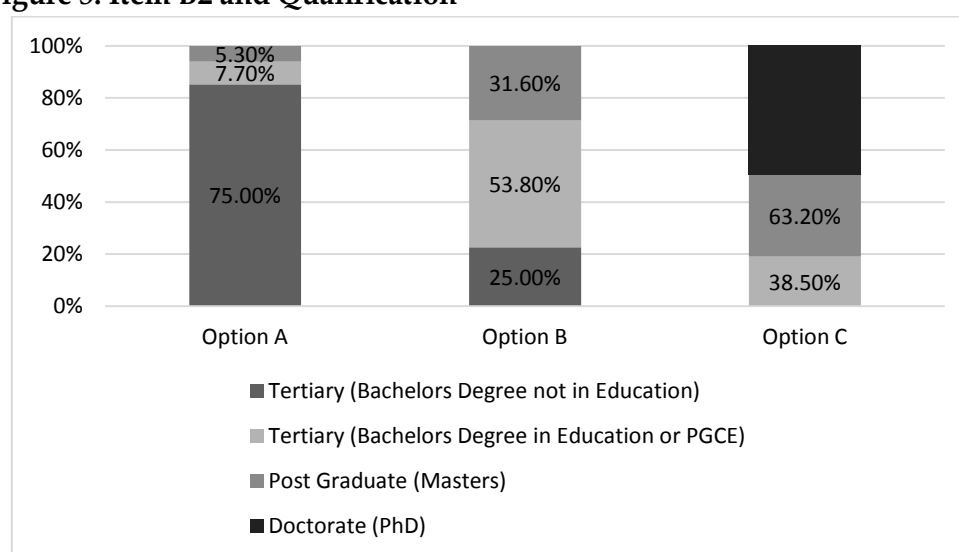
When asked to choose a definition of examinations from the following three options:

- A summative means of assessment which usually ends a course of study.
- A means of assessment which can be both formative and summative.
- A means of assessment which is useful for both teachers and students.

46% of the respondents opted for C, highlighting the usefulness of examinations for both teachers and students, while 42% chose B. Only 12%, equally spread across the 21-30, 31-40 and 41-50 age groups, chose Option A. This shows that most teachers are aware that examinations can also be rendered formative when quality feedback is given. This is further discussed under item C3.

No statistical significance was found when responses on this item were run against gender and age group, but a relationship with type of qualification was established ($P=.002$). Thus, as depicted in Figure 5, it was noticed that the majority of B.Ed. and PGCE graduates (53.8%) chose Option B, but the majority of graduates of university degree courses not in education chose Option A. Furthermore, the majority of post-graduate degree holders (63.2%) chose Option C. The statistical significance of these results indicates an association between teachers' qualifications and the knowledge and mindset that go with these and their views on assessment.

Figure 5: Item B2 and Qualification



Item B3:

This item asked respondents to pick a definition of continuous assessment: a current buzzword which teachers have been hearing a lot about. As described above, the assessment reform will formalise continuous assessment in terms of a set number of tasks per year. The options for this item were as follows:

- A means of assessment that is based on more than one piece of work over a period of time.
- A means of assessment that contains both summative and formative types of assessment.
- A means of assessment that is fairer and less stressful than examinations.

Just under two-thirds of the respondents chose Option A, 24% (12 respondents) chose Option B and 12% chose Option C.

The views expressed by the teachers in the sample echo diverse definitions of continuous assessment in the literature. Hernández (2012) claims that continuous assessment can be made of both summative and formative tasks over time. The distinction should not be made based on the type of task or when it is used, but rather on the effect such tasks would have on the students' learning. Greenstein (2010) reaffirms this by saying that tasks become formative when the information gathered from the assessment feeds back into the instruction and improves teaching and learning. If it only reports a grade, then it will be serving a summative purpose. Wiliam maintains that the distinction "is grounded in the function that the evidence elicited by the assessment actually serves, and not on the kind of assessment that generates the evidence" (2014, p.5). Therefore the concern lies here: if teachers are going to use tasks which would normally be used formatively, but only use the marks generated to report back progress or lack of it, then this will not be formative at all. This will be even more worrying if the mode of continuous assessment being used would be degraded into more frequent pieces of summative assessment, such as an increasing amount of tests during the year. Jansen (1989) reports that this was the result of curricular reform in South Africa when the move towards outcomes-based education was made. This could lead to "assessment overload and student anxiety" (Hernández, 2012, p.499). Quality feedback needs to be provided for students alongside the grade so that they would be able to understand what they did well or what to do better next time. However, Sadler (1989, in Hernández, 2012) maintains that grades or marks shift the students' attention away from the feedback that teachers might include. This is particularly true for written work, as many teachers of English would agree, when students just look at the final mark and not even bother to read the comments or the breakdown of marks under the specific criteria of the marking scheme.

Item C1:

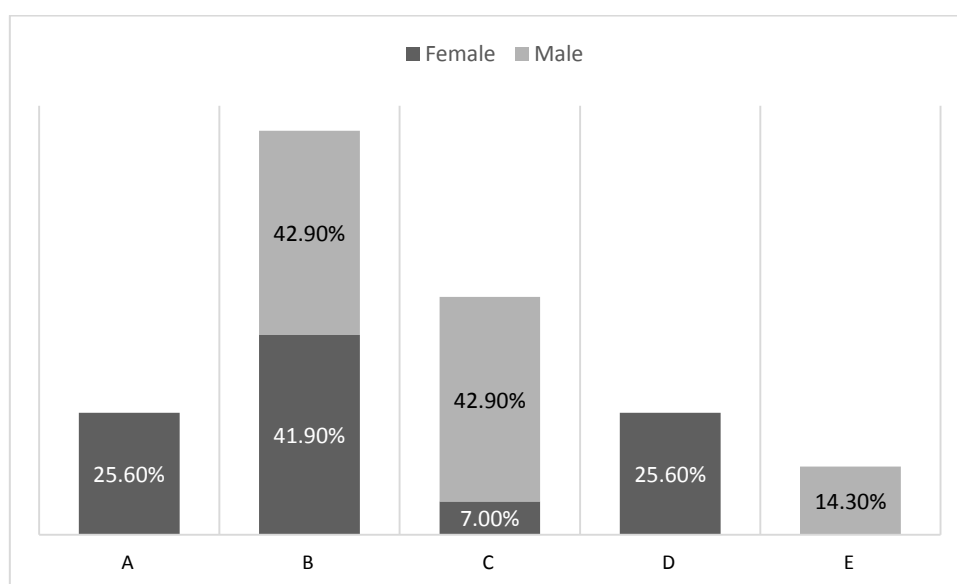
This section asked teachers about their opinion about the type of assessment they would use for different purposes. This item asked them what assessment they would prefer to evaluate students' progress over the course of the year. There were four choices:

- a) Using half-yearly and yearly examinations.
- b) Using regular tests and homework tasks.
- c) Using regular homework tasks and project work.
- d) Other:

Overall, 42% of all respondents chose Option B, followed by a joint score of 22% for Options A and D. This suggests that the majority of teachers of English in Church schools favour traditional summative means of assessment to evaluate the progress over a school year.

Option D, Other, was coded as “all of the above” as 11 female teachers wrote this response when expressing their opinion, while a fifth option (Option E) was added since one male teacher included “exams and tests” as his opinion. Although females were largely undecided between Options A, B, and D, the majority of females (41.9%) opted for B. Three out of seven (42.9%) male teachers also opted for B, however, three more opted for Option C, one which was not largely favoured by females. This seems to suggest that male teachers may be favouring project work as a valid means of assessment more than female teachers. Furthermore, many female teachers seem to favour examinations, tests and homework tasks as the best ways of measuring students’ progress during a scholastic year, with the bulk of female respondents (67.5%) spread across Option A and B. The same cannot be said for male respondents, who chose only Options B and C. This is illustrated in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6: Item C1 and Gender



Thus the relationship between these opinions and gender was significant ($P=.002$).

Item C2:

This item asked the respondents to choose one option out of three in terms of what is the best way to find out students' strengths and weaknesses. The options given were the same as in C1:

- a) Using half-yearly and yearly examinations.
- b) Using regular tests and homework tasks.
- c) Using regular homework tasks and project work.
- d) Other:

The majority of the sample (44%) chose Option B. 18 % chose Option A. Opinions included in Option D added three further statements in the open response section:

- Option D: Using all of the above (7 respondents, equivalent to 14%).
- Option E: Using homework only (1 respondent, equivalent to 2%).
- Option F: Using formative assessments rather than summative (1 respondent, equivalent to 2%).

The responses on this item seem to suggest that the majority of teachers believe that frequent tests and homework tasks would serve the purpose of identifying students' strengths and weaknesses better than examinations. Despite this, 18% still believe in the power of half-yearly and annual examinations to do this.

Overall, no statistical significance was noted when this item was tabulated against gender, age group, qualification, and teaching experience.

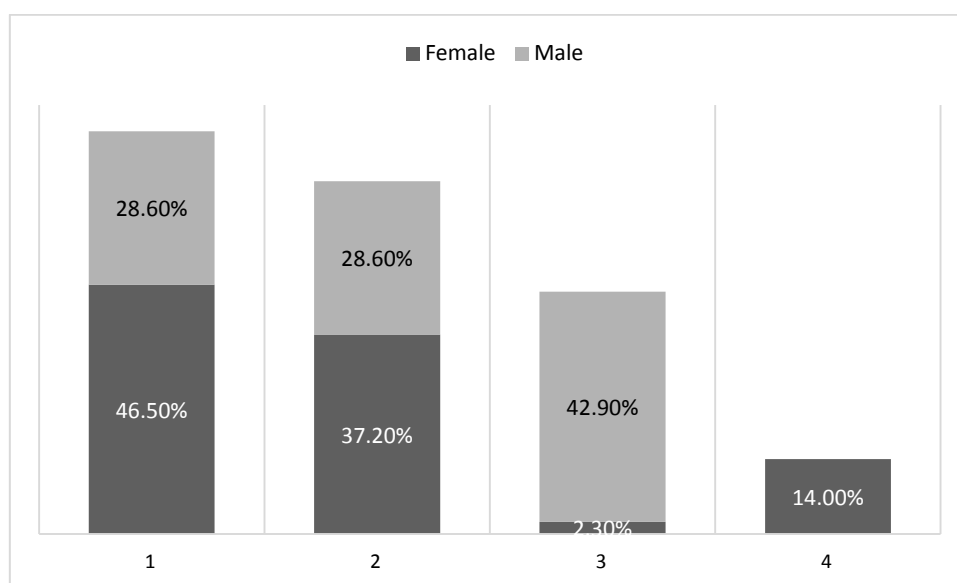
Item C3:

Teachers were asked to choose what, according to them, was the best option to select candidates for progress onto the next course of study. The options given in this item were the same as C1 and C2:

- a) Using half-yearly and yearly examinations.
- b) Using regular tests and homework tasks.
- c) Using regular homework tasks and project work.
- d) Other:

22 respondents (44%) opted for Option A, reinforcing what was reported for Item C1. This suggests that teachers believe in the benefits of these types of assessment. This does not necessarily mean that teachers favour summative types of assessment over formative ones, as even examinations can be rendered formative, for example, by returning examination papers to candidates during a feedback session. This is encouraged by the SfCE, especially for half-yearly sessions. Consequently, for Option D (Other), a total of 6 female respondents reported that summative assessments with a formative component, such as exemplified above, are the most favourable to select candidates for progress onto the next course of study. This is equivalent to 12% of the whole sample. Furthermore, a significant relationship ($P = .011$) was observed between responses on C3 and gender. Female teachers seem more inclined towards the use of examinations as almost half of them chose Option A, while the majority of male teachers chose C, which includes regular homework and project work.

Figure 7: Item C3 and Gender



Item C4:

This item asked respondents to choose their preferred mode of assessment for selection on a national scale. The choices listed for this item were as follows:

- a) Using examinations which are set by an external body such as MatSEC.
- b) Using examinations which are set by the school (e.g. Mock examinations) but moderated by an external body (e.g. MatSEC).
- c) Using examinations which are set by an external body together with school-based assessments which are also assessed by the same external body
- d) Using examinations which are set by the school together with school-based assessments which are assessed by the teachers, moderated by an external body.
- e) Other: _____

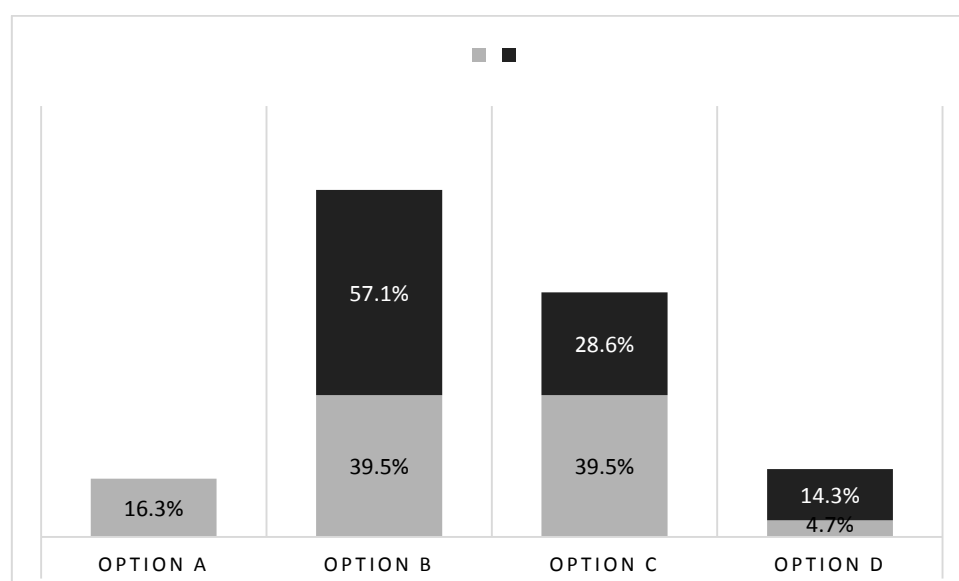
38% of the sample chose Option A, 32% chose Option C and 24% chose Option D. Only 2 respondents, the equivalent of 4% of the sample, chose Option B. Option E was coded as "Using continuous assessment and end of year annual exams" but only 1 respondent included this. Therefore, it seems that teachers of English in Church schools still favour national assessments to be carried out by MatSEC, despite the option that they could be carried out as school-based assessments and only moderated by an external body such as MatSEC. Fewer teachers chose options which only included moderation by MatSEC. No statistical significance was noted for any variable.

Item D1:

Section D includes the items set on a 4-point Likert Scale. The neutral option of the normal 5-point Likert scale was removed in order to avoid respondents sitting on the fence and not taking a stand. Responses could range from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Lozano et al (2008) claim that scales with 4 to 7 points are optimal for validity, even though a 4-point scale is considered 'forced'.

Item D1 asked respondents for their reaction to the statement: SEC examinations were due for a change. A total of 56% of respondents chose to strongly agree or agree, whereas a total of 44% disagreed or strongly disagreed. The majority of female teachers were split between the agree and strongly agree options. In fact, 55.8% of female teachers chose to agree or strongly agree with this statement, while 44.2% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Among the males, 57.1% chose to agree and 42.9% chose to disagree. Therefore, in both sub-groups, the majority is leaning towards agreement that reform was needed.

Figure 8: Item D2 and Gender



Item D2:

This item asked respondents whether they agree that SEC examinations were good as they were before this reform was set in motion. A particular pattern of opinions is observed for Item D2: teachers of English seem split down the middle regarding their perception of the SEC exam before and after the proposed change as half expressed disagreement and strong disagreement with the statement, while the other half place themselves diametrically opposite. Even more striking is the fact that the majority of females strongly agree and agree with this statement, while the majority of males disagree.

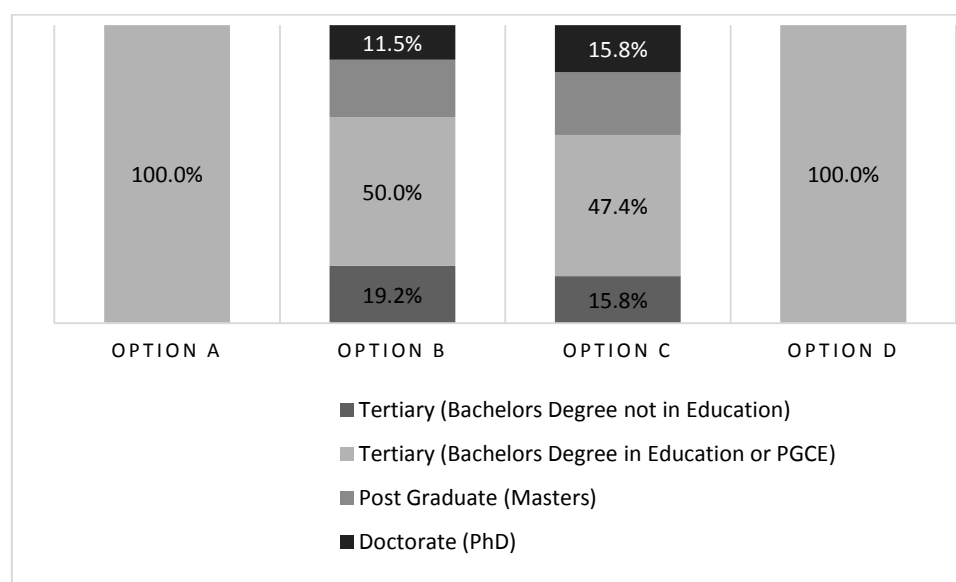
This split may be largely due to teachers not having seen the reform take shape yet and thus they have not made up their minds about its efficacy or lack thereof. No statistical significance was recorded when this item was computed against other variables.

Item D3:

This item asked teachers whether they think that introducing school-based assessments is a fair way of diversifying assessment. 54% of the sample agreed with this statement. The pattern of agreement and disagreement is quite similar for both females and males: 69.8% of females agree or strongly agree, whereas 30.3% disagree or strongly disagree. A total of 71.5% of male

teachers agree and strongly agree while 28.6% disagree. There were no male teachers who chose to strongly disagree.

Figure 9: Item D3 and Qualification

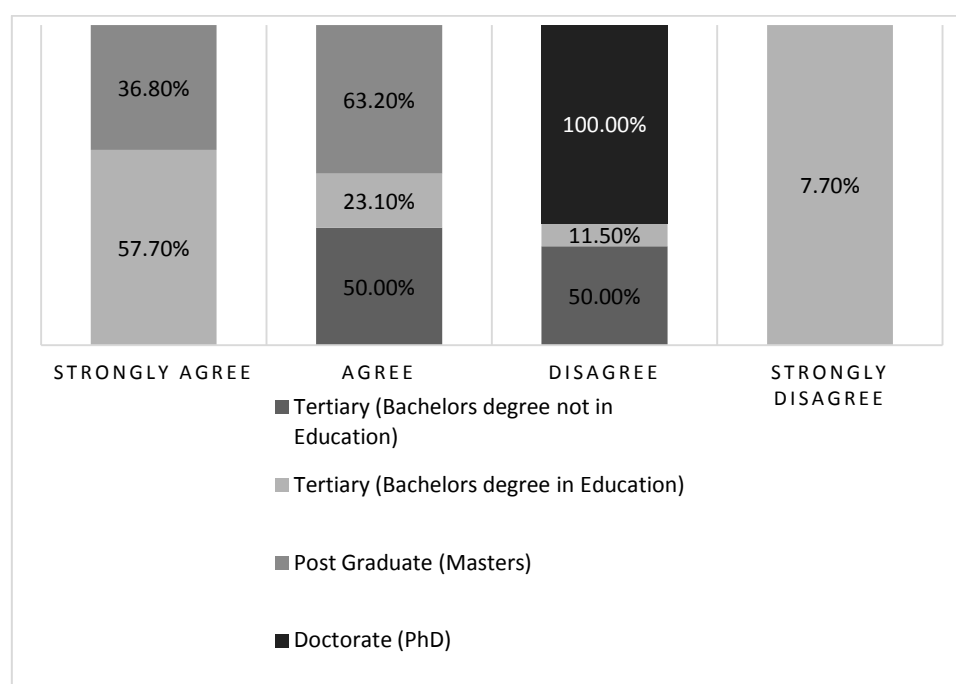


Responses on this item suggest that teachers do have faith in continuous assessment as a way of reducing the weighting of examinations while giving importance to other tasks completed at home or at school.

Item D4:

84% of the sample strongly agree and agree with this item, which asked whether teachers are concerned about issues of standardisation as a result of the introduction of school-based assessments. Only 16% chose to disagree or strongly disagree. Statistical significance was noted ($P = .045$) when this item was compared to the qualification variable. B. Ed. and PGCE Graduates seem to be the sub-group with the largest percentage of teachers who strongly agree with this statement (57.7%). Another 23.1% also agree. Similarly, respondents with a Masters qualification either strongly agree (36.8%) or agree (63.2%) with this statement. However, graduates of other degree courses were undecided, as only half agree with this statement. The other half disagrees. This is illustrated in Figure 10.

Figure 10: Item D4 and Qualification



This demonstrates that the majority of teachers of English in Church schools have preoccupations with notions of standardisation when it comes to the use of SBAs on a national scale.

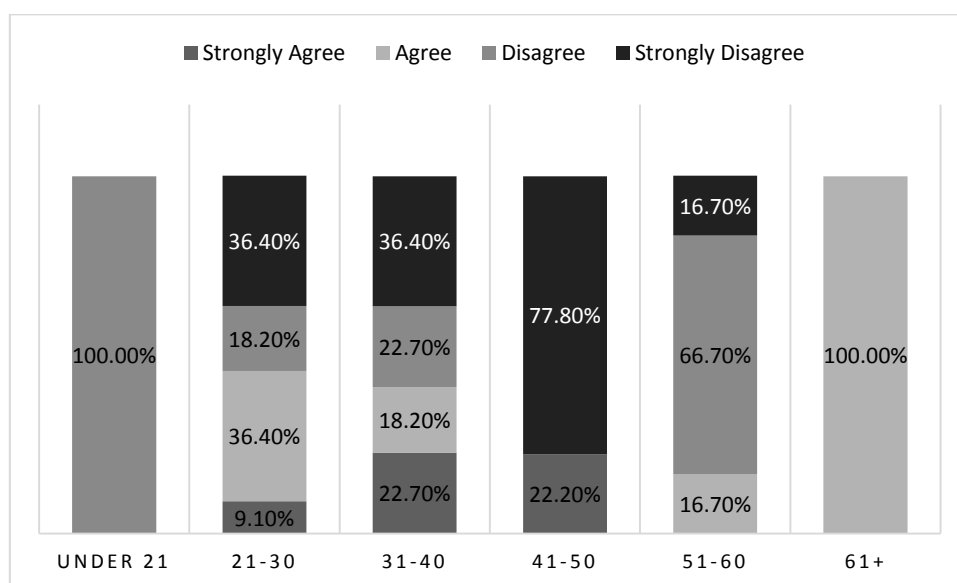
It seems to be quite crucial that teachers and schools are offered adequate support to carry out internal validation and moderation exercises. This will ease teachers' worries and ensure that what is being carried out in schools is of an adequate level, even when it is not the school's turn to be moderated.

Item D5:

64% of the sample either disagree or strongly disagree with this statement: *I am convinced that the new system will lessen the stress students usually feel when they sit for their SEC examinations.* Only 36% agreed or strongly agreed, indicating clearly that teachers think that stress will not be reduced with the introduction of Continuous Assessment and the lesser weighting given to examinations. This echoes Jansen (1989), McAlpine (2002) and Hernández (2012) where the issues of increased workload through coursework and continuous assessment are discussed.

There is a statistically significant relationship between teachers holding this belief and their age ($P=.043$). In fact, the majority of respondents across age groups chose to strongly disagree with this statement. This is especially evident in the bracket of respondents whose age ranges between 41-50 (77.8%).

Figure 11: Item D5 and Age group



Item D6:

This statement, *I feel I am prepared for this change*, was meant to shed light on whether teachers feel prepared for this reform. Many of the respondents - 72% - feel that they are not prepared for this reform in assessment. This is perhaps understandable, although the reform has been widely publicised in the media and mentioned during information meetings. However, syllabi are still in progress and there is nothing finalised yet. This uncertainty is a cause of anxiety in teachers, who would like to prepare enough adequate materials for this change.

Item D7:

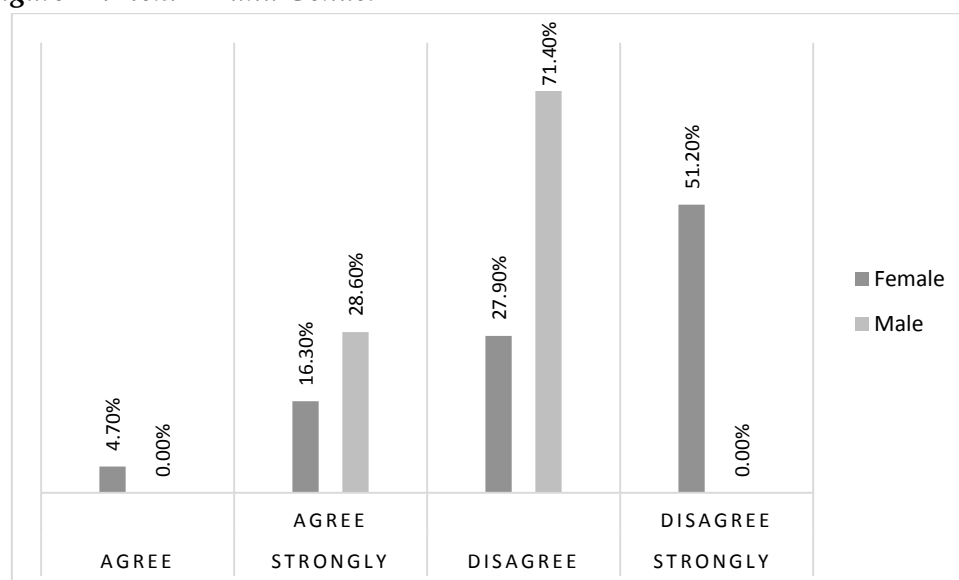
44% of the sample and another 34% reported that they either Strongly Disagree or Disagree with this statement: *I believe my students are prepared for this change*. This shows that the majority of teachers of English in Church

Schools (78%) do not think that their students are ready for this major change in assessment.

It is interesting to note that 22 female teachers strongly disagree and another 12 disagree with this statement, however, no male teachers chose the strongly disagree option. Five male teachers chose to disagree, and another two chose to agree. It appears that male teachers seem to have a more positive opinion of their students' readiness to cope with this change.

Cross-tabulation of these results yielded significance of 0.052, which is only borderline. This, however, means that the extent of disagreement with this statement may be related to gender, as there is just under 95% chance that the responses are not due to chance.

Figure 12: Item D7 and Gender



Item D8:

Most of the teachers (94%) do not believe that parents are ready for this change and this stance is related to their years of teaching experience ($P=.038$).

Figure 13: Item D8 and Age group



Therefore, it is very clear that teachers are not only concerned that they are feeling unprepared for this reform, but they also believe that parents are even more so.

As already stated, although much has been said in the media, there is a possibility that not enough practical information has been dished out in ways that parents can make sense of. This may be causing some misinformation, if not alarm. It will be the duty of the various Church secondary schools to hold information meetings for parents and guardians of the students who will be affected by this reform when the time comes. Undoubtedly, the SfCE will offer its support where needed.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Research

Teachers of English in Church schools define Assessment as a way to evaluate students' progress and a means to identify those who can progress and those who will need remedial support. This shows they see the usefulness of assessment in the day-to-day identification of difficulties and/or strengths in their students. Examinations, on the other hand, are seen as a summative means of assessment which can also be formative for both teachers and students. It is quite clear that the attitude of teachers towards examinations is positive and they still see that they have a use in our educational system today.

According to the sample of teachers, Continuous Assessment is based on more than one task over an extended period. A quarter of the sample identified that it may contain both summative and formative types of assessment, but the majority do not believe that it will reduce stress for students. The largest percentage of the sample think that regular tests and homework tasks would be the most effective way to gauge progress over the course of the year. A small group of teachers also identified project work as being appropriate for this purpose. This means that there is a small, but hopefully growing, awareness of alternative modes of assessment within Church schools. The SfCE will be required to offer adequate support to teachers, such as directed professional development, or as it is locally now known, Community of Professional Educators sessions (CoPE). Such support will help clarify difficulties, as certain innovations may be perceived as too much work or not having enough validity without adequate provision (Gardner et al, 2008). Additional small group meetings with teachers of English in their school environment would be helpful. The usefulness of such professional development sessions is widely discussed in the literature, including in Gardner et al (2008), who also acknowledge peer-to-peer discussions as would take place in meetings held in schools with Heads of Department.

Although not a majority, there was a significant group of teachers who acknowledged that the inclusion of continuous assessments such as SBAs, together with a formal exam would be suitable to assess students on a national scale, but only if both were assessed by an external examination body such as MatSEC. This is further confirmed in another questionnaire item where the majority of the sample agreed that the introduction of SBAs would be a good way of diversifying assessment. Contrastingly though, teachers showed evidence of a growing concern with issues of standardisation of the quality of work of SBAs when these are submitted. Thus, it seems to be quite crucial that teachers and schools are offered adequate support to be able to carry out internal validation and moderation exercises of SBAs. This will ease teachers' worries and ensure that what is being carried out in schools is of an adequate level, even when it is not the school's turn to be moderated.

Perceptions of the existing examinations set by MatSEC vary and male and female teachers were not always in agreement about statements regarding SEC examinations. However, small majorities declared that SEC examinations

were due for a change and that the proposed exam version seems to hold more potential than the old one. At the same time, however, teachers do not believe that the new system will lessen the stress levels linked to sitting for examinations.

Teachers also reported that major stakeholders in education such as themselves, their students and parents are not ready for this reform. This is an important gap which has been identified in this research and which will need to be addressed in the coming scholastic year by the SfCE. As already stated, although much has been said in the media, there is a possibility that not enough practical information has been dished out in ways that parents can make sense of. This may be causing some misinformation, if not alarm. It will be the duty of the various Church secondary schools to hold information meetings for parents and guardians of the students who will be affected by this reform when the time comes. Undoubtedly, the SfCE will offer its support where needed.

Further research, ideally qualitative, would be beneficial to generate a more detailed picture of the perception of assessment of teachers of English in Church schools and how this affects their day-to-day experience of their vocation.

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