

# Technical Vocational Education

*David Purchase*

VOCATIONAL education and training, in the post secondary phase of education, covers a very large range of employment opportunities. This whole area has, for some time, been one in which development has been sought, development that will improve the opportunities not only of school leavers, but also for those in employment. The topic of our vocational education and training is too large to cover in one article, and it is hoped that this introduction will lead to further work with many contributions coming from those employed in delivering the subjects.

**“The trade schools and technical institutes have such an important role to play that it must overcome any consideration of status and must renew its position in our society”**



DAVID PURCHASE came to Malta in 1995 after 23 years of teaching workshop based subjects in the U.K. and gaining a M.Ed. from Brunel University. Employed at the Faculty of Education as an assistant lecturer for Technology based subjects and has worked as a consultant to the Education Division for Technology.

The trade schools and technical institutes together offer a range of well over 20 courses. These courses, and those of other establishments, provide the craftsmen (meaning a competent and proficient worker in an industrial art) and the technicians (meaning a competent and proficient worker, who works at a level where specialisation and analytical skills are needed) that industry needs to help generate the wealth that helps the Maltese economy.

## Trade schools reformed

Trade schools have undergone a reform in recent years. The trade training that once started after 2 years of secondary education has been replaced by a secondary education curriculum that includes Technology Education. In the old sense, the true trade school career of a student now starts in the post secondary phase. Prior to that pupils can transfer from secondary schools to complete the last two years of compulsory education. For such pupils, entry into the vocational education and training of the Extended Skills Training Scheme is a relatively easy step. Pupils who opt to stay in secondary education can enrol in the trade school programmes, but must complete a one year technology foundation course before enrolling in the ESTS.

For those secondary school pupils who succeed in passing several SEC examinations, the technical institutes offer a range of courses in the mechanical, electrical and electronics fields as well as draughtsmanship. Many of these courses are connected with the Technicians Apprenticeship Scheme. These courses are often seen by society to have a worthy status and prestige. The mechanical, electrical and electronics courses use the syllabuses of the City and Guilds, while the draughtsman course is of a local format. The Fellenberg Centre for Industrial Electronics has the Diploma in Industrial Electronics. As industrial needs have changed, so have the

courses. Computer based courses have been introduced, for instance, in response to the growing use of such technology in the manufacturing work place.

At the entry point to these courses there are barriers that must be navigated. The ESTS demands the technology capability, the TAS demands SEC passes. Whilst employment in a sponsoring firm can be overcome, it represents another barrier.

Girls wishing to join the ESTS and TAS programmes in the technical field face the fact that they are entering a situation that still transmits the gender barrier. There are no female industrial instructors/teachers, the environment of the trade schools is very masculine, and the proportion of female students is so small, approximately 3.5% for the technical institutes in 1997, as is indicated in the research done for a dissertation by J. Camilleri and G. Tedesco.

At the end of what are usually four year courses, the successful students will become journeymen in a trade (ESTS) or technicians in a field (TAS). While many will continue in the employ of the firms that sponsored them through the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> years of the course, not all will be so lucky. This is the nature of “supply and demand” in the training of technical workers.

You will note that the two schemes are mutually exclusive. There is no natural progression from the lower level to the higher. A person who completes the ESTS does not gain a qualification to take him/her into the TAS programme, and yet the titles of the courses on offer show that there are connections. Nor can a student who starts in one programme transfer into the other, either because of proving an ability at a higher level, or because of finding the higher level beyond his/her capabilities. The termination of the course marks the termination of opportunities outside those provided by the employer to gain further skills and abilities. Even entry into the University cannot be considered as a natural progression.

## Damaging situation

In the modern economic and educational environment, the lack of progression must be seen as most damaging. The barriers that have been applied have to be eradicated to allow vocational education and training to enable people to capitalise on their talents and potential. They must be eradicated to allow those who have achieved less substantial school success to enter vocational education and training at a level from which they can benefit and make progress toward realising their potential.

The trade schools and technical institutes have an important role to play in our education system. This importance is such that it must overcome any consideration of status and must renew its position in our society.

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**“Our vocational education remains focused on the initial period of training”**

The role is so important, as it is in the other post secondary vocational schools and institutes, that the White Paper of 1998 argued that they should all be combined into one college system.

### **Life long learning**

Throughout the 1990's much has been said and written about the need of a well-educated workforce. One of the aspects constantly brought forward is that of life long learning. While the supply and demand principle applied by industrial needs to initial vocational education and training may be used to

economically manage the vocational programme, it does not address the student-centred issues and does not allow for personal development. By providing for student aspirations, flexibility is introduced, not only to the individual but to industry itself. The rate of technological change in industry is such that a constant up-dating is now more necessary than ever, and yet our vocational education and training system remains focused on the initial period of training. The workforce, that is those who are in employment, apart from courses such as those provided to renew work licences, have little on which to build the own career paths.

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