

Education and Training Policy

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Abstract

The Maltese National Vocational Education and Training policy assumes that post-compulsory VET should be geared towards skill acquisition, to build a country's human capital and to impart useful knowledge to students. The assumption is also that VET should target disadvantaged groups and students with different educational needs; those less academically inclined, and those at risk of dropping out of school. The constant reference to employer involvement, and of economic considerations mirror the goals set out in EU documents. Social inclusion is assumed to be achieved through investing in Human Capital. However, one aspect of the policy that could be construed as actively promoting social justice is the transformation of the main state post-compulsory vocational college, the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), into a comprehensive institution, offering a seamless path from FE to HE. Hurdles to this vision are discussed, including the negative public perceptions of non-traditional paths to HE and the risk of MCAST focusing on higher-status courses, at the expense of supporting students from lower levels to 'make the crossing' to higher levels. The jury is also still out on whether the comprehensivisation of MCAST will spread equity and social cohesion, and strengthen society through cooperation, participation in the democratic life of a country and empower people to participate effectively in society, including, but not exclusively in the economy.

Keywords: VET Policy, Further Education, Higher Education, MCAST.

Introduction

Post-compulsory vocational education is being afforded more attention by the Maltese educational authorities. Vocational subjects have been introduced in secondary schools with the declared aim of making education more inclusive and promote social justice, equity and diversity (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016, p.1), and to provide students with 'a seamless progression from middle to secondary schools and subsequently to post-compulsory academic and vocational education, and eventually to the world of work' (p.2). A National Vocational Education and Training Policy (NVETP) was published by the Malta College of Arts Science and Technology (MCAST) and the Ministry for Education and Employment in April 2015. The ideological assumptions of the policy will be analysed and compared to the European Union's (EU) Copenhagen Declaration on enhanced European cooperation in Vocational Education and Training (VET) (European Commission, 2002) and the Bruges Communiqué (European Commission, 2010).

The extent of the influence of neoliberal ideas and the Human Capital Theory will also be explored. It will also be argued that one of the policy's aims is to position the only state vocational college, MCAST, as an open access comprehensive university, offering an alternative vocational route to higher education (HE) and unifying further education (FE) and HE (Young *et al.*, 1997). My critique is inspired by ideals of social cohesion and social justice.

The policy's introduction immediately sets the tone for the rest of the document. It declares:

Policy recommendations are two-pronged: addressing quality and attractiveness [of Vocational Education and Training], as well as ensuring labour market relevance. These notions are in themselves interlinked in providing and sustaining stronger vocational education in Malta (MCAST, 2015, p.4).

The policy makes various assertions regarding VET, particularly that VET provision must respond to the 'social and economic needs' of the country; that it should shape 'skills development in accordance with the needs of specific sectors [of the economy]'; and that it should promote 'social inclusion, cohesion, mobility, employability and competitiveness' as laid out in the EU's Copenhagen Declaration (European Commission, 2002).

The policy also lists the 'deliverables' that the country is implementing according to the Bruges Communiqué (European Commission, 2010). Another aim of the VET policy is to increase the permeability between VET and HE; to increase the number of graduates at European Qualifications Framework (EQF) level 6 Bachelor's courses who progressed from lower level VET courses; and to introduce EQF level 7 (Master's) courses at MCAST.

Context

The Mediterranean island of Malta is a peripheral micro-state, the southernmost member state of the EU. A former British colony, independent since 1964, its institutions including the education system is largely modelled on British lines, although, as will be argued, recently, particularly since accession in 2004, the EU is also leaving its mark on VET policy.

State education, including all post-compulsory education, is free. FE and HE students do not pay any tuition fees and receive student maintenance grants. Students in Malta follow a common primary and secondary school curriculum. At the end of secondary school, at the age of sixteen, Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) examinations give students access to different post-secondary institutions depending on grades obtained and subjects studied. The SEC examination board is an agency of the University of Malta, with syllabi and the setting of examination papers controlled by the university.

Post-compulsory education is divided into two sectors, Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE). There are two types of state FE institutions, Further (Academic) and Further (Vocational) (NCFHE, 2015, pp. 26-30). The University of Malta offers HE courses and MCAST offers both Further (Vocational) courses and HE vocational higher diplomas and first-cycle degrees. Some Masters (Level 7) courses have also been introduced (MaltaToday, 2016).

Access to the University of Malta is through a combination of end-of-secondary school examinations mentioned above, and after sitting for a combination of Advanced and Intermediate level Matriculation examinations after two years of study at a Further (Academic) institution, commonly referred to as 'sixth form'. Generally, only students attending Further (Academic) institutions, called 'sixth form' schools or colleges can access HE courses at the only public university, the University of Malta. Students attending vocational institutes follow the respective institute's FE courses, and forfeit access to HE at the

University of Malta. The University of Malta only recognises its own academic SEC and Matriculation certificate as entry requirements. There is still no standard access route through VET qualifications to this public university (ReferNet, 2013, p. 14).

In recent years the provision of state post-compulsory VET was consolidated and strengthened, with a variety of courses at various levels, including the introduction of Level 6 Bachelor degree courses. In 2001 separate state FE (Vocational) technical institutes and schools set up in the 1950s and 60s were merged and absorbed into the Malta College of Arts Science and Technology (MCAST) (MCAST, 2015, p. 5). MCAST offers a range of FE and HE courses, spanning the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) from level 1 to level 7 – that is from ‘second chance’ secondary education with a vocational focus, EQF levels 1 to 3; EQF level 4 Advanced Diplomas; and EQF level 5 Higher Diplomas, leading to EQF level 6 vocational Bachelor’s degrees and subsequently Master’s degrees in some areas.

EQF levels 1 to 3, are offered to students after they complete their compulsory education at sixteen as a 'second chance' education. No qualifications are needed to access EQF levels 1 and 2, and only a SEC in two subjects is required to access EQF level 3. EQF level 4 VET courses are targeted at students wishing to pursue 'technician' level courses. Minimum entry requirements are lower than for a sixth form college - a SEC in four subjects, depending on the VET course chosen, whereas for a regular sixth form six subjects including the compulsory Maltese, English, Mathematics, and a Science subject are required.

Higher Diplomas (HD) at EQF level 5 are also offered at MCAST, with entry requirements being either a full EQF level 4 Advanced Diploma or else two academic ‘Advanced’ levels and two academic ‘Intermediate’ levels at EQF level 4 – making MCAST HDs and degrees accessible to students from Further (Academic) institutions. MCAST introduced its first EQF level 6 Bachelor's degrees in 2008 (timesofmalta.com, 2010). Subsequently more first degree courses were, and are still being introduced. The introduction of degrees provides access to HE to vocational students studying at lower levels at MCAST, a path which was previously closed to them.

Ideological discourse and influences

The influence of EU strategy or policy statements on the moulding of the National Vocational Education and Training Policy (NVETP) (MCAST, 2015) is clear. Although decisions about education are still taken at the national level, the cultural framework in which policy makers operate seems to be set at the EU level (Dale, 2005). Powell *et al.* (2012) speak of national civil servants and officials interacting with stakeholders and other officials from EU member states in the process of the negotiations to come to an agreement on an EU policy text, the open method of coordination. Even though voluntary, the Copenhagen Declaration on enhanced cooperation in VET (European Commission, 2002), exerts direct pressure on national systems, indirectly influencing debate and decision making.

This method of influence seems to be very effective in influencing national policy: through its soft-law mechanisms ‘such as guidelines and indicators, benchmarking and the sharing of best practices’ and enforcement through informal methods like peer pressure, naming and shaming and the politicians’ reluctance to have their country portrayed to their electorate as underperforming (Ball, 2013, pp. 44-45). This pressure is evident, with the NVETP (MCAST, 2015, pp. 20-23) making it a point to devote a section mapping the deliverables of an EU VET policy document, the Bruges Communiqué (European Commission, 2010) to national policy actions ‘to gauge Malta’s achievements’.

Ravinet (2008) describes how the implementation of national policies to national audiences are justified by referring to EU documents. Analysing the effects on national policy of the HE Bologna Process document, Ravinet (2008) speaks of the ‘myth’ of what was initially an elastic and informal process in which obligations are elaborated collectively, and contends that in fact in that case four major EU powers, Germany, France the UK and Italy called the shots. Cort (2010) makes some observations regarding Danish VET policy, which are as applicable to the Maltese NVETP:

‘the discursive perspective shows the discursive resonance between the European [Union] and Danish policy discourse in which vocational education and training is embedded. It brings forward the hegemonic discourse of globalisation and its emphasis on growth, inclusion... I would claim that the hegemony of this discourse has made European

discourse on education and training possible as ‘problems’ are now constructed in a similar way across the globe’ (p. 338).

The NVETP (MCAST, 2015) borrows heavily from the Copenhagen Declaration (European Commission, 2002), with no discernible novel policy measures. The various measures in the policy can be directly mapped to the aims of the Copenhagen Declaration (European Commission, 2002) such as responding to the requirements of the knowledge based economy, the development of human resources, and high quality VET as a means of promoting social inclusion, cohesion, mobility, employability and competitiveness.

Policy measures are rather vague, with no clear implementation details. For example, the policy calls for a National VET steering group, which ‘shall steer the anticipation of labour market and industry needs and advise policy-makers and VET providers on the responses [to labour market requirements]’ (MCAST, 2015, p. 24). The policy calls for ‘proactive responses to planned and unplanned industry needs’, the involvement of the private sector in course design - what Ball (2013, p. 44) calls the ‘privatization of policy’ - and ‘creating a marketing plan for VET... in order to enhance the profiles of career pathways that are currently not attracting enough students to respond to labour market needs’.

The constant emphasis on ‘market needs’ rather than ‘student needs’, assumes that VET is geared towards skill acquisition, to build a country’s human capital and to impart useful knowledge. In other words, an instrumental conception of education underpins VET policy (Allais, 2012; Keep, 2012; Fredman, 2014). The reference to social inclusion in the NVETP (MCAST, 2015, p.25) also assumes that VET should target disadvantaged groups and students with different educational needs; those less academically inclined, and those at risk of dropping out of school, who are assumed to be more attracted to VET courses (Powell *et al.*, 2012; Fredman, 2014). In itself, this aim can be said to be ideologically removed from the neoliberal tone of other sections of the policy. Neoliberal ideas and communitarian ideas seem to inhabit the same policy, although the emphasis is heavily skewed towards satisfying labour market, industry and economic needs. Indeed, the concepts of outcomes-based and objectives-based approaches (MCAST, 2015, p.20) have been championed by both neoliberals and communitarians: the former concerned with the relevancy and instrumental nature of education to industry, and the latter with widening participation and social inclusion (Allais, 2012).

The debate about the purpose of education centres around education for personal development, knowledge for its own sake, the development of a democratic society, and 'nation building' (Sahlberg, 2007; Patnaik, 2013), at one end, and an instrumentalist stance of education for work and to satisfy the economic needs of the country at the other (White, 2009, pp.20-21). Apple (2011) speaks of the transformation of democracy based on equity, and an active and participative citizenry to 'possessive individualism in the context of a (supposedly) free market'. The effects of this being that education policy and reforms are committed to the market and to a consumerist and individualist culture, controlled curricula and reduced teacher agency, with an emphasis on the measurable. The NVETP (MCAST, 2015) positions itself more towards the instrumentalist conception of education with calls for more involvement of private providers in designing courses according to 'developing industry needs' (p. 26). References to social inclusion seems to be an afterthought.

Through the provision of focussed, short, industry specific courses as 'continuing' VET, for workers (MCAST, 2015, p.28-29), the incentivising of private funding (p. 25) and the strengthening of quality assurance processes (p. 27) VET provision will tend towards McDonaldization, with an emphasis on measurable outcomes, elevating the values of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control - of student outcomes, of teachers' input, and of costs (Ritzer, 2015, pp. 14-16).

Neoliberal policies are justified by claims that what is good for the economy or finance is necessarily good for the country as a whole, and that the state has no other option but to devise policies to satisfy the global market. The other option of states cooperating with other states to shape the market (Patnaik, 2013; Ball, 2013, p.61) is not broached. It is the market which is assumed to shape the state in its own image, and not the other way round. No other alternative is envisaged (Avis, 2012). According to Sahlberg (2015), governments are using outdated and bad management models borrowed from the corporate world on which they base their education policies - heeding the calls of employers for more involvement in education. He calls this international exchange of policies, based on a neoliberal framing of education, a 'Global Education Reform Movement' (GERM) (pp.143-145).

The NVETP (MCAST, 2015) seems to assume that human capital investment will automatically lead to a more competitive economy - the same ideas

broached in the Bruges Communiqué (European Commission, 2010) and the Copenhagen Declaration (European Commission, 2002). Students are expected to behave and respond in the manner espoused by Schultz (1961): 'by investing in themselves, people can enlarge the range of choice available to them'. VET is expected to contribute to economic growth, give students access to the labour market, and employers a means of increasing productivity (Leney and Green, 2005). The neoliberal agenda rests on the assumption that human nature and economic or competitive behaviour is natural and is applicable to all aspects of life (Olssen *et al.*, 2004, p.153). For Friedman (2002, pp.101-107) it is imperative that individuals are not 'sheltered' by the state from competition for jobs, with vocational and professional education framed as an investment. It is claimed that Human Capital investment - through a more competitive economy - will indirectly lead to a more inclusive society. However, Cunningham (2004) contends that any personal payoffs are incidental or accidental. VET is regarded as a 'value free' commodity, with objective standards, skills are specified and assessed, the learning is assumed to have happened in between (Lum, 2003). The NVETP's (MCAST, 2015) emphasis on VET, responding to labour market needs, is an ideological stance, and certainly not 'value free'. Human Capital has been defined as the 'stock of expertise accumulated by a worker - knowing how to do something... It is valued for its income earning potential in the future' (Halpern, 2005, p.4). The NVETP emphasises the view that VET contributes to giving students, as future workers, skills to satisfy the demands of the labour market. Flexibility and reskilling and competitiveness are highlighted. The implications are that the more skills students acquire, the higher their income, and the more competitive the economy becomes. Wolf (1993) cautions on too much emphasis on training students to what employers need - through employer-led curricula. It is argued that this can lead to dead end jobs, whereas more general courses may offer a wider range of careers.

The clear focus of the policy is clearly employer or economy driven provision of VET. The OECD (2012, p.54) recommends a mix of provision between what employers need and what students prefer. The risk of employer driven provision is a narrow focus on very specific skills, which may not be transferable and even lead to VET providing workers for low skill occupations such as in services and sales (p.40), the provision of labour for unpleasant and poorly paid jobs, and increasing the supply of labour in declining sectors (p. 54). A narrow VET provision risks providing as many docile workers as possible, keeping wages low in the interests of 'the capitalist who can produce more cheaply than his competitors... [earning] a higher rate of profits' (Clarke,

2005, p. 54). The student is assumed to be a cog in the wheels of the economy (Olssen *et al.*, 2004).

Education and training are deemed to increase the individual's cognitive capacity, which in turn increases productivity and the individual's earnings. Since the underlying assumption is that human beings only engage in behaviours from which they derive maximum benefits, the policy assumes that responding to labour market needs will make VET more attractive to students, with students reaping socioeconomic rewards following their education and training (Baptiste, 2001; Fredman, 2014). The 'more skills, higher income' mantra is taken for granted. Social context, the role of society or the state in shaping the economy is not mentioned. One of the criticisms of the Human Capital Theory is that it ignores the social-dimension, that it ignores that some people are advantaged because of their social status or background, and that social structures are constructed by people (Tan, 2014).

The NVETP (MCAST, 2015) ignores that students choose to study, or indeed, not to study, beyond compulsory education for a variety of reasons. It assumes that 'making VET more attractive' will automatically entice young people to further their studies. That employer needs and student needs are superimposable and the interests of employers are in synch with those of students (Baptiste, 2001). While investing in one's human capital can be a major reason to further one's studies, choosing VET can be more of a forced choice, because say, of a student not achieving entry requirements to an academic 'sixth form'.

There are various social and cultural factors which influence students' choices (Fredman, 2014). Halpern (2005), for example, cites the influence of parents, family, peers, social relationships, friendship networks and the individual's financial situation on young people's aspirations, propensity to further their studies, educational choices and attainment. Tan (2014) also mentions studies pointing to a person's habits, perceptions, abilities peer pressure, parental expectations, parents' social class together with pragmatic considerations as reasons for individuals to further their studies beyond compulsory schooling.

Fevre *et al.* (1999) discuss Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' in relation to the career decisions taken by young people. These decisions, and by stretching the concept to the choice of whether to continue education or not, are claimed to be influenced by young people's personal experiences, social structures,

interaction with 'significant others' and their cultural milieu, rather than the crude rational maximizing behaviourist explanation offered by the Human Capital Theory.

A comprehensive post-compulsory university – achieving social justice?

Although, as discussed above, the recurring theme in the policy is the need for MCAST to respond to the needs of industry and to provide trained workers depending on the country's economic needs, it can also be argued that another important aim is the development of the college into a 'comprehensive post-school institution' (Young, 2006). Institutions offering both FE courses (EQF levels 1 to 4) and HE courses (EQF level 5 upwards) are also termed 'dual-sector' colleges or universities.

The NVETP (MCAST, 2015, p. 25) calls for the provision of EQF level 6 courses (Bachelor's degrees) in all areas of study, and the preparation of 'concrete plans for the introduction of Level 7 VET programmes' (Master's degrees). It also calls for the establishment of research and innovation 'units'. Revealing its aspiration for recognition as a technical university, MCAST emphasises the paths which lead to Bachelor's degree (EQF level 6) in its prospectus. Academic staff have also been funded or encouraged to pursue doctorates.

It is argued that the divide between VET and 'academic' sectors is no longer tenable. Increased access to post-compulsory education for low participation and disadvantaged groups is seen as desirable both from an economic perspective and to increase social cohesion and social justice (Garrod and Macfarlane, 2009a). The arguments for an institution with open access at sub-degree level, with paths of progression to HE are framed in the discourse of social inclusion, social justice and the widening of participation of students from disadvantaged social groups (Young, 2006; Garrod and Macfarlane, 2009b). The policy of offering pathways from lower level courses to degrees for students with technical qualifications is described as attempting to address the needs of students from families with low socioeconomic expectations, low academic achievers, and students who need more support with longer contact hours, and smaller classes in institutions which are more 'teaching focused' (Fleming and Lee, 2009; Neyland and Triplett, 2009; Powell and Solga, 2010). Some authors make the case for a comprehensive institution which bridges Further and Higher Education by arguing that they cater for the needs of students who need support and benefit from progressing to higher levels through the qualifications framework within the same institution, avoiding

'transfer shock' (Garrod, 2009, pp.88-90). Dual-sector (or comprehensive) institutions are touted as providing the opportunities for 'achieving social justice, democracy, access, and opportunity' (Wheelahan, 2009, p. 29).

At MCAST, students in different institutes, according to their chosen vocational area, are grouped into classes and students attend lessons, in contrast to the University of Malta, where there are no classes as such and students attend lectures in lecture theatres with large numbers of students. Students at MCAST have longer guided learning hours. Comprehensive institutions strengthen student pathways from FE to HE (OECD, 2012), more so where entry to the traditional universities is problematic. The smaller classes, highly structured curriculum and more supported environment at MCAST, and the clear and developed pathways from FE courses to HE courses - which according to Wheelahan (2009) are important to promote social justice - provide a good basis for progression of students who otherwise would not have considered HE. The more supported pathways through the levels, from FE to HE gives students more time to build up confidence in their abilities.

In this regard, apart from catering for students who need more support, the policy of MCAST to expand its course offerings to Bachelor's and Master's level could also be a reaction to the University of Malta's rigid entry requirements and its reluctance to recognise alternative qualifications to the SEC and Matriculation certificate, which are designed and controlled by itself (ReferNet, 2013). This reluctance of traditional universities to facilitate progression of VET students is a common issue across various countries, with universities refusing to recognise advanced or higher diplomas at EQF levels 4 and 5, for progression to Bachelor degree programmes (Powell and Solga, 2010; OECD, 2012). Universities, particularly research-intensive institutions, tend to privilege academic education over VET; vocational qualifications based on learning outcomes are criticised as being 'mechanistic, reductionist... not sufficiently developmental', the lack of critical engagement with social and political issues, and that vocational qualifications are not rigorous enough (Swales and Roodhouse, 2004). VET is seen, according to Garrod and Macfarlane (2009b) mistakenly, as less intellectually challenging than university degree programmes.

The differences between FE and HE are said to be artificial, with higher order thinking not peculiar to HE (White, 2009), the divisions having led and reproduced social divisions (Young *et al.*, 1997). At secondary school level in Malta technical schools, distinct from 'academic' secondary schools ended up

as dead-end sink schools, before they were abolished (Sultana, 1997; MCAST, 2015, p.5). A more general education, combined with VET in the same schools, is seen as more conducive to achieving the aims of social justice and avoiding social exclusion and reproduction of social structures. The provision of VET subjects in secondary schools may go some way in reducing the VET/academic dichotomy. The comprehensivisation of post-compulsory education could, through providing clear pathways from FE to HE change the perceptions of VET as 'second best'.

Additionally, vocational subjects have been introduced in secondary schools (MCAST, 2015, p. 26), with the apparent aim of making VET more attractive and considered at par with other more traditional academic subjects. This policy measure could also be framed as an attempt to reduce the number of students entering MCAST at the lower levels, diminishing the college's focus on widening access and social inclusion (Gallacher, 2006), with the college shifting its attention to the more prestigious EQF levels 4 to 7 courses.

From a different angle, the MCAST comprehensive model could also avoid the scenario described in Powell and Solga (2010), where certain types of students, from particular socioeconomic backgrounds are diverted 'into terminal lower-tier courses of study without much chance of transfer to the higher tier', exacerbating social inequality.

Three scenarios in the development of VET institutions have been described (Powell and Solga, 2010): separate academic and vocational tracks with VET institutions becoming more academic (academic drift) without losing its main characteristics; VET losing its independence and identity and qualitative differences between types of learning are reduced since academic knowledge is valued over more practical skills; an intermediate sector offering dual qualifications. It remains to be seen how the comprehensivisation of MCAST will develop and how the vague policy measures will be implemented in practice.

The underlying assumption in the NVETP (MCAST, 2015) is that offering a seamless route to HE, within the same institution, will lead to more students progressing to higher levels. Students from backgrounds with low aspirations, who lack confidence because of prior experience of schooling and because of a lack of social capital (Putnam, 2000, pp.296-306) may need help to cross the boundaries (Gallacher, 2006) and help to support their learning from the community, their school and their parents (Putnam, 2000, p. 302).

The NVETP (MCAST, 2015) seems to satisfy Raffe's (1994) requirements to overcome the academic/vocational division, albeit within the same institution since indications are that the University of Malta remains reluctant to recognise VET qualifications for access to its courses, preferring to consider applicants with 'untraditional' qualifications on a case by case basis (ReferNet, 2013, p. 14).

Raffe (1994) describes the following characteristics of what he calls a 'unified system':

- It should embrace both academic and vocational course;
- Offer a full range of curricular options at different levels;
- Cover different sectors of education and different types of providers;
- Modules should be designed according to a standard pattern, with consistent principles of pedagogy, assessment and certification;
- There should be credit accumulation and transfer within the system;
- Modularization should form part of a broader policy programme with the explicit aim of overcoming academic/vocational divisions.

MCAST includes general academic modules in English, Maltese, Mathematics, ICT and Science, together with Personal and Social Development in its lower level EQF levels 1, 2 and 3 courses. Higher level courses are a blend of hands-on, practical lessons, project work, work placements and more academic modules. Students can progress from the lower levels upwards and the credit system adopted for EQF level 5 courses upwards is ECTS rather than ECVET, purportedly to 'ensure parity of esteem [with academic qualifications] and facilitate permeability [between FE and HE]' (MCAST, 2015, p. 28).

There are however contrasting views about the 'blurring of boundaries' between FE and HE. Some (Norton Grubb, 2006; OECD, 2012, pp.117-118) lament the risk of the loss of the distinctive profile and mission of vocational education. Norton Grubb (2006) speaks of the potential danger of FE colleges losing their distinctive role of socially inclusive institutions, although he recognises the importance of avoiding 'dead end' VET institutions and favours mechanisms that facilitate upward mobility in the system, together with a concept of VET which includes deeper and more conceptual competencies which serve students better in the longterm. Te Riele and Crump (2002), on the other hand, warn that framing VET courses as exclusively targeted towards

academically weak and disadvantaged students risks alienating students. They propose that VET is not necessarily narrowly instrumental and can contribute, using a different approach, to social and cultural goals in exactly the same way as traditional academic education.

Students have different learning styles which are sometimes ignored by traditional academic institutions. Te Riele and Crump (2002) propose that an approach combining VET and general education is best suited to achieve the aims of social inclusion, particularly:

- work-related subjects which are both practical and applied, and reflective and critical;
- development of knowledge, skills and attitudes towards active social participation;
- curriculum structure based on students' personal, community and vocational needs;
- a weak division between classroom, community and world of work;
- a range of teaching approaches, including self-paced learning, group work and authentic project tasks;
- assessment based on demonstrating broad competencies within authentic contexts.

Through effective, thoughtful planning and reflection and the involvement of teachers, which are hardly mentioned in the policy, VET can mean a rich integrated curriculum, with hands-on teaching and the practical application of knowledge bridging the vocational/academic divide, crossing disciplinary boundaries and satisfying the curiosity of young people 'who find little interest in the traditional curriculum, but are 'intrigued by the world of work' (Rose, 2014). MCAST can develop into a comprehensive FE/HE institution, were even though the emphasis is on work related and applied courses, the student's needs, dispositions and interests can still be a priority.

Conclusion

The general approach of the NVETP (MCAST, 2015) is to make VET responsive to labour market needs. The constant reference to employer involvement, and to economic considerations mirror the goals set out in the EU's Copenhagen Declaration (2002) and Bruges Communiqué (2010). Social inclusion is assumed to be achieved through investing in Human Capital. The trend

towards a hegemonic conception of the aims of education, to 'produce human and cognitive resources relevant to global business' (Moutsios, 2010) is reflected in the Maltese VET policy.

One policy aspect which could be seen as actively promoting social justice is the transformation of MCAST into a comprehensive institution, offering a seamless path from FE to HE. The issue remains if the perceptions of the public towards VET education will change; if Further (Academic) schools and the University of Malta will still be regarded as the better institutions; if MCAST will focus on the higher-status courses, losing its distinctive character of supporting students from lower levels to 'make the crossing' to higher levels with all the extra resources required; and whether employers will value the newer MCAST degrees in the same way as they value existing degrees from the more selective University of Malta (Norton Grubb, 2006).

The National Vocational Education and Training Policy (MCAST, 2015) is quite recent. The outcomes and effects of its implementation remain to be seen. Probably its emphasis on economic considerations will not help Malta reach the Europe 2020 aim to lower the rate of early school leavers from 20.7% in 2013 to less than 10% by 2020 (MCAST, 2015, p. 6), since in 2020 the proportion of early school leavers stood at 16.3% (Malta Independent, 2020). The jury is also still out on whether the comprehensivisation of MCAST will spread equity and social cohesion, and strengthen society through cooperation, participation in the democratic life of a country and empower people to participate effectively in society including, but not exclusively in the economy (Sahlberg, 2007, p.147).

Will it just provide docile workers or form active citizens? The message in the policy is that everything stems from investing in Human Capital, that good workers make good citizens, and that a competitive economy suits society.

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