

Views of employer organisations on future skills requirements

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In September 2008, representatives from the Malta Employers' Association, the Malta Chamber of Commerce and Enterprise, and the Malta Federation of Industry participated in a conference on 'Skills for the future', organised by the National Commission for Higher Education. The participants emphasised the need for a more dynamic, ongoing dialogue between the various sectors of economic activity on the one hand and the educational providers on the other.

Background

On 19 September 2008, the National Commission for Higher Education ([NCHE](#)) organised a conference on '[Skills for the future](#)', with the participation of various social partners and other national organisations. Representatives from Malta's three main employer organisations – the Malta Employers' Association ([MEA](#)), the Malta Chamber of Commerce and Enterprise, and the Malta Federation of Industry – presented their views on the future labour market skills that will be needed to continue sustaining Malta's evolving economy. Their opinions must be considered in light of the government's vision for transforming Malta into a centre of excellence in seven areas of activity by 2015. The targeted areas include health, education, communication, information technology (IT), finance, tourism and value-added manufacturing.

Views of employer organisations

The Malta Federation of Industry ([FOI](#)) asserted that economic policies should lead to an integrated and forward-looking education system. According to FOI, the main emphasis should be on excellence in the areas of science and research. This will be achieved if close cooperation is maintained between business and academic communities. Key to the structural change is a larger number of better educated workers, supported by educational structures that enable them to maintain their productivity and employability throughout their working life. FOI emphasised the importance of exposing students to practical modules in order to encourage multi-skilling and flexibility. This is especially true for vocationally-trained workers, who are in great demand in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The skilling and re-skilling of employees should be coupled with the assessment and recognition of their informal training. To this end, according to

FOI, valuable work is being carried out by the Malta Qualifications Council ([MQC](#)) through the development of a National Qualifications Framework.

The Malta Employers' Association ([MEA](#)) expressed concern that a high number of school leavers are entering the labour market without having acquired core skills that will enable them to deal with the three main global changes identified by the International Labour Organization ([ILO](#)) as being most likely to affect the labour market: technological developments that result in changing skills requirements; trade policies that present strong challenges for domestic industries; and climate change that is giving rise to new industrial practices. MEA believes that forward-looking policies should be based on the early identification of sectoral trends and needs, the balancing of vocational and higher skills to improve the investment climate and productivity, and the encouragement of students to take up technology-related subjects that are essential to innovation and technological development. Furthermore, MEA emphasised that trade unions also have an important role to play in skills forecasting, which results in the need for increased social dialogue.

For its part, the Malta Chamber of Commerce and Enterprise ([MCCE](#)) advocates greater responsibility on the part of the individual, to ensure that their skills profile matches the skills required by the labour market. However, this can only take place if the private sector recognises its role 'in inducing the educational institutions to implant a business and entrepreneurial mentality within our newest generations and the leaders of tomorrow'. This also means that education and training programmes should meet 'clearly articulated' skills requirements. For example, MCCE notes the growing importance of niches in the tourism industry – such as the yachting industry and its need for skilled craftspersons. New, albeit somewhat volatile, areas of the financial services sector, such as call centres, highlight Malta's reliability on its multi-lingual and trainable workforce. Meanwhile, the growth in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector is bringing to light the pressing need to train, and retain, a high number of ICT specialists. An equally worrying 'brain drain' in the health sector could be curtailed through the intensified development of 'medical tourism'. At the other end of the skills spectrum, a similar effort should be made to promote and support traditional crafts, such as the production of lace and local food specialities, as well as agriculture and fisheries.

Commentary

Malta is not immune to the global, fast-paced technological, economic and climatic changes that are taking place. The abovementioned employer organisations, representing a large number of Maltese employers, recognise that identifying and meeting future skills requirements necessitates a collaborative approach that has to be purposeful and structured. NCHE stated that the outcomes of the conference 'shall act as a basis for a report on skills gaps and necessary education responses, and shall inform the development of all strategies in the education sector'. During the conference, the Minister of Education and Culture, Dolores Cristina, stated that the government is allocating considerable funds to improve the current and future skills of people living in Malta. The minister also stated that she was interested in reading about the outcomes of the conference. It is unfortunate that the trade unions were not involved in such a conference. In this regard, a greater level of cooperation is needed between the social partners and the government in order to proactively tackle current and future skills needs in Malta.