



THE MALTA CHAMBER

PRESS RELEASE

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A national debate on the future of education

Malta Chamber calls for genuine interest in the well-being of future generations, not short-sightedness

The Malta Chamber launched its policy recommendations on a National Workforce Strategy in response to the ongoing national consultation process on a Labour Market Reform, which was drafted following an internal consultation together with RSM, which leads the Chamber's HR Committee. The document includes over 50 recommendations on various aspects of the labour market, some of which relate to education. Of all these recommendations, a particular one was picked up by certain sections of the media, namely the proposal to increase compulsory education to 18 years from the current 16 years.

During a press launch on Wednesday, the Malta Chamber explained that the additional two years should not be spent in secondary education but in post-secondary training, as successful employees of the future need to have a solid basis on which to develop their careers. Leaving the education system at 16 is too early and Malta is often singled out internationally for having a high rate of early school leavers, with almost 1 out of every 6 students leaving school aged 16. And the majority without having achieved any qualifications at Level 3 (Ordinary level) or higher.

The Covid pandemic has made things worse as the current generation of students already has two scholastic years that have been significantly disrupted, and the impact of this is already being felt.

Remarkably, two unions representing teachers and educators came out strongly against this proposal, evidently without having read the 50-page document which is publicly available on the Chamber's website.

The document stands out for highlighting the importance of employers investing in the upskilling of their employees and of working hand in hand with educational institutions to provide a more relevant and effective vocational educational experience. Yet, one of these unions interpreted the proposal of extending compulsory schooling as businesses wanting to shrug off their responsibilities to train new workers for their immediate needs by

expecting educational institutions to carry out training through the proposed extended compulsory school age.

Among the objections raised against the proposal is the argument that there are not enough teachers to cope with the increased demand it would entail. This indicates that teachers' representatives are assuming that the additional two years need to be spent in secondary schools rather than in post-secondary schools that are constantly trying to attract more students. But even if the lack of teachers is the main limiting factor, we need to address that as we are doing in other sectors by recruiting the required resources from other countries. We cannot possibly constrain the educational attainment of future generations by the availability of teachers locally.

However, the most heart-breaking objection was making it imperative for students to stay in education till they are 18 that was raised is the possible decline in tax revenue from 16- to 18-year-olds in the labour market. If students enter the labour market at the lowest ranks, without adequate qualifications, they have a high probability of remaining at the lower ranks for life because of their poor educational attainment. Coming from representatives of educators, it is appalling.

"The national debate on the future of education needs to involve all those who have a genuine interest in the prosperity and well-being of future generations. It needs to be free from short-sightedness and immediate self-serving interests." – Marisa Xuereb, President, Malta Chamber.

The Chamber recently issued another document through its Education Thematic Committee, which is made up of representatives from various areas of education as well as employers. This document, entitled 'Education for the Future' is essentially an ode to educators, stating that: "This document has mainly focused on the educator as a central pawn in the education system. We felt that we need to approach educational development and reform in Malta by giving educators their due... We appreciate that as a caring profession teaching is more of a calling rather than just another job. However, whilst altruism is at the centre of the profession, we cannot purely rely on this trait but need to work hard to ensure that a good mix of intrinsic and extrinsic factors come together for educators to feel prepared, empowered and respected by a society that demands so much out of them and who are responsible for developing the human capital of tomorrow."

There was no reaction from the unions representing teachers and educators on the above document, but many educators who read it gave positive feedback.

Whether employers, parents, educators, or policymakers, we are all disappointed by the current educational outcomes, and we all need to work together to make sure that the educational experience improves for everyone and that students do not rush out of schooling empty-handed. It is a collective duty.

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