

22nd November 2017

Consultation Paper

Increased Access, Better Quality – A vision for tomorrow's University in the Modern World

Feedback of the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry

Introduction

The Malta Chamber strongly agrees with Government's vision for education as a fundamental pillar of our country's dynamic identity, social and economic development and in the furtherance of Malta's competitive edge in the global market. To this end, and after consistent calls for overdue reforms to the country's education system, the Chamber welcomes the 'Consultation Paper on Increased Access, Better Quality – A vision for Tomorrow's University in the Modern World.'

The Paper is a first step in the right direction, however, a much wider approach is urgently required at all levels and facets of the education system if Malta is to remain renowned for the quality of its human resources.

As the value of formal education is increasingly being recognised and appreciated, the level of hard skills and qualifications amongst the Maltese workforce are improving. However, **employers are reporting a worrying decline in soft skills, particularly among the younger generation.** This reality can be traced to the shortcomings in an education system that has not developed in parallel with technological and societal developments.

The Malta Chamber agrees with the Paper in its statements that at present, the University serves a very necessary and pivotal role in contributing to Malta's development through the dissemination of knowledge, research and links with society and business. However, the unprecedented labour gap and skills mismatches

show that reforms throughout the education sector are well overdue and the proposed reforms to the University must be one part of a multi-faceted approach to modernise all public education in Malta.

While the Consultation Paper explores numerous proposals in all facets of the University's operations, **the Malta Chamber strongly believes that the specific proposals on work-based learning for students and pedagogical training for lecturing staff will drive the required improvement in the quality of education and level of personal development of students** attending the University.

Hereunder, the Malta Chamber also presents its concerns over elements of autonomy and governance that the Paper proposes, as well its proposals for a reworked stipend system and enhanced research capabilities through more industry-academia collaboration.

Malta Chamber Position on Specific Proposals

Work Based Learning

Chamber members continually express their perceived effectiveness of work-based learning programmes as a way to improve the overall skill set of young people and their level of readiness to enter the labour market.

As part of the Consultation Paper's aims to protect students' interests through good governance, the proposal to develop work-based learning structures within all faculties is significantly positive. The forthcoming 'Work-based Learning and Apprenticeship Act' will prove an effective enabler for this as it seeks to establish quality standards and drive the proliferation of work-based learning throughout all levels of education.

Government has recognised University departments that already operate successful work-based learning systems, namely dentistry, nursing, pharmacy, medicine, education social work and tourism – a rather low count when considering the total number of courses offered at the University.

Therefore, based on the effectiveness and importance of work-based learning coupled with the lacking proliferation of WBL frameworks within University courses, **the Malta Chamber strongly agrees with Government's proposals and urges the University to implement the necessary improvements across the board without further delay.** Work-based learning must be **integrated accordingly into all courses and accredited depending on duration of the work experience and the student's performance.** Courses wherein curricula do not allow for WBL elements to be

introduced must be reviewed in order to accommodate WBL elements as the education, experience, knowledge and exposure gained from WBL is invaluable.

On Minister Bartolo's request, **as of mid-August 2017 the Malta Chamber is chairing the ad-hoc 'Work Based Learning Committee' established under the National Skills Council. The Committee is tasked with the formulation of tangible policy proposals and initiatives to enhance WBL frameworks in Malta in all sectors of education.** Discussions with numerous stakeholders in the field of WBL are ongoing and promise to be fruitful. The Committee will submit its proposals in the coming months and urges Government to consider the proposals as part of the strategy to development work based learning into a core element in the University's education framework.

Pedagogical Training

The Malta Chamber is strongly in favour of the proposal to require all teaching staff in higher education institutions to receive certified pedagogical training. This will undoubtedly have invaluable positive effects on the quality of education for University students. It is unacceptable that lecturers, though highly academically qualified and knowledgeable in a certain field, are unable to teach effectively by generating interest and due to over reliance on endless lecture notes, slides and monologues that do not, in any way, drive discussion, engagement and critical thought.

Furthermore, **the modernised University legislation must allow increased flexibility, in the decision-making processes pertaining to the extension and renewals of posts based on the lecturer's qualities and results,** particularly in the case of head of department positions.

The Skills Gap and the role of Stipends

Addressing skills mismatches through better coordination between industry and academia with regards to the courses offered and their content, as well as using financial incentives to attract students to further their studies in courses where there are serve shortages and rewarding opportunities, is vital for the country.

A form of fund could serve to top-up the basic stipend in courses of particular importance for the economy through affiliation with industry partners. This would also funnel students accordingly while also providing a more promising launching pad for careers.

Foreign universities, and to a certain extent other local education institutions, have been very successful in **drawing up new courses or modifying existing ones based on**

constant dialogue with main industry players. Those in industry are best positioned to provide insight on the present and future requirements in particular job profiles and what elements are of relevance to a new or existing course. Such dialogue, would ensure that the courses being drawn up are actually required by the economy and provide a better, more relevant graduate able to hit the ground once employed. It is imperative that this form of constant dialogue is given significant importance by every faculty and the Chamber is prepared to play its part in establishing and maintaining this constant dialogue.

However, these proposals alone will do very little to counter the widening skills gap in certain fields. **They must be coupled with a concerted effort to modernise career guidance system for students in secondary schools.**

Enhanced R&D through collaboration with Industry and leading Universities

The Chamber reiterates its call for both the University and Industry to open their doors to enhanced collaborative relationships with industry, especially in its research function. Traditional academic research must remain a core function of the University, however, it must not be its sole function.

With Malta lagging so far behind in terms of its national spend on R&D, **the University has a unique opportunity to drive innovative research with potential commercial applications.** This will result in win-win situations for both the institution and the economy.

Malta does not afford to continue to lose top quality researchers to foreign universities with bigger research budgets as this is resulting in significant loss in value added for the economy as a whole. Maltese researchers abroad end up contributing hundreds of thousand, sometimes millions of euros in value added to the host institution and economy.

To counter this phenomenon, the Malta Chamber proposes the introduction of doctoral and post-doctoral scholarships for students as well as enhanced R&D cooperation agreements with reputable foreign Universities and players in industry. These would provide such students and R&D staff with space to grow without having to leave the country. In turn, such practices will improve the University's reputation.

Governance & Proposed Structures

Good Governance is critical in ensuring that the needs and interests of all stakeholders are safeguarded. As the Consultation document rightly notes, "the

systems of governance contribute to the smooth running of a university” and “determine the academic quality and reputation of the institution, as well as the broader qualities of autonomy, self-regulation and accountability”.

However, the introduction of additional layers to the governance hierarchy is not a realistic solution to achieve smooth operations and improve the academic quality, reputation, autonomy and accountability of the institution. The Chamber believes that the proposed governance structure will, in fact, weaken the University’s autonomy and threaten the smooth running of the institution.

Therefore, the Chamber strongly discourages the introduction of a more bureaucratic, politicised and hierarchical management structure within the institution. **It is not an acceptable solution to have new Boards introduced at the top of hierarchy with an absolute majority of members appointed directly by the Prime Minister** and who have no direct involvement or interest in the day-to-day operations of such a complex institution.

Hence, the Chamber believes that all efforts should instead be focused on **strengthening and improving the existing governance structures in a way that truly enshrines the institution’s autonomy**. Necessary improvements include, but are not limited to, decoupling of administrative issues from academic staff responsibilities and allowing key academic decisions to be taken as close to the actual courses as possible. Furthermore, as more and more fields of work become increasingly interdisciplinary **the current single-discipline faculty system should be slowly dismantled to allow and incentivise more collaboration between faculties**, especially where first degrees and research is concerned.

As a responsible organisation, the Chamber admittedly agrees with oversight mechanisms and strengthened accountability in the interest of the taxpayer, however, this is only the case where administrative issues, such as H&R and facilities management, are concerned.

Institutional Autonomy granting right to control student numbers.

The Malta Chamber must also express its concerns about the University being granted the “**capacity to decide on overall student number and to select students**”. Although it is unclear which structure in the governance hierarchy will have this responsibility, the possibility of any such decisions resting in the hands of political appointees is not acceptable in a country that aspires to further its development and become a model for economic and social success. The country suffered greatly for a number of years when such practices were enforced.

Therefore, the Chamber stresses that access to state-funded tertiary education remains an unquestioned right available to all who achieve the minimum entry requirements and aspire to attain a tertiary education qualification.

Conclusion

The Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry reiterates its firm belief that education has a fundamental role to play in the country's continued development. Above, the Chamber has provided its feedback in response to the Consultation Paper entitled the 'Vision for Tomorrow's University on the Modern World' and invites policy makers to further, deeper discussions on the feedback included in this document. The Chamber is committed to contribute in any way possible to safeguard and enhance the country's competitiveness. Accessible and autonomous education remains a fundamental pillar to this end.

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