Malta's National Strategic Action Plan for Further and Higher Education

2022-2030

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Foreword

The Minister for Education, Sports, Youth, Research and Innovation

The Ministry for Education, Sports, Youths, Research, and Innovation supports sustainable and resilient providers of Further and Higher Education, and this Strategy is an important step towards that.

Our country is committed to bringing growth to our nation and our people. We must continue to work together to provide access to quality education for all. We must ensure and sustain a strong, ethical, high quality educational community to achieve development at both national and global level.

The Strategy places the students at the center and focuses on a robust quality assurance system and transparency. Having equitable further and higher education ensures that people irrespective of their socio-economic factors have an equal chance of educational attainment, retention, and completion.

Further and Higher Quality Education serves to enrich our modern society in many complex ways, and it is an integral part of our local and international communities. Our country requires a network of high-quality education providers that are ready to act as enablers for change, to respond to challenges while contributing to research, innovation, and excellence.

The strategy recognises the central role that further and higher education institutions have in the path towards sustainable growth, and the creation of a competitive island.

The key trends and drivers up to 2030 promises preparedness to shape a resilient society in the 21st Century. The relevance of Teaching, Learning and Research, as well as Strategic Internationalisation and Mobility will connect us and move us forward to advance and address the Sustainable Development Goals.

Our goal continues to be focused on personal and professional development through lifelong learning based on democratic values, and we need to invest in widening participation and adult learning.

The strategic plan provides a considered and informed basis for government policy on the development of further and higher education.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority and the stakeholders who have contributed time and expertise throughout the consultation stages.

Dr. Clifton Grima

Executive Summary

Recent world events have served to highlight the growing fragility of our planet and the vulnerability of our society to systemic crisis and sudden shocks. These challenging times of pandemic, conflict and the drive towards economic, societal and individual recovery call for innovative policy approaches to build resilience at all levels of society and the economy. Education must rise to this challenge by supporting learning in a range of emerging contexts through flexible formats and content, tailored for diverse communities, their needs and lifestyles. Education and learning need to become more responsive and anticipatory in this dynamic environment.

Indeed, education and learning are on the move just as much as society is on the move. We have embarked on pathways leading to major transitions, societal, demographic, digital, green and industry 5.0. These will generate new economic opportunities, new jobs, work locations, work framework and conditions. Preparing young people for the economy in 2030 requires anticipation of new career paths and skills needs in the private and public sectors.

This Strategic Plan identifies key trends and drivers up to 2030 and their relevance to further and higher education, with a view to mapping and tackling emerging opportunities and threats. The policy implications and recommended actions highlight the need for closer policy synergies between education, research, and industry /enterprise. This co-design of policies needs to extend to the digital, health and environment policy areas.

The review of Malta's performance to date in the education policy domain indicates that significant progress has been made in addressing EU and national targets. However, these efforts need to be sustained and remaining gaps to be addressed, for example by building a culture for quality and transparency, empowering stakeholders, as well as widening participation and reducing the number of early dropouts.

The Strategic Plan revisits the Vision and guiding principles for further and higher education to ensure they are future-ready for 2030 and beyond. The seven pillars for implementing the Vision focus on building a sound basis for more joined-up policies across government and with industry. The Plan envisages in the first instance the setting up of effective structures for policy co-design and the mechanisms for rolling out the required measures. A key priority across the seven pillars is the need to strengthen the evidence base for policy design, the setting of commonly agreed targets and effective mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation.

MFHEA Chief Executive Officer
Dr. Rose Anne Cuschieri

Introduction
and emerging context

The challenges facing further and higher education up to 2030 are multi-faceted and complex and their resolution depends on the co-design of government-wide coordinated policy responses based on robust, forward-looking approaches. In this introductory section, the aim is to analyse and explore the emerging policy context for education, taking into account demographic, technological, socio-economic and geopolitical trends and drivers. Relevant EU and national policy developments will be mapped in order to identify issues of potential opportunity and concern, requiring national action.

This is followed by a review of Malta's performance in relation to key EU indicators and targets in education and training. This will help to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the national education ecosystem as well as emerging opportunities and threats. The aim is to provide a preliminary evidence base for prioritising and designing required actions and measures.

1.1 Key Trends and Drivers up to 2030

This section focuses on current and emerging trends and drivers of key relevance for further and higher education in Malta up to 2030. As evidenced by current events in the Ukraine, the geopolitical context is emerging as a particularly strong driver with potentially destabilising effects on economic and social trends and drivers. The current crisis and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic highlight the need to keep track of a dynamic global context and to prepare society to cope with systemic crisis. The table below aims to flag emerging opportunities, challenges and threats in the local context which are opening up and the main policy implications for education.

TRENDS AND DRIVERS	POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION
Demographic	
In Europe, demographic change has been identified as a dynamic transformation process on a par with the green and digital transitions currently underway. Recently it has become apparent that more complex dynamics are emerging due to the interactions between demographic change and the twin green and digital transitions which often cause them to support or accelerate each other.[1] Another important driver is the mobility of young people in pursuit of career, education, training and business opportunities which is profoundly shaping Europe's demographic profile. [2] In the last century Malta has been undergoing a gradual demographic transition, going from high birth and death rates to declining death rates due to an improving health care system, which led to population growth and improved life expectancy. The elderly population is expected to double by 2050[3], increasing its dependence on the economically active population and requiring more carers and medical staff[4]. Emigration and brain drain have been complemented by inward migration flows, giving rise to social and educational challenges. Inward and outward flows of young people, students, workers, researchers, foreign workers and migrants are expected to increase in the coming decades.	These trends collectively require timely and effective policy responses and there is no one-size-fits-all. EU and national policies need to be tailored, based on sound analysis of how demographic change factors interact with local and national realities. In order to counteract the effects of demographic and economic declines, the EU highlights the importance of developing closer interlinkages between education, research and innovation within the European Research Area. The education ecosystem will need to be better prepared to manage these inward and outward flows of students and workers. It needs to be more resilient in the face of these disruptions and rather to embrace them as necessary transitions. Policy co-design links between education, employment and innovation are critical for for addressing the demographic challenge, particularly in the context of green and digital transitions. This will ensure that the required human resources and skills are in place and effective participation in the related EU initiatives.

Environmental	
Environmental change is expected to continue on its upward spiral up to 2030 due to a growing incidence of natural and man-made hazardous events including droughts, desertification, floods, fires, earthquakes and dispersion of radioactive gases in the atmosphere. The combination of these is expected to generate major social, environmental and economic impacts. [5] Climate change has become an independent driver of environmental change[6] and its effects are expected to become more prominent up to 2030. Whereas in the past economic development has been a driver of climate change, in the future climate change is expected to create critical challenges for economic development and to test the resilience of economies and societies. Indeed the risks to human societies through impacts on livelihoods, health, food and water security, and biodiversity are a matter of growing concern. Climate change is expected to amplify existing risks and create new risks for natural and human systems and to test their resilience and ability to adapt. Combined with demographic change, it is likely to cause further disruption, e.g. in the Mediterranean increasing desertification could result in climate migration into Europe. Global agreement and action to control climate change are expected to offset these challenges and risks. The EU's drive to promote a green transition will provide a stimulus in the right direction.	These trends highlight the need for policy action on a number of levels in terms of re-aligning education and training to meet the challenge of climate change and a green transition.[7] This entails providing appropriately qualified teachers and staff, curricula[8], content, methods and tools to equip learners with the skills and knowledge to act on the climate emergency, support the green transition and thrive in the green economy. Education needs to play a more proactive role in changing attitudes and behaviour, by instilling values and a sense of responsibility towards the global commons, as well as supporting informed decisions on the part of policy-makers, producers and consumers. Education policy needs to work hand in hand with environmental and R&I policies to empower all, in particular, young people to take action by exploring opportunities in the green economy and supporting green transition, and more sustainable lifestyles. Education needs to equip teachers and learners with a broad range of skills and competences from the development of multidisciplinary approaches and competences to anticipate and address climate change, from mitigation and adaptation, to disaster risk reduction and resilience.

1   https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/impact-demographic-change-europe#impacts-of-demographic-change

2   https://www.eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/j9vvik7m1c3gyxp/vlidcy9crrxu?ctx=vg9pjpw5wsz1&start_tab1=5   and   https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC123046

3   https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_structure_and_ageing&oldid=549185

4   https://www.inia.org.mt/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/4.2.1-Measuring-and-Modelling-Demographic-Trends-in-Malta-pgs-78-90-Final.pdf

5   https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/research-topic/natural-and-man-made-hazards

6   https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/27654/GEO6_CH2.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

7   https://ec.europa.eu/education/news/greener-more-sustainable-europe-public-consultation_en

8   https://www.uncclearn.org/wp-content/uploads/library/resource_guide_on_integrating_cc_in_education_primary_and_secondary_level.pdf

Socio-economic

As the Fourth Industrial Revolution impacts on socio-economic and demographic drivers with significant disruption to business models and labour markets, the fifth Industrial Revolution is set to ' place trust in technology, ensuring that it is being used for the good of the world, not just for profit.' Indeed, Industry 5.0[9] is set to move beyond productivity, to re-orient industry with a new vision of contributing to society

This comes with a growing emphasis on worker wellbeing and research and innovation driving the transition "to a sustainable, human-centric and resilient European industry".

New jobs and skills[10] sets are expected to emerge, transforming work patterns with more home-based work and gender considerations.

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted negatively on some key economic sectors and social groups, while opening new niche markets and business models. The full extent of the social impact on the poorer, weaker parts of society has yet to be captured. The social economy has played an important role in mitigating the effects of the pandemic. Its prime focus is on addressing societal challenges, "using sustainable and inclusive economic practices, and participatory and democratic governance, to generate economic activities with positive social impact based on local roots."[11] By 2030, the demand for the social economy is expected to become greater, as a means for coping with the social disruption of demographic, green and digital transitions, by contributing to territorial cohesion, inclusive growth, social innovation and environmental sustainability.

The socio-economic drivers up to 2030 will create key challenges for education policy, as it is challenged to keep up with the disruptions in the labour market. The majority of primary school children have to be prepared for jobs which do not yet exist.[12]

The education system needs to work more closely with enterprises to develop education and training initiatives which support the future economy, in particular the social economy. This will entail actions to ensure that there is a stronger emphasis on values, and social economy principles, including self-responsibility, democracy and equality. These models must be taught at all levels (primary, secondary, university, vocational) in order to build competences, reinforce skills, and ensure that young people are prepared for future careers.

Action is needed at EU and national level to support the upskilling of workers for the future social economy in areas such as digitalisation, participatory governance and the green transition.

There is an opportunity to build on the attraction of the social economy for young people, and to invest in it through national actions, thereby opening up a range of opportunities from creativity, personal development and socially relevant skills, to new jobs linked to social innovation and community building.

A key driver of the social economy is that it offers potential for more equitable access to the labour market and jobs for young people. The social economy also has a resonating effect with younger generations[13], keen on striving for more sustainable and equitable livelihoods and communities, based on active citizenship, solidarity and democratic values.

Technological

The evolving dynamics between technology and learning is challenging traditional roles, content and methods of education to meet the needs of new economy sectors (including green and digital) and a fast-changing labour market. The education market is in turn experiencing greater openness to online competition from global digital providers as well as opportunities for alliances to source content.

Key technologies with potential to revolutionise tomorrow's learning are:

- Artificial intelligence (and big data)[14], in particular learning analytics, the personalisation of learning content, and monitoring and control of learners' behaviour;

- Augmented and virtual reality offer immersive learning, by increasing learners' motivation and the retention of learning content with applications mostly in vocational education;

- Blockchain with applications in certification, recognition of degrees, tracking of academic content and work,

- Highly equipped and connected classrooms with digital equipment, access to digital content.

These technology trends are influencing and challenging education systems to make the transition to the digital age and to provide the soft and technical skills and competencies for the future global labour market and jobs that may not yet exist. This entails rethinking education to support social inclusion and equal participation of citizens in a digitalised democracy. [15]

Effective education policies are needed for the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem. This will depend on gearing up education providers for technology-assisted learning through provision of appropriate support in the form of guidelines and standards (data protection), online infrastructure (including platforms), capacity development (access to expertise and training), digitally competent teachers/staff; and high-quality content.

Digital education policies have evolved through three generations[16] from (i) infrastructure development to (ii) teacher and student competence building and training to the current drive towards (iii) systemic integration of digital education into the overall educational settings.

9   https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/research-area/industrial-research-and-innovation/industry-50_en

10   https://reports.weforum.org/future-of-jobs-2016/chapter-1-the-future-of-jobs-and-skills/

11   https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/social-economy-and-the-covid-19-crisis-current-and-future-roles-f904b89f/

12   https://reports.weforum.org/future-of-jobs-2016/chapter-1-the-future-of-jobs-and-skills/#view/fn-1

13   https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/files/civsocdays_2021_ws_2.pdf

14   https://iite.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Steven_Duggan_AI-in-Education_2020.pdf

15   https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/tertiaryeducation#1

16   EPRS Study (2019)

In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic has played a significant catalytic role in forcing the transition from traditional learning towards more technology-enabled and on demand learning. By 2030, smart technologies in the classroom, will facilitate hyper- personalized learning based on individual needs and appropriately tailored educational approaches and content. Adaptive learning technology such as intelligent tutoring systems can detect students' knowledge or gaps in knowledge and design appropriate steps for learning through new curricula, exercises and forms. Social robots will be increasingly used for learning purposes.

Sustainability pressures on travel may change the international student model with a higher digital content combined with shorter international experiences on campus.

The shift to third and next generation policies calls for closer collaboration between Ministries responsible for education, employment, digital and R&I to develop coordinated, forward-looking policies.

Malta's strong digital footprint opens up a range of viable opportunities in the digital education and serious gaming sector.

Geopolitical

Emerging geopolitical trends and drivers up to 2030 and beyond are expected to have a profound impact on education, particularly in terms of educational systems and markets, as well as goals, values, approaches and content.[17]

Governance is shifting as key policies are being influenced by global events and agenda-setting. Climate, R&I and education priorities are increasingly being shaped and determined by global and European agendas, for example the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals[18] and EU Next Gen[19].

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, worrying geopolitical developments were causing some EU Member States to adopt more nationalistic policies to address sovereignty concerns. The pandemic has highlighted further the growing vulnerability to external shocks and the need to protect the EU's assets and value systems and its ability to set its own policies, defend its strategic interests and to play a globally responsible role. The open strategic autonomy (OSA)[20] approach adopted by the EU in 2020 aims at reinforcing the EU's independence and resilience in defense, trade, industrial, digital, economic, monetary, health, energy and technological policy.

Ongoing shifts of power to Asia and the emergence of new global players highlight the need to reduce the EU's dependence on foreign innovation providers by investing more in its "own economic, research and innovation capabilities, its labour market and its education system in order to avoid being taken over by emerging economies". [21]

Increased citizen activism is evident against 'foreign' educational installations on national soil which compete for scarce local resources.

Geopolitical developments are already having important ramifications for education policy, since old policy assumptions about the global context and international cooperation are being challenged.

There are indications that education could become a more globally contested commodity and market, as technology and digital assets become more subject to protection. Global players are expected to engage more extensively in the strategic use of cross-border education initiatives and to include such initiatives, as part of their foreign investment approach.

The EU is becoming more vigilant of the use of foreign educational investments as a means for wielding economic and political influence and gaining access to industry-relevant knowledge and R&I capabilities in the locality and EU-wide. A key ongoing EU policy drive is the European Universities Initiative[22], which supports the emergence of bottom-up alliances of universities across Europe on a particular theme, as a means for promoting common European values and a strengthened European identity and supporting a significant leap in quality, performance and competitiveness.

The policy implications at national level highlight the need for Malta to invest more in education and R&I in order to reduce dependence on foreign providers and to keep attracting foreign students and global talent. This will put Malta on a par with other EU member states that are implementing OSA policies.

In turn, a rethinking of Malta's internationalization approach in this sector will be needed to take strategic advantage of emerging opportunities and mitigate potential risks.

17   https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/ESPAS_Report.pdf

18   https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals

19   https://europa.eu/next-generation-eu/index_en

20   https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/7e1bcf73-06e2-11ec-b5d3-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

21   https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/research_and_innovation/funding/documents/ec_rtd_horizon-europe-strategic-plan-2021-24.pdf

22   https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/european-universities-information-session-2022-call-proposals_en

1.2 Benchmarking Malta's education sector

Over the last decade, Malta has managed a significant transformation of the education sector as a whole. This is evidenced by impressive progress recorded on key EU education indicators, as indicated in the EU Education and Training Monitor (2020).[23] A key factor supporting this transition is the level of national public expenditure on education which is above the EU average, both as a proportion of GDP (5.2% compared to EU-27 4.6%) and as a proportion of total general government expenditure (14.2% compared to EU-27 9.9%). Malta also compares well with OECD countries, where total public spending on primary to tertiary education as a percentage of total government expenditure averages 11%, ranging from around 7 to 17%[24]. This scale of public expenditure needs to be weighed up against timely achievement of targeted outcomes and impacts and the appropriate allocation of public expenditure on education in line with national priorities. Determining the effectiveness of public spending in education requires careful consideration of a complex of policy objectives and contextual factors requiring more in-depth analysis. In this context, the OECD Indicators Report recommends that Malta undertakes a careful evaluation of the effectiveness of the current allocation of resources and takes into consideration other measures.

Education at a Glance 2021 – OECD Indicators

The way resources are allocated across the different levels of education varies widely across countries. While countries such as Australia, Greece, Korea, Latvia and Lithuania devote a larger share of public funds to education compared to the proportion of students in pre-tertiary levels, the opposite is observed in the majority of other countries where a disproportionate share of resources (after excluding research and development expenditure) are devoted to tertiary education levels. This is particularly striking in countries such as Denmark where generous student grants are provided.

In terms of its performance in achieving education goals and targets, Malta has recorded progress on a number of fronts. In particular, the advance in **educational attainment** is reflected in an increase in the population with tertiary level education from 10.3% to 28.0% over the period 2005-2020.[25] Participation in **lifelong learning** exceeds the EU27 average. Improvements in education levels have to be assessed in the context of social changes underway in recent years linked to the growing role of women and foreign workers in the labour market. Important reforms to attract women to higher education account for approximately 56% of the increase in tertiary educational attainment over the same 15-year period. However, there is a persisting gender gap which is evident in particular fields of study, so while female participation in general has increased, there is still female under-representation in STEM programmes at the higher education level.

Another important achievement is the drop in the rate of **early school leavers** from 33.0% to 16.7% over the period 2005-2020. However this figure remains higher than the EU benchmark of 10% and the challenge of equipping early school leavers with basic qualifications and skills remains a key concern for the education system. On the EU structural indicators linked to early school leaving, Malta is among six EU Member States (Ireland, Greece, France, Cyprus and Austria) that have set quantitative targets for widening participation in 2021. On the achievement of basic skills, a key

aspect is the additional support provided for schools with disadvantaged students, including funds for additional staff, enhanced professional development opportunities in the delivery of inclusive education and career advice services. The Eurydice Background Report highlights Malta's initiative to set up a scheme providing additional support to disadvantaged students.

A study on **dropouts** 2015-16 conducted by MEDE's ESLU[26] identified key factors accounting for student decisions to drop out from post-secondary education, including course content not matching their expectations, the course being too difficult to follow, and to a lesser extent financial, family and transport constraints. The study recommended enhanced career guidance services, dedicated support for students with specific needs, customized programmes, including stand-alone and short courses, enhanced facilities (social space) and pastoral care and welfare. The public tertiary education providers have stepped up their efforts in this respect. The University of Malta's strategic plan (2022-25)[27] prioritises as one of its core strategies the provision of enhanced academic and pastoral support to students, in particular for disadvantaged students. It includes an emphasis on welfare and improved facilities and increased empowerment in terms of student involvement in planning and decision-making. MCAST in its strategic plan 2022-2027[28] includes student engagement and retention as the first transversal theme and sets as a smart target 2027, a student retention at the College of 70%. This will be implemented through the provision of holistic support, a dedicated space for students, enhanced student representation in decision-making structures, mobility support and enhanced access to key skills, enterprise and research and innovation.

Malta performs relatively well on the EU's structural indicators for monitoring education and and training systems and the call to action in the Commission's Communication, 'Supporting growth and jobs: An agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems'.[29] Malta has prioritized both policy goals relating to increasing and widening participation, and improving the quality and relevance of higher education. According to the Eurydice Background Report on Structural Indicators, Malta has taken action to address four of the five structural indicators developed in relation to the headline target on education within the Europe 2020 growth strategy, namely:

- quantitative targets relating to the social dimension of higher education

- monitoring of the socio-economic characteristics of the student body.

- recognition of informal and non-formal learning on entry to higher education

- completion rates as a requirement in external quality assurance

The fifth indicator which focuses on performance-based funding mechanisms which financially reward higher education institutions for meeting defined social objectives, has yet to be implemented by the majority of European countries.

On the Eurydice Mobility Scoreboard for higher education[30], Malta has recorded a level of relative success on a number of the indicators compared to the other member states, in particular: foreign language preparation, portability of public grants and loans, and recognition of qualifications for learner mobility. Further efforts are needed to improve guidance for outward mobility and the

23   https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2020/en/

24   https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/b35a14e5-en.
        pdf?expires=1641821138&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=2A973992012F25CEA26BAD84BE4C2CFA

25   https://www.centralbankmalta.org/site/Publications/Economic%20Research/2021/policy-note-educational-attainment-in-Malta.
        pdf?revcount=4564

26   https://researchandinnovation.gov.mt/en/Documents/ESLU%20%E2%80%93%20Study%20on%20Dropouts%202015-16.pdf

27   https://www.um.edu.mt/media/um/docs/about/strategy/UMStrategicPlan2020-2025.pdf

28   https://www.mcast.edu.mt/wp-content/uploads/MCAST-Strategy-22-27_CONSULTATION_SPRING-2021.pdf

29   https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/structural-indicators-monitoring-education-and-training-systems-
        europe-2021_en

30   https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/0f751de6-5782-11ea-8b81-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/
        source-120474453

monitoring and evaluation of personalized services and participation of disadvantaged learners in mobility programmes.

		Malta		EU-27	
		2009	2019	2009	2019
Education and training 2020 benchmarks					
Early leavers from education and training (age 18-24)		25.7%	16.7%	14.0%	10.2%
Tertiary educational attainment (age 30-34)		21.9%	37.8%	31.1%	40.3%
Early childhood education (from age 4 to starting age of compulsory primary education)		94.6%	95.3% [18]	90.3%	94.8% [18]
Proportion of 15 year-olds underachieving in:	Reading	36.3%	35.9% [18]	19.3%	22.5% [18]
	Maths	33.7%	30.2% [18]	22.2%	22.9% [18]
	Science	32.5%	33.5% [18]	17.8%	22.3% [18]
Employment rate of recent graduates by educational attainment (age 20-34 having left education 1-3 years before reference year)	ISCED 3-8 (total)	92.9%	93.1%	78.0%	80.9%
Adult participation in learning (age 25-64)	ISCED 0-8 (total)	6.2%	12.0%	7.9%	10.8% [b]
Learning mobility	Degree mobile graduates (ISCED 5-8)	:	9.4% [18]	:	4.3% [18]
	Credit mobile graduates (ISCED 5-8)	:	5.3% [18]	:	9.1% [18]
Other contextual indicators					
Education investment	Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP	5.4%	5.2% [18]	5.1%	4.6% [18]
	Expenditure on public and private institutions per student in € PPS — ISCED 1-2	€7 446 [12]	€6 722 [17]	€6 072 [d, 12]	€6 240 [d, 16]
	ISCED 3-4	€12 614 [12]	€8 352 [17]	: [12]	€7 757 [d, 16]
	ISCED 5-8	€32 669 [12]	€14 423 [17]	€9 679 [d, 12]	€9 977 [d, 16]
Early leavers from education and training (age 18-24)	Native-born	26.0%	15.4%	12.6%	8.9%
	Foreign-born	: [u]	27.0%	29.3%	22.2%
Tertiary educational attainment (age 30-34)	Native-born	21.9%	32.7%	32.0%	41.3%
	Foreign-born	22.1% [u]	50.3%	25.1%	35.3%
Employment rate of recent graduates by educational attainment (age 20-34 having left education 1-3 years before reference year)	ISCED 3-4	88.6%	88.8%	72.2%	75.9%
	ISCED 5-8	97.0%	95.0%	83.7%	85.0%

Detailed overview of performance

AREA	MAIN FINDINGS
Early childhood and school education	Participation in early childhood education remains around the EU average for children under 3 years of age. Pupils attending private schools perform better. However, the figure is decreasing for the older age group. Over the period 2013-2019 Malta has slipped from 99 to 91%[31] in relation to the EU target - at least 96% of children between 3 years old and the starting age for compulsory primary education participating in early childhood education by 2030. Strong efforts will be required to reverse this negative trend.
Early leavers	In relation to early leavers from education and training, Malta has over the years improved its performance on this indicator, reducing the percentage of early leavers from 17.1% to 12.6%[32]. However, this remains higher than the majority of member states. Malta has to improve its efforts if it is to achieve the EU target of reducing the percentage of early leavers below 9% by 2030.
	Average levels of basic skills are low and a large percentage of pupils fail to achieve minimum proficiency levels. Malta will need to invest in significant efforts to achieve the EU target of reducing the share of low-achieving 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science from round 30%(2018) to less than 15%, by 2030.[33]Efforts are being made to make the system more inclusive but challenges remain. The COVID-19 pandemic may exacerbate educational inequalities and low levels of basic skills if its impact is not fully assessed. Better support for students' learning needs is key to achieve higher quality. Improving students' well-being could contribute to better learning outcomes and to reducing early school leaving.
Vocational education and training (VET)	Following a decline in 2017, enrolments in upper secondary VET increased from 27.1% to 28.5% in 2018. The proportion of VET learners at upper secondary level enrolled in programmes involving work-based learning rose to 35% in 2018 from 32% a year earlier, continuing the upward trend recorded in the past five years. This coincided with the entry into force of the Work-based Learning and Apprenticeship Act,[34], providing an effective framework for work placements, apprenticeships and internships, and the rights and responsibilities of trainees and employers, including the right to an income for trainees.
	The new secondary school system (European Commission 2019b) will help increase enrolment in vocational and applied paths, by making them more attractive.
	Efforts have been made to make vocational education more responsive to technological developments and to promote excellence in the provision of innovative technical and tertiary vocational education (VET). MCAST and ITS have introduced programmes focused on innovative practices and blending team delivery, and technological innovation. VET centres have continued to conduct lectures through distance learning, while practical sessions have been postponed.

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31   https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/educ_uoe_enra21/default/table?lang=en

32   https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat_lfse_14/default/table?lang=en

33   https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDUC_OUTC_PISA__custom_1935163/default/table?lang=en

34   https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/576/eng/pdf

Higher education	In relation to the EHEA 2025[35] targets, Malta has registered a marked improvement in the percentage of 25 to 34 year olds having completed tertiary or equvialent education, with an increase from 31.1% in 2013 to 40.1% in 2020[36]. It will need to step up its efforts to meet the European target of 45% by 2030. Tertiary educational attainment has improved largely due to the arrival of EU nationals in the labour market. A large attainment gap exists between native-born (32.7%) and foreign-born individuals (50.3%), with a considerable difference between people from non-EU countries (45.8%) and EU nationals (63.7%). This highlights Malta's high reliance on foreigners to meet skills shortages and sustain economic growth (European Commission, 2020a). This may account for the increase in new entrants to tertiary programmes up to 2018. This together with the rise in part-time courses could also have a positive impact on participation trends provided that COVID-19 does not have a long-term impact on early school leaving or on university dropout rates. Lessons and exams have been held online and admission criteria have been reviewed to ease the transition from secondary level. Efforts are underway to better align higher education with labour market needs. Despite the very high employment rate of recent tertiary graduates (95% v 85% at EU level in 2019), skills shortages remain an issue at all levels. As Malta's economy is heavily reliant on tourism and services, temporary business closures during the pandemic are likely to affect overall employment levels, including those of recent graduates with least work experience. Difficulties in finding and retaining specialised skilled workers is one of the main challenges expressed by employers (European Commission 2020a). The significant increase (+85%) in the number of new entrants into ICT fields between 2015 and 2018 may help better match labour market needs in the future.
Adult learning	Participation in adult learning among the low-qualified remains low. A strong drive is required to meet the European target of at least 60% of adults participating in learning by 2030. Malta's high proportion of low-qualified adults continued to decline but the need for upskilling and reskilling remains. Malta is making efforts to improve the quality of adult learning. In line with the national lifelong learning strategy 2020 and as part of the migration of adult educators' training to the University of Malta, a new diploma course in Adult Education and Training with a unit on online teaching was introduced in February 2020 and the pandemic has prompted a complete shift to online teaching at the Lifelong Learning Centre.This may help overcome the resistance to converting learning from traditional in-person delivery to blended adult learning courses, which represents a key challenge in the promotion of digital education in Malta.

Policy evaluation	Strengthening policy monitoring and evaluation will ensure more effective education policies, including better student learning outcomes. The adoption[37] of a number of strategy and policy documents to address specific aspects of education, including compulsory education needs to be backed up by monitoring and evaluation of implementation and targeted results (particularly ESL/ELET reduction and TIMMS/PIRLS improvements). Improved data collection, dedicated reviews and tracer studies covering compulsory, further, higher education to employment) would allow the development of more informed analyses.

Malta ranks 6th among EU member states in the EU Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI),[38] performing well on human capital (11th) including ICT graduates (6% v. EU 3.9%) and ICT specialists, although less well on female ICT specialists (11% v. EU19%). Malta will need to step up its efforts to meet the Digital Decade[10] target of 80% of population with at least basic digital skills by 2030. Indeed, the 2021 report highlights the need for Malta to sustain its drive to provide basic digital skills society-wide in line with "the good positioning achieved in terms of advanced and specialised digital skills and in other digital-related dimensions. Efforts are also important in order to close the existing gender gap in the digital sector and match the growing demand for skilled labour force, which may increasingly represent an obstacle to further progress in digitalisation of the economy and public administration".

The EU Innovation Scoreboard (EIS)[39] compares Malta's performance with EU member states on key R&I-related indicators, including higher education and employment. Based on 2020 data, the EIS 2021 indicates an overall improvement in Malta's ranking as a moderate innovator. This can be attributed to strong improvements in human resources, employment impacts and in particular attractive research systems with the highest rate of performance increase (47%). Malta is strong on Environmental sustainability, Use of information technologies and Intellectual assets. Compared to the EU benchmark, Malta excels on Employment in knowledge-intensive activities and has improved performance significantly on foreign doctorate students, and Innovative SMEs collaborating with others.

In terms of global benchmarks, Malta ranks favourably on key indicators related to the provision of transnational education (TNE). According to the British Council global gauge database[40] which benchmarks countries on TNE, international student mobility and international research engagement, Malta ranks third (out of 57) in terms of doing most to embed TNE in the national system. It ranks 7th on recognition of TNE qualifications by local labour law. It ranks 13th both in relation to facilitating inward student mobility and in allowing the setting up of international branch campuses. According to a study[41] conducted in 2018 on Malta's viability as an international education hub, "the country possesses a strong set of factor conditions - e.g. the wide use of English, the quality of human capital, and high-quality IT infrastructure – that create a positive environment for the development of TNE and generally the presence of foreign higher education institutions. ...In conjunction with the welcoming environment for foreign investments, the favourable factor conditions and firm rivalry create the prospects for innovative forms of TNE (i.e. combining different forms of TNE, exploring blended modes)."

35   https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/eea-factsheet-sept2020_en.pdf

36   https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDAT_LFSE_03__custom_1930080/default/table?lang=en

37

38   https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/desi-malta

39   https://ec.europa.eu/docsroom/documents/45925

40   https://www.britishcouncil.org/education/he-science/knowledge-centre/global-landscape/global-gauge

41   http://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/33220/1/10657_Tsiligiris.pdf

1.3 Assessing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats

European structural indicators and scoreboards provide an important overview of the extent and variety of policy measures currently being implemented at European level. This includes indications of innovative policy approaches and good practices and the countries which are leading these initiatives. These policy tools provide important insights for benchmarking and assessing the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of national policies and actions in further and higher education. They are less helpful in connecting the effectiveness of these measures to expected outcomes and longer-term impacts. This calls for more in-depth qualitative analysis.

The scoreboards indicate that significant progress has been achieved in further extending the scope and depth of Malta's policy approach in further and higher education. National policy, while framed by the local context and national needs, continues to be shaped primarily by the current drive of the European Union to implement the European Education Area and synergies with the European Research Area, the Higher Education Transformation Agenda, including European Universities and more broadly the twin green and digital transitions.

In summary the main strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for Malta's further and higher education ecosystem up to 2030 are identified below:

Strengths:
Malta's small size has proven a strength for the education ecosystem and its steady development, as it facilitates communication and a level of policy coherence across sectors. The appointment of a single authority, the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA), responsible for quality assurance, accreditation, MQRIC, vocational education, higher education, further reinforces policy synergies and coherence. The Authority has developed a wealth of structural and policy knowledge and research capacity in its areas of responsibility, with active participation in EU initiatives and is well perceived by stakeholders.

By prioritizing education as a pivotal national policy and maintaining high levels of public expenditure on primary, secondary and tertiary education, Malta has developed an increasingly robust education and knowledge ecosystem. A strong legislative and quality assurance framework is in place, with effective monitoring and corrective mechanisms. Effective deployment of policies on a number of fronts is underway including tackling early school leaving, widening participation and lifelong learning, industry relevance and digital education. EU membership, allowing access to transnational mobility, research and structural funding programmes and participation and contribution in EU policy development /learning fora, has allowed a further strengthening in the effective provision of education for all, on a par with international and EU standards.

Malta has continued in its efforts to provide an enabling knowledge ecosystem, for education providers in the public and private sectors, serving as an important bridge into both research and innovation and the workplace and industry. By working with and mobilizing key stakeholders in the co-design of customized approaches, it has been possible to spearhead new policies and measures as well as legislative and institutional reform and to strengthen strategic governance structures as part of the required transitions, The effective shift to online and blended learning due to the COVID pandemic is helping to further improve the resilience of the education ecosystem. This augurs well for addressing the challenges ahead for education/learning related to the demographic, digital and green transitions underway.

Weaknesses:
The above average expenditure on education compared to EU counterparts does not necessarily mean that current public spending patterns are optimal. Indeed, OECD has highlighted the need for a more in-depth analysis of the effectiveness of public spending on education and to identify ways of achieving an optimal overall allocation of resources in the sector. The weakness in relation to policy monitoring and evaluation as part of systemic policy improvement and learning cycles means that assessments of the effectiveness of education policy approaches and measures are often dependent on external reviews. This may be due to limitations in terms of available specialized expertise and/or insufficient investment in local mechanisms and related capacity-building. In-depth information and analysis on the performance of the education system is largely fragmented and presented from a primarily external perspective. This hampers efforts to develop a comprehensive policy approach covering the ecosystem as a whole with a dedicated focus on national priorities.
The tendency to work in silos both within government and between government and industry is still very predominant. Despite significant achievements in meeting EU targets, the education ecosystem lacks sufficiently close links to industry and the labour market to ensure timely delivery of critical skills. The introduction of the concept of work-based learning is a positive step in this direction. The policy links between education and research and innovation are improving but not well-enough defined to allow effective co-design of policies and measures, in particular to address STEM and science literacy shortfalls and thematic and smart specialization priorities.

Malta's potential as an international education hub requires a more coordinated policy approach bringing together education, industry and research and innovation. This would also benefit Malta's internationalization approach at EU level and beyond. Insufficient rigour in attracting inward investments can prove counterproductive to efforts to build international profile. Inward and outward mobility barriers are still preventing a full exploitation of these opportunities.

Opportunities:
As an EU country centrally positioned in the Mediterranean, a range of assets including temperate weather suited for health/leisure activities and a richness of cultural resources serve as a strategic lever for attracting investments and hybrid tourism. The Maltese Islands offer an optimal living and learning environment for international students and teachers, with a range of education and research opportunities.[42]

The hosting of education/ knowledge hub(s) is a viable opportunity, provided that a joined-up approach can be put in place, integrating education, research, innovation, environment and enterprise policies and actions. These domains need to share policy intelligence and support each other in a mutually reinforcing way. Malta's small size and its combined strengths in education, research and innovation create an opportunity for bringing these communities together in a concerted effort to build critical mass and enable the development of joint initiatives. At national Level, there is an opportunity for HEIs to link up with the industrial and innovation ecosystems with appropriate investments in knowledge transfer. New opportunities opening up with the launch of the EU missions and the drive to implement the green and digital transitions, provide common areas of priority. Partnerships with countries/regions leading the green transition could explore the setting up of education hubs to promote learning for environment sustainability[43] .

Shortfalls in terms of human resources, expertise and service provision, particularly in STEM, hampering take-up and transition management, need to be addressed through joint efforts, starting with closer interactions between compulsory and further education policy efforts. This collaborative approach

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42   for example the study of sustainable and ecological changes of warm landscapes and seascapes.

43   https://education.ec.europa.eu/document/proposal-for-a-council-recommendation-on-learning-for-environmental-sustainability

needs to extend to different types and size of industry in order to ensure that the appropriate skillsets are in place at the required levels to support these transitions and take advantage of the emerging market opportunities. Inward and outward mobility of students, researchers and educational professionals provides an important lever if appropriately targeted, to procure lacking /required expertise and specialized skills. While the pandemic has had a negative effect on physical mobility, it has facilitated access to online learning and opened up possibilities to source multiple training activities and materials.

A more strategic approach to internationalization is needed to focus these efforts to where they are needed most. In particular, closer cooperation and working partnerships with advanced member states are needed to tap into critical know how and expertise to upgrade policy, legislative and governance approaches to continue on the path towards achieving a state-of-the-art education and knowledge ecosystem.

Threats:
The emerging scenario up to 2030 and beyond is one of ongoing systemic crises, health and environmental as well as dynamic change, both natural and engineered. Crisis management and building long-term resilience to crises should not detract attention from the need to advance ongoing efforts to build a holistic culture of quality in education. Economic hardship exacerbated by the pandemic and cost of living increases (rent and transport costs) could prevent both local and foreign students from completing their studies and achieving their full potential. Failure of the education system to prepare citizens and young people for this new world, will have negative knock-on effects for society as a whole.

Education and learning systems are currently challenged by the need to prepare society as a whole for rapid and unprecedented change at all levels and to develop critical skills in resilience and managing disruption and transition. The emerging application areas related to the digital and green economy require a combination of highly specialized and advanced skills with more basic skills. Customised variations of these skillsets are currently not available to the extent and level required both in the private and public sectors and action is required if Malta is to keep up in these sectors. The main brunt of the pandemic may have passed, however some its impacts are proving more lasting. The global market for education is itself undergoing significant change and the pandemic has slowed transnational education and mobility.

Key sectors such as aviation, hospitality and tourism, linked to leisure/entertainment, health and well-being and education, depend on skilled staff that can spearhead and manage innovation and transition. The impacts at global level affecting supply chains and access to key resources together with the transition to Industry 4.0 (followed by 5.0), are having local consequences for enterprises, forcing them to rethink their business models and to invest in innovative skills and technologies. While the anticipation of such skillsets is relatively 'easy', their delivery can prove more elusive, particularly on the scale and level required.

1.4 Policy priorities identified through stakeholder consultations

A vision-setting exercise was launched by MFHEA in 2021 with the aim of consulting with key stakeholders in the further and higher education sector on emerging priorities for the sector. The exercise and resulting document made reference to the Further and Higher Education Strategy 2020 proposed in 2009 by the then National Commission for Higher Education in 2009.

The aim of this exercise was:

- to ensure the design of a forward-looking strategy which responds effectively to the changing world particularly concerning the 4th /5th industrial revolution and the shift to a digital and green circular global economy;

- to work closely with key players in the co-design process, to achieve effective alignment with national and international strategies and the active engagement of all stakeholders in the development and the implementation of the strategy.

The results of this exercise, including the vision, guiding principles, priorities and objectives have provided an important basis for building this strategic plan.

The consultations identified 6 key priority areas[44] requiring action up to 2030:
1. Social dimension in participation and access
2. Educational attainment, retention and completion
3. Relevance of teaching, learning and research
4. Quality and Transparency
5. Digital and green transition
6. Internationalization and mobility

1.5 Reviewing the evidence base for future policy design

Malta has made important advances in the education sector as evident in the progress achieved on a number of the EU targets. The analysis points to areas of education policy which require sustained efforts and those where deeper policy drives need to be put into place. The overview of relevant future trends and drivers provides insights on emerging areas of opportunity which Malta could tap through appropriate (re)design of its education policy. We identify below a list of areas of education policy requiring action. These have been structured into three main clusters of challenges:

1) policy and governance
2) policy implementation and targets; and,
3) emerging opportunities.

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44   National Further and Higher Education Strategy 2030 (NCHE, 2020)

	AREA	CHALLENGE	POSSIBLE ACTION RESPONSIBLE ENTITY
1.		**Policy design and governance**	
1.1	Public spend on education	improve effectiveness of budget allocation	Public Review OPM/PPS
1.2	Evidence base for policy design and learning	strengthen the evidence base /policy skills increase policy monitoring/evaluation	Capacity-building MFHEA Lead
1.3	Governance structures	reduce the fragmentation/policy silos	MEDS review
1.4	Values and Responsibility	enhance awareness/compliance with guiding principles; ensure equitable access, participation and inclusion to create equal opportunities for all	MEDS review /code
2.		**Policy Implementation and Targets**	
2.1	Quality assurance and transparency	promote the use of transparency, comparability and transferability tools; sustain quality standards in FHE provision offered in and from Malta; ensure a high level of compliance as the sector grows	invest in HR and training MFHEA lead
2.2	Internationalisation and Mobility	foster European identity and international collaboration facilitate outward mobility, increase participation of students and disadvantaged in mobility programmes promote automatic mutual recognition of qualification;	increase monitoring and evaluation – MEDS lead with MFHEA, UM, MCAST
2.3	Early childhood and school education	Address factors which impact on further and higher education: ensure a return to full participation, literacy, STEM and digital skills	Regulation by MEDS Joint action with relevant Ministries
2.4	Early leavers Dropouts (VET) Dropouts (Tertiary education)	reduce the number of early leavers improve efforts to reduce the number of dropouts; provide preparatory courses	Review of social factors, monitoring of efforts Lead: MEDS
2.5	Education attainment, retention and completion	promote parity of esteem between all education pathways; ensure basic skills/ minimum proficiency for 15 year-olds; provide professional development for staff; Tertiary education attainment: step up efforts to meet EHEA targets; enhance student support systems; ensure diverse, flexible, student-centred education provision;	Set KPIs and monitor progress Lead MEDS
2.6	Relevance of education Meeting Public and private sector needs	enhance the green, R&I, digital, and societal relevance of education at all levels; science/digital literacy ensure adequate supply of ICT and STEM professionals address shortfalls through targeted actions; address gender gap in STEM; Industry: co-design appropriate skills sets for different size /type of industry; increase work-based learning	Government-wide review Lead: OPM Joined-up initiatives between relevant Ministries National knowledge transfer office
2.7	Adult and lifelong learning	increase participation among low-qualified ensure basic digital skills (target:80%); address gender gap in the digital sector; address need for resilience skills	Dedicated support/ incentives MFHEA lead

2.8	Widening participation	widen participation at all levels financially reward HEIs to meet defined social objectives recognize prior learning facilitate the transition to online learning and the use of digitally supported teaching and learning;	MFIN performance-based funding mechanisms Incentives and support
3.		**Emerging Opportunities**	
3.1	International education/ knowledge hub(s)	Explore international partnerships in green/digital Digital, online and blended learning	Joined-up initiatives between relevant Ministries
3.2	Focus on national priorities	Cater directly for national priorities: aviation, hospitality and tourism, linked to leisure/entertainment, health and well-being and education	Joined-up initiatives between relevant Ministries

This table shows the supply demand side measures for higher education and research and innovation ecosystem.

SUPPLY			DEMAND		
Financial	Services	Networking Measures	Policies Support for Private Demand	Regulations	Public Procurement
Grants, subsidies loans,	Accreditation, Certification audits monitoring evaluation	Joined-up Policies, foresight for setting visions	Cluster policies Supply chain policies Smart specialisation		
Scholarships	Guidelines	Co-location Incubators, science parks, knowledge transfer hub	Tax subsidies /incentives	Ministry: governance, allocation of public funding, evaluation, accreditation	
Taxation	Information; signposting			HEI: staff recruitment Students: tuition fees, loans,	

A key challenge relates to ongoing pressures to implement and refine key 'business as usual" education support services linked to quality assurance and accreditation, which can detract from more forward-looking actions to address human resource and capacity-building needs. The latter are becoming critical. The balance of effort between areas of current and potential weakness and emerging opportunities will determine the design and scale of appropriate measures. This aspect will be addressed in the next section.

Vision :
Towards a dynamic knowledge ecosystem by 2030

The shared vision, principles and many of the objectives elaborated in the Further and Higher Education Strategy 2020 remain valid in 2022 and provide an important compass for guiding national FHE policy and actions beyond 2020. However, ongoing and emerging challenges, in particular the Covid-19 pandemic, the EU drive on green and digital transitions and a highly volatile global environment, are generating new challenges for education and learning. This is a call to action to rethink and codesign education policy strategy together with related national policies. The aim is to dovetail education investments to secure national strategic positioning for exploiting emerging opportunities while ensuring resilience to cope with systemic crises. The emerging trends and drivers affecting the further and higher education sector highlight the need to prioritise and streamline the recommended goals and actions to ensure that the progress achieved to date on national and EU education targets is sustained and to focus efforts to build resilience at all levels.

In this context, the extensive stakeholder consultations held in the lead-up to the drafting of this strategic plan, have allowed a honing of the broad vision set in the 2020 Strategy into an overarching vision statement which encapsulates the way forward:

Vision for Further and Higher Education 2030

*Towards a **dynamic resilient knowledge ecosystem** by 2030, based on an **innovative, inclusive quality-driven further and higher education sector**, inspiring individuals, throughout their educational and life experience, to develop **relevant skills,** that allow them to contribute, as community members and **active citizens,** towards a fair, digital and green economy.*

The vision underlines the importance of reinforced efforts to build a resilient knowledge ecosystem, open to all, with an emphasis on engaging individuals to advance their own learning paths and thereby take on more proactive, productive roles in the knowledge economy and society. The aim is to instill a strong culture for quality and innovation in the education sector, permeating public and private entities, working hand in hand for the advantage of learners. This is a sine qua non if Malta is to emerge strongly in the green and digital economy.

A second precondition for ensuring achievement of the vision is agreement on a core set of guiding principles. The 2020 Strategy elaborated a detailed set of principles for each stakeholder to follow and these remain valid, in particular: "preserving the unique missions and characteristics that further and higher education institutions have, the importance of effective autonomous leadership in education institutions, capable of delivering on their diverse roles and missions in a proactive and responsible manner is the only vehicle for high quality, relevant education outcomes that guarantee a vibrant

future for Malta. The need for all stakeholders to assume their responsibilities shall be a crucial factor in determining the ability of Malta as a nation to meet its aspirations."

In the light of current and emerging societal challenges, this Strategic Plan highlights the following core set of shared guiding principles as underpinning the vision:

1.   The Maltese context, identity, cultural heritage and language shall be a central element across all objectives and targets of the strategy.

2.   Malta shall maintain a high quality level of further and higher education provision, accessible to all students, irrespective of their social economic background and responsive to their needs and circumstances throughout their lives.

3.   Further and higher education institutions shall maintain their autonomy and shall be encouraged to collaborate with emphasis on research and curricular development to remain relevant, diverse, and efficient particularly during and after the economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.

4.   There should be strong synergy and coordination between all stakeholders based on clear assignment of roles and responsibilities. Mutual learning and cooperation shall form the essence of this coordination.

5.   Channels for information and dissemination shall be reinforced to ensure access to information on different education services and open communication with the general public

6.   Evidence-based, systematic, and effective monitoring, evaluation and performance review shall be based on relevant comparable data collection.

7.   The strategy shall be supported by sustainable funding and a strong legal, policy and governance framework.

The specific goals for implementing the vision are defined and addressed through a coherent set of recommended measures and targeted outcomes covering seven priority areas:

• Strengthening Policy Design and Governance
• Quality Assurance and Transparency
• Internationalization and Mobility
• Educational Attainment, Retention and Completion
• Relevance of Teaching, Learning and Research
• Widening Participation and Adult Learning
• Exploiting Emerging opportunities

These seven strategic pillars are elaborated in further detail in the next section.

Strategic Pillars and Recommendations

The Vision for Further and Higher Education 2030 sets a high level of ambition to achieve a dynamic resilient knowledge ecosystem open to all. The pathway towards this vision entails the coordination of efforts on a number of fronts, namely:

-    Joined-up Policy Design and upscaling of the national governance and legislative framework
-    Building a robust Quality Assurance and Transparency
-    The launch of a strategic approach to internationalization and mobility
-    Incentives to support self-assessment and quality assurance at the institutional level
-    Educational Attainment, Retention and Completion
-    Relevance of Teaching, Learning and Research
-    Widening Participation and Adult Learning
-    A proactive stance to exploit emerging opportunities in the green and digital economy

The Strategic Plan sets out the required measures for embarking on this pathway and identifies the lead players and key stakeholders. A key challenge to be overcome is the fragmentation in policy making in the education sector and in relation to other policy domains. The proposals relating to strengthening the governance and policy framework aim to improve coherence in policy design and the development of more joined-up policies. In particular the aim is to increase synergies between education, research and innovation and enterprise and build closer links with the digital and environmental policy domains. Thus, beyond addressing its own 'internal' targets in relation to quality assurance, educational attainment, relevant curricula and widened participation, this Strategic Plan focuses on how further and higher education can be instrumental in key sectors to drive economic recovery, R&I and green and digital transitions and Industry 4.0.

In order to fulfill this role, the further and higher education sector needs the appropriate tools, mechanisms and resources in place. This calls for a high-level strategic review of public spending in the education sector in order to achieve an optimal distribution of funding, reallocating resources where they are needed most and to dovetail with national priorities. In line with these efforts to increase the effectiveness of public spending, a more streamlined approach is recommended in rolling out quality assurance and education attainment measures. The aim is to improve quality by supporting self-assessment on the part of further and higher education (FHE) providers and incentivizing mergers between FHE providers locally and abroad particularly in areas of national priority.

The Strategic Plan recommends that a phased approach is followed in implementing these measures, with a primary emphasis on building a robust ecosystem, by putting in place the appropriate inter-ministerial and institutional policy and governance structures. In piloting new policy approaches, the recommendations include reviews, data collection, studies, monitoring and evaluation to promote the use of more evidence-based approaches.

Pillar 1:

Joined-up Policy Design and Governance

The pathway for achieving the Vision 2030 depends primarily on the development of a more strategic and joined-up policy approach to further and higher education. A key challenge to address is the current fragmentation in policy making in the education sector as a whole and in relation to other proximate policy domains. The recommended measures are pivotal for creating an enabling governance framework for policy co-design and joined-up policies. In particular the aim is to increase synergies between education, research and innovation and enterprise and build closer links with digital and environmental policy domains.

- ■ **Recommendation 1.1: Review of governance structures in FHE to support joined-up policy (Lead: Ministry for Education)**
- ■ **Recommendation 1.2 Review of effectiveness of FHE public spending (Lead: Ministry for Education and Ministry of Finance)**
- ■ **Recommendation 1.3: MFHEA Working Group on Policy Intelligence**
- ■ **Recommendation 1.4 Capacity-building: MFHEA structures including Policy Unit**
- ■ **Recommendation 1.5 Upgrading of the FHE legislative framework**

Recommendation 1.1:
Review of governance structures in FHE to support joined-up policy

As one of the first actions to be undertaken in this Pillar, the Strategic Plan recommends that the Ministry for Education launches and oversees a review of governance structures within FHE to identify policy silos and other barriers constraining whole of government approaches in FHE and between FHE and related policy areas including research and innovation, and enterprise. The main aim is to make recommendations on effective mechanisms for supporting joined-up policy, including addressing gaps in structures, capacity and/or competence. A dedicated task force will be set up to undertake and complete this task within a six-month period and report to the Ministry with its findings and recommendations. The main targeted outcomes are to reduce fragmentation in national policy in FHE and related policy areas by identifying and addressing their cause and to develop coherent policy initiatives, by building synergies between FHE national institutions within MEDS and with related Ministries.

The Task Group should ideally be composed of competent independent experts drawn from the public and private sector and overseas and will report to the Ministry for Education.

The Task Group will give due consideration to whether there is need for a permanent high-level structure, such as an Inter-Ministerial Committee for Further and Higher Education, to steer joined-up policy on FHE and the role of FHE in other policies (education, finance, economy, enterprise, R&I, digital, environment, health, social justice).

Recommendation 1.2:
Review of effectiveness of FHE public spending

In line with OECD and FHE Strategy 2020 recommendations, this Strategic Plan recommends that the Minister for Education launches a review of public spending on further and higher education with the aim of improving the effectiveness of current budget allocations and ensuring adequacy by addressing gaps or shortfalls in areas of national priority. The review will make recommendations on the introduction of more transparent long-term financial planning to ensure that the targets set by Government in this sector can be achieved. Other aspects to be addressed include the use of public funding to incentivize increased accountability and required changes, including linking the level of annual budgetary allocations to performance (increasing participation rates, quality improvements and generation of own income), as well as the introduction of incentives for donors and social responsibility.

The Review will be undertaken by a team of independent local and overseas experts in FHE public spending to include representatives of OECD and Ministry of Finance. The aim is that the Review will include consultations and gathering of evidence from national authorities/institutions and key stakeholders and will be completed within one year. The findings and recommendations will be presented to the relevant authorities and actioned at the highest levels.

Recommendation 1.3:
Setting up of MFHEA Working Group on Policy Intelligence and Monitoring

As a complementary action, it is recommended that the MFHEA sets up a dedicated working group to develop and coordinate the collection of data and intelligence to support FHE policy design, set targets and measure performance. The main targeted outcomes are to strengthen the evidence base for policy, enable joined-up policy design and support the monitoring, evaluation and iteration of FHE policy.

The WG will be composed of relevant Ministries and public institutions and key experts in data collection and policy design, in particular the National Statistics Office. The WG will provide the necessary technical support to the Ministry for Education in the development of joined up policies in FHE and respond in a timely manner to related requests for information. The WG will prepare a yearly report on key data for presentation to the Ministry for Education and Cabinet. The WG will be supported in its work by a newly set up Unit within MFHEA addressing policy intelligence and monitoring.

Recommendation 1.4:
Capacity-building: MFHEA and the Policy Unit

A key outcome of the review is that it will identify gaps in capacity which prevent national authorities from fulfilling their functions in the FHE sector effectively. As the key national entity responsible for overseeing the implementation of national legislation and government policy in this sector, it is important that the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority is given particular priority. The Review will take into account both current gaps in capacity affecting MFHEA as well as anticipated capacity-building needs in light of additional functions which the Review and the Strategic Plan may confer

on MFHEA. The aim is to ensure that MFHEA has the necessary structures and resources to fulfill its role as an Authority effectively, giving due attention to all of its functions. In this context, the Strategic Plan recommends that MFHEA's setup is benchmarked with peer organisations in Europe in terms of structures, headcount, competencies and budget.

Capacity-building measures will primarily take the form of strengthening and extending existing structures, including a new Policy Unit within MFHEA, and addressing gaps in expertise, including staff exchanges and training opportunities with peer organisations abroad.

Recommendation 1.5:
Upgrading of the FHE legislative framework

The Strategic Plan recommends that a comprehensive exercise is undertaken to upgrade the FHE legislative framework. The aim is to ensure clarity, coherence and robustness in national legislation and to address any loopholes and that MFHEA has the necessary legal powers to fulfill its role. The Ministry for Education in consultation with MFHEA will decide on the appropriate setup to undertake this exercise.

Pillar 2:
Exploiting Emerging opportunities

Malta's advances in further and higher education and growing research and innovation capacity combined with its strong digital footprint open up a portfolio of viable opportunities locally and abroad. Beyond digital education and serious gaming, Malta's recently launched Smart Specialization (RIS3) Strategy (2021-7) prioritises national investments in the following areas identified through a process of entrepreneurial discovery: future digital technologies and big data, marine and maritime technology, climate mitigation, health and well-being, smart manufacturing, aviation and aerospace. In order to position itself strategically to take advantage of windows of opportunity for exploiting relevant niche areas, there needs to be a more effective mechanism for timely action and coordination between Ministries responsible for education, R&I, economy, enterprise, employment, digital, environment, health and foreign affairs, to develop anticipatory and coherent policies and actions. Attracting and sustaining inward and local investments requires a joint commitment government-wide to deliver on the education, research and innovation, digital, enterprise fronts.

Recommendation 2.1:
Setting up of a National Coordination Mechanism on Emerging Opportunities

The Strategic Plan recommends that as an important step in reducing policy silos and developing an enabling framework for policy co-design and coherence, that the Minister responsible for Education, sets up a national coordination mechanism on targeting viable emerging international opportunities and rallying government-wide efforts for their effective and timely take-up

The aim is that the national coordination mechanism provides strategic advice and leads the implementation of a framework for the development of a more anticipatory, joined-up approach in identifying and exploiting emerging niche opportunities in FHE and in FHE linked to other policy domains. A key priority in this context are opportunities linked to green and digital transitions which are critical for national economic recovery.

The national coordination mechanism will have the following remit and working approach:

-       to act proactively to codesign the approach, coordinate cross-ministerial policies, and work on delivery systems: measures, programmes and resources.

-       to set up, as required, dedicated sub-groups for addressing specific opportunities

-       to commission required studies and bring in required domain expertise local and abroad

The National Coordination Mechanism will be composed of representatives of relevant Ministries, MFHEA, MCST, Chamber of Commerce, eskills Foundation among others.

The main targeted outcomes are to:

-       Cater effectively through appropriate planning for a select number of national priorities and emerging niche opportunities: apart from the RIS areas identified above, clustered themes can be given consideration including digital tourism, hospitality, linked to leisure/entertainment, health, well-being and education;

-       Ensure an adequate supply of required professionals, expertise and skills, including ICT and green professionals, for Industry 4.0 and the green circular economy with an emphasis on gender balance;

-       Contribute towards achieving digital and STEM literacy and skills for all

-       Contribute to the work of the economic sector councils and the work on programme audits with a focus on a particular area

Recommendation 2.2:
Coordinated Action Plan

It is recommended that the National Coordination Mechanism with the support of MFHEA focuses its effort on developing a targeted action plan which outlines the proposed approach and the key actions and measures to be undertaken with a clear timeline and allocation of responsibilities. The plan will be presented to the Ministry for Education and Cabinet on an annual basis and will be used as the basis for securing the necessary resources .

It is envisaged that among the core actions foreseen, the following will be given particular priority as the means for developing the evidence base:

-        to undertake skills stock-takes of economic sectors and niche areas of high priority

-       to identify and address related gaps in skills and competencies

The Plan will include a number of exploratory actions, including the commissioning of studies and forward-looking initiatives to:

- explore the potential for developing international partnerships, with particular priority to green/digital learning, marine and R&I.

- to pilot an international education/knowledge hub as a means for widening the use of digitally supported teaching and blended learning

Recommendation 2.3:
Monitor and evaluate outcomes

As the pillar development and the work matures, the National Coordination Mechanism will draw up recommendations for the implementation of a monitoring and evaluation system based on performance targets. This allows the monitoring of performance in relation to the action plan, initiatives and schemes and to ensure that the targeted outcomes are achieved.

Pillar 3:
Enhanced Educational Attainment, Retention and Completion

A key challenge in further and higher education up to 2030 is the need to set and achieve more ambitious targets for enhanced educational attainment, retention and completion at all levels. This represents both an education and social challenge with repercussions in other policy domains. This pillar focuses on developing effective national structures and mechanisms for coordinating policy approaches across government and unlocking resources as an incentivize for meeting targets. A key objective is to ensure that FHE providers are appropriately equipped for ensuring diverse, flexible, student-centred education provision. This entails investments in training, upgrading facilities and continuous professional development for FHE stakeholders. The aim is to support FHE providers to set their own targets for education retention and completion and thereby responsibilise and empower them to play their part. A second focus of this pillar is on providing targeted support and incentives for students who are vulnerable, either due to financial or other barriers preventing them from completing their studies.

Recommendation 3.1:
Setting up of a Ministry for Education Working Group on Educational attainment, retention and completion

The Strategic Plan recommends that the Ministry for Education sets up a dedicated working group to lead the co-design of a strategic approach on educational attainment, retention and completion in consultation with key stakeholders. The core aim is to ensure that the policy is joined-up, effectively implemented, monitored and kept updated. The Working Group will be composed of responsible entities within the Ministry for Education, including MFHEA, representatives of relevant Ministries, representatives of FHE providers among others.

The main role of the Working Group is:

- to set targets in relation to basic skills requirements and proficiency, dropouts;

- to identify barriers and gaps in support;

- to recommend enhanced delivery structures and mechanisms,

- to develop appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms

Recommendation 3.2:
Coordinated Action Plan on Educational attainment, retention and completion

As the Working Group proceeds with its tasks, the main deliverable will be the development of a targeted action plan. The plan, which will be updated on an annual basis, will build on ongoing work by MFHEA and aim to unlock additional resources and support mechanisms. In particular, the action plan will develop capacity-building actions aimed at improving MFHEA's competencies in this area through collaboration with international peers for provision of support, expertise; training for policy design /practitioners.

The main targeted outcomes are to:

- Ensure educational attainments at all levels, including passes in core subjects

- Clearly define, present and communicate all education pathways to targeted audiences;

- Ensure a diverse, flexible, student-centred education provision,

- Embed reinforced structures to achieve parity of esteem between all education pathways to encourage retention, completion rates and limit dropouts;

- Address the regulation of post-secondary education and ensure the achievement of basic skills/ minimum proficiency for 15 year-olds;

- Step up efforts to meet EHEA targets in tertiary education attainment;

- Undertake a student engagement study on a regular basis, targeting particularly students at high risk and those stages in education where there is high incidence of dropouts;

- Implement Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) guidelines, audits and monitoring;

- Secure a budget line and provide experts to support FHE providers.

Recommendation 3.3:
Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Review in 2023-24

It is recommended that a year on from the introduction of RPL guidelines, the Working Group commissions a review in order to assess how RPL guidelines are being implemented, to obtain feedback from FHE providers and to make recommendations if they need adapting.

Recommendation 3.4:
Support package for FHE providers

The Strategic Plan recommends that based on consultations with FHE stakeholders, the Working Group co-designs a support package with a budget line to equip providers with the tools and resources to reduce the number of early leavers and dropouts. This will be based on the identification of gaps in expertise, resources and facilities and recommendations for how this can be addressed through appropriate support measures.

It is envisaged that the package could include provision of

-       customized local training and tools for FHE providers: to set and meet targets for reducing the number of dropouts; e.g. pilot training scheme for doctoral and post-doc candidates with a focus on high quality teaching, technical and digital skills, pedagogical approaches for curriculum design, and teaching and assessment methods with set deliverables. Programme for existing staff: challenge as more resistant; to expose staff members to best practice and a young academics programme – "train the trainers"

-       resources for upgrading of their support and guidance facilities for students at all levels,

-       opportunities for continuous professional development (CPD) for staff to stay updated, with a focus on building resilience, using networking, mobility and peer learning nationally and abroad.

The targeted outcomes are to:

-       sustain diversity in education provision by offering support and guidance to FHE providers, particularly those in the private sector;

-       have in place national and institutional student support systems, providing both academic and non-academic support; ensuring early detection and timely intervention;

-       ensure enhanced levels of technical competence, including guidance and counselling staff to support students to make informed choices, particularly in relation to STEM

-       set conditionality for ensuring FHE providers meet targets for dropouts and increase student representation in decision-making and meeting EU targets (EHEA).

Recommendation 3.5:
Support for students

The Strategic Plan recommends that the Working Group commissions a comprehensive review of social factors impacting on early leavers and dropouts to determine where support is required most and in what format it could prove effective. The Working Group will present its findings and recommendations to the Steering Group with a view to developing a support scheme for vulnerable students. The aim is to keep the review 'live' by monitoring the situation on a regular basis to ensure the responsible and cost-effective use of resources.

The Working Group will give consideration to the piloting of the following support schemes:

-       Pilot a support/incentive scheme (subsidized bank loan) for vulnerable students to cover tuition fees/learning costs targeting areas with highest dropout rates

-       A scheme for student vouchers for mentoring through internships and work experience, incentivizing take-up in areas of national priority, including handholding, detailed information on courses, career guidance.

The targeted outcomes are to:

-       Reduce the number of dropouts due to students encountering financial constraints and/or difficulties in following their courses.

-       Increase students' work experience related to the field of study prior to starting the study programme, RPL system can be developed to recognize the learning

Pillar 4:
Robust Quality Assurance and Transparency

Vision 2030 places a strong emphasis on quality assurance by mainstreaming standards in FHE provision offered in and from Malta; facilitating the use of transparency, comparability and transferability tools; and ensuring a high level of compliance as the sector grows. Extensive work is underway on the development of procedures and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance mechanisms (EQAVET framework), accreditation, programme audits, blended learning, jointly awarded and transnational programmes, a code of conduct on academic integrity and peer review. The challenges ahead are considerable and include the need to build trust with stakeholders and to foster a culture of shared ownership and commitment to quality assurance. As part of these efforts, it is important to ensure that stakeholders are consulted and informed in advance on developments in quality assurance. Vision 2030 goes a step further by providing FHE providers with opportunities to embark on self-evaluation pathways and where appropriate to face this challenge in partnership with others. The Strategic Plan recommends that the MFHEA, as the national authority responsible for this pillar, sets up a dedicated working group to lead the co-design of a quality assurance policy in consultation with key stakeholders. The core aim is to ensure enhanced policy coordination and implementation and to ensure that the policy is kept updated. The Working Group will be responsible for identifying key concerns in the period up to 2030 and proposing appropriate measures and required resources. In particular, the WG will focus its efforts on developing and overseeing systematic QA review

mechanisms (Europass, Malta Qualifications Framework updating); and to identify and address barriers to compliance (e.g. gaps in expertise).

The Working Group will be composed of responsible entities within the Ministry for Education, in particular MFHEA, eskills Foundation, representatives of relevant Ministries, Chamber of Commerce, and representatives of FHE providers among others.

Recommendation 4.2:
Targeted Action Plan for QA

As the Working Group proceeds with its tasks, the main deliverable will be the development of a targeted action plan for quality assurance. The plan which will be updated on an annual basis, will build on ongoing work by MFHEA and aim to unlock additional resources and support mechanisms. In particular, the action plan will develop capacity-building actions aimed at improving MFHEA's competencies in this area through collaboration with international peers for provision of support, expertise; training for QA policy /practitioners. The targeted outcomes of the Plan are to: strengthen QA policy coherence and implementation sector-wide and thereby increase stakeholder trust and confidence; to achieve a high level of compliance by all private and public education institutions and to develop sustainable partnerships between national FHE institutions, including joint education programmes. A key priority for the Action Plan up to 2025 is the organization of programme audits of institutions, offering online and blended learning, jointly awarded programmes and transnational programmes of study.

Recommendation 4.3:
Monitoring and evaluation

The Working Group will draw up recommendations for the implementation of a monitoring and evaluation system based on performance targets. This allows the WG to monitor performance in relation to the action plan, initiatives and schemes and to ensure that the targeted outcomes are achieved.

Recommendation 4.4:
Review of FHE Provider Sector

In order to design more tailored policies and support to cater for different profiles of FHE providers, the Strategic Plan recommends the launch of a sector-wide review. The Working Group may appoint a task force to undertake this review. The aim of the review is to identify key factors which lead small providers to close down their operation, with a view to better design remedial support measures which can be provided. A second aim is to ensure that the efforts of MFHEA in the area of QA are appropriately targeted and cost effective, given the large number of providers and the diversity of profiles they have to cater for.

Two initiatives have been identified for consideration as part of the review:

(i)   Pilot Merger Scheme: incentive to encourage mergers and partnerships between FHE providers in Malta and abroad linked to areas of national priority. The aim is to help build critical mass as a basis for improving quality of provision and compliance.

(ii)   Pilot Voucher Scheme: incentive for FHE providers to embark on self-assessment. The aim is to provide FHE providers with vouchers to support their efforts to undertake self-assessment and self-evaluation allowing them to access required expertise. The targeted outcomes are to instill a culture of self-evaluation as a means for fast-tracking QA compliance; and to facilitate the identification of high quality FHE providers.

Recommendation 4.5 Training facility for FHE providers

The Strategic Plan recommends that the Steering Group directs its efforts and secures resources for the setting up of a local training facility for FHE providers and those providing QA consultancy services to providers. The facility will draw on collaboration with international partners for the provision of peer support and expertise to enhance the transparency and consistency of quality assurance arrangements particularly linked to VET. MFHEA will be responsible for identifying appropriate peer organisations and setting up the training programmes and tools for internal quality assurance. The targeted outcomes are to increase local expertise in quality assurance and to build mutually beneficial partnerships with quality assurance agencies in Europe.

Pillar 5:
Improving the Relevance of Teaching, Learning and Research

A dynamic global economy, new jobs and working patterns and a fast-changing workplace render the anticipation of skills needs and competencies up to 2030 complex. The timely delivery of future economy skills and preparing for jobs which do not yet exist, is challenging, However, the green, digital and societal transitions ahead provide a clear direction for re-aligning education and training. A key step is to enhance the relevance of education to science and digital literacy at all levels. The education system needs to work more closely with enterprises and relevant Ministries to develop effective education and training initiatives which support the future economy. Action is needed at national level to support the upskilling of workers for industry 4.0, in areas such as digitalisation, circular and green economy, among others. There is an urgent need to ensure an adequate supply of ICT and STEM professionals, to co-design appropriate skills sets for different sizes and types of industry; and to increase work-based learning. This will also entail actions to ensure that there is a stronger emphasis on values and ethics, including inclusiveness and social economy principles.

Recommendation 5.1:
Setting up of a Working Group on Relevance of Teaching, Learning and Research

The Strategic Plan recommends that MFHEA sets up a dedicated working group to lead the co-design of a forward-looking approach to anticipate teaching/learning needs up to 2025 and to ensure the relevance of learning and research in line with current and emerging national priorities.

This initiative will be undertaken in consultation with key stakeholders, in particular the Ministries responsible for enterprise and inward investment, green and digital transitions, and research and innovation. The Working Group will be composed of relevant Ministries, key entities responsible for curriculum development, including MEDS, MFHEA, eskills Foundation, Malta Enterprise, MCST and Chamber of Commerce.

The main role of the Working Group is to:

- define education needs linked to digital and green economy/transitions, social economy and niche areas in the new national smart specialisation strategy RIS3[45]

- ensure relevance by embedding evidence-based, anticipatory approaches in curricula design;

- co-design the approach and work on delivery systems and education providers;

- enhance synergies between education and research;

- develop high quality and innovative professional Vocational Education and Training provision, in particular targeting green and digital transitions;

- identify and coordinate required resources and funding instruments;

- monitor implementation of these approaches and their effectiveness;

- address gaps in data-gathering and capacity for adopting these approaches

The main targeted outcomes are to:

- embed efficient and timely education delivery systems which cater more directly to national and industry needs.

- Ensure systematic use of evidence in policy design, including annual national graduate tracer surveys and skills and market forecasting;

- Develop a balanced approach in tackling relevance of teaching in relation to different priorities: national and industry priorities as well as personal development.

Recommendation 5.2:
Targeted Action Plan on Relevance of Teaching, Learning and Research

The Working Group will incorporate its proposed measures into a dedicated action plan. The initial focus of efforts will be on building the evidence base: identifying and addressing priority national needs, industry requirements and societal/individual diversity. The plan which will be updated on an annual basis will build on ongoing work by MFHEA and aim to unlock additional resources and support mechanisms. In particular, the action plan will undertake dedicated relevance reviews of key sectors of emerging priority, in particular industry 4.0 and green, digital and societal transitions with the aim of developing the necessary coordination of efforts to deliver the required skills and competencies in a timely manner.

The main targeted outcomes are to:

- Incentivize mutually beneficial partnerships between Ministries, FHE providers and industry in areas of national priority; (RIS3: Health and Well-being, Sustainable Use of Resources for Climate Mitigation; Smart Manufacturing, Marine and Maritime Technologies; Digital Technologies);

- Ensure that society/individuals are equipped with resilience and crisis management skills for coping with systemic crises and pandemics; enhance personal development, combining hard and soft skills and competencies;

- Set targets and develop an appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanism to track progress and fine-tune policy.

Recommendation 5.3 Programme audits in areas of national priority

The Strategic Plan recommends that the Working Group spearheads the setting up of programme audits in areas of national priority and advises on the thematic focus and approach. The composition of the Working Group provides an effective mechanism for launching such inter-ministerial initiatives, working in close cooperation with the Ministries concerned. The targeted outcomes are to build stronger working links with Ministries to advance the quality of programmes in a particular area and to set national occupational standards through the Sector Skills Councils. This initiative will form an integral component of the targeted action plan. The actual implementation of the programme audits will be undertaken by MFHEA in consultation with the QA Working Group

Recommendation 5.4 Pilot work-based learning and student internships

The Working Group will consider the design and piloting of a scheme to promote work-based learning and student internships in industry, both local and abroad. An MFHEA Report analyzing work-based learning will provide VET project EOI for VET experts and the scoping report by November 2022 will provide a clear picture of the current situation in Malta and provide the basis for setting the guidelines.

Recommendation 5.5 Task Group on Values and Ethics

The Working Group will set up a task group to undertake a review of current practices in relation to values and ethics in FHE sector. The aim is to move towards the adoption of a common set of

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45   http://mcst.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Malta-RIS3-2021-2027_DRAFT-PUBLIC-CONSULTATION-Oct2020.pdf

values and principles in FHE to ensure equitable access, participation and inclusion to create equal opportunities for all. The targeted outcome is enhanced awareness/compliance with these guiding principles sector-wide.

Pillar 6:
Social Dimension: Widening Participation and Adult Learning

Despite progress on many fronts in the FHE area, Malta needs to continue with its ongoing drive to widen participation and adult learning to ensure that FHE opportunities are truly open to all, regardless of background or gender. As Malta's population becomes more international and less homogenous, the challenge of preparing for the future economy and society, is expected to increase in complexity and require a targeted, yet comprehensive approach. By involving all the relevant players from the public, private and voluntary sectors, the aim is to bring on board a broader base of experience, expertise and resources, to address this challenge more effectively. This task goes hand in hand with efforts to identify effective means for reaching out to different societal players and engaging them in the FHE sector.

Recommendation 6.1:
Setting up a Working Group on the Social Dimension

The Strategic Plan recommends that the MFHEA sets up a dedicated working group to lead the co-design of a comprehensive policy approach on the social dimension of FHE. The aim is to ensure widening, equitable and inclusive participation in FHE and adult learning, in line with current and emerging national and EU priorities. This initiative will be undertaken in consultation with key stakeholders, in particular the Ministries responsible for social policy, economy, innovation and enterprise, MFHEA, MCESD, NCPE. Consultations are also to be held with relevant public entities and representatives of corporate social responsibility, cooperatives and voluntary organisations.

The immediate goals of this Working Group are to:

- launch a review of the social dimension of FHE (widening inclusive participation in FHE and adult learning), focusing on the effectiveness of current approaches and to make recommendations for a more joined-up approach.

- identify areas requiring urgent action and launch consultations to design and pilot appropriate measures,

- unlock required resources from the public and private sectors, including incentives to support social innovation,

- to develop effective mechanisms for monitoring and securing the social dimension of FHE.

The main targeted outcomes are to:

- ensure equitable, widening participation and inclusion by rallying efforts and resources to provide a truly enabling environment for all;

- Reinforce structures for permeable pathways between all education systems, in particular both initial and continuing vocational education and training, general and academic education and informal and non-formal learning;

- Widen the supply of learning opportunities for adults by encouraging flexible and modular provision in terms of study intensity and mode of delivery;

- Set regulations for the provision of non-traditional learning programmes such as MOOCS, OERs and monitor microcredentials;

- Financially reward HEIs and FHE providers to meet defined social objectives.

Recommendation 6.2:
Coordinated Action Plan on the Social Dimension of FHE

The Working Group will incorporate its proposed measures into a dedicated action plan which takes due account of societal and individual diversity. The initial focus of efforts will be on building the evidence base: identifying and addressing priority national social needs, as well as the potential of industry and voluntary sector to advance the social dimension of FHE and social innovation. The plan which will be updated on an annual basis will build on ongoing work by MFHEA and aim to unlock additional resources and support mechanisms.

The Action Plan aims to:

- Build an in-depth evidence base on current and emerging priorities related to the social dimension and inclusivity and recommendations for the design of appropriate measures

- Set and address targets for widening participation in FHE, adult education and lifelong learning, with a particular focus on low-qualified and socially disadvantaged groups (including the elderly, persons with special needs, ethnic minorities and migrants)

- Set and address targets for bridging the gender gap in FHE, in particular in STEM fields of study and professions, including the digital sector;

- Pilot remedial actions targeting:
  o Basic digital skills for all
  o Bridging the gender gap
  o Upskill the low-qualified

The targeted outcomes are to:

- achieve a high level of basic digital skills (target:80%);

- reduce the number of low-qualified;

- widen participation in FHE by recognizing prior learning and facilitating the transition to online learning and the use of digitally supported teaching and learning;

Recommendation 6.3 Monitor and evaluate outcomes

As the pillar development and related work matures, the Working Group will draw up recommendations for the implementation of a monitoring and evaluation system based on performance targets. This allows the WG and MFHEA to monitor performance in relation to the action plan, initiatives and schemes and to ensure that the targeted outcomes are achieved.

Recommendation 6.4 Strategic approach to communications

As part of the effort to widen participation in FHE, the Strategic Plan recommends the development by the WG and MFHEA of a more strategic approach to communications. This covers a range of different types of communications, from official notifications to FHE providers and awareness-raising notices to young and adult learners. This will entail efforts to identify the appropriate/effective means for communicating with different audiences, in particular those which have proven difficult to reach. Apart from consideration of alternative media, including social media, the development of customized content and the organization of regular networking events could prove effective. This action is considered a key element in raising awareness on this new Strategic Plan and for building joined up approaches. A key priority is to increase awareness on the Malta Qualifications Framework.

Pillar 7:
Strategic Internationalization and Mobility

In recent years, Malta has recorded significant progress on key EU education targets, as indicated in the EU Education and Training Monitor (2020). Maintaining the progress achieved to date requires continued efforts to keep track of developments at EU level, participate proactively in the setting of policies and targets, engage in relevant peer learning and collaborative actions, as well contribute to the design of new EU initiatives. Given the extent of these commitments Malta has to be selective in identifying where its efforts are best deployed in order to secure national needs and support Malta's performance.

The EU is currently working on a number of policy initiatives in order to advance the European Education Area, including the development of closer links between education and research and innovation, the Higher Education Transformation Agenda, the European Strategy for Universities and extending the European Universities Initiative.

These initiatives dovetail and impact on EU initiatives in related areas including the European Green Deal, the Twin Transitions, the Digital Agenda and the European Pact for Research and Innovation. Malta needs to adopt a joined-up strategic approach to these initiatives and more broadly to the twin challenges of internationalization and mobility by developing the appropriate national structures and mechanisms to coordinate efforts.

Recommendation 7.1:
Setting up of a SG Working Group on Internationalisation and Mobility

The Strategic Plan recommends that MFHEA sets up a dedicated working group to lead the co-design of a strategic approach on internationalization and mobility in consultation with key stakeholders. The core aim is to ensure that joined-up policies are implemented effectively and that these policies are monitored and kept updated.

The Working Group will be composed of representatives of relevant Ministries, MFHEA, EUPA, MCST among others.

The main targeted outcomes are to:

- Set national priorities for internationalization and mobility in further and higher education taking into account related priorities in other policy domains;

- take full advantage of opportunities at EU level, particularly to address gaps in structures, capacity and competencies at national level, and thereby provide effective national inputs to EU policy design in FHE and related areas;

- address short-term priorities resulting from global crisis and disaster, such as forced migration, war, pandemic and environmental disaster.

- improve the quality and effectiveness of internationalization and mobility actions, by linking them more directly to national needs and priorities, addressing gaps in capacity and skills, required peer learning and capacity-building and reducing brain drain,

- develop the evidence base through enhanced data collection, analysis and dedicated studies for policy design and more systematically set targets,

- draw up recommendations for the implementation of appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms based on performance targets. This allows the WG and SG to monitor performance in relation to the action plan, initiatives and schemes and to ensure that the targeted outcomes are achieved.

Recommendation 7.2:
Targeted Action Plan on Mobility

As the Working Group proceeds with its remit, one of its main deliverables will be the development of a targeted action plan on mobility, addressing both international and inter-sectorial mobility. The plan which will be updated on an annual basis will build on ongoing work by MFHEA. The core aim is to

improve policy coordination and unlock additional resources and support mechanisms. In particular, the action plan will develop capacity-building actions aimed at improving MFHEA's competencies in this area through collaboration with international peers for provision of support, and expertise.

The action plan will focus on actions to:

- develop and implement flexible mobility formats (short and long term, virtual and blended) in all types of private and public educational institutions

- facilitate inter-sectorial mobility, in particular for researchers;

- ensure full portability of available domestic student support measures for credit and degree mobility;

- ensure automatic recognition of learning period abroad by transferring all credits gained during a period of study abroad towards the student's degree

- encourage the use of existing tools (e.g. learning agreement and memorandum of understanding, Europass platform, Diploma Supplement, EQF/NQF…) supporting mobility of learners particularly within the private institutions

The targeted outcomes of the Plan are to:

- set and achieve an optimal balance between ensuring equitable mobility opportunities for all, meeting EU mobility targets, and addressing national needs and priorities;

- address barriers to mobility through coordinated action and in particular ensure increased mobility of disadvantaged learners at all levels;

- achieve an increased share of students and staff participating in outward mobility and digital mobility periods in line with national policy;

- develop a strategic approach to incoming mobility targeting national needs;

- increase automatic mutual recognition of qualifications;

- secure a budget line to unlock necessary resources

Recommendation 7.3:
Targeted Action Plan on Internationalisation

The Working Group's second key deliverable will be the development of a targeted action plan for internationalisation. The plan which will be updated on an annual basis will build on ongoing work by MFHEA and aim to unlock additional resources and support mechanisms. In particular, the action plan will develop capacity-building actions aimed at improving MFHEA's competencies in this area, through collaboration with international peers for provision of support and expertise. The WG will consider the setting up of a dedicated Unit within MFHEA to coordinate EU affairs and the internationalization approach.

The Action Plan will focus on:

- gathering evidence to define the national approach on inward investment in FHE and the identification of areas to be targeted for new internationalisation initiatives and securing the budget to support this.

- developing a strategic overview of EU collaboration opportunities to increase coordination and coherence in FHE: including EHEA inputs; support the European Universities' initiative and COVEs; mobility approach (ERASMUS) and other EU funded programmes (ESF/ERDF)

- exploring the potential of job shadowing and internships between European education institutions and exchanges of staff and students for targeted education experiences

The targeted outcomes of the Plan are to:

- develop a strategic approach on internationalization in consultation with relevant Ministries with an emphasis on gearing actions to national priorities;

- enhance Malta's international profile through proactive participation in EU policy fora, liaison internally with relevant units, and identifying required actions

- ensure optimal use of EU opportunities: funding, expertise, access to infrastructure, participation in EU projects and capacity building activities

- fully exploit EU initiatives, in particular the University Flagships and the European Universities initiative

- increase efforts towards more targeted use of bilateral cooperation within EU and beyond – particularly with Eu counterparts on a more consistent level, for example on accreditation

- develop strategic partnerships between Maltese and MS FHE policy institutions to address national priorities;

- secure a budget line for 5 strategic partnerships up to 2030 to address FHE 2030 priorities-

Summary Table of Recommendations

PILLARS	RECOMMENDATIONS
1. Policy Design and Governance	1.1: Review of governance structures in FHE to support joined-up policy (Lead: Ministry for Education) 1.2 Review of effectiveness of FHE public spending (Lead: Ministry for Education and Ministry of Finance) 1.3: MFHEA Working Group on Policy Intelligence 1.4 Capacity-building: MFHEA structures including Policy Unit 1.5 Upgrading of the FHE legislative framework
2. Exploiting Emerging Opportunities	2.1 Setting up of a National Coordination Mechanism on Emerging Opportunities (Lead: Ministry for Education) 2.2 Targeted Action Plan on Emerging Opportunities 2.3 Monitor and evaluate outcomes
3. Enhanced educational attainment, retention and completion	3.1 Setting up of a Working Group on Educational attainment, retention and completion (Lead: MFHEA) 3.2 Coordinated Action Plan on Educational attainment, retention and completion 3.3 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Review in 2023-24 3.4 Support package for FHE providers 3.5 Support for students
4. Robust Quality Assurance and Transparency	4.1 Setting up of a Working Group on Quality Assurance and Transparency in FHE (Lead: MFHEA) 4.2 Targeted Action Plan for QA 4.3 Monitoring and evaluation 4.4: Review of FHE Providers 4.5 Training facility for FHE providers
5. Improved Relevance of Teaching, Learning and Research	5.1 Setting up of a Working Group on Relevance of Teaching, Learning and Research (Lead: MFHEA) 5.2 Targeted Action Plan on Relevance of Teaching, Learning and Research 5.3 Programme Audits in Areas of National Priority 5.4 Pilot work-based learning and student internships 5.5 Task Group on Values and Ethics
6. Social Dimension: Widening Participation and Adult Learning	6.1 Setting up a Working Group on the Social Dimension (Lead: MFHEA) 6.2 Targeted Action Plan on the Social Dimension of FHE 6.3 Monitoring and evaluating outcomes 6.4 Strategic approach to communications
7. Internationalisation and Mobility	7.1 Setting up of a Working Group on Internationalisation and Mobility (Lead: MFHEA) 7.2 Targeted Action Plan on Mobility 7.3 Targeted Action Plan on Internationalisation

Proposed launch of structures and initiatives with a timeline

- 2023
  - Launch of Reviews by the Ministry for Education
  - MFHEA Capacity-building
  - Ministry for Education Working Group on Educational attainment, retention and completion

  - MFHEA launch of 4 Working Groups on:
    - Internationalisation and Mobility
    - Social Dimension
    - Relevance of Teaching, Learning and Research
    - Quality Assurance and Transparency in FHE

- 2024
  - Setting up of a National Coordination Mechanism on Emerging International Opportunities

Proposed Chart and Structures
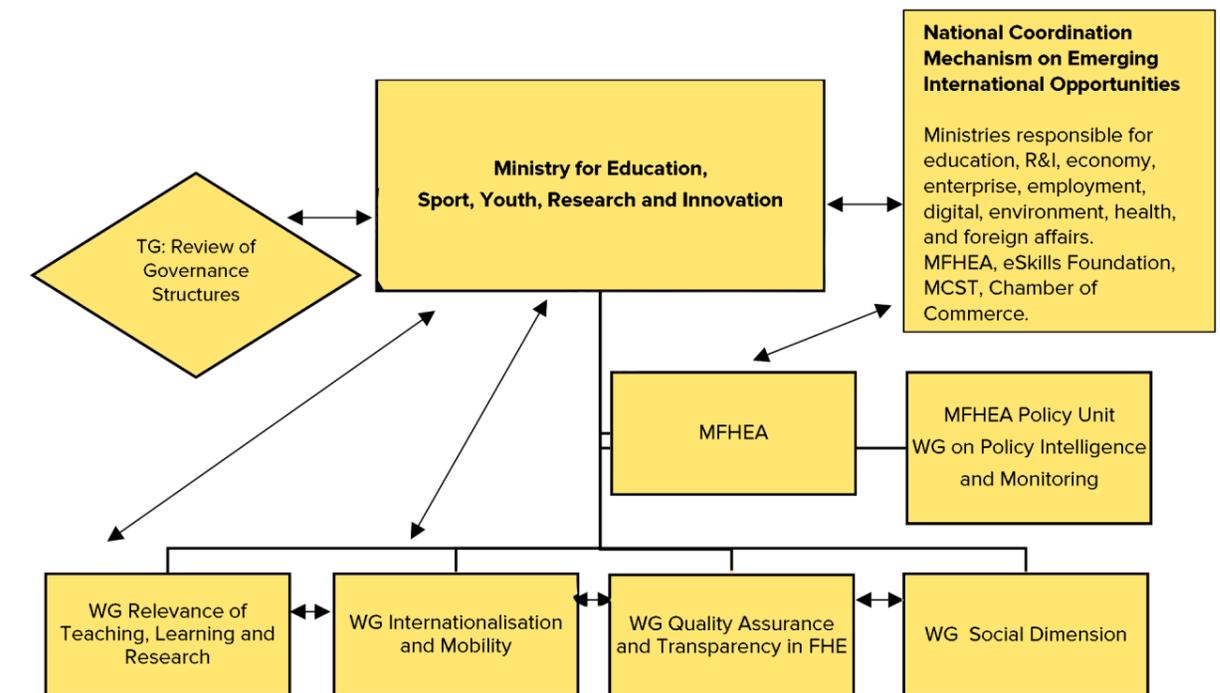
Way forward

This Strategic Plan has redefined our Vision and goals for Further and Higher Education 2030:

Towards a dynamic resilient knowledge ecosystem by 2030, based on an innovative, inclusive quality-driven further and higher education sector, inspiring individuals, throughout their educational and life experience, to develop relevant skills that allow them to contribute as community members and active citizens towards a digital and green global economy.

Through a simplified set of guiding principles, the aim is to bring on board all stakeholders in further and higher education, building a culture of mutual trust and shared responsibility, as we embark on the challenging pathways ahead.

The roadmap which has been set, is deliberately ambitious - we need to step up our efforts if we are to catch up and keep up with our peers. The launch of the pillars and recommended measures depends on the active engagement of all stakeholders and their invaluable contribution to their design and implementation. The aim is to provide an enabling framework to work together to unlock capacities and resources across different sectors, and thereby build the critical mass to make these policies work in practice.

This Plan depends on having the appropriate structures, mechanisms and resources in place to ensure more evidence-based and forward-looking policy design fit for 2030 and beyond.

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HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGY FOR MALTA

within the context of the
Further and Higher Education Strategy 2020 (NCHE, 2009)
and the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2015-2024

National Commission for
Further and
Higher Education
Malta

HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGY FOR MALTA

within the context of the
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and the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2015-2024

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This higher education strategy for Malta is embedded within the overall strategic direction of the proposed Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta for 2014 to 2024 and aims to deliver specific targets with regard to higher education. Higher Education (HE) refers to the provision of education leading to qualifications at Malta Qualifications Framework Level 5 or higher. HE includes programmes that are of a professional nature as well as those that are not targeting a specific profession.

This strategy follows up on the Further and Higher Education Strategy 2020 proposed by the former National Commission for Higher Education in 2009, but responds specifically to the need for a strategic direction and priorities for the European Union's programming period of 2014-2020.

It sets out by providing an overview of the development of the higher education sector in Malta to date in order to highlight the key concerns for its further development. To this end, the strategy has also drawn on related policies and strategies of public entities and stakeholders at national and international level influencing higher education policy. It has done so to contextualise these concerns and derive from them possible initiatives to address them.

Based on this context, the strategy proposes a list of measures to address the identified key concerns and priority areas. In order for this strategy remain relevant and flexible enough to accommodate changing circumstances, an action plan has been annexed to this strategy and further details the actors, timeline and contribution of these actions towards the measures and priority areas identified. The strategy with its proposed measures and action plan have been subject to internal consultation and regular feedback by a steering group including representatives from the University of Malta, MCAST, ITS, ETC and the Ministry for Education and Employment. The NCFHE would like to express its sincere thanks for the generosity with which these actors shared their time and feedback in the development of this strategy. It would also like to express its gratitude for the feedback received during the public round table consultation held on the initial draft document on 16th July 2014.

01

THE DEVELOPMENT
OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALTA

1.1.   Increasing participation and attainment in higher education

In the past decade Malta has witnessed a considerable expansion of its higher education sector. While at the turn of the millennium 6,362 students were enrolled in higher education, this number had increased to 14,718 in 2012 (see Figure 1). This rise in participation in higher education had two very positive effects for Malta. Firstly, it resulted in an increase in higher education attainment from 9.3% of 30-34 year olds holding higher education qualifications in 2002 to 26.0% in 2013 (see Table 2). Secondly, it resulted in a decrease in early school leaving. That means the share of 18-24 year olds with at most lower secondary education, which in Malta is equivalent to the end of compulsory schooling, and who are not in education or training has decreased from 53.2% in 2002 to 20.8% in 2013 (see Table 3).
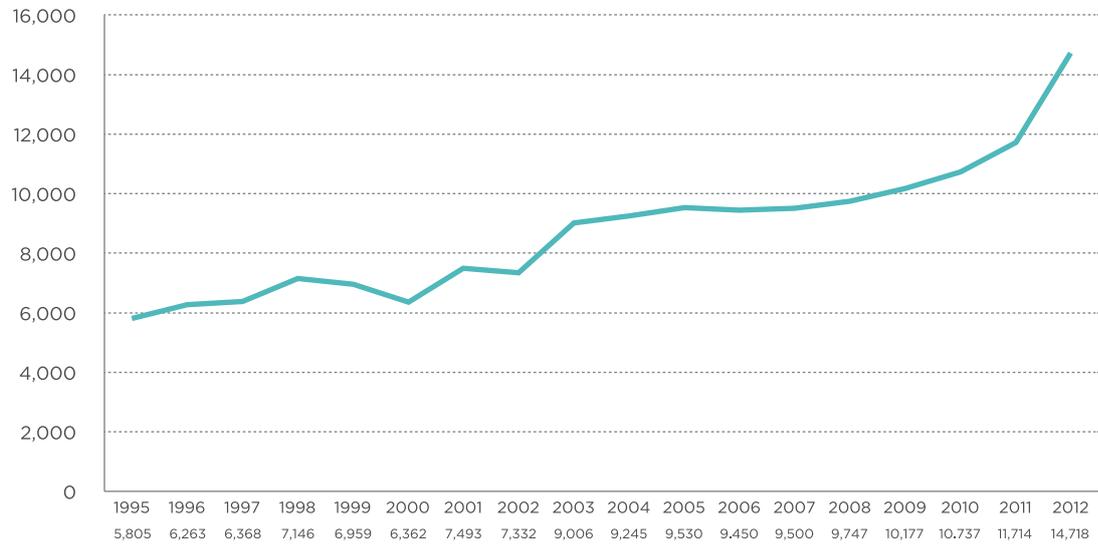
However, despite these encouraging developments, progress has been well below that registered in the 28 European Union member states. While the EU average stood at 36.8% of 30-34 year olds with higher education qualifications in 2013, the share for Malta was 26.0% (see Table 2). In the same manner, Malta's share of 20.8% of early school leavers in 2013 is far above the EU average, which stood at 12.0% (see Table 3).

Besides that, Malta has committed to align itself to the European Union's target to increase higher education attainment of 30-34 year olds to 40% and reduce the share of early school leavers among 18-24 year olds to 10% by 2020.[1] While the National Reform Programme for Malta has confirmed the 10% target for early school leavers, the target for higher education attainment has been set more cautiously at 33% of 30-34 year olds by 2020.[2]

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[1] *European Commission: Communication from the Commission. Europe 2020. A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Brussels (2010), Available online at: http://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/pdf/COMPLET%20EN%20BARROSO%20%20%20007%20-%20Europe%202020%20-%20EN%20version. pdf, last accessed on 21st October 2014, p. 9.*

[2] *Ministry of Finance. Malta's National Reform Programme under the Europe 2020 Strategy. Malta (2014), Available online at: http://mfin.gov.mt/en/ Library/Documents/NRP/NRP%202014%20Final%20Version.pdf, last accessed on 24th October 2014, p. 25.*

FIGURE 1
Total student population enrolled
in higher education in Malta from 1995-2013

16,000

14,000

12,000

10,000

8,000

6,000

4,000

2,000

0

1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
5,805	6,263	6,368	7,146	6,959	6,362	7,493	7,332	9,006	9,245	9,530	9.450	9,500	9,747	10,177	10.737	11,714	14,718

(Source: 1994–2005 NSO Education Statistics; 2006-2007 NCHE provisional data; 2008-2013 NCFHE Further and Higher Education Statistics Survey 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012)

Students in HE

TABLE 2
Share of 30-34 year olds in Malta and the EU-28
having attained higher education from 2002-2013

GEO/TIME		2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
EU-28	Total	23.6	25.0	26.9	28.1	29.0	30.1	31.2	32.3	33.6	34.7	35.9	36.9
	Males	22.6	24.0	25.3	26.1	26.3	27.2	28.0	28.0	30.0	30.8	31.7	32.7
	Females	24.5	26.1	28.6	30.1	31.6	32.9	34.4	35.7	37.2	38.6	40.2	41.2
MALTA	Total	9.3	13.7	17.6	17.6	20.7	20.8	21.0	21.9	20.6	23.4	24.9	26.0
	Males	10.3	14.9	19.3	17.9	19.3	19.1	21.0	20.3	17.5	22.6	23.4	22.6
	Females	8.2	12.6	16.1	17.3	22.0	22.5	20.9	23.6	23.8	24.2	26.6	29.5

Source: EUROSTAT, http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=edat_lfse_07&lang=en

TABLE 3
Share of 18-24 year olds in Malta and the EU-28 with at most lower secondary
education and not currently in education or training (Early School Leavers) from 2002-20133

GEO/TIME		2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
EU-28	Total	17.0	16.4	16.0	15.7	15.3	14.9	14.7	14.2	13.9	13.4	12.7	12.0
	Males	19.1	18.5	18.3	17.7	17.4	16.9	16.6	16.1	15.8	15.3	14.4	13.6
	Females	14.9	14.3	13.7	13.7	13.2	12.8	12.6	12.3	11.9	11.5	10.9	10.2
MALTA	Total	53.2	49.9	42.1	33.0	32.2	30.2	27.2	27.1	23.8	22.7	21.1	20.8
	Males	56.5	51.7	44.3	37.4	36.1	34.8	31.1	30.9	29.9	28.8	25.2	23.2
	Females	49.7	48.0	39.8	28.3	28.1	25.3	23.2	23.0	17.4	16.3	16.8	18.4

Source: EUROSTAT, http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=edat_lfse_14&lang=en

Thus, both in order to catch up with the development in other European Union member states and achieve the Europe 2020 targets for early school leaving and higher education attainment further action is needed to promote participation and attainment in higher education.

1.2. Reducing gender differences in higher education

In this regard particular efforts are needed to reduce the considerable gender differences with regard to early school leaving and higher education attainment (see Table 2 and 3). The share of male Early School Leavers (23.2% in 2013) not only exceeds by far the corresponding share of females (18.4% in 2013) (see Table 2), males also report lower shares of Higher Education Attainment (22.6% in 2013) compared to females (29.5% in 2013) (see Table 3). This appears to be influenced by males being more active in the labour market, given that the share of young males in Malta that are not in employment, education or training is slightly lower (9.9%) than the share of females (10.3%) (see Table 4). While this difference may appear to be marginal, due to the larger share of male early school leavers in Malta, in absolute numbers young males appear to be more present in the labour market than young females.

TABLE 4
Share of 18-24 year olds in Malta and the EU-28 neither in employment
nor in education and training by educational attainment level from 2002-2013

GEO ISCED97/TIME		2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
EU-28	All ISCED	16.8	16.8	16.5	16.2	15.1	14.1	13.9	16.1	16.5	16.7	17.1	17.0
	Males	14.9	15.3	15.0	14.6	13.4	12.3	12.3	15.3	15.9	16.1	16.6	16.6
	Females	18.6	18.3	18.0	17.9	16.8	15.8	15.6	16.8	17.2	17.3	17.5	17.4
MALTA	All ISCED	14.3	18.0	14.3	12.7	10.7	11.1	7.7	11.1	10.4	11.0	11.3	10.1
	Males	12.7	15.5	11.7	11.5	8.9	10.6	5.7	10.1	9.5	10.7	9.9	9.9
	Females	16.0	20.6	17.2	14.0	12.6	11.7	9.8	12.1	11.3	11.4	12.8	10.3

Source: EUROSTAT, http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=edat_lfse_21&lang=en

Darmanin suggests a number of historical and cultural factors present in Maltese society that may influence this occurrence. In this regard, she reports that until the late 1970s various restrictions in the Maltese labour market applied that disadvantaged women and favoured men.[3] These included the obligation for women to give up employment upon marriage; the restriction that positions previously occupied by a male had to be filled again by a male; or the lack of legal restriction on wage differentials between females and males for the same job. These restrictions resulted in women overall being guided towards domestic responsibilities or to low-skilled and low-wage labour especially in manufacturing and the textile industry, in recognition of the reliance of females from low social backgrounds on own income. In contrast, boys not intending or admitted to pursue academic pathways leading to higher education were guided towards crafts and trades. It may be due to a persistent impact of these former Trade Schools that there is still a very strong male majority of students attending MCAST today, given that it is the main successor and public provider of vocational education up higher education level in Malta (MQC 2010).[4] Figure 5 clearly indicates that the share of females in vocationally oriented higher education programmes has remained unchanged since 2009. However, this may also be due to the fact that over the years females retreated from the low-skilled and low-wage jobs.[5] Along with the continued impact of the historical and cultural factors mentioned above, this may explain the persistently low female employment rate in Malta to this day. [6]

FIGURE 5
Enrolment in vocationally oriented higher
education programmes by gender 2008-2012

Data: NCFHE Further and Higher Education Statistics Surveys 2008-2012

Males   Female

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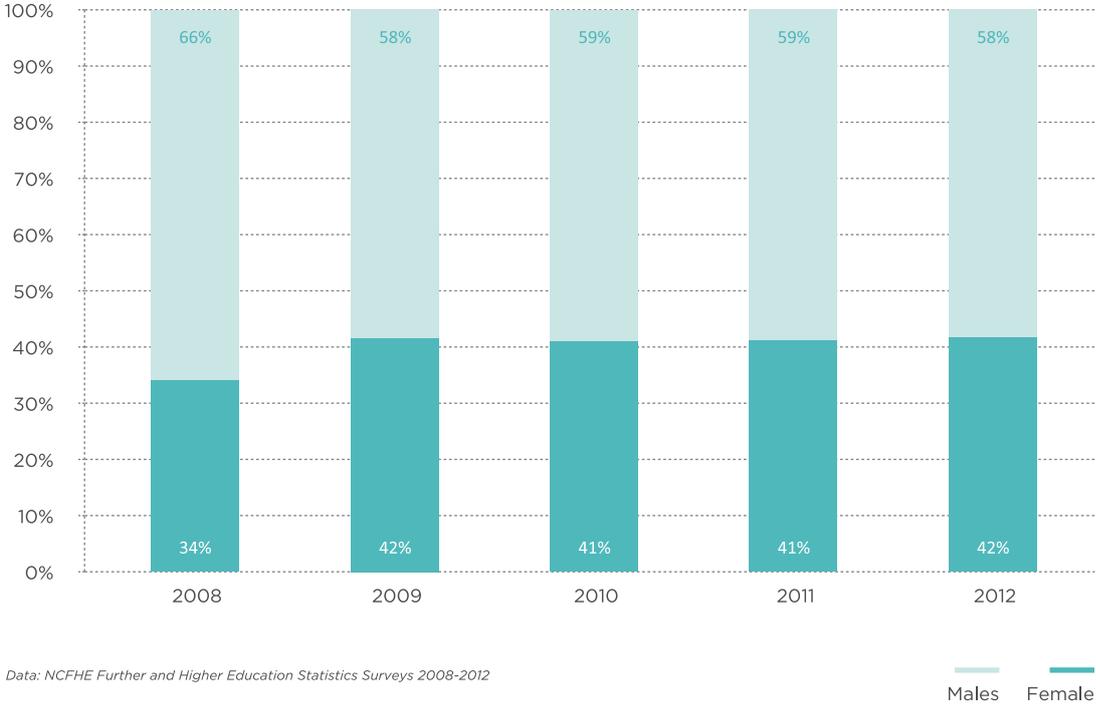
[3] Darmanin, Mary (1992): The Labour Market of Schooling. Maltese girls in education and economic planning. In: Gender and Education, Vol. 4, No. 1/2, 1992, p. 105-126.

[4] Malta Qualifications Council (2010): VET Policy Report. Progress in the policy priority areas for Vocational Education and Training, Malta, October 2010.
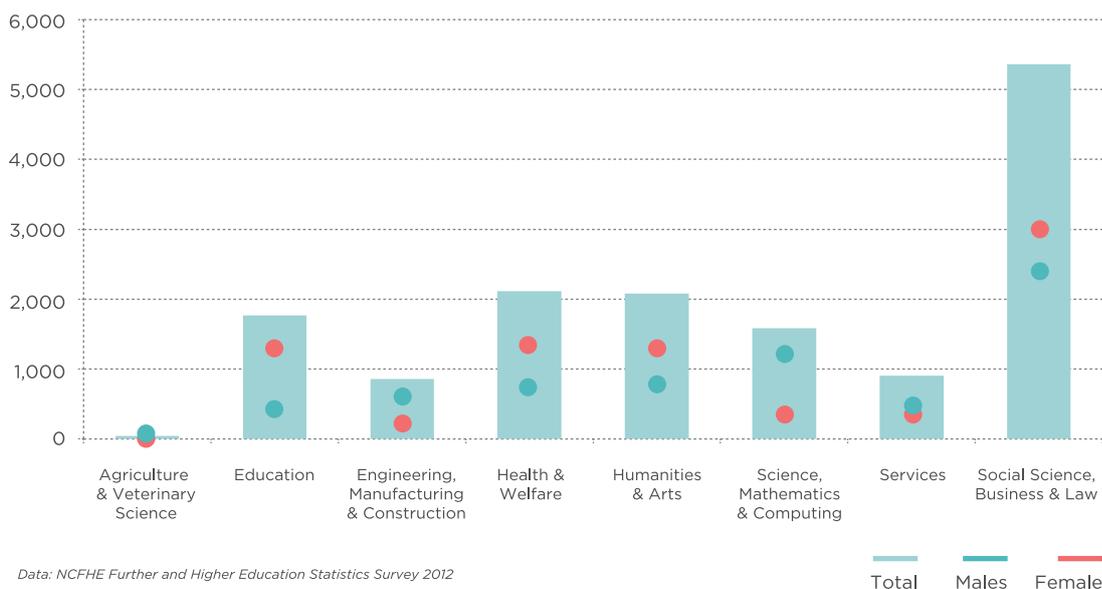
[5] Darmanin 1992

[6] ibid

Nevertheless, Darmanin suggests that due to surges in emigration in the 1950s and resulting labour shortages, female labour was sought in sectors such as education and healthcare, apart from labour market growth in clerical professions and the retail trade targeting female workers.[7] Given that professions in the field of education and healthcare were accessible through higher education qualifications, this influenced female attainment at this level. In fact, Darmanin,[8] with reference to Borg and Falzon, has argued that the single sex school system in Malta as well as streaming have contributed to females succeeding in gaining access to and attaining higher education. This may explain why female rates of Early School Leavers are lower than males (see Table 3) and why their higher education attainment rates exceed that of males (see Table 2).

Overall, Darmanin argues that these developments have influenced female career choices to this day.[9] In fact, data from students enrolled in Form 2; 3 or 4 in private and public secondary schools in 1990 and 1987 respectively, thus of females or males aged 30-35 today, suggests that while students in private schools aspired in general to more prestigious and managerial positions compared to students in public secondary schools, girls were particularly attuned the labour market opportunities available to them and, consequently, conveyed more sober aspirations than boys. This was particularly the case for females in public secondary schools. This is also evidenced in the enrolment of females and males by subject area. As Figure 6 shows most students in higher education are enrolled in programmes in the social sciences, business and law; followed by health and welfare; and humanities and arts. However, particular differences in student enrolment are notable in the field of education and science, mathematics and computing, with the difference in the number of females and males enrolled in these fields of study being particularly striking. While females are more often enrolled in study programmes in education, males are more often following studies in science, mathematics and engineering. This appears to support the argument of Darmanin.[10] In contrast, gender differences appear less pronounced in the field of agriculture or services, with the number of females enrolled in programmes in these two fields matching closely the number of males.

Total higher education student population
by field of study and gender in 2012

Data: NCFHE Further and Higher Education Statistics Survey 2012

Total   Males   Female

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7 ibid

8 ibid, see also Darmanin, Mary (2003): When Students Are Failed. 'Love' as an alternative education discourse? In: International Studies in Sociology of Education, Volume 13, Number 2, 2003, p. 141-170.

9 See Darmanin 1992

10 ibid

This data suggests that action to reduce gender differences has to be twofold. On the one hand gender differences have to be addressed in terms of higher education attainment. This refers specifically to the lower share of males achieving higher education qualifications. Given the majority of males in vocationally oriented higher education (see Figure 5) its further expansion could, therefore, clearly contribute to increasing male higher education attainment. On the other hand further research is needed in order to better understand the factors influencing the apparent gender differences in the subject choices. Such research may provide a more solid basis for action on how to overcome low levels of higher education attainment among males or the differences in subject choices between males and females.

1.3. Increasing the participation of underrepresented groups in higher education

Apart from widening access to higher education as a means of decreasing gender differences especially with regards to early school leaving and higher education attainment, it is also important in view of Malta's commitment to the social dimension ingrained in the Bologna Process. This refers to the aspiration that the population in higher education should reflect the diversity of Malta's entire population.[11]

One indicator to measure the social inclusiveness of a higher education system is to compare the share of students, whose parents have attained a particular level of education, with the corresponding share in the total population. In an inclusive higher education system that proportion would be close to 1, which would indicate that the shares are nearly equivalent in both populations.

In this regard, the Eurostudent project, which compares data on the social and economic conditions of students in different countries in Europe, suggests a typology of social inclusiveness of higher education systems. For this purpose the share of students, whose fathers have attained at most compulsory education, was compared with the corresponding share in the male population aged 40-60 years (index: low education background). This was contrasted with the share of students, whose fathers have attained higher education compared to the corresponding share in the male population aged 40-60 years (index: high education background) (see Figure 7). The data indicates that in few countries the share of students from low and high education background matches well the corresponding share in the total population. Countries like Finland, Ireland, Switzerland and the Netherlands are closer to achieving an inclusive system, while the higher education system in Romania, Slovakia or Croatia appears to be considerably more exclusive. Malta's situation appears to differ somewhat with a considerable overrepresentation of individuals from high education backgrounds in higher education, but no considerable underrepresentation of individuals from low education backgrounds. This very positive finding is clearly linked to the recent expansion of Malta's higher education sector, which opened access to a wider and more diverse student population. With increasing higher education attainment in the Maltese population overrepresentation of students from higher education backgrounds will probably diminish. However, measures to attract individuals from lower education backgrounds and those, who discontinued their education after compulsory schooling, need to be expanded to ensure that their representation in higher education is not only maintained, but further increased.

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[11] *London Communiqué 2007*

FIGURE 7
Typology of social inclusiveness of higher education systems –
highest educational attainment of students' fathers as a share of corresponding
age group in general population (index: 1=perfect balance) in %
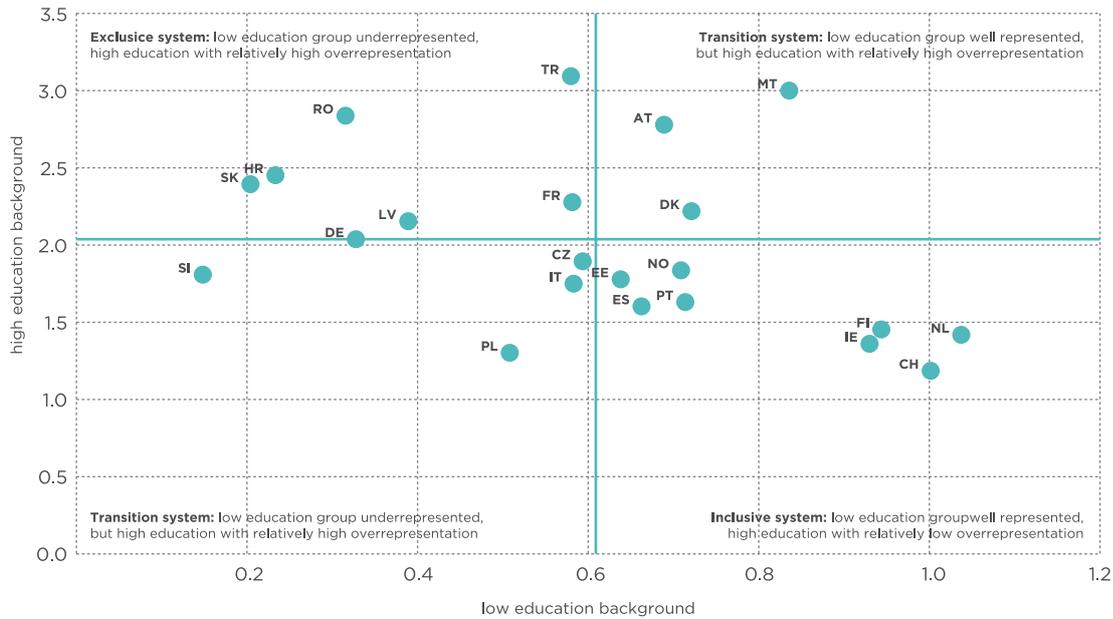
Source: Eurostudent IV, Subtopic C3 and national statistics/LFS, No data: LT, SE, E/W. No part-time students in sample:
DK, LV. High education background oversampled: DK. Low education includes ISCED 3C: CZ. Males of corresponding age
are defined as males between the ages of 40 and 60 years old. Update 12.01.2012, available online at:
http://www.eurostudent.eu/download_files/documents/IB_HE_Access_120112.pdf

In this regard, Vocational Education and Training provides important alternative pathways into higher education. Data from the national Eurostudent survey in Malta carried out in 2013 shows that 34% of students enrolled in higher education programmes at MCAST or ITS have entered their programme with a VET qualification (see Figure 8). This suggests that these students have continued their education after compulsory schooling in a vocational setting and have done so up to higher education level. The expansion of vocationally oriented higher education could, therefore, clearly contribute to attracting more students overall, not just males, and in this way increase higher education attainment and reduce early school leaving in Malta. Indeed, facilitating the transition between vocational and academic oriented further and higher education programmes has also been recommended by the Rector of the University of Malta as a measure to increase higher education attainment.[12]

At the same time, increasing attainment levels may require higher education institutions to reach out to a more diverse student population, including mature students. However, in order to do so the underlying reasons for the low participation rate of mature students need to be addressed.[13] This may require more diversity in the study programmes on offer or the mode of delivery while ensuring that study programmes deliver the knowledge, skills and competences required in the labour market.
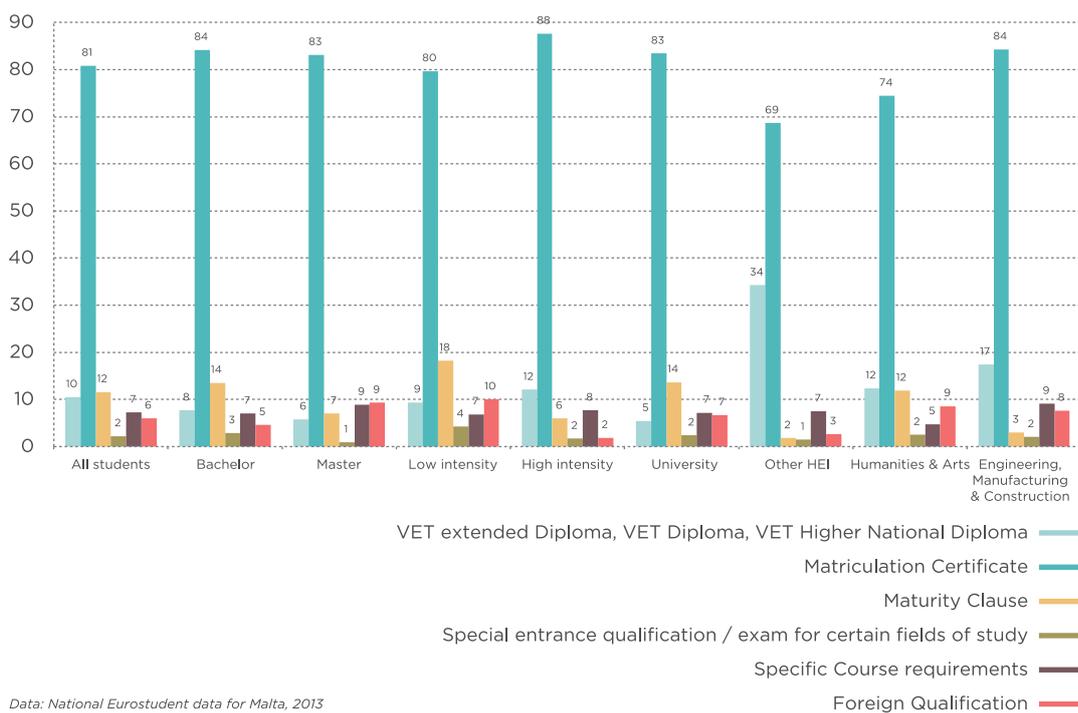
[12] Camilleri, Juanito (2010): 2020 Vision or Optical Illusion? Malta, 2010.

[13] EACEA (2012): The European Higher Education Area in 2012. Bologna Process Implementation Report.

In this regard the Rector of the University of Malta[14] and the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry[15] have recommended to:

- support and encourage individuals to return to education alongside employment, including through distance learning and e-learning;

- widen the provision of higher education and attract foreign education providers to Malta to cater for a diverse student body;

- ensure that knowledge, skills and competences delivered in higher education meet the needs in the labour market and to

- monitor the supply and demand of skills in the labour market.

Entry qualifications and measures used for entry into higher education by study-related characteristics of students (in %)

VET extended Diploma, VET Diploma, VET Higher National Diploma
Matriculation Certificate
Maturity Clause
Special entrance qualification / exam for certain fields of study
Specific Course requirements
Foreign Qualification

Data: National Eurostudent data for Malta, 2013

In order to monitor this development regular data collection on student enrolments in higher education and their social and economic conditions is important. This allows for an evaluation of the effectiveness of measures to attract underrepresented groups into higher education and for a monitoring of the obstacles they face to successfully complete higher education.

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[14] *Camilleri 2010*

[15] *The Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry (2014): Economic Vision for Malta 2014-2020. Full Report. Malta, 2014.*

1.4. Increasing the relevance of higher education to the individual and the labour market

When looking into the factors that may influence young people's decision in Malta on continuing their education, it appears that the labour market opportunities available to them are an important pull-factor. In fact, while in 2013 20.6% of 18-24 year olds in Malta were considered as early school leavers[16] only 10.1% of this age group were neither in employment, nor in education or training.[17] This goes to show that young people deciding to discontinue their education after compulsory schooling are by no means inactive or unemployed. This is quite a different scenario from that found in other European countries. In fact, the average share of young people aged 18-24 that are not in employment, education or training in the 28 EU member states is 17.0%,[18] which exceeds the average share of early school leavers in the 28 EU member states of 12.0%.[19] This suggests that a considerable share of young people with qualifications above lower secondary education, thus young people not considered as early school leavers, is faced with unemployment.

Unfortunately, these employment opportunities available to young people in Malta seem to provide further incentives to compulsory school students that may be already de-motivated by schooling to discontinue their education, due to a "lack of connection with the school, perceptions that the school is boring, lack of motivation, academic challenges, personal backgrounds and community contexts."[20] It is evident, therefore, that the implementation of the National Curriculum Framework[21] and the Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta[22] are paramount to ensure that students are well prepared and supported to succeed both in the labour market and in Further and Higher Education. In so doing, the National Curriculum Framework and the Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta also deliver on the National Youth Policy (2015-2020) for Malta, namely

• to effectively support and encourage the young individual in fulfilling her/his potential and aspirations while addressing their needs and concerns and

• to effectively support young people as active and responsible citizens who fully participate in and contribute to the social, economic and cultural life of the nation and Europe.[23]

In addition to these important prevention[24] and intervention[25] strategies in compulsory education, higher education has an important role to play to provide compensation measures, such as initiatives and pathways that enable those young people, who have left school early, to return to education and training. The effective interplay between these prevention, intervention and compensation measures to tackle Early School Leaving and increase Higher Education Attainment is important also in view of the particular impact of unemployment on young people and especially young people with low levels of education, which has been further aggravated in the wake of the financial crisis since 2008 (Dietrich 2012; Bell & Blanchflower 2011; Scarpetta et. al. 2010; Verick 2009).

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[16] *See Table 3, EUROSTAT, http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=edat_lfse_14&lang=en*

[17] *See Table 4, EUROSTAT, http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=edat_lfse_21&lang=en*

[18] *ibid*

[19] *See Table 3*

[20] *Ministry of Education and Employment (2012): A National Curriculum Framework for All. Malta, December 2012, p. 7.*

[21] *ibid*

[22] *Ministry for Education and Employment (2014): A Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving In Malta 2014. Malta.*

[23] *Parliamentary Secretariat for Research, Innovation, Youth and Sport (2014): A shared vision for the future of young people. Draft National Youth Policy Framework 2015-2020. Discussion Document. Malta, 2014, p. 16.*

[24] *Prevention refers to actions taken that avoid Early School Leaving to occur by ensuring that from the early years, schooling is meaningful and that it responds to students' needs and particular situations.*

[25] *Intervention refers to action taken to address Early School Leaving when warning systems reveal the need to give support to students at risk of becoming Early School Leavers.*

That means that young people choosing to discontinue their education after compulsory schooling are encountering more difficulties in finding employment.

The impact of the financial crisis on youth unemployment is evidenced by Eurostat data for the 28 European Union member states (see Table 9). While youth unemployment decreased overall between 2004 and 2008 it continuously increased from 2009 onwards. The situation in Malta appears similar, albeit less severe. Nevertheless the rate of youth unemployment has still not reached the same level witnessed prior to the crisis in 2008. The figures also confirm that young Maltese holding at most compulsory education are particularly affected by unemployment and that the rate of unemployment among these young people appears to be increasing. Given this impact, the concerns of young people have gained in political importance at European level (European Commission 2012b; Official Journal of the European Union 2011, 2012, 2013):

> The crisis which Europe has been undergoing since 2008 is having an exceptionally severe and ever-increasing impact on young people: the youth unemployment rate stood at 22.7 % in the third quarter of 2012, twice as high as the adult rate, and no signs of improvement are in sight. […] Being unemployed at a young age can have a long-lasting negative impact, a 'scarring effect'. In addition to higher risks of future unemployment, these young people are also at a higher risk of exclusion, of poverty and of facing health problems. Effective remedies are urgently needed. (European Commission 2012b: 2)

TABLE 9
Unemployment rate of 15-24 year olds by
highest level of education attained (%)

GEO	ISCED11/TIME	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
EU-28	All ISCED 2011 levels	18.7	18.7	17.4	15.5	15.6	19.9	21.0	21.4	22.9	23.4
	ISCED 2011 levels 0 – 2	21.4	21.8	21.3	20.1	21.3	26.2	27.5	28.3	30.5	31.0
	ISCED 2011 levels 3 – 4	18.1	17.5	15.7	13.5	13.0	17.2	18.3	18.8	20.2	20.8
	ISCED 2011 levels 5 – 8	12.9	14.3	13.6	11.5	11.7	15.6	16.4	16.8	18.0	18.8
MALTA	All ISCED 2011 levels	18.3	16.1	15.5	13.5	11.7	14.5	13.2	13.3	14.1	13.0
	ISCED 2011 levels 0 – 2	23.7	24.5	21.4	18.3	17.4	22.8	21.3	21.5	23.4	23.6
	ISCED 2011 levels 3 – 4		9.3	9.8	10.6	8.3	8.8	9.9	9.6	9.4	8.0
	ISCED 2011 levels 5 – 8									9.4	8.7

Data: EUROSTAT, http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=lfsa_urgaed&lang=en

In order to avoid these 'scarring effects'[26] on youth or reduce their impact Scarpetta et. al. (2010) have recommended to step up assistance particularly to those youth facing difficulty in finding employment. Bell and Blanchflower (2011a; 2011b) have suggested that one strategy of young people facing unemployment or downsizing in their current job has been to return to education:

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[26] *This scarring effect of youth unemployment includes an increased likelihood of becoming unemployed again with increased number of instances of having been unemployed; the increased likelihood of facing long-term unemployment later in life; or a wage penalty specifically on young males having faced unemployment (Bell & Blanchflower 2011a; 2011b; Scarpetta et al. 2010). At the same time Verrick (2009) highlights the social and psycho-social consequences of youth unemployment, such as social exclusion, mental health problems; violence; crime or drug abuse and the associated macro-economic costs to national welfare systems. Dietrich (2012) suggests that issues of poor well-being may be linked more generally to financial concerns and not specifically to unemployment, which so far is lacking in solid evidence. They may also be the cause, rather than the effect of unemployment, suggesting the need for further research and targeted initiatives to better assist young people with mental health problems.*

One symptom of this is the increase in applications for tertiary education from young people. Although students may still take part-time work and thus not drop out of the labour market completely, the reduction in the opportunity cost of study makes investment in human capital more attractive. In both the UK and the USA, college applications increased significantly during 2010. This is consistent with the evidence of Clark (forthcoming) that student enrolment rises during recessions. (Bell & Blanchflower 2011b: 8)

That means, the higher likelihood of becoming unemployed for young people with low levels of education makes returning to education more attractive. This may also explain the considerable increase in enrolments in further and higher education witnessed in Malta in the previous years.[27]

However, attaining higher education by itself is not a safeguard against unemployment either. Indeed, the European Commission has highlighted the impact of skills mismatches resulting in underemployment[28] or unfilled vacancies due to a lack of qualified individuals in a particular sector.[29] Likewise, Bell and Blanchflower have argued that

It is not clear that during the Great Recession increases in youth unemployment have been concentrated on the poorly educated. In the EU as a whole, rates of unemployment among those with a tertiary education qualification have risen more sharply than have those with primary or secondary qualifications, albeit from a lower base. Thus in Belgium, Italy and a number of eastern European states, unemployment rates among graduates are higher than those with a secondary qualification. One possible explanation is a genuine oversupply of graduates with relatively high reservation wages. An alternative explanation focuses on differences in labour market experience. Within the 16-24 years age group, graduates tend to have less work experience than the poorly qualified. If employers' immediate reaction to a recession is to stop hiring, then graduates may be in a more difficult position than those with lower qualifications, who already have jobs and accumulated experience.[30]

These considerations may influence individuals with labour market experience to return to higher education or for students to study alongside regular employment, in order to attain higher levels of qualifications while building on their work experience. In fact, the number of students enrolled in part-time programmes in further and higher education has more than doubled in previous years, from 3,349 in 2008 to 7,225 in 2012.[31] Another factor supporting this interpretation is the level of education pursued by students reporting more often to work regularly alongside their studies, namely programmes at MQF level 5 (45% work regularly) and MQF level 7 (67% work regularly) (see Figure 10 and Table 11). This suggests that these students may have witnessed limitations in their career progression due to the lack of a higher education qualification or seeking to advance their career prospects through the pursuit of an advanced higher education qualification.

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[27] *Based on the NCFHE Further and Higher Education Statistics Survey 2012 enrolments in further and higher education increased from 21,621 in 2008 to 27,781 in 2012.*

[28] *Underemployment refers to individuals being employed in positions below the level of qualification they hold. See: COM (2012) 727 final*

[29] *See COM (2012) 727 final; COM (2012) 669 final; and 2013/C 64/06.*

[30] *Bell, David N. F./ Blanchflower, David G. (2011): Young people and the Great Recession. In: Discussion paper series Forschungsinstitut zur Zukunft der Arbeit, No. 5674, April 2011, p. 9.*

[31] *NCFHE Further and Higher Education Statistics Survey 2012*

FIGURE 10
Employment rate during the academic year 2012/2013
by level of qualification currently enrolled in
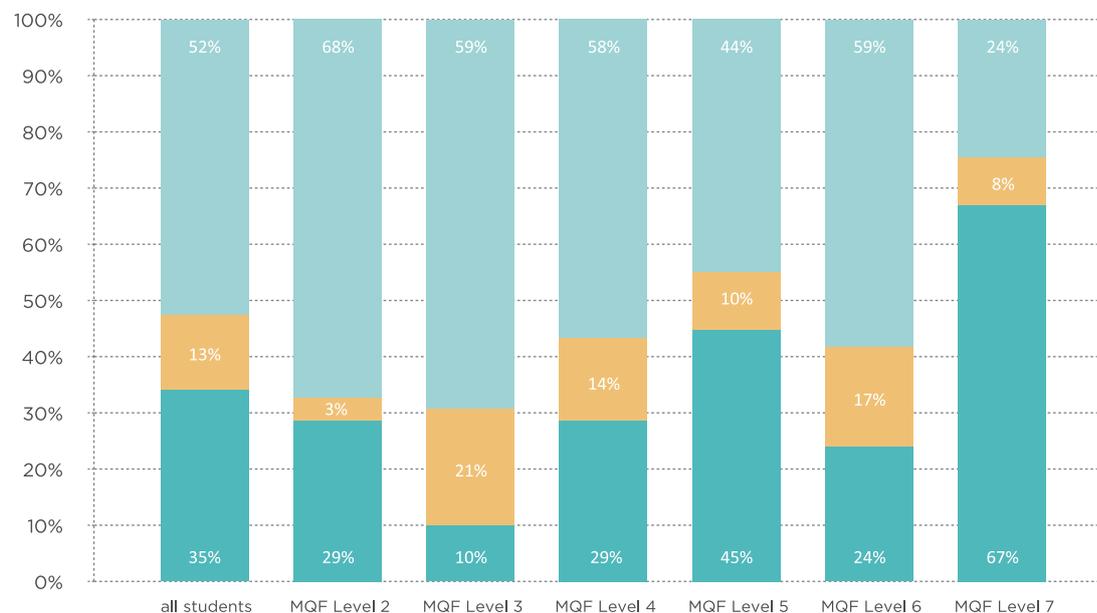
Data: National Eurostudent data for Malta, 2013

No. I don't work during the semester
Yes. I work during the whole semester
Yes. I work from time to time during the semester

TABLE 11
Employment rate during the academic year 2012/2013
by level of qualification students are currently enrolled in

	all students	MQF[32] Level 1	MQF Level 2	MQF Level 3	MQF Level 4	MQF Level 5	MQF Level 6	MQF Level 7	MQF[33] Level 8
Yes. I work during the whole semester	339	n.d.	19	10	51	66	74	115	n.d.
Yes. I work from time to time during the semester	130	n.d.	2	20	24	15	54	14	n.d.
No. I don't work during the semester	503	n.d.	44	67	104	65	181	42	n.d.
Total	972	3	65	97	179	146	310	171	1

Data: National Eurostudent data for Malta, 2013

If this is the case, one may assume that students, who are working regularly alongside their studies, do so particularly often in programmes closely related to their employment. However, this is only confirmed in part by data from the national student survey in Malta on the relationship between the programme students follow and the job they hold alongside their studies (see Figure 12 and Table 13).[34]

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[32] *Too few cases of students enrolled at MQF level 1 and working during the academic year 2012/2013 to report data on employment rate.*

[33] *Too few cases of students enrolled at MQF level 8 and working during the academic year 2012/2013 to report data on employment rate*

[34] *National Eurostudent data for Malta 2013*

This data suggests that students enrolled in advanced higher education programmes at MQF level 7 generally hold employment that is closely related to their studies, but for students enrolled in programmes at MQF level 5 the link to their employment appears to be limited. Instead it is interesting to note that 53% of students enrolled in programmes at MQF level 3 state that their job is very closely related to their studies.

Relationship between job held during the academic year 2012/2013
and the study programme by level of qualification currently enrolled in
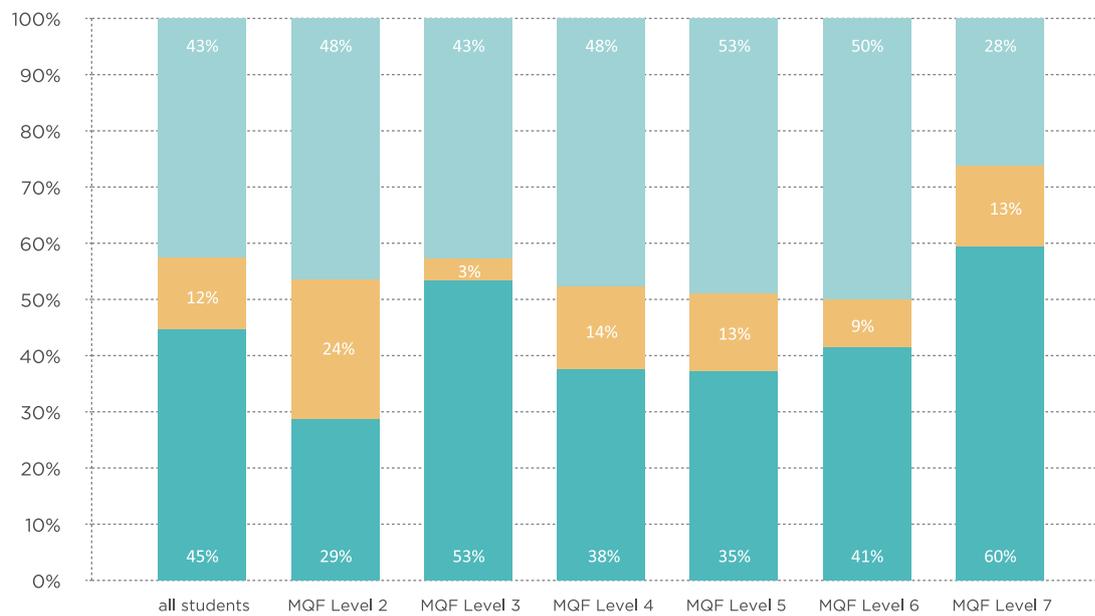
Data: National Eurostudent data for Malta, 2013

Slightly / not at all
Very closely
moderately

Relationship between job held during the academic year 2012/2013
and the study programme by level of qualification currently enrolled in

	all students	MQF Level 1[35]	MQF Level 2	MQF Level 3	MQF Level 4	MQF Level 5	MQF Level 6	MQF Level 7	MQF Level 8[36]
(very) closely	207	n.d.	6	16	29	28	53	72	n.d.
Moderately	53	n.d.	5	1	11	10	11	15	n.d.
Slightly / not at all	199	n.d.	10	13	37	42	64	33	n.d.
Total	459	3	21	30	77	80	128	120	0

Data: National Eurostudent data for Malta, 2013

[35] *Too few cases of students enrolled at MQF level 1 and working during the academic year 2012/2013 to report data on the relationship between studies and job held.*

[36] *Too few cases of students enrolled at MQF level 8 and working during the academic year 2012/2013 to report data on the relationship between studies and job held.*

While employment alongside studies may have adverse effects on academic achievement (Curtis & William 2002; Metcalf 2003; Auers et. al. 2007), research suggests that it may also hold various benefits, such as the application of theoretical knowledge in the workplace or work experience to contextualise theory (Watts & Pickering 2000) in addition to increasing confidence, organisational or time-management skills (Curtis & William 2002).

It may be argued, therefore, that employment alongside studies can have considerable benefits, especially if it is related to the study programme students are following. It may provide important opportunities for individuals, who have discontinued their studies after compulsory education, to return and attain higher education, especially in instances where they face unemployment or restrictions on career progression. It may also contribute to a better matching of skills required in the labour market while continuing to expand the individual's work experience. These aspects have been particularly stressed by the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry[37] in its Economic Vision for Malta.

In order to achieve this, programmes need to allow for an adequate balance of studies, work and family life. In this regard, the expansion of part-time programmes or programmes offered through distance learning or e-learning may be beneficial – a measure, which has also been recommended by the Rector of the University of Malta.[38] Moreover, the validation of knowledge, skills and competences acquired through informal and non-formal learning, including in the workplace, may be beneficial in instilling confidence and pride in individuals and motivate them to further their education or employers to invest in the training of their employees.

1.5. Encouraging innovative content and programme design

Besides striving for gender equality and social inclusion in higher education; increasing attainment levels and the link between higher education and the labour market, another priority of higher education reform is to facilitate student mobility within and towards Europe. To this end Ministers responsible for higher education initiated the so-called Bologna Process in 1999 to increase the comparability and compatibility of European systems of higher education in order to facilitate the recognition of mobility periods abroad as well as of foreign qualifications within the European Higher Education Area of 47 European countries. As part of this process, which also contributes to delivering on the aims of the European Union's "Education and Training 2020 strategic framework", European countries have developed specific tools aimed at increasing the transparency, comparability and transferability of higher education qualifications across borders, such as:

• the development of a three-cycle degree structure of undergraduate; postgraduate and Doctoral degree;
• the development of system of credit transfer and accumulation through the use of ECTS based on learning outcomes and student workload;
• the comparability of qualifications through the issuing of the Europass Diploma Supplement;
• the development of quality assurance at programme, institutional, national and international level; and
• the development of national qualifications frameworks.

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[37] *Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry 2014*

[38] *Camilleri 2010*

This process of collaboration and implementation at national and institutional level is ongoing as a means of increasing trust in the quality of higher education provided within the European Higher Education Area. Therefore, both in order to encourage innovative content and programme design, but also to facilitate student and staff mobility from as well as to Malta, a proper implementation of the developed transparency tools and quality assurance frameworks are paramount. Indeed, within the national context the implementation of the abovementioned tools and measures is already under way:

Programme design based on units of Learning Outcomes	The design of study programmes based on units of learning outcomes is part of the national system for the accreditation of home-grown study programmes. Based on Subsidiary Legislation 327.433 on Further and Higher Education Licensing, Accreditation and Quality Assurance Regulations, licensed service providers need to adhere to the conditions made by the NCFHE, which is the authority entrusted for the licensing and accreditation of programmes of study at a national level.
Referencing of all qualifications against the Malta Qualifications Framework	Malta has established its own Qualifications Framework, which is referenced against the European Qualifications Framework for Higher Education and the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning. The Malta Qualifications Framework guides programme design, programme accreditation as well as the recognition of foreign qualifications in Malta. At the same time it aides the recognition of Maltese qualifications abroad.
Implementation of ECTS based on Learning Outcomes and Student Workload	In Malta all higher education providers and programmes make use of the ECTS based on learning outcomes and student workload. Based on the recommendation by the NCFHE, 1 ECTS should be equivalent to 25 hours of total learning. In this regard the NCFHE has recommended that an estimate of 6.25 hours should be based on taught lessons, while 18.75 hours should be based on other forms of learning, such as self-study and assessment hours.
Issue of the Europass Diploma Supplement automatically and free of charge in English	The University of Malta issues the Diploma Supplement automatically and free of charge in English to all graduates at first, second and third cycle. Moreover, MCAST issues the Diploma Supplement automatically and free of charge in English to all graduates of its first cycle programmes However, all other public and private higher education institutions so far do not issue the Diploma Supplement.
Implementation of a quality assurance framework at institutional level	All public higher education institutions and 21 out of 39 private higher education institutions have arrangements in place for the internal approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards.
Accreditation and licensing of higher education institutions	A single national Quality Assurance Agency for the accreditation and licensing of higher education providers has been established. The NCFHE performs the role of this agency, is government funded and appointed, but has sufficient legal and operational independence to carry out its role. The NCFHE has developed the external quality mechanism that is being piloted and implemented in 2015.

However further work is needed to strengthens the implementation of these Bologna transparency tools in order to support the implementation of quality assurance in higher education in Malta currently in process. To this end more information on the implementation of the Bologna transparency tools may prove useful in contributing to the development of a robust quality assurance framework in Malta. Such a robust quality assurance framework would also support the ongoing diversification of higher education in Malta, given that the share of students following programmes of private higher education providers has increased from only 2% in 2008 to 16% in 2012,[39] by making transparent and promoting the quality of higher education both locally and abroad.

This would certainly serve to make Malta's higher education system more attractive for foreign students and strengthen the repute of Maltese qualifications abroad. At the same time it would deliver on the recommendation of the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry[40], which urged to widen the provision of higher education and attract foreign education providers to Malta in an effort to cater for a more diverse student population and attract foreign students to Malta.

[39] *NCFHE Further and Higher Education Statistics Surveys 2008-2012*

[40] *The Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry (2014): Economic Vision for Malta 2014-2020. Full Report. Malta, 2014.*

02

THE **WAY FORWARD**

The review of the development of higher education in Malta to date suggested that targeted initiatives are needed to increase higher education attainment and reduce early school leaving in Malta. Such initiative should focus in particular on underrepresented groups, but also more specifically on males, who are consistently outpaced by females. At the same time further efforts are needed to achieve a more balanced gender distribution in different areas of studies. However, further research appears to be needed to better understand the factors influencing study and career choices of females and males and how to best address persistent gender differences. Further research also appears to be necessary to better understand the link between higher education and the labour market, especially with regard to skills mismatches and labour market outcomes of higher education. Such information would clearly contribute to make transparent to individuals and employers the benefits of remaining in and investing in education and, thus, encouraging more individuals to attain higher education, rather than leaving school early. One important factor in ensuring the quality and relevance of higher education is the creating of a robust quality assurance system in Malta, which is already well under way. However, further information appears to be needed on the implementation of the various European transparency tools, which contribute to making higher education qualifications more comparable and compatible nationally as well as internationally.

Based on these considerations this higher education strategy, therefore, recommends the following four priority areas for action:

- increase participation and attainment;
- reduce gender differences;
- encourage innovative content and programme design; and
- increase employability and entrepreneurship.

The following section outlines measures to address the key concerns in these priority areas outlined above. These measures are further detailed in an action plan, which is annexed to this strategy in order for the flexibility of revising and adjusting actions to respond to changing circumstances. This action plan details the actors, timeline and contribution of these actions towards the measures and priority areas identified to ensure transparency and accountability for the different actions concerned.

1. Increase participation and attainment

In line with the above-mentioned Europe 2020 target, Malta is committed to the overarching target of increasing higher education attainment of 30-34 year olds to 33% by 2020. To further increase participation and attainment in higher education the Rector of the University of Malta[41] and the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry[42] have recommended various initiatives, such as:

• increasing the number of young people attaining the entry qualification into higher education;
• facilitating the transition between vocational and academic oriented further and higher education programmes;
• supporting and encouraging individuals to return to education alongside employment, including through distance learning and e-learning;
• widen the provision of higher education and attract foreign education providers to Malta to cater for a diverse student body and attract foreign students to Malta; and
• ensuring sustainable funding mechanisms to support higher education institutions and students.

Bearing these recommendations in mind, the following measures are being proposed.

1.1. Proposed measures

1.1.1. Ensure strong support, sufficient and sustainable funding

In order to ensure adequate capacity and infrastructure accommodating increasing participation in higher education sufficient and sustainable funding based on the principles of access, equity and economy is required. In order to ensure such sustainable funding of higher education, further research on different funding models for higher education should be carried out in addition to a consultation of stakeholders in higher education as a basis for a funding strategy for higher education in Malta.

1.1.2. Strengthen student-centred learning

To increase the relevance of education for the individual and better take into account and address different needs and experiences, the education process should centre more strongly on the learner. Such learner-centred approaches should allow for teaching and assessment methods drawing on the experiences of or catering for the needs of the individual, in addition to providing adequate career education and support.

For this reason it is recommended to implement forms of learning that draw more strongly on the use of Information and Communication Technologies as well as the development of study programmes allowing learners more flexibility and choice in the courses and workload of their study programme.

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[41] *Camilleri, Juanito (2010): 2020 Vision or Optical Illusion? Malta, 2010.*

[42] *The Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry (2014): Economic Vision for Malta 2014-2020. Full Report. Malta, 2014.*

1.1.3. Strengthen career education services

A strong focus on the individual in the education process requires adequate career education and support at all levels of education as well as outside education institutions. To this end further investment is recommended in career education services targeted both at students and their parents that is sensitive to the interests of the individual and values and promotes all learning.

1.1.4. Further develop the Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning

Additionally, the Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning is an important vehicle to focus education more strongly on the needs and experiences of the individual. Such measures are in harmony with national measures on the Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning. By recognizing the knowledge, skills and competences attained outside formal education settings, we do not only value competences attained in practice, but also instil self-confidence and pride in individuals and motivate them to further their competences at higher levels. At the same time, information on alternative access routes into higher education for mature students should be improved to facilitate access for those individuals interested in continuing their education at tertiary education level.

1.1.5. Ensure that programmes allow for an adequate balance of work, study and family life

An important factor for individuals considering the furtherance of their learning is their compatibility with other responsibilities, such as family and work. Therefore, programmes aimed at adult learners should have a range of formats, some of which are designed with an adequate balance of work, study and family life in mind. This refers to the mode of delivery, the time at which these programmes are offered as well as the workload associated with them. Furthermore, a stronger focus on distance and e-learning may help in addressing these issues and allow more adults to further their learning.

1.1.6. Promote the development of e-learning as a means of widening participation in higher education

Moreover, the provision of e-learning programmes may be helpful in increasing participation in higher education, since it allows individuals to plan and conduct their studies in a more flexible manner. Therefore, such provision should be supported and encouraged in Malta.

1.1.7. Increase information on available programmes and diversify the offer

Increasing information on available programmes targeted at adult learners, as well as information on financial incentives in place to support them in this endeavour, could prove useful in increasing lifelong learning and adult learning.

1.1.8. Sustain regular data collection on participation, attainment and the social dimension

In order to monitor progress achieved with regard to participation, attainment and the improvement of the social dimension of higher education, Malta will sustain a regular data collection among higher education institutions and students to inform policy development and implementation.

1.1.9. Improve participation of students with special needs

The National Commission for Persons with a Disability (KNPD) has stressed the need to review the situation of students with special needs and the obstacles they face with regard to participating in higher education. In order to provide measures that adequately address the needs of these students and support them throughout higher education, Malta will undertake regular data collection on the progression routes of students with special needs into higher education, their social and economic conditions and obstacles faced throughout higher education. Besides that, entities providing assistance to individuals with special needs should endeavour to cooperate better in providing assistance and support to individuals with special needs in higher education.

1.1.10. Improve the permeability between different educational pathways

Irrespective of the education pathway chosen, qualifications at the same level of the Malta Qualifications Framework, irrespective of their orientation, should allow individuals to apply and be considered for admission into programmes at the next higher level. This is in line with the proposals of the NCFHE with regard to the Malta Qualifications Framework as well as the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

2. Reduce gender differences

The proposed Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta[43] highlights the importance of education as a means of empowering all individuals to become active citizens, find their place in society and succeed in the world of work, irrespective of their socio-economic or ethnic background, their religion, gender or sexual status. However, when it comes to higher education gender differences still persist. These are linked not only to attainment levels between females and males, but also differences in the subject areas chosen. These gender differences cause innovative potential to remain untapped. Thus, by reducing gender differences Malta may contribute to increasing inclusion in higher education as well as productivity and innovation.

2.1. Proposed measures

2.1.1. Research on gender differences in subject choices and higher education attainment

In order to better understand the factors influencing the gender differences in higher education attainment and subject choices further research is needed. Such research may also provide a more solid basis for action on how to overcome low levels of higher education attainment among males or the differences in subject choices between males and females.

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[43] *Ministry for Education and Employment (2014): Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024. Sustaining foundations, creating alternatives, increasing employability.*

2.1.2. Improve career education

Further support and information should be provided to career education professionals on the delivery and expected workload as well as the working conditions in related professions arising from different higher education programmes and in particular of STEM programmes, in order to improve the career education of interested individuals on these fields and sectors. In order to do so, career education professionals should be exposed more often to real life conditions of professionals, in particular of females, in various fields, especially in science and technology related areas. This would be helpful especially to build female role models in order to encourage a decrease in gender differences in particular in STEM subjects.

2.1.3. Incentivise females to take up careers in STEM-related subject matters

In order to challenge gender role models females should be encouraged in general to enter disciplines and professions, which are not typically associated as female domains. In this regard, more work needs to be done by government to encourage the public and private labour market to ensure that working conditions and family friendly measures are in place to allow higher take up of these positions by females.

Besides that, science summer schools held in collaboration with higher education institutions and the MCST as well as females already enrolled in higher education programmes in science and technology may raise girls' aspirations to undertake studies at higher education level in these subject areas. By experiencing higher education studies in science and technology and campus life first hand and by interacting with female peers that have chosen similar pathways aspirations of females to undertake studies in STEM subjects may be raised and contribute to overcoming gender differences between subject areas in the long run.

2.1.4. Undertake projects and initiatives aimed increasing aspirations and participation of underrepresented groups in higher education

In order to overcome gender differences in tertiary education attainment and support in particular educational achievement of students from low income and underrepresented groups, initiatives should be focussed on these students in order to raise their aspirations to attain higher levels of education. One such initiative could be the provision of summer schools or camps offered by higher education institutions to girls and boys still in compulsory education in order for them to get a better understanding of the day to day life on campus and increase their confidence and aspiration to achieve higher levels of education as well as provide them with the skills required to successfully complete compulsory education and attain access to further and higher education. In this regard, the engagement of student already enrolled in higher education programmes, particularly those from underrepresented groups in the implementation of the summer schools to allow students to learn with and from their peers from backgrounds similar to their own.

3. Encourage innovative content and programme design

Through the Bologna Process European countries created the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with the scope of increasing the comparability and compatibility of higher education in Europe as well as worldwide in order to increase student and staff mobility within and towards Europe. As part of this process, which contributes to delivering on the aims of the European Union's "Education and Training 2020 strategic framework", European countries have developed specific tools aimed at increasing the transparency, comparability and transferability of higher education qualifications across borders. This process of collaboration and implementation at national and institutional level is ongoing. European countries also collaborate in the field of quality assurance as a means of increasing trust in the quality of higher education provided within the European Higher Education Area.

Therefore, both in order to encourage innovative content and programme design, but also to facilitate student and staff mobility from as well as to Malta, a proper implementation of the developed transparency tools and quality assurance frameworks are paramount.

3.1. Proposed measures

3.1.1. Provide information on transparency tools and measures aiding innovative content and programme design

In order to provide educators and administrators in higher education with up to date, easily accessible information on transparency instruments aiding innovative content and programme design and support them in their implementation in line with the Bologna Process, Malta will embark on an information campaign. It is recommended that this campaign focuses on website, e-newsletters and briefing sessions on the principles of the Bologna Process and the Modernisation of Education. These measures are aimed in particular at those individuals involved in curriculum design, such as deans, faculty heads, lecturers, tutors, or individuals involved in internal quality assurance.

At the same time, this information campaign is aimed at all institutions and actors requesting information on the recognition and level of qualifications held by individuals and the measures in place providing and assuring this information, such as the inclusion of a statement of MQF equivalence in Europass Diploma Supplements.

3.1.2. Monitor the implementation of the transparency tools arising from the Bologna Process

In line with the above mentioned information campaign, the implementation of the transparency tools agreed in the Bologna Process should be monitored. This refers in particular to the design of programmes based on units of learning outcomes, the implementation of ECTS based on learning outcomes and student workload, the implementation of the Europass Diploma Supplement and its award to all graduates automatically, free of charge and in English and the implementation of robust internal quality assurance mechanisms in higher education institutions. In this regard, the development of robust internal quality assurance in higher education institutions as well as the of an external quality assurance framework will be pivotal to ensure monitoring of the implementation of these tools. Such monitoring will contribute to increasing the transparency of the content and quality of study programmes in Malta as well as abroad and, thus, contribute to the international attractiveness of higher education in Malta.

3.1.3. Fund innovative funding programmes and curriculum design

The implementation of the ESF 2.139 by MCAST, which aims at making higher education more attractive and accessible, is a good example for the use of European Union funding to support innovative programme and curriculum design by implementing e-learning in study programmes. In view of this positive example, European Union funding should be continued to be made available to facilitate innovative programme and curriculum design.

4.   Increase employability and entrepreneurship

One important reason for increasing participation in higher education is to improve the living conditions and employment prospects of individuals. In addition to this objective of higher education to contribute to social inclusion, it is also an important factor for economic development and innovation capacity. However, as has also been raised by the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry[44] this is true only insofar as higher education delivers the knowledge, skills and competences required in the labour market and there is no considerable mismatch between labour market capacity and the number of graduates in a specific area.

4.1.   Proposed measures

4.1.1. Ensure relevance of education to the labour market

In line with the recommendation by the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry[45] greater consideration should be given in programme and curriculum development to knowledge, skills and competences required in and contributing to labour market development without neglecting the development of key competences. Such a development may not only reduce skills mismatches, but may also incentivize individuals to further their education perceiving it as relevant for their personal and professional development. This is of particular importance given the strong reliance of Malta's economy on small and medium-sized enterprises, in particular family-owned businesses. This may also discourage young individuals from choosing an early entry into the labour market at the expense of leaving school early or without a minimum level of qualification.

One way of achieving that is by setting up a Sector Skills Committee and subsequently Sector Skills Units for each specific industry in order to establish occupational standards and eventually carry out trade testing for the validation and recognition of Informal and Non-formal learning for each specific industry.

4.1.2. Provide more opportunities for work placements at all levels of education

Another recommendation by the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry[46] has been to make available more opportunities for students to gain work experiences related to their studies either alongside their studies and recognised by the higher education institution or as part of their studies. In this regard, funding opportunities for work placements as part of the Erasmus+ programme may provide positive incentives.

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[44] *The Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry (2014): Economic Vision for Malta 2014-2020. Full Report. Malta, 2014.*

[45] *ibid*

[46] *ibid*

However, education institutions should ensure that students undertaking such work placements are not exploited by being given menial tasks, rather than work commensurate to the agreed set of learning outcomes between the institution and the provider of the work placement. This is already a practice by public VET providers. Nevertheless, monitoring should be further improved.

4.1.3. Promote lifelong learning alongside employment

A joint venture of industry and educational institutions is imperative to develop curricula and study programmes that respond to current and future labour market needs. Programmes should provide both subject specific knowledge, provide for personal development, but should also be relevant to the place of work. Balancing these three aspects may provide an important incentive for individuals to continue their education. This is of particular importance in fostering adult learning. Learning alongside employment may have an important role to play in this regard and to this effect the Validation of Informal and Non-formal skills attained in the work-place may be an important tool to value the achievements of employees' and incentivize employers to further invest in them.

4.1.4. Undertake graduate employability research

In order to monitor their employability regular surveys among higher education graduates and their transition into the labour market should be undertaken. The information collected in this way will be important to guide higher education institutions with regard to the relevance of their programmes to the labour market. In this way, this measure is closely linked to the above-mentioned measures 4.3.1 to 4.3.3. Besides that, this information will be of relevance to career education professionals, prospective students and their families as well as employers providing them with insights on the skills and competences held by higher education graduates and their employment prospects.

4.1.5. Undertake research on skills supply and demand

Moreover, in order to better understand skills developments regular research on skills supply and demand should be undertaken. This research will provide both data on the development of the labour market and different sectors of the economy as well as on the specific knowledge, skills and competences desired from prospective employees. This information will be important both for higher education institutions in order to ensure the relevance of their programmes to the labour market as well as for employers for the development of their businesses and recruitment. In this way, this measure is closely linked to the above-mentioned measures 4.3.1 to 4.3.3.

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