

TOWARDS A NATIONAL LEARNING AREA FOR VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATION

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Education is about possibilities. It is about the fulfilling of potential. It is about the fulfilment of dreams. Who's dreams? Who's education? The temptation is for us to keep educating for our own past rather than for our children's future. Too many children have been sacrificed on the altar of education according to our terms, our objectives, our definitions. Success and failure is still determined with the precision of a selection process cum guillotine. The result is students who have given up on themselves. Perhaps with time, we have come to realise that this collateral damage is too high a price. Indeed, structures are meant to be in the service of children, not the other way round.

This brings me to a number of reflections which I would like to share with you on this occasion. I shall begin by quoting two former trade school students, whom I had the opportunity and privilege to interview in order to shed light on systemic violence and worse, the resulting learned helplessness of these students:

“Għall-iskola mhinix kapaċi, allura għażilt snajja...ghax ma nafx skola, ma naf nagħmel xejn iżjed.

I am not good for school. I have therefore opted for trade...I don't 'know school' I know nothing else

Nippreferi oġġetti ta' l-idejn ghaliex Ingliz u hekk ma nafx u naqta qalbi, mentri l-ohrajn jekk turini darba mill-ewwel naghmilhom. Qtajt qalbi...hekk jghiduli...dahhalt xi haga f'rasek li mhintix kapaci ghal xejn.

I prefer using my hands because English I do not know and I lose heart. Other things you show me once, and I deliver. I have lost heart....that's what they always tell me...I have convinced myself that I am no good.

The choice of the technical strand was not therefore not the result of a conscious decision to choose between two equally valid realms of knowledge. It was the result of failure in the academic strand. This is an ingrained insidious mentality that pits manual as against mental and places them in an odious hierarchy.

This is a trend is hopefully being reversed. The fact that the National Qualifications Framework puts the academic and the vocational strand side by side within one whole, is a very strong message that there should be parity of esteem between the two. Indeed the fact that the line that divides the two strands on the table is visibly porous is now a clear statement of a holistic perspective of knowledge. This needs to be coupled with further efforts to provide aspects of both the technical and the academic to **all** students from the primary onwards. This is borne out of the realisation, that learners have different learning patterns, each of equal value, which we are obliged to cater for.

1. As the number of institutions both private and public grows, there is the distinct advantage of providing a diverse scenario. It provides the possibility of further opportunities of doing things in different ways. Of providing further avenues and possibilities. On the other hand however, the possibility of an isolationist mentality of protecting one's own ground at whatever cost, can mean that standards are not what they should be. The National Qualification framework therefore provides a necessary matrix for the creation and eventually maintenance of standards. It also provides the possibility of synergies and the avoidance of costly duplication of resources and energies; a luxury which as a country we can ill afford. It is also a means of providing for progression and transferability even between institutions and areas of knowledge.
2. The framework also provides clear directions. Opting for particular avenues for learning will reduce the need of negotiating the way through a thick jungle of options, hearsay and perceived outcomes. Linked to this would be the need to have clear guidance services so that learners make conscious choices. Perhaps as an aside, given the fact that the area of vocational guidance is a specialized area in its own right, perhaps we increasingly need to look at the separation of personal from vocational guidance so that both can be given the attention they deserve.
3. The focus on learning outcomes is all important because it shifts the lynchpin from provision to outcomes; from structures to learners. This is the quantum leap that our education system needs insisting on. As a country, education for all, compared to the continent is a relatively recent phenomenon. We have managed, despite all the odds to provide the broad infrastructure for this to be possible. In many senses, the issue of quantity therefore, we have catered for. What we need to keep doing now is ensure the all important issue of quality. Of course, we need to initiate an ongoing debate on what constitutes desirable learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are constructs. In whose interest do they work? Critical debate on this, is, to my mind a key consideration. In any case, the provision of this shift in focus from provision to outcomes is therefore a welcome development.
4. The consideration of informal and non-formal education apart from the formal is also an important paradigm shift. This means that any education system does not provide a proverbial bottle-neck but rather a means of giving value to all aspects of education where yet again what is central is the skills and competences acquired not the agency providing them. It is a means of inclusion. It is a matter of accessibility.

I end by congratulating the Malta Qualifications Council in its work, especially in the fact that it has given importance to the process, through the wide consultation process, as much as to the end-product.

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