The Challenges and Barriers Students Face in their Learning Journeys

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Description

The aim of the MCAST Monograph Series is to act as a showcase for specialised research carried out by MCAST professionals and academics, or with collaborative partners, across the various sectors of vocational education at MCAST. As the first in the MCAST Monograph Series, this volume focuses particularly on the challenges and barriers that students encounter in their educational journeys. The MCAST Monograph Series is aimed at researchers, academics and practitioners across various vocational specialisations.

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Foreword

Professor Joachim James Calleja
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This first volume in the MCAST Monograph Series tackles the challenges and barriers that students face in their educational journeys, which may ultimately lead learners to drop out of their studies early.

This study presents the findings that serve as a backdrop to the original research that was carried out as part of this study. Perspectives and recommendations taken from different authors are discussed and argued. The research conducted for this study was multi-faceted, sampling both State school students and students/ex-students of MCAST using various methods, such as online questionnaires and phone interviews. Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques were utilised.

The research carried out for the purpose of this study indicated that, within the local context, specifically with the Vocational Education and Training (VET) context provided at MCAST, the main reasons for students dropping out of their studies were work and financial reasons. In view of the findings presented in this study, the authors challenge the literature cited as offering little pragmatic hope. It is quite evident that tackling the issue of student dropout is not a simple task and does not have a singular fixed solution.

However, the authors of this study argue that when it comes to strategising and policy development, current times require a pragmatic answer to the issue of student dropout. Based on the findings obtained, the authors propose a number of recommendations aimed at lessening the negative impact and the detrimental repercussions caused when students do eventually take the decision to drop out of their education and training programme.

Since results show that a substantial number of students go into employment when they drop out of non-compulsory schooling, one measure that VET and Higher Education institutions can take is to reach out to the labour force through employers and engage employees in education through their place of work. The authors of this study therefore propose a model that would re-engage former students as well as other employees in lifelong learning.

It is being proposed that, if students aspiring to join the labour market leave college as soon as employment becomes available, then VET institutions such as MCAST need to strengthen further their ties with industry and provide innovative upskilling and reskilling programmes at the workplace.

This proposed model can be extended further by incorporating competency-based, industry-driven curricula tailored by strategic partnerships between educational institutions, government bodies and industry.

A more radical model would be the education-in-industry model. Such a model enables employees to study while also being in employment. The 'Ford College Graduate Program', an in-house programme providing rotational job assignments for recent college graduates during their first years of employment with Ford Motor Company, promotes such a model. MCAST is also currently engaged in an EU-funded multi-million Euro project EU4DUAL, in which Higher Education institutions are seeking ways of delivering qualifications using the dual approach of work-based learning. One of the objectives of such a programme is to re-engage early leavers for education and training (E&T) in meaningful experiences at college and industry levels.

Over many years, student dropout is addressed in various ways. In this publication, the authors are proposing an innovative strategy that goes beyond the physical domain of educational institutions and incorporates real life trends, trends that students have developed over the years in relation to choices between education and employment. The proposed model attempts to incorporate the students' choices and the opportunity for them to work and study concurrently at the place of work.

If students are choosing to leave education to enter the labour market, then VET and Higher Education institutions can move education to their workplace. After all, the workplace is the school of life and work.

CONTENTS

Author Biographies

Dr Marco Montalto is a researcher at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), working on an EU-Funded project, Project ESF.02.058: 'Adding Value: Nurturing Learning Journeys in IVET at MCAST', specifically within the project component dealing with the challenges and barriers that students face in their learning journeys.

He holds a Master's degree in the Science of Performative Creativity (M.S.P.C.; UM) and a Ph.D. in Cognitive Science (UM). For his Master's thesis he revisited the unfairly neglected topic of 'centricity' and use of 'the centre' in the context of human performativity. His Ph.D. thesis was the first local study investigating human mirror neuron system (MNS) behaviour and gave original contributions to the nascent field of dance neuroscience. Employing tools such as near-infrared spectroscopy (NIRS) and electroencephalography (EEG), expert and novice human participants were monitored during expert and novice action observation. Although not joining the human-MNS sceptics' bandwagon, results did indicate that such a potential system in the human seemingly can only be triggered by prior effective training.

When he is not conducting research, he is usually occupied with photography or busy reading.

Dr Tatjana Chircop is the Deputy Principal for Research and Innovation at MCAST. Her main areas of expertise are vocational education and training, informal and non-formal learning, performing arts, community development and youth work with particular focus on leisure and identity formation. Leading a team of researchers at the College, she has worked on researching challenges that students find in their educational journeys, as well as innovative pedagogical tools that enhance learning, such as gamification.

In her role as Deputy Principal for Research and Innovation, she leads the Applied Research and Innovation Centre (ARIC), the Library and the Centre for Professional Development teams. Within MCAST, Dr Chircop has occupied a number of roles, including Director of the Institute of Community Services, Head of the Foundation College and Deputy Principal for Arts and Social Sciences. Prior to joining MCAST, Dr Chircop was a professional musician with the Manoel Theatre Orchestra and the National Orchestra, and taught violin and pianoforte performance at the Johann Strauss School of Music.

Dr Chircop holds a BA Hons in English (University of London), a BA Hons in Youth and Community Studies (University of Malta), a Licentiate Diploma in pianoforte, a Fellowship Diploma in violin, a Master of Arts in Youth and Community Studies (Brunel University), a Master in Intercultural Eco-Management (Università Ca Foscari), a Post-Graduate Certificate in Vocational and Educational Training (MCAST) and a PhD (Brunel University).

Her doctoral research focuses on how young Maltese women make meaning out of the music they listen to in their everyday lives, and how they incorporate this meaning into everyday discourses and identities. Through the research, she explores the consumption of global and local cultural forms of music as leisure, and the incorporation or resistance of these cultural forms in identity formation processes. She also analyses ways in which social and cultural capitals are processed, in the social and cultural power struggle, to form cultural hierarchies.

List of Tables

Abstract

The rate of early leavers from education and training in Malta in 2021 stood at 10.7%, above the EU average (9.7%; Eurostat 2022). It has been noted that Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions suffer most from low student retention rates (CEDEFOP 2016). This study, which forms part of an EU-funded project led by the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), Malta's leading VET institute, seeks to investigate the challenges and barriers students in Malta face in their learning journeys. Data were collected through questionnaires (research exercises 1-4) and phone interviews (research exercise 5) from various sources, including State Secondary Schools (research exercises 1 and 3), in order to get insights into the baggage that students bring with them to the College, which would enable better contextualisation of the learning environment MCAST students find themselves in. Results indicate that MCAST, and possibly VET institutions at large, may suffer from a double bind, where, because of the very ethos VET institutions find themselves founded on, namely, to considerably align themselves with the realities of the workplace, students, already minded for work, enrolling at such institutes being enticed by the aforementioned ethos on which these institutes are founded, drop out from their studies once employment becomes available. It is hypothesised that other such double binds may exist within the VET context, as has already been evinced by analyses of data collected from teachers at Maltese State Schools and from lecturers at MCAST, results that were presented in a previously-published study by the authors of this study (Montalto and Chircop 2022).

Keywords: challenges and barriers, student barriers, barriers to learning, learning experience, learning journeys, vocational education and training

Introduction

Research shows that the causes of low student retention rates at post-secondary school institutions generally have their roots in students' life and schooling experiences that are prior to students' enrolment at the post-secondary school institution of their choice. One such study is a longitudinal study by Alexander, Entwisle and Horsey (1997), which examined the phenomenon of student dropout in high school as being the culmination of many years of academic disengagement. In order to provide a learning journey tailored to meet students' specific needs, a preliminary investigation of which type of students are opting to enrol at Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions such as MCAST was performed.

Literature Review:
The Vocational Education and Training Context

Students Opting to Enrol at Vocational Education and Training Institutions

Agodini, Uhl and Novak (2004) confirmed previous research findings, namely that the students attracted to VET are mainly:

- Students with low academic achievement and students with no plan to proceed to higher education;
- Students with disabilities;
- Students with behavioural problems.

In addition, the authors noted that, after adjusting for other characteristics, disability status and behavioural problems did not seem to influence vocational education participation; the higher rates of participation in VET evinced by these two groups were related to "low academic achievement, low educational expectations, and low socioeconomic statuses – not to disability status or behavioural problems" (Agodini, Uhl and Novak 2004: 7).

Xhumari and Dibra (2016) recognised the importance of individual, social and school-based factors as important influencers in students' decisions about whether or not to attend a vocational school or training centre. In the same study, kinship and social networks were recognised as among the strongest determinants, with parents having the most significant influence, together with peers (Xhumari and Dibra 2016). The following sections enlist and detail the main influencers affecting students' decisions that the authors of this paper have recognised as being the most noteworthy in the literature.

Influencers in Students' Decisions

What are the main influencers that affect students' decisions in general? In the literature, one finds that students are affected by their personality traits (Komarraju 2013), the influence exerted by their parents (Jungen 2008) and peers (Cooper and Cooper 2008), the learning environment and teachers' perceptions of students (Abela and Smith La Rosa 2007; Vassallo 2014), and labour market factors (rate of early leavers from education and training in Malta in 2021 stood at 10.7%, above the EU average [9.7%; Eurostat 2022], and the percentage of employed persons aged 15+ in Malta in 2020 with a basic level of education [comprising persons with no schooling, those who attended primary education and special schools for disabled and those who attained a secondary level of education and have less than two O levels or equivalent] stood at 37.0%, higher than the EU average of 25.1%, and the fourth highest share of low skilled persons in the EU [Central Bank of Malta 2022]). The following sections discuss in more detail the aforementioned five influencers in students' decisions, shedding light on the current plight affecting VET institutions today, namely low student retention

rates (national data from France, Belgium and the Netherlands have shown that early leaving is more common among students enrolled at VET institutions than amongst students enrolled in general education tracks; CEDEFOP 2016).

Personality traits.

Young people's personality traits have been shown to determine how successful or how challenging they find their schooling experience. The Big Five personality traits, namely: "extraversion", "agreeableness", "conscientiousness", "neuroticism", and "openness to experience" (Hart, Stasson, Mahoney and Story 2007: 268), have been given particular attention in the research, with a study by Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham (2008: 1598) suggesting that 20% to 45% of the variance in learning approaches can be accounted to these traits. The Big Five personality traits are defined as follows (Hart et al. 2007: 268):

- Extraversion refers to how much an individual engages with his or her social environment and how sociable, outgoing and adventurous the person is;
- Agreeableness refers to how cooperative, collectivist, kind and unselfish the person is;
- Conscientiousness refers to the degree to which an individual is goal-oriented, responsible, organised, deliberate and follows social norms;
- Neuroticism refers to the emotional stability of an individual and manifests itself in traits like being emotional, temperamental and anxious;
- Openness to Experience refers to how imaginative, curious and willing to entertain non-mainstream thoughts a person is.

Out of these five personality traits, 'conscientiousness' has consistently been found to be associated with academic achievement (Kappe and van der Flier 2010). In education, 'conscientiousness' has been associated with hardworking, disciplined, well-organised, proactive students, who are willing to assess and review their learning strategies (Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham 2008; Bidjerano and Dai 2007). 'Conscientiousness' has also been positively associated with attending to lectures, acquiring skills, working on team projects, obtaining on-the-job training and completing a thesis (Kappe and van der Flier 2010). Due to the fact that personality traits affect students' ability to stay motivated, process information and regulate themselves, Komarraju (2013) suggested that educators need to take this information into account when they are designing syllabi, curricula and lessons so that the learning environment will foster and reward conscientious behaviour.

Influence exerted by parents.

Research has shown that parents can have a great influence on their children's career decisions (Jungen 2008). All parents wish that their children do well at school; but parents from different backgrounds tend to have different aspirations as to the level of achievement they wish their children attain (Lareau 1987). Gniewosz and Eccles (2013) divided parental influence into three components:

- Who the parents are - i.e. their socioeconomic background, which affects how much time and educational resources they can afford to give to their children;
- What parents believe - i.e. how much they value schooling, a value which will be passed on to their children, and how confident they are that their child can

succeed at school, because children of parents who hold positive academic perceptions of their offspring are more likely to succeed;
- What parents do - i.e. whether they show an interest in what their children are learning at school and whether they will put in any effort in trying to help their children.

Gniewosz and Eccles (2013) pointed out that the question about *what parents do* often became a question about *what parents can afford to do*, this because of financial and other constraints.

Respondents in a research study conducted by Oakes, Selvin, Karoly and Guiton (1992) reported that high-achieving, affluent parents and students constituted the group that was the most willing to 'push the system'. On the other hand, low-achieving and mid-range students usually had less-involved parents and were less determined to challenge the system (Oakes, Selvin, Karoly and Guiton 1992; similar findings are reported in more recent research by Wells and Serna 2017). In Malta, poor parents' low expectations of their children's academic success (with 57% of parents below the poverty line believing that their children will continue their schooling after compulsory age, compared to 74.7% of parents above the poverty line who share the same view [Abela and Tabone 2008: 29]), lack of various opportunities that mainstream children have (Abela and Tabone 2008) and poverty compounded with emotional problems (with 12.2% of children in poor households having had emotional problems for at least one month [Abela and Tabone 2008: 28]), all make it difficult for local students who come from deprived backgrounds to rise above the circumstances they were born and raised in.

"Parental education is an important predictor of children's schooling patterns" (WB 2018: 94). Both parents' income and social networks are conditioned by the parents' level of education (WB 2018). Lack of financial resources hinder single parents from investing in their own informal education, as well as in the socialisation and education of their children (Sammut 2010). In 2020, 22.6% of children aged 0-17 in Malta were at risk of poverty or social exclusion (European Commission 2022: 12).

Parents' level of education, income and degree of social connectedness influence their capacity to navigate the system of education policies and use the information for the benefit of their children (WB, 2018). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015 report (PISA 2015), students whose parents had higher levels of education and income usually benefited from a wider range of resources, which made it easier for them to succeed in school than for their peers whose parents were poor, chronically unemployed, in low-paying jobs or who had lower levels of education. The same report (PISA 2015) listed the resources available to children whose parents had a higher level of education as being:

- Financial - e.g. private tutoring, computers, books;
- Cultural - e.g. extended vocabulary, time in active parenting;
- Social - e.g. role models and networks.

In addition, a study by Gortazar et al. noted that early school leaving was often strongly driven by household social background (as cited in WB 2018).

As part of their study investigating family poverty and social exclusion in Malta, with particular emphasis on children from deprived backgrounds, Abela and Tabone (2008) conducted focus groups with teachers. In that study, one teacher shared his observation that children coming from poor families found it difficult to relate to peers outside of their subculture (Abela and Tabone 2008). The same study noted the relatively high rates of poor reading and writing skills evinced by children coming from poor families: while 11% of children from poor families were not able to read and write, only 5.2% of children living above the poverty line were not able to read and write (Abela and Tabone 2008: 26). This, however, was not due to neglect by the children's parents: 80% of children living in poverty received help at home with their homework, this level of parental involvement being on par with the level of parental involvement practised by parents who lived above the poverty line (Abela and Tabone 2008: 29). Also, in spite of the difference in financial status, there was no discrepancy noticed between mothers below and above the poverty line when it came to securing private lessons for their children (Abela and Tabone 2008).

Lareau (2003: 2-3) draws a distinction between middle-class parents, who practise "concerted cultivation", and working-class parents, who practise "natural growth". Concerted cultivation is a manner of rearing children through organised educational and cultural activities, controlled by the parents, from which the children acquire valuable skills that can be used in the world of work. Children reared through concerted cultivation learn to question adults and to relate with them as equals. Natural growth, on the other hand, allows children to spend long stretches of leisure time and to socialise with kin on a daily basis; play is child-initiated and clear boundaries are established between the children and the adults. Some parents who allow their children to regulate their own life explain their reason for opting for this kind of child rearing by saying that children need to be allowed to make their own decisions so that they can learn from them and become independent (Sax 2015). It should be understood, though, that regardless of parenting style adopted, the importance of the parents' role in their children's lives and the responsibility parents have for the proper development and education of their children do not in any way diminish, since, as Sax (2015: 32) warns, parents who fail "to enculture and instruct them [their children] rightly means that these kids will be ill-equipped to withstand the challenges of later adolescence and adulthood".

Based on students' responses regarding their choice of whether or not to attend a vocational school or training centre, Xhumari and Dibra (2016) noted that the family had a strong influence on students' choices. In their study, three-quarters of the students reported that the family aided their choice of whether or not to attend a vocational school or training centre and one third of the students reported that this same choice of theirs was influenced by their peers. Therefore, this study concluded that parents were the main influencers, together with peers. Furthermore, the results of this study (Xhumari and Dibra 2016) showed that:

- VET students were likely to come from low-income families, with parents' level of education being relatively low;
- Parents' labour market status had a direct impact on the level of access to learning resources students had at their home, like a quiet place to study, a desk, books, a computer and an internet connection;
- Most often, those parents perceived VET as a means for their children to enter employment and make a financial contribution.

Despite the above conclusions from the results obtained, the researchers did note though that most parents in the study were still hopeful that their children would continue with higher education; generally, they did not press their children to enter the labour market upon finalising their vocational education (Xhumari and Dibra 2016).

Participation in early childhood education in Malta (age 3+) stood at 91.9% in 2021, which was slightly below the EU average of 92.8% (European Commission 2022: 47). A report issued in 2012 noted that in regard to educational attainment, family background in Malta was "particularly unfavourable" (EUR-Lex 2012: 22). Research has found evidence that strongly suggests that "investing in young children (0–5 years old) through early childhood development (ECD) programs — ensuring they have the right stimulation, nurturing, and nutrition — reduces early school leaving, raises cognitive skills and sets important social-emotional foundations for later in life" (WB 2018: 91).

Influence exerted by peers.

"The establishment of friendships is fundamental to positive youth development" (Cooper and Cooper 2008: 6). Portelli (2004) found that boys depend on other boys to construct their masculine identity. The influence of peer pressure can be manifold. Winston and Zimmermann (2003) indicated that strong students tended to increase their peers' academic performance while weak students tended to decrease their peers' academic performance. In a study by Clark and Cefai (2014), participants described how they used to skip school with their friends and spend the time running around with motorbikes, playing games outdoors and smoking cigarettes together.

Boys low on academic achievements may find other ways to gain power (Portelli 2004). By displaying 'laddish' behaviour, academically low-performing students can preserve their social esteem (Portelli 2014). Such boys may even try to convince their peers that their poor academic performance is due to them wilfully not paying attention in class and not because of any lack of cognitive prowess of theirs (Portelli 2014). Portelli (2004) notes that "conformity to peer pressure can work against some boys' academic success and lead to much physical and psychological abuse, which is damaging to the lives of marginalised boys" (Portelli 2004: 17). Students opting to further their education may feel that their old friends now perceive them as a cut above them; the common ground that held their friendship in place now feels lost; and this causes anxiety and stress to those students opting to educate themselves further but who are reluctant to give up on old longstanding relationships (Bufton 2001).

The learning environment and teachers' perceptions of students.

"Low academic success tends to be stable; that is, students who are low achievers at one age tend to be low achievers at a later age" (Bergin 2013: 289). Low academic success at a young age tends to predict further low academic success, dropping out from school and poor life prospects (Bergin 2013). In order to break this chain of events, one must try to find the root cause of early school failure. As stated previously, relationships with parents and peers can greatly influence young people's views on schooling. Similarly, teachers can exert a great influence on their students, with those teachers, who display a negative attitude towards their students and who create a non-supportive environment in the classroom, damaging their students' willingness to learn in class (Dislen 2013). A young man, reminiscing on his school career, reported

that sometimes his teachers would become opinionated and judgemental concerning his future prospects and abilities and that this would act as a disincentive to him actively participating in the schooling experience (Clark and Cefai 2014). Bufton (2001) reported similar experiences from students whose teachers had low expectations of them or even tried to dissuade them from academic success based on their view that the students did not possess the necessary abilities to do well at school. Some students felt that their teachers were "giving up on them" at an early age (Bufton 2001: 108).

The learning environment is also an important influencer on students' schooling experience, sometimes acting as a reinforcer to stigmas accrued through time. Based on interviews and focus groups with stakeholders, Xhumari and Dibra (2016) noted that there was a general agreement amongst their research participants that students taking part in VET were low academic achievers and would not be able to enrol and do well in general education. Findings from the previously mentioned study conducted by Oakes et al. (1992) indicated that disadvantaged students coming from minority groups, as well as students coming from low-income families, were more probable to take part in vocational courses, even if those students happened to have good academic achievement records. The study covered three schools that differed in their student population, and the school that evinced the aforementioned trend most clearly had proportionally more opportunities for uptake of vocational courses than the other two schools. Therefore, in this school, even top students in class had a higher probability of participating in vocational courses than their counterparts in the other two schools. Also, differences in the number of opportunities for uptake of vocational courses in the three schools did not correspond to variations in the three schools' overall achievement levels. The authors noted that affluent students, Asians and Caucasians took the fewest vocational courses overall (Oakes et al. 1992). It thus seems that to some extent students were being matched to programmes and courses based on their race, ethnicity and social class.

In the same study by Oakes et al. (1992), respondents emphasised that:

- Due to a shortage of teaching staff, the type of courses that could be offered was being affected. Often, vocational educators were being assigned to teach academic courses too, requiring more preparations on a daily basis. This was leading to an erosion in the quality of both vocational and academic programmes;
- Programmes of the academic curriculum were best defined and most carefully sequenced. They also had the best teachers assigned to them;
- High-achieving students were given more time and attention from counsellors (at two of the schools participating in the study by Oakes et al. (1992), an extra counsellor was appointed to assist high-achieving students);
- Programmes attended by the middle-level students were the least coherent and the least stable. Counsellors reported spending little time with this group of students.

It is postulated that an overhaul of the learning environment and of teachers' perceptions of their students is required in order that students feel a sense of belonging at their respective educational institution and feel a sense of self-worth. "If young people care what their teachers think about them then they are less likely to jeopardise their good standing by engaging in deviant behaviour" (Clark and Cefai 2014: 39).

Labour market factors.

When youngsters find easy ways of obtaining gainful employment, furthering one's education may not seem as a priority to them. Micro, small and medium-sized enterprises constitute the majority of companies in Malta[1]. Research has shown that efficiency is not impeded but actually improved by small firms recruiting new people through familial and kinship contact of existing workers (Ram and Holliday 1993). In Malta, 20.9% of vacancies are filled by word of mouth, making it the most common way to fill vacancies in Malta (NCFHE 2017: 48). In 2020, it was noted that 37.0% of the working-age population in Malta, aged between 15 and 64, had no schooling, or had attended primary education and special schools for disabled, or attained a secondary level of education and had less than two O-levels or equivalent (Central Bank of Malta 2022).

On the other hand, all across the EU, jobs are becoming more intensive in non-routine cognitive tasks and less intensive in routine cognitive and manual tasks (WB 2018). How much each EU country has been ready to adapt to that shift has depended on "the stage of structure change, which is partly driven by technological change, as well as by the 'skills readiness' of the workforce to accommodate and reinforce those changes" (WB 2018: 69). Instead of physical operators performing repetitive tasks, new technologies require skilled workers who understand and operate digital processes (EuroFound 2017). Critical thinking, problem-solving skills, socioemotional skills, coupled with basic cognitive skills such as literacy and numeracy, are the skills that are becoming the most rewarded in the workforce (WB 2018).

With this shift in the workforce becoming more apparent, requiring workers equipped with cognitive skills that are different and far more wide-ranging than the traditional sort, the rate of early school leavers in Malta in 2021 (10.7%) is alarming, being higher than the EU average (9.7%; Eurostat 2022). Coupled with that is the aforementioned worrying fact that, while the unemployment rate in Malta in 2021 stood at a low 3.5% (WB 2022), in 2020, 37.0% of the working-age population in Malta aged between 15 and 64 had a basic level of education (Central Bank of Malta 2022).

In 2016, Maltese employers reported that, at 22.2%, vacancies for clerical support workers were particularly hard to fill, followed by vacancies for service and sales workers, at 15.3%, and plant and machine operators and assemblers, at 14.7% (NCFHE 2017: 32). In addition, vacancies for craft and related trade workers, professionals, technicians and service/sales workers took the longest to fill (EPALE 2016). The main reasons given by employers to explain this shortfall were that applicants lacked the required skills (56.2%), had attitude or personality deficits (43.7%), and that there was in general a low number of applicants (37.7%): "written communication, technical skills, problem-solving and team-working resulted as the commonest skills that prospective applicants lacked for hard-to-fill vacancies. These were also the skills that employers considered to be the most pertinent" (EPALE 2016).

In 2016, Malta surpassed the EU average with more than 13 percentage points in the difficulty that employers encountered with finding employees with the right skills

1 According to the *2019 SBA fact sheet: Malta* issued by the European Commission, 99.8% of enterprises in Malta are micro, small or medium-sized (SMEs). These SMEs provide employment to 77.7% of the Maltese workforce (European Commission 2019: 2).

(NCFHE 2017: 75); although one must note that Malta's labour force is becoming more highly qualified, with the share of the labour force with low levels of qualification being forecasted to decrease to 21.0% by 2030 (CEDEFOP 2020: 9).

It is thus imperative that MCAST takes stock of the current impasse, where students feel they benefit more by leaving school early and obtaining gainful employment without furthering their education, and devises student-centred strategies to help students overcome this short-sighted and unsustainable vision. By customising learning journeys through a student-centred approach that takes note of the students' needs and aspirations, MCAST, through such efforts, will be making an investment in a future labour force that will be more resilient to unemployment, social exclusion and poverty and capable of riding high on the crest of a new millennium steeped in technological change.

A Way Forward: Fostering Student College Identity

Studies have shown that student engagement at school is strongly related to student attendance and academic performance (Klem and Connell 2004), that a sense of belonging at school predicts more positive academic outcomes such as academic motivation, academic effort and lessened absenteeism (Sanchez, Colon and Esparza 2005), that perceptions of school warmth coupled with student participation influence academic outcomes (Voelkl 1995) and that school connectedness mediates the relations between perceived cohesion, perceived friction and overall satisfaction with classes and subsequent early adolescent conduct problems (Loukas, Suzuki and Horton 2006). McNeely (2013: 516) argues that "school connectedness can help forestall or reverse the disengagement process that leads to school dropout". In light of these research findings, the authors of this paper argue that in order for students at MCAST to successfully complete their course of studies at the College, and have a fulfilling time doing so, the formation of a *college identity* amongst all students at the college is pivotal.

McNeely (2013: 515), supported by further research (McNeely, Nonnemaker and Blum 2002; Whitlock 2006), identified the following six domains of school life as being associated with the formation of a sense of belonging to one's educational institution:

- Calm, orderly classrooms;
- Teaching practices that foster cooperative and participatory learning;
- Discipline policies that have adults respond with tolerance to the first infraction of school rules;
- Opportunities and support for students to be involved in ongoing decision-making within the school (often called support for autonomy);
- Teachers' beliefs that students are worthy of respect and capable of learning;
- High rates of participation in extracurricular activities.

(The six domains identified above are discussed in more detail in the succeeding sections).

McNeely (2013: 515) pointed out that "schools can feel safe, respectful, and academically challenging, or, conversely, they can feel unsafe, exclusionary, or chaotic".

Having been established in 2001, MCAST is still in its nascent stages, this relative to other educational institutions established in Malta. Thus, a culture at the College may still have not fully consolidated itself, leaving students without some tangible legacy to leave behind at the College once they graduate, and to pass on to new student cohorts once they leave the College and enter the workforce. With MCAST being a young educational institution, students at MCAST might be finding it difficult to fit in the College's structures, policies and regulations, and thus they may be failing to form a sense of belonging at the College. The authors of this paper thus firmly believe that, for a positive student learning experience at MCAST and for increased retention rates at the College, the aim must be for all stakeholders at MCAST to collectively and actively engage in the strengthening of the College's identity.

Calm, orderly classrooms.

Effective class management programmes can produce statistically and educationally significant achievement gains, especially when the programmes engage students in the management of the classroom (Freiberg 2013). For example, Consistency Management and Cooperative Discipline (CMCD), which is a school-based discipline management programme that seeks to provide a stable and orderly learning environment in which students become self-disciplined and empowered by experiencing greater responsibility in classroom organisation, has been shown to significantly improve Teacher-Student Relationship, significantly reduce the number of students referred to the offices of their principals, reduce time wasted on student conduct/disciplinary problems and significantly improve academic performance in mathematics and reading (Opuni 2006). Citing Chiari (1994), Freiberg (2013: 766) states:

> Classrooms with management systems are more conducive to student learning because students individually assume responsibility for their learning and develop a sense of school connectedness. When students display ownership of the environment, the social, emotional, and learning climates are all improved resulting in increased higher order cognitive processes.

Teaching practices that foster cooperative and participatory learning.

In classroom environments that allow peer engagement, students show greater effort, greater learning and more liking of the task and other students (Slavin 1983, as cited in Webb 2013). Giving and receiving explanations during group collaboration may encourage students to restructure their own knowledge and understanding (O'Donnell 2006, as cited in Webb 2013). Students receiving explanations can compare their own knowledge with what is being presented, correct misconceptions, and recognise and fill in gaps in their own knowledge (Webb 2013). Through a collective construction of knowledge, students can build knowledge and problem-solving strategies together, an acquisition of skills that might have been missed had group interaction not taken place (Barron 2000, as cited in Webb 2013).

However, group collaboration in the classroom environment may have its pitfalls too, and it is important that teachers are made aware of the possible shortcomings of group collaboration. Webb (2013) identified extroverted students and talkative, assertive, high-status students as potential problems to healthy dialogue between group members, as Webb noted that these kinds of students can dominate a group,

disallowing the input and exchange of opinions from introverted and/or low-status students (Webb 2013). Other potential dangers inherent to group collaboration take guise in the "free rider effect" and "sucker effect" (Salomon and Globerson 1989: 94-95). The free rider effect takes operation when one or more group members decide/s not to participate in group work, because s/he believes that his/her work is dispensable, leaving the other more-functional group members to do all the work. The free rider effect might then transform into a sucker effect. The sucker effect takes operation when the other functional group members realise that they have been duped by the non-functional group member/s, leaving them to do all the work alone, and these thus decide to start contributing less to the group in order not to be identified as suckers (Salomon and Globerson 1989). In order to forestall these potential dangers in group collaboration, Webb (2013) recommends that teachers first build their students' communication skills to make sure that every student is capable of contributing healthily to the group.

Fostering cooperative and participatory learning also requires a healthy teacher-student relationship. Research has shown (Bergin and Bergin 2009) that secure teacher-student relationships predict greater knowledge, higher test scores, greater academic motivation and fewer retentions or special education referrals than insecure teacher–student relationships. Contrastingly, children who have conflicting relationships with their teachers experience less self-direction, show lessened levels of cooperation in the classroom and tend to like school less (Bergin and Bergin 2009). It is imperative to discuss how teachers can develop more secure relationships with their students. Davis (2013) noted that students bring their previous manner of interacting with teachers to the classroom environment, with those students who had had positive relationships with their teachers experiencing benefits to learning and motivation. Wubbels et al. (1997, as cited in Davis 2013) argue that the more dominant a teacher is, the more his/her students will achieve, while the more cooperative a teacher is, the more his/her students will evince positive attitudes. The authors of this paper strongly feel that teachers must strike a fine balance: on the one hand, they must be strict enough to help their students get good grades, and, on the other, they must be flexible enough to nurture positive attitudes within the classroom environment.

Some of Bufton's (2001: 141) research participants reportedly perceived their teachers as "aloof" and "stand-offish". Bufton (2001) noted that this perceived aloofness may have deterred the students from asking their teachers for help. Even though participants in Bufton's study reported that their teachers did invite them to approach them and ask them questions when they faced problems in their learning, the students felt that this offer was not genuine and was only meant to act as a front. On a similar note, it has been reported in other research that some students feel that, if they ask questions in class, they might get a negative reaction from their teacher and classmates (Dillon 1981).

When teachers relate with their students in a way that fulfils their needs, engage with them in an emotionally warm manner and provide their students with the right ferment to practise autonomy, students feel more motivated in the classroom and have higher rates of academic success (Davis 2013).

Discipline policies that have adults respond with tolerance to the first infraction of school rules.

"Good discipline is not only a necessary condition for effective teaching and learning but an important outcome of education" (OFSTED 1993, as cited in Palaniandy 2009: 54). Disciplinary procedures in school, such as out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, are associated with a number of negative outcomes, such as recidivism, lower achievement and school dropout (Skiba and Rausch 2013). In the literature, it has been recommended to discipline minor infractions like classroom disruptions, attendance issues or small fights between students by applying constructive disciplinary procedures that do not disrupt the positive school climate and that do not stop students from furthering their education, such as by resorting to in-school suspensions, parent contact, reprimands, community service or counselling (Skiba and Rausch 2013). School discipline is not an end in itself but has important ulterior instructional and organisational purposes, ensuring the safety of students and teachers, creating a climate conducive to learning, teaching students skills needed for successful interaction within their school and society, and reducing rates of future misbehaviour (Skiba and Rausch 2013).

Rogers (2002, as cited in Palaniandy 2009) defined three major aims for behavioural management:

- Making students take ownership and accountability for their behaviour and enable them to develop self-discipline in relation to others;
- Teaching students to respect the rights of others in their classroom and across the school;
- The formation of effective teacher-student relationships.

A study by Kenely (2015), performed in a Maltese secondary school, recommended disciplinary measures that included students in the formulation of class rules early in the scholastic year because this ensured greater student ownership and commitment towards upholding those rules. According to Vacek and Lasek (2006, as cited in Palaniandy 2009), ensuring that students behaved well in class was important for two reasons: firstly, school discipline equipped students with the tools to engage within society as responsible citizens, together with the main aim of schooling and educating them; secondly, without effective school discipline, even the best thought-out and potentially engaging lesson could fail to achieve its desired aims.

Opportunities and support for students to be involved in ongoing decision-making within the school (often called support for autonomy).

Cook-Sather (2006, as cited in Palaniandy 2009: 7) pointed out that it was logical to seek and solicit advice on all issues concerning student welfare at school from the group most informed about students' matters, the "'clients' of the educational process", namely the students themselves. Given that students spend a great deal of time with their teachers and that they are the main recipients of their teachers' instruction, they can identify flaws they have encountered during instruction or interaction and can provide useful insights into ways of remediating those perceived flaws (Joshua and Bassey 2004, as cited in Palaniandy 2009). According to Smyth (2006, as cited in Palaniandy 2009), when students feel that their needs and ambitions are being

ignored, they have a tendency to develop a kind of hostility to their school and for schooling in general.

Teachers' beliefs that students are worthy of respect and capable of learning.

Teachers' expectations of their students' achievement can be delineated in three distinct ways: "accuracy", "bias", and "self-fulfilling prophecy" (Jussim 2013: 813). Accuracy refers to teachers accurately predicting their students' level of academic success, without them, the teachers, having been the cause of that achievement (Jussim 2013). Biasis when teachers' evaluations of their students are distorted by their own expectations of their students (Jussim 2013). The self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when a wrong expectation based on a false belief causes a chain of events to unfold in the bearer's life (through his/her behaviour and actions), which eventually lead to the fulfilment of that wrong expectation, making its bearer then retrospectively consider the original false belief, on which the wrong expectation was based, as correct and justified. As Merton (1948: 195), who is credited with coining the term, stated: "the specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error". In education, the self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when a teacher's erroneous expectations of his/her students leads him/her to behave differently towards his/her students, leading his/her students to get the results which s/he had expected (Jussim 2013). Thus, if a teacher thinks highly and behaves differently towards his/her high expectancy students, these will proceed to achieve even more academic success, which would not have occurred had there been no self-fulfilling prophecy. Conversely, if a teacher thinks lowly and behaves differently towards his/her low expectancy students, these will proceed to achieve even less academic success, which would not have occurred had there been no self-fulfilling prophecy (Jussim 2013). In a study by Wentzel (1997, as cited in Bergin and Bergin 2009), it was noted that students between sixth and eighth grade who expressed a belief that their teacher cared about them, exhibited more motivation, earned higher grades and paid more attention in class. Studies such as Sorhagen's (2013) show the strong impact of teachers' over- and under-estimation of the abilities of students from lower income families. Silverman, Hernandez and Destin (2021) argue that teachers' positive beliefs about background of students of lower socioeconomic status improve such students' motivation and academic persistence.

Based on these findings one would be reasonably assured that recommending that all teachers should have high expectations of their students would surely reap a lot of benefit since, based on the above research, such high expectancy students should all turn out to be very academically successful. However, Jussim (2013) noted that such an oversimplification would be unworkable and probably dysfunctional. Jussim (2013: 822) instead suggested three approaches to raising student achievement through teachers' expectations, which are as follows:

- Teachers should be flexible about their expectations of their students, because the expectations they formulate about them might be wrong and, also, students can change over time;
- Teachers should combine high standards with a warm and supportive environment, because such an environment would benefit all students not just the high achievers;
- Teachers should realise that high expectations can be perceived differently by different students. An average grade may be perceived as a high achievement

by one student but a low achievement by another student. As Jussim (2013: 822) notes, "if teachers want to purposely harness expectancy effects to maximise student achievement, they need to couple a high expectation (for that student) with a clear plan for how that student will maximise his or her learning and achievement".

High rates of participation in extracurricular activities.

Given that students opt to take extracurricular activities out of their own free will, such activities offer students more opportunity than most classroom activities for forming relationships with peers and coaches or teachers (Bergin and Bergin 2009). However, in a critical review and meta-analysis of the literature about the effects of extracurricular activities on school achievement, Shulruf (2010) mostly found no meaningful associations (as evinced by low effect sizes) between positive students' educational outcomes and participation in extracurricular activities, which he attributed to methodological limitations in the studies reviewed. However, Shulruf (2010) did note two meaningful effect sizes, one of which was the effect of general extracurricular activities on aspiration to tertiary studies. Sport was the most commonly investigated extracurricular activity across all studies reviewed, yet the effect of sport activities on the range of learning outcomes was minimal (Shulruf 2010). Shulruf (2010) noted that while participation in extracurricular activities may have been associated with positive educational outcomes, no causality could be inferred. On the other hand, McNeal (1995) found that participation in athletic activity significantly reduced the likelihood of students dropping out of school. In the literature, sports as an extracurricular activity has been consistently linked to positive effects on a broad range of academic outcomes (Marsh and Kleitman 2003). These studies seem to indicate that extracurricular activities, especially athletically oriented ones, may help students remain engaged in school activity and may reduce the risk of them dropping out of school.

Conclusion

Research has shown that students that are mainly attracted to VET come from minority groups (Oakes et al. 1992), low socioeconomic backgrounds (Agodini et al. 2004), low-income families (Xhumari and Dibra 2016; Oakes et al. 1992), with parents' level of education being low (Xhumari and Dibra 2016).

Research has also noted that teachers can dramatically influence students' achievements (Dislen 2013; Clark and Cefai 2014; Bufton 2001). Teachers' expectations of their students can trigger a self-fulfilling prophecy, with teachers who think lowly of their students, and adjusting their behaviour in class accordingly, reaping low achievement from their low expectancy students (that would not have occurred had there been no self-fulfilling prophecy), and, conversely, with teachers who think highly of their students, and adjusting their behaviour in class accordingly, reaping high achievement from their high expectancy students (that would not have occurred had there been no self-fulfilling prophecy) (Jussim 2013). However, it is important to note that the self-fulfilling prophecy is always based on an erroneous belief/expectation, and, as Merton (1948: 195) points out, "the specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error".

Research has noted that students enrolling into VET institutions are mainly low academic achievers (Agodini et al. 2004; Xhumari and Dibra 2016), with low educational expectations (Agodini et al. 2004) and unable to enrol and do well in general education (Xhumari and Dibra 2016).

Research has also shown that early leaving is more common among students enrolled at VET institutions than amongst students enrolled in general education tracks (CEDEFOP 2016).

Research has shown that it is high-achieving, affluent parents and students who are most willing to push the system; and low-achieving and mid-range students have less-involved parents, who are less determined to challenge the system (Oakes et al. 1992; Wells and Serna 2017).

In light of these seemingly disparate research findings, what climate is being fostered, even if unwittingly, at our VET institutions? If teachers stigmatise students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, then these teachers will relate to these students differently from the way they will relate to their other more affluent students. Such stigmatised students are likely to underachieve (Dislen 2013; Jussim 2013) and enrol in VET (which has been shown to mainly attract low achievers [Agodini et al. 2004; Xhumari and Dibra 2016]), where, as already statistically measured and verified (CEDEFOP 2016), they are most likely to drop out. These students and their parents are not determined to challenge the system, maintaining the status quo (Oakes et al. 1992; Wells and Serna 2017). This lack of determination in the parents cannot be attributed simply to their low socioeconomic status since, as research in Malta has shown (Abela and Tabone 2008), poor parents' involvement in their children's educational needs is on par with that practised by those parents above the poverty line.

In line with the previous argument, one could surmise then, that effectively tackling the issue of student dropout would merely require constructive intervention amongst the educators tasked with the educational development of the students. Indeed, the argument made evident above, which takes its impetus from Merton's self-fulfilling prophecy (1948), could be considered a working model for those supporting such a conclusion. Yet, the aim in reporting the above-mentioned findings in the literature is in fact otherwise. The authors of this study argue that, given the present zeitgeist, we surely ought to bear in mind the implications that seemingly emerge from such findings. However, the authors of this study are also of the opinion that we should steer away from such thinking when it comes to strategising and policy development. The authors of this study do not question the strengths or validity of the above-mentioned findings from the literature but argue that current times evince that a pragmatic answer to the issue of student dropout is direly needed. As will be discussed in the concluding 'General Discussion' section, recommendations will be proposed to tackle the issue of student dropout, which, although not pretending to be the complete answer, bring to the fore the true call of this chapter, which is a call for a return to a more pragmatic way of thinking and acting when dealing with the issue of student dropout.

Research Exercise 1
(with Form Four, State Secondary School Students)

Methodology

An online questionnaire was designed and implemented on Qualtrics, in both English and Maltese languages, and the link distributed via e-mail by the respective Heads of College amongst all their Form Four students. Ethics clearance to conduct research with State school students was sought from and granted by the Ministry for Education and Employment (formerly MEDE; now known as the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR)) and by the MCAST Research Ethics Committee (REC) prior to dissemination of links to online questionnaires. Also, since State school students are defined by Maltese law as being minors, prior to any research intervention, consent was also obtained from these students' respective parents. State schools were chosen for the purpose of this research exercise since demographically they would cover all regions in Malta and Gozo. The questionnaire was activated and made to collect responses for a four-week period starting mid-March 2019. Since preliminary investigation of data evinced a low response rate, permission was sought from and granted by the Heads of Colleges for the researchers of this study to visit the schools and have Form Four students complete the online questionnaire in their presence during one of the students' IT classes. Once this exercise was finalised, the questionnaire was closed and data downloaded in csv file format and imported into Microsoft Excel. Preliminary sorting of data and statistical procedures were done in Microsoft Excel. Further statistical procedures were performed in SPSS version 24.

Results

There were 142 responses, all being valid responses. This constituted the sample size of this research study.

More female respondents (n = 85, 59.9%) responded to the questionnaire than males (Table 1).

Gender	Count	Percentage
Females	85	59.9
Males	55	38.7
Other	2	1.4
Total	142	100

Table 1: *Count and percentage of respondents by gender*

The mean age of the sample population was 14.43 years with a standard deviation of 0.53 (Table 2).

	M	SD	Min	Max
Age	14.43	0.53	13	16

Table 2: *Descriptive statistics for respondents' ages (M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation)*

The sample population had residence predominantly in Malta (*n* = 100, 70.4%; Table 3).

	Locality	Count	Tot %	Malta %	Gozo %
Malta	Attard	4	2.8	4	
	Balzan	0	0.0	0	
	Birgu	0	0.0	0	
	Birkirkara	2	1.4	2	
	Birżebbuġa	2	1.4	2	
	Bormla	0	0.0	0	
	Dingli	1	0.7	1	
	Fgura	10	7.0	10	
	Floriana	0	0.0	0	
	Gudja	0	0.0	0	
	Gżira	0	0.0	0	
	Għargħur	0	0.0	0	
	Għaxaq	1	0.7	1	
	Ħamrun	1	0.7	1	
	Iklin	0	0.0	0	
	Isla	0	0.0	0	
	Kalkara	1	0.7	1	
	Kirkop	0	0.0	0	
	Lija	1	0.7	1	
	Luqa	0	0.0	0	
	Marsa	0	0.0	0	
	Marsaskala	22	15.5	22	
	Marsaxlokk	2	1.4	2	
	Mdina	0	0.0	0	
	Mellieħa	3	2.1	3	
	Mġarr	2	1.4	2	
	Mosta	1	0.7	1	
	Mqabba	0	0.0	0	
	Msida	1	0.7	1	

	Mtarfa	3	2.1	3	
	Naxxar	2	1.4	2	
	Paola	1	0.7	1	
	Pembroke	0	0.0	0	
	Pieta	1	0.7	1	
	Qormi	0	0.0	0	
	Qrendi	1	0.7	1	
	Rabat	9	6.3	9	
	Safi	0	0.0	0	
	San Ġiljan	0	0.0	0	
	San Ġwann	0	0.0	0	
	San Pawl il-Baħar	2	1.4	2	
	Santa Luċija	3	2.1	3	
	Santa Venera	2	1.4	2	
	Siġġiewi	1	0.7	1	
	Sliema	0	0.0	0	
	Swieqi	0	0.0	0	
	Ta' Xbiex	0	0.0	0	
	Tarxien	5	3.5	5	
	Valletta	0	0.0	0	
	Xgħajra	0	0.0	0	
	Żabbar	5	3.5	5	
	Żebbuġ	0	0.0	0	
	Żejtun	11	7.7	11	
	Żurrieq	0	0.0	0	
Gozo	Fontana	1	0.7		2.4
	Għajnsielem	4	2.8		9.5
	Għarb	3	2.1		7.1
	Għasri	0	0.0		0.0
	Kerċem	1	0.7		2.4
	Munxar	3	2.1		7.1
	Nadur	8	5.6		19.0
	Qala	4	2.8		9.5
	Rabat	6	4.2		14.3
	San Lawrenz	0	0.0		0.0

	Sannat	0	0.0		0.0
	Xagħra	6	4.2		14.3
	Xewkija	2	1.4		4.8
	Żebbuġ	4	2.8		9.5
	Total	142	100.0		
	Malta Total	100	70.4		
	Gozo Total	42	29.6		

Table 3: *Respondents' place of residence in Malta and Gozo*

Most respondents and their parents/guardian were born in Malta (**You**: *n* = 130, 93.5%; **Mother**: *n* = 122, 87.1%; **Father**: *n* = 114, 83.2%; **Guardian**: *n* = 14, 93.3%; Table 4).

Country of birth	**You**		**Mother**		**Father**		**Guardian**	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Malta	130	93.5	122	87.1	114	83.2	14	93.3
EU	5	3.6	5	3.6	7	5.1	0	0.0
Non-EU	4	2.9	12	8.6	15	10.9	1	6.7
Don't know	0	0.0	1	0.7	1	0.7	0	0.0
Total	139	100	140	100	137	100	15	100

Table 4: *In which country were you, your parents (mother and father separately) and/or guardian born?*

Most respondents' parents/guardian had completed at most secondary school (**Mother**: *n* = 78, 56.1%; **Father**: *n* = 63, 46.3%; **Guardian**: *n* = 6, 60%; Table 5). Respondents' fathers were also more likely to have completed technical or vocational school (*n* = 44, 32.4%).

Level of schooling completed	**Mother**		**Father**		**Guardian**	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
No formal school	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Primary school	0	0.0	1	0.7	0	0.0
Secondary school	78	56.1	63	46.3	6	60.0
Technical or Vocational school	26	18.7	44	32.4	1	10.0
University (Bachelor's)	16	11.5	8	5.9	2	20.0
Postgraduate (Master's; Doctorate)	9	6.5	10	7.4	1	10.0
Don't know	10	7.2	10	7.4	0	0.0
Total	139	100	136	100	10	100

Table 5: *What is the highest level of schooling completed by your parents (mother and father separately) and/or guardian?*

Most respondents' parents/guardian were working full-time for pay (**Mother**: *n* = 83, 61%; **Father**: *n* = 110, 80.9%; **Guardian**: *n* = 2, 40%; Table 6).

Current status	Mother		Father		Guardian	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Full-time employment	83	61.0	110	80.9	2	40.0
Part-time employment	20	14.7	11	8.1	1	20.0
Student	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	20.0
Homemaker	25	18.4	0	0.0	0	0.0
Retired and living on State pension	0	0.0	2	1.5	1	20.0
Unemployed or not working due to health condition	0	0.0	2	1.5	0	0.0
Not working due to permanent disability	0	0.0	1	0.7	0	0.0
Carer of other household member	2	1.5	0	0.0	0	0.0
Other	3	2.2	3	2.2	0	0.0
None of these	3	2.2	1	0.7	0	0.0
I do not know	0	0.0	6	4.4	0	0.0
Total	136	100.0	136	100.0	5	100.0

Table 6: *What are your parents (mother and father separately) and/or guardian currently doing?*

Most respondents lived with both parents (*n* = 112, 78.9%; Table 7). The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'Both parents'.

Who do you primarily live with?	Count	Percentage
Both parents	112	78.9
Mother	28	19.7
Father	1	0.7
Other relatives	0	0.0
Guardian	0	0.0
Sheltered/Residential home	1	0.7
Total	142	100.0

Table 7: *Who do you primarily live with?*

The majority of the respondents had siblings/stepsiblings living in the same household with them (*n* = 117, 84.2%; Table 8) and the mean number of siblings living in the same household was 1.62 with a standard deviation of 0.92 (Table 9).

Do you have siblings/stepsiblings living in the same household with you?	Count	Percentage
Yes	117	84.2
No	22	15.8
Total	139	100.0

Table 8: *Do you have siblings/stepsiblings living in the same household with you?*

M	SD	Min	Max
1.62	0.92	1	5

Table 9: *Descriptive statistics: How many siblings/stepsiblings are living in the same household with you? (M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation)*

The natural parents of most respondents were not divorced or legally separated or not living together (*n* = 102, 71.8%; Table 10). The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'No'.

Are your natural parents divorced/ legally separated/not living together?	Count	Percentage
No	102	71.8
Yes	28	19.7
N/A	11	7.7
I do not know	1	0.7
Total	142	100.0

Table 10: *Are your natural parents divorced/legally separated/not living together?*

The most typical leisure activity most respondents' families engaged in together was watching TV (*n* = 94; Table 11). This was followed by dining-out (*n* = 83). The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'Watching TV'.

What typical leisure activities does your family engage in together?	Count
Sport/leisure activities	27
Cultural activities	44
Dining-out	83
Time with wider family	67
Time in nature	57
Shopping	80
Attending Mass	52
Community work	7
Travelling	65

DIY hobbies	12
Watching TV	94
We do not engage in leisure activities together	7
Other	8

Table 11: *What typical leisure activities does your family engage in together?*

Most respondents had an average or above-average prior schooling experience (*n* = 134, 94.3%; Table 12). The median for this question corresponded to response item 'A good schooling experience so far'. Students with prior bad schooling experiences were thus not well-represented in our sample population.

Thinking of your experiences in previous school years, would you say that you have had:	**Count**	**Percentage**
Very good schooling experience so far	46	32.4
Good schooling experience so far	58	40.8
Average schooling experience so far	30	21.1
Bad schooling experience so far	4	2.8
Very bad schooling experience so far	4	2.8
Total	142	100.0

Table 12: *Thinking of your experiences in previous school years, would you say that you have had:*

Most of the respondents had never repeated a grade (*n* = 137, 96.5%; Table 13). The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'No'.

Have you ever repeated a grade?	**Count**	**Percentage**
No	137	96.5
Yes	3	2.1
I do not remember	2	1.4
Total	142	100.0

Table 13: *Have you ever repeated a grade?*

The sample population consisted predominantly of self-reported average, and above, academic performers (*n* = 135, 95.2%; Table 14). The median for this question corresponded to response item 'Above average'. This result indicated that our sample population was not a wholly representative sample, as underperformers were very poorly represented. Also, when interpreting the results of this question one should always bear in mind that responses to this question were based on respondents' subjective experience; no actual exam scores or measured performance indicators were collected through the questionnaire.

How well do you do in your studies at school?	Count	Percentage
Excellent	19	13.4
Well above	39	27.5
Above	37	26.1
Average	40	28.2
Below	1	0.7
Well below	2	1.4
Poor	4	2.8
Total	142	100.0

Table 14: *How well do you do in your studies at school?*

Most respondents reportedly intended to continue going to school preparing for higher education when they finished compulsory secondary education (*n* = 115; Table 15). This was followed by 'I will look for a job to earn money' (*n* = 21). The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'I will continue going to school preparing for higher education'. Percentages were not computed for this question as respondents were able to choose more than one response item.

What do you think you will do when you finish compulsory secondary education (when you reach the age when you can leave school if you choose)?	Count
Continue going to school preparing for higher education	115
Attend a school where I can learn a trade	9
Start an apprenticeship	5
Look for a job to earn money	21
Work at the family business	4
Stay at home and care for relatives	0
Other activity	8
I do not know yet	5
Total	167

Table 15: *What do you think you will do when you finish compulsory secondary education (when you reach the age when you can leave school if you choose)?*

When those respondents who chose the response item 'I do not know yet' to the question 'What do you think you will do when you finish compulsory secondary education (when you reach the age when you can leave school if you choose)' were asked what could be done to help them decide, respondents suggested that more information should be given to them regarding the different career options available to them and more job exposure opportunities should be provided.

Respondents were asked to think about their school and then choose from the response item-list the one/s they thought was/were the reason/s why they enjoyed studying. The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'I would say that I enjoy studying at my school because the environment at my school is safe' (*n* = 50).

- I would say that I enjoy studying at my school because the environment at my school is positive (n = 41)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at my school because the environment at my school is safe (n = 50)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at my school because support services at my school are good (n = 32)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at my school because the teachers at my school are motivating (n = 44)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at my school because the relationship between my schoolteachers and my parents/guardian is good (n = 39)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at my school because my parents/guardian are/is involved in school activity (n = 6)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at my school because we, the students, are made to be active contributors in class (n = 33)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at my school because my schoolteachers know how to manage the class well (n = 40)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at my school because in class, more emphasis is put on the practical side of the subject/s rather than on the theoretical side (n = 18)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at my school because a lot of student activities are held at school (n = 31)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at my school because students at school are treated equally (n = 37)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at my school because at school my opinions and suggestions are valued and taken into consideration (n = 32)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at my school because I find a lot of support in my studies from my teachers at school (n = 45)

Those respondents who completed the text entry field stated that when thinking of their school, the reasons why they enjoyed studying were that they had supportive friends at school, that they were friends with all their classmates, that teachers were nice and were adept at class management, that the relationship with teachers was safe and that they felt valued and treated as adults in senior class.

Respondents were asked to think about their schoolwork and then choose from the response item-list the one/s they thought was/were the reason/s why they enjoyed studying. The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'I would say that I enjoy studying because assignments and assessments are well-structured' (*n* = 43).

- I would say that I enjoy studying because homework is easy (n = 26)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because studying takes little of my free time (n = 20)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because assignments and assessments are well structured (n = 43)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because assignments and assessments are well timed (n = 31)

- I would say that I enjoy studying because assignments and assessments are relevant (n = 38)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because assignments and assessments are fair (n = 27)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because grading of assignments and assessments is fair (n = 38)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because results of assignments and assessments are published in a timely manner (n = 27)

Those respondents who completed the text entry field stated that when thinking of their schoolwork the reasons why they enjoyed studying were that they would reap benefit from the work in the long run ("learning is needed in life") and that through studying they would perform better in class, that certain subjects were interesting ("they are colourful because I make them colourful"), and that if they did not understand what was expected from them in their schoolwork, teachers were always available to lend a hand.

Respondents were asked to think about their core skills and then choose from the response item-list the one/s they thought was/were the reason/s why they enjoyed studying. The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'I would say that I enjoy studying because my writing skills are good' (*n* = 84).

- I would say that I enjoy studying because my reading skills are good (n = 81)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because my writing skills are good (n = 84)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because my numeracy skills are good (*n* = 72)

Respondents were asked to think about their home and then choose from the response item-list the one/s they thought was/were the reason/s why they enjoyed studying. The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'I would say that I enjoy studying because I find a lot of support in my studies at home' (*n* = 88).

- I would say that I enjoy studying because I find a lot of support in my studies at home (n = 88)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because the home environment is positive (*n* = 86)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because the financial situation at home is stable/ good which allows me to invest in schoolbooks and other resources (*n* = 76)

Those respondents who completed the text entry field stated that when thinking of their home the reasons why they enjoyed studying were that the environment at home was quiet, comfortable and fun, allowing them to focus on their studies, and that parents were encouraging and helpful.

Respondents were asked to think about their relationships with others and then choose from the response item-list the one/s they thought was/were the reason/s why they enjoyed studying. The mode for this question corresponded to response item "I would say that I enjoy studying because I have a good relationship with my parents/ guardian" (*n* = 92).

- I would say that I enjoy studying because I have a good relationship with my peers (*n* = 79)

- I would say that I enjoy studying because I have a good relationship with my teachers (*n* = 67)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because I have a good relationship with my parents/guardian (*n* = 92)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because I have a good relationship with my siblings/stepsiblings (*n* = 56)

Those respondents who completed the text entry field stated that, when thinking about their relationships with others, the reasons why they enjoyed studying were that they felt accepted and respected by others, that others helped them with troubles they experienced with their schoolwork and that most of their friends had the same subjects as them.

Respondents were asked to think about their self-expectations / the expectations others had of them and then choose from the response item-list the one/s they thought was/were the reason/s why they enjoyed studying. The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'I would say that I enjoy studying because my parents/ guardian have/has high expectations of me' (*n=93).*

- I would say that I enjoy studying because I have high self-expectations (*n* = 63)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because my parents/guardian have/has high expectations of me (*n* = 93)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because my teachers have high expectations of me (*n* = 62)

Those respondents who completed the text entry field stated that, when thinking about their self-expectations / the expectations others had of them, the reasons why they enjoyed studying were that they wanted to do well in life and wanted to find a decent job in the future, that they needed good grades to get accepted into schools of high repute, that they had goals they were determined to reach and that it helped them get better grades.

Respondents were asked to state what other reasons made them enjoy studying and respondents answered that they enjoyed studying because in the future it would enable them to achieve their career goals. One respondent stated, "I am aware that, to have a financially stable life and a purpose in society, I have to get a higher education and that requires a lot of work and sacrifice". Respondents also mentioned that they enjoyed studying because their parents and teachers supported them in their learning journeys and believed in them. Also, respondents mentioned that studying enabled them to get good grades and pass their exams, and this made them feel satisfied and proud, and allowed them to enjoy the summer break. Competitiveness was a reason for liking studying mentioned by one respondent in that if one studied and got good grades, the respondent reasoned that one could compete with one's classmates and test one's personal limits. Other respondents stated that they enjoyed studying because schoolwork was easy and others mentioned that they enjoyed studying because of their general passion for learning new things and because they liked to be well-informed. Some respondents stated that they enjoyed studying because they could make their own notes in summary format and this helped them to understand, evaluate and memorise more easily. Thinking about other reasons

why studying was enjoyable, one respondent stated, "Certain subjects truly interest me and I enjoy studying them, which motivates me to learn them well and get good grades in them".

Respondents were asked to think about their physical/psychological health and life experiences and then choose from the response item-list the one/s they thought was/were the reason/s why they did not enjoy studying. The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'I would say that I DO NOT enjoy studying because physical and/or psychological health issues are having negative repercussions on me' (n = 18).

- I would say that I DO NOT enjoy studying because a life-altering incident in the past has affected me negatively (n = 17)
- I would say that I DO NOT enjoy studying because physical and/or psychological health issues are having negative repercussions on me (n = 18)
- I would say that I DO NOT enjoy studying because I suffer from an addiction (n = 12)
- I would say that I DO NOT enjoy studying because I have a learning disability (n = 5)
- I would say that I DO NOT enjoy studying because ongoing familial problems are causing me a lot of stress (n = 16)
- I would say that I DO NOT enjoy studying because I am being bullied/harassed at home (n = 5)
- I would say that I DO NOT enjoy studying because I am being bullied/harassed at school by peers/teachers/etc. (n = 9)
- I would say that I DO NOT enjoy studying because my school peers are having a negative influence on me (n = 11)

Those respondents who completed the text entry field stated that, when thinking about their physical/psychological health and life experiences, the reasons why they did not enjoy studying were (1) stress, (2) anxiety, (3) mental health issues, (4) boredom, (5) cyberbullying and (6) low self-esteem. One respondent stated, "Students are put under a lot of pressure i.e. I am one of the best students in my class so that means a lot of people are expecting from me and it puts me under a lot of stress". Respondents also complained that teachers give them too much work, that there are too many subjects to study and that there is not enough time to study. Distractions from studies caused by technology were also mentioned, with one respondent stating, "I get distracted by the Internet and then it makes me feel stressed that I didn't study at all".

Respondents were asked to state what other reasons made them not enjoy studying and most mentioned that some subjects were not interesting and/or too difficult to understand (with one respondent stating, "Sometimes I don't even know how to study certain subjects), that too much work was given to students leaving them with no free time to, for example, practise their hobbies ("Studying causes a lot of stress to students. They do not have time to do other things like their hobbies. There is also a lot of syllabus that needs to be covered during the year and students might not manage to do it all for their exams"; "Certain lengthy homework takes up too much time which leaves little time for studying and no free time"; "I do not like to study not because I don't like school but because we have a lot on our mind and sometimes we stay up late like at 1 a.m. or more to do projects or homework"), that too much pressure was being

put on the students by the teachers and the school, and that studying was stressful. Others mentioned anxiety issues, irrelevance of certain subjects to students' planned career path ("There are subjects that I do not need for my career at all and still have exams for"; "I still don't really know how to study properly – I don't know if I'm doing it right or not), irrelevance of aspects of study content (with one respondent stating, "I do not enjoy studying since in my opinion it is a giant waste of time. It is unrewarding and also half of the syllabus is virtually useless for day-to-day experiences. The lessons are boring, which doesn't help things and seeing countries like Finland, which flourish in their education department, is disheartening since such procedures are not applied to our schools here" and another respondent stating, "… because the way education is taught must change and not stay the same. It's useless to teach someone skills that they will never use. Another way is how one delivers the education to the student. Nowadays it is not good. It must change"), and difficulty with memorising material ("There are a lot of subjects to study which I find hard to memorise"). Others mentioned that teachers were not capable of delivering study content properly ("Some things are too hard and complicated for us students to understand. The reason that we do not understand is because some of the teachers are not capable of explaining the problem well and do not consider the fact that not everyone is 100% sure they understood"). Others mentioned issues of cyberbullying and bullying, which caused them a lot of anxiety.

Respondents were asked to think specifically about their school subjects and to rate each response item related to their school subjects on a 5-point Likert Scale. Three response items presented received a response that corresponded to the Neutral position on the Likert scale ([1] The subjects I am studying are easy to understand [Table 16]; [2] The subjects I am studying are fun to learn [Table 21]; [3] The subjects I am studying do not contain much repetition of content [Table 26]). Nine response items received a response that corresponded to the Agree position on the Likert scale, and these were: (1) I feel passionate about the subjects I am studying (Table 17); (2) Studying these subjects grants me access to certain resources and facilities at school/home (Table 18); (3) The subjects I am studying are interesting (Table 19); (4) The employment prospects associated with the subjects I am studying are good (Table 20); (5) The subjects I am studying teach me a lot of skills (Table 23); (6) The subjects I am studying are well structured/designed (Table 24); (7) The subjects I am studying are relevant to my life (Table 25); (8) The subjects I am studying provide a lot of practical work (Table 27); (9) The subjects I am studying meet my expectations (Table 28). These results seem to show that respondents have an overall positive outlook on their school subjects. Interestingly, only one response item garnered a response corresponding to the Strongly Agree position on the Likert scale, and this response item was 'It was my personal choice to study these subjects (with specific reference to the subjects you choose in Year 9 [Form 3])' (Table 22). This result shows that the majority of respondents were self-determined individuals, capable of taking decisions about their future career path.

Thinking of my school subjects, I would say that:

Subjects are easy to understand		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Strongly Disagree	15	10.6	11.5	11.5
	Disagree	27	19.0	20.8	32.3
	Neutral	55	38.7	42.3	74.6
	Agree	24	16.9	18.5	93.1
	Strongly Agree	9	6.3	6.9	100.0
	Total	130	91.5	100.0	
Missing	System	12	8.5		
Total		142	100.0		

Table 16: *Subjects are easy to understand (Mdn=Neutral)*

I feel passionate about subjects		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Strongly Disagree	7	4.9	5.4	5.4
	Disagree	11	7.7	8.5	14.0
	Neutral	41	28.9	31.8	45.7
	Agree	48	33.8	37.2	82.9
	Strongly Agree	22	15.5	17.1	100.0
	Total	129	90.8	100.0	
Missing	System	13	9.2		
Total		142	100.0		

Table 17: *I feel passionate about subjects (Mdn=Agree)*

Studying these subjects grants me access to resources and facilities at school/home		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Disagree	18	12.7	14.0	14.0
	Neutral	42	29.6	32.6	46.5
	Agree	52	36.6	40.3	86.8
	Strongly Agree	17	12.0	13.2	100.0
	Total	129	90.8	100.0	
Missing	System	13	9.2		
Total		142	100.0		

Table 18: *Studying these subjects grants me access to resources and facilities at school/home (Mdn=Agree)*

Subjects are interesting		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Strongly Disagree	2	1.4	1.6	1.6
	Disagree	10	7.0	7.8	9.4
	Neutral	34	23.9	26.6	35.9
	Agree	46	32.4	35.9	71.9
	Strongly Agree	36	25.4	28.1	100.0
	Total	128	90.1	100.0	
Missing	System	14	9.9		
Total		142	100.0		

Table 19: *Subjects are interesting (Mdn=Agree)*

Employment prospects associated with subjects are good		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Strongly Disagree	2	1.4	1.6	1.6
	Disagree	10	7.0	7.8	9.3
	Neutral	35	24.6	27.1	36.4
	Agree	52	36.6	40.3	76.7
	Strongly Agree	30	21.1	23.3	100.0
	Total	129	90.8	100.0	
Missing	System	13	9.2		
Total		142	100.0		

Table 20: *Employment prospects associated with subjects are good (Mdn=Agree)*

Subjects are fun to learn		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Strongly Disagree	5	3.5	3.8	3.8
	Disagree	15	10.6	11.5	15.3
	Neutral	52	36.6	39.7	55.0
	Agree	37	26.1	28.2	83.2
	Strongly Agree	22	15.5	16.8	100.0
	Total	131	92.3	100.0	
Missing	System	11	7.7		
Total		142	100.0		

Table 21: *Subjects are fun to learn (Mdn=Neutral)*

It was my personal choice to study these subjects		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Strongly Disagree	1	.7	.8	.8
	Disagree	5	3.5	3.8	4.6
	Neutral	18	12.7	13.8	18.5
	Agree	38	26.8	29.2	47.7
	Strongly Agree	68	47.9	52.3	100.0
	Total	130	91.5	100.0	
Missing	System	12	8.5		
Total		142	100.0		

Table 22: *It was my personal choice to study these subjects (Mdn=Strongly Agree)*

Subjects teach me a lot of skills		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Strongly Disagree	4	2.8	3.1	3.1
	Disagree	8	5.6	6.2	9.3
	Neutral	37	26.1	28.7	38.0
	Agree	50	35.2	38.8	76.7
	Strongly Agree	30	21.1	23.3	100.0
	Total	129	90.8	100.0	
Missing	System	13	9.2		
Total		142	100.0		

Table 23: *Subjects teach me a lot of skills (Mdn=Agree)*

Subjects are well structured/designed		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Strongly Disagree	2	1.4	1.5	1.5
	Disagree	9	6.3	6.9	8.5
	Neutral	45	31.7	34.6	43.1
	Agree	47	33.1	36.2	79.2
	Strongly Agree	27	19.0	20.8	100.0
	Total	130	91.5	100.0	
Missing	System	12	8.5		
Total		142	100.0		

Table 24: *Subjects are well structured/designed (Mdn=Agree)*

Subjects are relevant to my life		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Strongly Disagree	7	4.9	5.4	5.4
	Disagree	12	8.5	9.2	14.6
	Neutral	39	27.5	30.0	44.6
	Agree	49	34.5	37.7	82.3
	Strongly Agree	23	16.2	17.7	100.0
	Total	130	91.5	100.0	
Missing	System	12	8.5		
Total		142	100.0		

Table 25: *Subjects are relevant to my life (Mdn=Agree)*

Subjects do not contain much repetition of content		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Strongly Disagree	4	2.8	3.1	3.1
	Disagree	27	19.0	20.9	24.0
	Neutral	49	34.5	38.0	62.0
	Agree	40	28.2	31.0	93.0
	Strongly Agree	9	6.3	7.0	100.0
	Total	129	90.8	100.0	
Missing	System	13	9.2		
Total		142	100.0		

Table 26: *Subjects do not contain much repetition of content (Mdn=Neutral)*

Subjects provide a lot of practical work		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Strongly Disagree	3	2.1	2.3	2.3
	Disagree	15	10.6	11.7	14.1
	Neutral	41	28.9	32.0	46.1
	Agree	38	26.8	29.7	75.8
	Strongly Agree	31	21.8	24.2	100.0
	Total	128	90.1	100.0	
Missing	System	14	9.9		
Total		142	100.0		

Table 27: *Subjects provide a lot of practical work (Mdn=Agree)*

Subjects meet my expectations		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Strongly Disagree	1	.7	.8	.8
	Disagree	13	9.2	10.1	10.9
	Neutral	36	25.4	27.9	38.8
	Agree	55	38.7	42.6	81.4
	Strongly Agree	24	16.9	18.6	100.0
	Total	129	90.8	100.0	
Missing	System	13	9.2		
Total		142	100.0		

Table 28: *Subjects meet my expectations (Mdn=Agree)*

Conclusion

From the results reported above, the mostly typical sample population for this research exercise mainly consisted of female respondents, coming from relatively traditional families of Maltese nationality, with their parents/guardian having mostly completed Secondary School and with parents/guardian engaged in full-time employment. Respondents were mainly living with both parents and family size was altogether standard, with respondents reporting living with 1-2 siblings in the same household. The natural parents of the respondents were mainly not divorced, nor legally separated, nor not living together. The preferred family activity the family engaged in together was watching TV. Two of the main reasons for them enjoying studying was that they found a lot of support in their studies at home and that they had a good relationship with their parents/guardian. Regarding academic performance, our respondents were predominantly good academic achievers (through self-report), never having repeated a grade. The majority of respondents had an overall good schooling experience and intended continuing going to school to prepare for higher education once they completed compulsory secondary education. This latter result evinces a sample population predominantly made up of respondents who were altogether confident in the career path they wanted to take. Yet, most respondents indicated that they enjoyed studying because their parents/guardian had high expectations of them. This result seems at first at odds with what seemed like a sample population primarily made up of self-motivated and assertive respondents, capable of making their own choices and taking decisions unaided. However, here one has to bear in mind the age of the sample population, being approximately 14 years of age. Respondents may indeed have been assertive and decisive, yet, being still relatively young, they might have still felt the need to be backed-up by their caregivers in their life and career choices. Yet, more inconsistencies crop up once one looks at the results in more detail. This is at its most clear when respondents were asked about what makes them enjoy and what makes them not enjoy studying and also when asked to rate response items in connection with their school subjects. If one ignores the results obtained from the question asking respondents the reasons for them not enjoying studying, one would get the impression that overall our respondents had a very positive outlook on their school and their studies. Yet, when we do take that data into consideration, we see that the main reason

for them not enjoying studying was due to physical and/or psychological health issues having negative repercussions on them. When respondents were given space (through open text fields) to freely vent their reasons for not enjoying studying, several factors cropped up, such as stress, anxiety, low self-esteem and bullying. One respondent, having first chosen as a reason for her enjoying studying the high self-expectations she had of herself and the high expectations namely caregivers and educators had of her, now argued that these high expectations were an unbearable burden ("I am one of the best students in my class so that means a lot of people are expecting from me and it puts me under a lot of stress"). Respondents complained that they were given too much schoolwork, leaving them with little to no free time, and that material covered in class was at times not interesting or irrelevant to their chosen career paths. They also complained that teachers were at times not understanding of students' problems ("The reason we do not understand is because some of the teachers are not capable of explaining the problem well and do not consider the fact that not everyone is 100% sure they understood"). These results indicate that any discussion/s regarding the challenges and barriers being faced by good academic achievers ought to take into consideration the issue of the possibility of early burnout among such students.

Another reason why these inconsistencies being reported by good academic-achieving respondents are of high interest is because when one considers that this is a mostly typical sample population, with respondents coming from relatively stable backgrounds, the respondents' reticence when speaking about the factors that made them not enjoy studying makes one wonder what the situation could be like for the academic low-achievers, especially those coming from difficult backgrounds, who do not have representation in this sample population. As will be reported later, Research Exercises 3 and 4 were tailored specifically to target so-called academic low-achievers, at State schools (Research Exercise 3) and at MCAST (Research Exercise 4).

Research Exercise 2
(with all MCAST Students)

Methodology

An online questionnaire was designed and implemented on Qualtrics, in both English and Maltese languages, and the link distributed via e-mail by the respective Institute directors amongst all their students at all MQF levels ranging from EQF/MQF Introductory Level A to EQF/MQF Level 7. Ethics clearance to conduct research with all MCAST students was sought from, and granted by, the MCAST Research Ethics Committee (REC) prior to dissemination of link to online questionnaire. The questionnaire was activated and made to collect responses for a three-week period starting mid-February 2019. At the beginning of each week, a reminder was sent via e-mail by the Institute directors to all their students, reminding them to respond to the questionnaire if they had not done so already. At the end of this three-week period, the questionnaire was closed and data downloaded in csv file format and imported into Microsoft Excel. Preliminary sorting of data and statistical procedures were done in Microsoft Excel. Further statistical procedures were performed in SPSS version 24.

Results

There were 497 responses, 33 of which were partially completed responses. Seven responses came from non-full-time students at MCAST, and these were filtered out (number of remaining responses: 490). Reponses that were completely blank starting from the question, 'How well do you do in your studies at MCAST?' were removed. This question was chosen as the cut-off point since it was the first question in the questionnaire to address the topic of this research study (questions preceding this cut-off point mainly collected demographic data). After this exercise, there were 393 valid responses, which constituted the sample size of this research study.

More female respondents (n = 256, 65.3%; Table 29) responded to the questionnaire than males. This result already indicates that the sample population of this research study is not a wholly representative sample. One respondent left the question asking about one's gender blank.

Gender	Count	Percentage
Females	256	65.3
Males	131	33.4
Other	5	1.3
Total	392	100

Table 29: *Count and percentage of respondents by gender*

The mean age of the sample population was 19.83 years with a standard deviation of 4.49 (Table 30).

Age	M	SD	Min	Max
	19.83	4.49	16	61

Table 30: *Descriptive statistics for respondents' ages (M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation)*

The sample population had residence predominantly in Malta (*n* = 367, 94.8%; Table 31).

	Locality	Count	Total %	Malta %	Gozo %
Malta	Attard	5	1.3	1.4	
	Balzan	2	0.5	0.5	
	Birgu	1	0.3	0.3	
	Birkirkara	15	3.9	4.1	
	Birżebbuġa	16	4.1	4.4	
	Bormla	11	2.8	3.0	
	Dingli	7	1.8	1.9	
	Fgura	16	4.1	4.4	
	Floriana	2	0.5	0.5	
	Gudja	7	1.8	1.9	
	Gżira	2	0.5	0.5	
	Għargħur	2	0.5	0.5	
	Għaxaq	4	1.0	1.1	
	Ħamrun	12	3.1	3.3	
	Iklin	6	1.6	1.6	
	Isla	0	0.0	0.0	
	Kalkara	5	1.3	1.4	
	Kirkop	5	1.3	1.4	
	Lija	2	0.5	0.5	
	Luqa	4	1.0	1.1	
	Marsa	4	1.0	1.1	
	Marsaskala	17	4.4	4.6	
	Marsaxlokk	5	1.3	1.4	
	Mdina	0	0.0	0.0	
	Mellieħa	0	0.0	0.0	

	Mġarr	2	0.5	0.5	
	Mosta	18	4.7	4.9	
	Mqabba	2	0.5	0.5	
	Msida	13	3.4	3.5	
	Mtarfa	3	0.8	0.8	
	Naxxar	11	2.8	3.0	
	Paola	4	1.0	1.1	
	Pembroke	7	1.8	1.9	
	Pieta	4	1.0	1.1	
	Qormi	18	4.7	4.9	
	Qrendi	1	0.3	0.3	
	Rabat	7	1.8	1.9	
	Safi	3	0.8	0.8	
	San Ġiljan	4	1.0	1.1	
	San Ġwann	11	2.8	3.0	
	San Pawl il-Baħar	27	7.0	7.4	
	Santa Luċija	2	0.5	0.5	
	Santa Venera	4	1.0	1.1	
	Siġġiewi	6	1.6	1.6	
	Sliema	8	2.1	2.2	
	Swieqi	5	1.3	1.4	
	Ta' Xbiex	0	0.0	0.0	
	Tarxien	11	2.8	3.0	
	Valletta	5	1.3	1.4	
	Xgħajra	1	0.3	0.3	
	Żabbar	10	2.6	2.7	
	Żebbug	15	3.9	4.1	
	Żejtun	10	2.6	2.7	
	Żurrieq	5	1.3	1.4	
Gozo	Fontana	2	0.5		10.0
	Għajnsielem	3	0.8		15.0
	Għarb	0	0.0		0.0
	Għasri	0	0.0		0.0
	Kerċem	0	0.0		0.0
	Munxar	0	0.0		0.0

	Nadur	3	0.8		15.0
	Qala	2	0.5		10.0
	Rabat	2	0.5		10.0
	San Lawrenz	1	0.3		5.0
	Sannat	1	0.3		5.0
	Xagħra	3	0.8		15.0
	Xewkija	1	0.3		5.0
	Żebbuġ	2	0.5		10.0
	Total	387	100.0		
	Malta Total	367	94.8		
	Gozo Total	20	5.2		

Table 31: *Respondents' place of residence in Malta and Gozo*

There was representation from all Institutes, with least representation from Gozo campus (*n* = 10, 2.5%; Table 32).

Institute	**Count**	**Percentage**
IAS	48	12.2
IBMC	115	29.3
ICS	88	22.4
ICA	38	9.7
IET	36	9.2
ICT	55	14.0
Gozo	10	2.5
Don't know	3	0.8
Total	393	100

Table 32: *As a current full-time MCAST student, at which institute/campus are you enrolled? (**IAS**: Institute of Applied Sciences; **IBMC**: Institute of Business Management and Commerce; **ICS** = Institute of Community Services; **ICA** = Institute for the Creative Arts; **IET** = Institute of Engineering and Transport; **ICT** = Institute of Information and Communication Technology; **Gozo** = Gozo Campus)*

Most respondents were EQF/MQF Level 3 students and upwards (*n* = 373, 95.4%; Table 33). Again, this shows that the sample population of this research study was not a wholly representative sample since students from lower levels were either highly underrepresented (EQF/MQF Levels 1 and 2: *n* = 9, 2.3%) or not represented at all (EQF/MQF Introductory Levels A and B: *n* = 0).

EQF/MQF Level	Count	Percentage
A	0	0.0
B	0	0.0
1	1	0.3
2	8	2.0
3	59	15.1
4	164	41.9
5	41	10.5
6	105	26.9
7	4	1.0
Don't know	9	2.3
Total	391	100

Table 33: *To which EQF/MQF level does the course of study you are following at MCAST correspond?*

Most respondents and their parents/guardian were born in Malta (**You**: *n* = 337, 87.8%; **Mother**: *n* = 323, 83.5%; **Father**: *n* = 313, 81.7%; **Guardian**: *n* = 66, 74.2%; Table 34).

Country of birth	You		Mother		Father		Guardian	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Malta	337	87.8	323	83.5	313	81.7	66	74.2
EU	26	6.8	29	7.5	35	9.1	11	12.4
Non-EU	20	5.2	33	8.5	33	8.6	9	10.1
Don't know	1	0.3	2	0.5	2	0.5	3	3.4
Total	384	100.0	387	100.0	383	100.0	89	100.0

Table 34: *In which country were you, your parents (mother and father separately) and/or guardian born?*

Most respondents' parents/guardian had completed at most secondary school (**Mother**: *n* = 194, 49.7%; **Father**: *n* = 160, 41.7%; **Guardian**: *n* = 12, 20.3%; Table 35) followed by technical/vocational school (**Mother**: *n* = 93, 23.8%; **Father**: *n* = 94, 24.5%; **Guardian**: *n* = 9, 15.3%).

Level of schooling completed	**Mother**		**Father**		**Guardian**	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
No formal school	2	0.5	4	1.0	0	0.0
Primary	14	3.6	22	5.7	3	5.1
Secondary	194	49.7	160	41.7	12	20.3
Technical or Vocational	93	23.8	94	24.5	9	15.3
University (Bachelor's)	42	10.8	42	10.9	8	13.6
Postgraduate (Master's; Doctorate)	8	2.1	24	6.3	3	5.1
Don't know	37	9.5	38	9.9	24	40.7
Total	390	100.0	384	100.0	59	100.0

Table 35: *What is the highest level of schooling completed by your parents (mother and father separately) and/or guardian?*

Most respondents' parents/guardian were working full-time for pay (**Mother**: *n* = 186, 48.7%; **Father**: *n* = 319, 85.8%; **Guardian**: *n* = 20, 39.2%, Table 36).

Current status	**Mother**		**Father**		**Guardian**	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Full-time employment	186	48.7	319	85.8	20	39.2
Part-time employment	49	12.8	5	1.3	1	2.0
Not working but looking for a job	9	2.4	3	0.8	0	0.0
On social benefits	22	5.8	17	4.6	8	15.7
Other (e.g. unpaid homemaker, student)	99	25.9	8	2.2	8	15.7
Don't know	17	4.5	20	5.4	14	27.5
Total	382	100.0	372	100.0	51	100.0

Table 36: *What are your parents (mother and father separately) and/or guardian currently doing?*

Most respondents lived with both parents (*n* = 281, 73.0%; Table 37). The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'Both parents'.

Who do you primarily live with?	Count	Percentage
Both parents	281	73.0
Mother	67	17.4
Father	17	4.4
Other relatives	11	2.9
Legal Guardian	2	0.5
Sheltered/residential home	7	1.8
Total	385	100.0

Table 37: *Who do you primarily live with?*

The majority of the respondents had siblings/stepsiblings living in the same household with them (*n* = 291, 75.4%; Table 38) and the mean number of siblings living in the same household was 1.62 with a standard deviation of 1.08 (Table 39).

Do you have siblings/stepsiblings living in the same household with you?	Count	Percentage
Yes	291	75.4
No	95	24.6
Total	386	100.0

Table 38: *Do you have siblings/stepsiblings living in the same household with you?*

M	SD	Min	Max
1.62	1.08	0	8

Table 39: *Descriptive statistics: How many siblings/stepsiblings are living in the same household with you? (M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation)*

The natural parents of most respondents were not divorced or legally separated or not living together (*n* = 285, 73.1%). The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'No'.

Are your natural parents divorced/legally separated/not living together?	Count	Percentage
No	285	73.1
Yes	92	23.6
Don't Know	13	3.3
Total	390	100

Table 40: *Are your natural parents divorced/legally separated/not living together?*

The most typical leisure activity most respondents' families engaged in together was watching TV (*n* = 218; Table 41). This was followed by dining-out (*n* = 211). The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'Watching TV'.

What typical leisure activities does your family engage in together?	Count
Sport/leisure activities	39
Cultural activities	87
Dining-out	211
Time with wider family	159
Time in nature	116
Shopping	146
Attending Mass	83
Community work	15
Travelling	143
DIY hobbies	41
Watching TV	218
We do not engage in leisure activities together	48
Other	17

Table 41: *What typical leisure activities does your family engage in together?*

Most of the respondents had never previously dropped out from a course of study at MCAST (*n* = 342, 87.2%; Table 42). The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'No'.

Have you ever previously dropped out from a course of study at MCAST?	Count	Percentage
No	342	87.2
Yes	40	10.2
Don't remember	1	0.3
N/A	9	2.3
Total	392	100.0

Table 42: *Have you ever previously dropped out from a course of study at MCAST?*

Also, most of the respondents had never repeated a year at MCAST (*n* = 353, 90.5%; Table 43). The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'No'.

Have you ever repeated a year at MCAST?	Count	Percentage
No	353	90.5
Yes, once	20	5.1
Yes, twice or more	4	1.0
Don't remember	0	0.0
N/A	13	3.3
Total	390	100

Table 43: *Have you ever repeated a year at MCAST?*

The sample population consisted predominantly of average, and above, academic performers (*n* = 374, 95.4%; Table 44). The median for this question corresponded to response item 'Above average'. This result too indicated that our sample population was not a wholly representative sample, as underperformers were very poorly represented. Also, when interpreting the results of this question, one should always bear in mind that response to this question was based on respondents' subjective experience; no actual exam scores or measured performance indicators were collected through the questionnaire.

How well do you do in your studies at MCAST?	Count	Percentage
Excellent, probably best in class	66	16.8
Well above average	108	27.6
Above average	107	27.3
Average	93	23.7
Below average	8	2.0
Well below average	0	0.0
Poor, probably worst in class	10	2.6
Total	392	100.0

Table 44: *How well do you do in your studies at MCAST?*

Regarding financial stability, there was a more balanced response, with 46.3% stating that they were not financially stable (*n* = 181; Table 45) and 53.7% stating that they were financially stable (*n* = 210). The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'Yes'.

Are you financially stable?	Count	Percentage
No	181	46.3
Yes	210	53.7
Total	391	100

Table 45: *Are you financially stable?*

When asked whether they depended financially on others, again the result was quite balanced, with 43.6% stating that they did not depend financially on others (*n* = 170) and 56.4% stating that they depended financially on others (*n* = 220). The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'Yes'.

Do you depend financially on others?	Count	Percentage
No	170	43.6
Yes	220	56.4
Total	390	100

Table 46: *Do you depend financially on others?*

Most respondents reportedly intended to continue studying at MCAST when they finished their current course of study at MCAST (*n* = 139, 35.7%; Table 47). This was followed by 'I will look for a job to earn money' (*n* = 103, 26.5%). The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'I will continue studying at MCAST'.

What do you think you will do when you finish your current course of study at MCAST?	Count	Percentage
Continue studying at MCAST	139	35.7
Continue studying at a different educational institution	50	12.9
Start an apprenticeship	4	1.0
Look for a job to earn money	103	26.5
Continue with my current job	23	5.9
Plan to start a family	3	0.8
Start/continue working at the family business	3	0.8
Stay at home taking care of children/parents/ other relatives	0	0.0
Do not know yet	39	10.0
Other	25	6.4
Total	389	100.0

Table 47: *What do you think you will do when you finish your current course of study at MCAST?*

When those respondents who chose the response item 'I do not know yet' to the question 'What do you think you will do when you finish your current course of study at MCAST?' were asked what could be done to help them decide, most suggested talks and information sessions, and sessions with ex-students and students in the same field of study as theirs to share their experiences with them. Others suggested that to aid their decision, the College should be more professional, that there should be an increase in the stipend, that more Master's degree courses should be set up, that courses of studies should be made less boring and that apprenticeship schemes should be made more relevant to their respective courses of studies. Some

respondents stated that their objective was to finish their course of study and that they would then decide what to do after that. Other respondents stated that they had no idea what could be done to help them decide, with one respondent being confused as to whether to continue with the current course of study or opting for a different course of study.

Respondents were asked to think about the College and then choose from the response item-list the one/s they thought was/were the reason/s why they enjoyed studying. The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'I would say that I enjoy studying at the College because I find a lot of support in my studies from my lecturers at MCAST' (*n* = 144).

- I would say that I enjoy studying at the College because the environment at MCAST is positive (*n* = 85)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at the College because the environment at MCAST is safe (*n* = 81)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at the College because support services at MCAST are good (*n* = 48)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at the College because the lecturers at MCAST are motivating (*n* = 94)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at the College because the relationship between my lecturers and my parents/guardian is good (*n* = 27)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at the College because my parents/guardian are/is involved in activity at MCAST (*n* = 4)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at the College because we, the students, are made to be active contributors in class (*n* = 80)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at the College because my lecturers know how to manage the class well (*n* = 94)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at the College because in class more emphasis is put on the practical side of the subject/s rather than on the theoretical side (*n* = 139)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at the College because studying at MCAST gives me an opportunity to remain engaged with the community (*n* = 60)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at the College because the institutional practices at MCAST are stable (*n* = 52)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at the College because a lot of student activities are held at MCAST (*n* = 18)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at the College because students at MCAST are treated equally (*n* = 80)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at the College because the administrative services at MCAST are good (*n* = 39)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at the College because at MCAST my opinions and suggestions are valued and taken into consideration (*n* = 56)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at the College because I find a lot of support in my studies from my lecturers at MCAST (*n* = 144)
- I would say that I enjoy studying at the College because communication between students and all staff members at MCAST is good (*n* = 90)

Respondents were asked to think about their schoolwork and then choose from the response item-list the one/s they thought was/were the reason/s why they enjoyed

studying. The mode for this question corresponded to response item "I would say that I enjoy studying because assignments and assessments are relevant" (*n* = 157).

- I would say that I enjoy studying because homework is easy (*n* = 37)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because studying takes little of my free time (*n* = 44)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because assignments and assessments are well-structured (*n* = 110)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because assignments and assessments are well-timed (*n* = 57)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because assignments and assessments are relevant (*n* = 157)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because assignments and assessments are fair (*n* = 104)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because grading of assignments and assessments is fair (*n* = 106)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because results of assignments and assessments are published in a timely manner (*n* = 30)

Respondents were asked to think about their core skills and then choose from the response item-list the one/s they thought was/were the reason/s why they enjoyed studying. The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'I would say that I enjoy studying because my writing skills are good' (*n* = 216).

- I would say that I enjoy studying because my reading skills are good (*n* = 210)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because my writing skills are good (*n* = 216)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because my numeracy skills are good (*n* = 163)

Respondents were asked to think about their home and then choose from the response item-list the one/s they thought was/were the reason/s why they enjoyed studying. The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'I would say that I enjoy studying because the home environment is positive' (*n* = 190).

- I would say that I enjoy studying because I find a lot of support in my studies at home (*n* = 168)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because the home environment is positive (*n* = 190)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because the financial situation at home is stable/good which allows me to invest in schoolbooks and other resources (*n* = 140)

Respondents were asked to think about their relationship with others and then choose from the response item-list the one/s they thought was/were the reason/s why they enjoyed studying. The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'I would say that I enjoy studying because I have a good relationship with my parents/guardian' (*n* = 206).

- I would say that I enjoy studying because I have a good relationship with my peers (*n* = 189)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because I have a good relationship with my lecturers (*n* = 184)

- I would say that I enjoy studying because I have a good relationship with my parents/guardian (*n* = 206)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because I have a good relationship with my siblings/stepsiblings (*n* = 148)

Respondents were asked to think about the expectations they have of themselves/ others have of them and then choose from the response item-list the one/s they thought was/were the reason/s why they enjoyed studying. The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'I would say that I enjoy studying because I have high self-expectations' (*n* = 192).

- I would say that I enjoy studying because I have high self-expectations (*n* = 192)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because my parents/guardian have/has high expectations of me (*n* = 180)
- I would say that I enjoy studying because my lecturer/s has/have high expectations of me (*n* = 109)

Respondents were asked to state what other reasons made them enjoy studying. Most respondents answered that it was the love and passion for learning in general and its rewarding nature, and to become more knowledgeable and successful. Other main reasons why respondents enjoyed studying were that studying would help them achieve their aims and goals, progress to higher levels and help them in securing a good job, which would ensure financial stability. Some respondents stated that they enjoyed studying because they found their course of study relevant, interesting and fun to learn, and aligned to what they envisioned they would be doing in the future. Some respondents stated that they enjoyed studying out of personal satisfaction and to make their loved ones proud of them. Other respondents stated that they enjoyed studying because the lecturers at MCAST were experienced in their profession, and lectures and other members of staff were supportive, helpful, and empowered students. Still other respondents stated that they enjoyed studying in order to pass their exams and gain accredited certification. Some respondents stated that they enjoyed studying because it was free or in order not to repeat a year at the College. The ability to ask questions related to school and classroom environment to one's mentor and LSE was the reason why one respondent enjoyed studying. A few respondents stated that they enjoyed studying because of the good relationships they had with their classroom peers, who all supported each other, and because of the support received from family members. Placements and the greater emphasis placed on practical work were the reasons why some respondents enjoyed studying. The fact that studying improves mental processes, such as memory, and one's communication skills were the reasons why one respondent enjoyed studying.

Respondents were asked to think about their physical/psychological health and life experiences and then choose from the response item-list the one/s they thought was/were the reason/s why they did not enjoy studying. The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'I would say that I DO NOT enjoy studying because physical and/or psychological health issues are having negative repercussions on me' (*n* = 68).

- I would say that I DO NOT enjoy studying because a life-altering incident in the past has affected me negatively (*n* = 30)

- I would say that I DO NOT enjoy studying because physical and/or psychological health issues are having negative repercussions on me (*n* = 68)
- I would say that I DO NOT enjoy studying because I suffer from an addiction (*n* = 7)
- I would say that I DO NOT enjoy studying because I have a learning disability (*n* = 19)
- I would say that I DO NOT enjoy studying because ongoing familial problems are causing me a lot of stress (*n* = 53)
- I would say that I DO NOT enjoy studying because I am being bullied/harassed at home (*n* = 6)
- I would say that I DO NOT enjoy studying because I am being bullied/harassed at the College by peers/lecturers/etc. (*n* = 17)
- I would say that I DO NOT enjoy studying because my peers at MCAST are having a negative influence on me (*n* = 25)

Respondents were asked to state what other reasons made them not enjoy studying. From the responses gathered, it was evinced that some students felt the need for improvement in the College's curricular sector (such as more relevant and updated course content, and improved lecturing and grading methods), in the administrative sector (such as improvement in timetabling assessments and assignments' deadlines, notifications and feedback about assessments being provided in a more timely manner, more protection offered to students from negative repercussions caused by industrial action directives, and improved apprenticeship working conditions) and in the infrastructural sector (such as better Wi-Fi connection on campus and improved class décor). Another reason why respondents were not enjoying studying was financial difficulties, with one respondent stating that food and water at MCAST were expensive, leaving one with insufficient funds to buy both lunch and the required materials related to one's studies, and another respondent stating that having to work to financially support the family, while studying, was causing problems. Other respondents stated that they did not enjoy studying because of time management issues. Other respondents enlisted more personal reasons for not enjoying studying, such as short attention span, a general sense of boredom, having a lot on one's mind, depression, emotional instability, demotivation and stress. Some respondents stated that they did not enjoy studying because there was no real bond with peers at the College, and that peers in class were rowdy, with no one being able to manage them properly. One respondent stated that the air pollution at the MCAST Main Campus in Paola caused health problems and this made one not enjoy studying there. Some respondents felt that there was a language barrier at the College and that foreign students were being treated differently from local students by lecturers and members of staff. Some respondents stated that they did not like studying in general. One respondent stated that having a perfectionist parent, who insisted on better grades, caused restrictions to one's social life and this led one not to enjoy studying.

Respondents were asked to think specifically about their course of study at MCAST and to rate each response item related to their course of study on a 5-point Likert Scale. Five response items presented received a response that corresponded to the Neutral position on the Likert scale ([1] The course of study is easy to understand [Table 48]; [2] The course of study grants me access to certain resources and facilities at the College/at home [Table 50]; [3] The course of study allows for flexible management of attendance days and hours [Table 55]; [4] The course of study is well-structured/

designed [Table 57]; [5] The course of study does not contain much repetition of content [Table 59]). Eight response items received a response that corresponded to the Agree position on the Likert scale, and these were: (1) I feel passionate about this course of study (Table 49); (2) The course of study is interesting (Table 51); (3) The employment prospects associated with this course of study are good (Table 52); (4) The course of study is fun to learn (Table 53); (5) The course of study teaches me a lot of skills (Table 56); (6) The course of study is relevant to my life (Table 58); (7) The course of study provides a lot of practical work (Table 60); (8) The course of study meets my expectations (Table 61). This result seems to indicate that the respondents feel passionate about their course of study and are aware of the career possibilities that their respective course of study grants them. Interestingly, only one response item garnered a response corresponding to the Totally Agree position on the Likert scale, and this response item was 'It was my personal choice to follow this course of study' (Table 54). This result shows that the majority of respondents were self-determined individuals, capable of taking decisions about their future career path.

Thinking of my course of study at MCAST, I would say that:

The course of study is easy to understand		**Frequency**	**Percentage**	**Valid Percentage**	**Cumulative Percentage**
Valid	Totally Disagree	14	3.6	4.2	4.2
	Disagree	47	12.0	14.1	18.3
	Neutral	149	37.9	44.7	63.1
	Agree	100	25.4	30.0	93.1
	Totally Agree	23	5.9	6.9	100.0
	Total	333	84.7	100.0	
Missing	System	60	15.3		
Total		393	100.0		

Table 48: *The course of study is easy to understand (Mdn=Neutral)*

I feel passionate about this course of study		**Frequency**	**Percentage**	**Valid Percentage**	**Cumulative Percentage**
Valid	Totally Disagree	9	2.3	2.7	2.7
	Disagree	16	4.1	4.8	7.6
	Neutral	60	15.3	18.1	25.7
	Agree	154	39.2	46.5	72.2
	Totally Agree	92	23.4	27.8	100.0
	Total	331	84.2	100.0	
Missing	System	62	15.8		
Total		393	100.0		

Table 49: *I feel passionate about this course of study (Mdn=Agree)*

The course of study grants me access to certain resources and facilities at the College/at home		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Totally Disagree	19	4.8	5.7	5.7
	Disagree	23	5.9	6.9	12.7
	Neutral	130	33.1	39.3	52.0
	Agree	116	29.5	35.0	87.0
	Totally Agree	43	10.9	13.0	100.0
	Total	331	84.2	100.0	
Missing	System	62	15.8		
Total		393	100.0		

Table 50: *The course of study grants me access to certain resources and facilities at the College/at home (Mdn=Neutral)*

The course of study is interesting		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Totally Disagree	4	1.0	1.2	1.2
	Disagree	6	1.5	1.8	3.0
	Neutral	57	14.5	17.2	20.2
	Agree	161	41.0	48.6	68.9
	Totally Agree	103	26.2	31.1	100.0
	Total	331	84.2	100.0	
Missing	System	62	15.8		
Total		393	100.0		

Table 51: *The course of study is interesting (Mdn=Agree)*

The employment prospects associated with this course of study are good		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Totally Disagree	8	2.0	2.4	2.4
	Disagree	18	4.6	5.4	7.8
	Neutral	93	23.7	28.0	35.8
	Agree	126	32.1	38.0	73.8
	Totally Agree	87	22.1	26.2	100.0
	Total	332	84.5	100.0	
Missing	System	61	15.5		
Total		393	100.0		

Table 52: *The employment prospects associated with this course of study are good (Mdn=Agree)*

The course of study is fun to learn		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Totally Disagree	12	3.1	3.6	3.6
	Disagree	26	6.6	7.8	11.4
	Neutral	91	23.2	27.2	38.6
	Agree	159	40.5	47.6	86.2
	Totally Agree	46	11.7	13.8	100.0
	Total	334	85.0	100.0	
Missing	System	59	15.0		
Total		393	100.0		

Table 53: *The course of study is fun to learn (Mdn=Agree)*

It was my personal choice to follow this course of study		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Totally Disagree	4	1.0	1.2	1.2
	Disagree	4	1.0	1.2	2.4
	Neutral	21	5.3	6.3	8.7
	Agree	86	21.9	25.7	34.3
	Totally Agree	220	56.0	65.7	100.0
	Total	335	85.2	100.0	
Missing	System	58	14.8		
Total		393	100.0		

Table 54: *It was my personal choice to follow this course of study (Mdn=Totally Agree)*

The course of study allows for flexible management of attendance days and hours		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Totally Disagree	55	14.0	16.6	16.6
	Disagree	62	15.8	18.7	35.3
	Neutral	104	26.5	31.4	66.8
	Agree	81	20.6	24.5	91.2
	Totally Agree	29	7.4	8.8	100.0
	Total	331	84.2	100.0	
Missing	System	62	15.8		
Total		393	100.0		

Table 55: *The course of study allows for flexible management of attendance days and hours (Mdn=Neutral)*

The course of study teaches me a lot of skills		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Totally Disagree	9	2.3	2.7	2.7
	Disagree	14	3.6	4.2	6.9
	Neutral	77	19.6	23.1	30.0
	Agree	141	35.9	42.3	72.4
	Totally Agree	92	23.4	27.6	100.0
	Total	333	84.7	100.0	
Missing	System	60	15.3		
Total		393	100.0		

Table 56: *The course of study teaches me a lot of skills (Mdn=Agree)*

The course of study is well-structured/designed		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Totally Disagree	34	8.7	10.2	10.2
	Disagree	48	12.2	14.4	24.6
	Neutral	117	29.8	35.1	59.8
	Agree	99	25.2	29.7	89.5
	Totally Agree	35	8.9	10.5	100.0
	Total	333	84.7	100.0	
Missing	System	60	15.3		
Total		393	100.0		

Table 57: *The course of study is well-structured/designed (Mdn=Neutral)*

The course of study is relevant to my life		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Totally Disagree	6	1.5	1.8	1.8
	Disagree	10	2.5	3.0	4.8
	Neutral	80	20.4	23.8	28.6
	Agree	142	36.1	42.3	70.8
	Totally Agree	98	24.9	29.2	100.0
	Total	336	85.5	100.0	
Missing	System	57	14.5		
Total		393	100.0		

Table 58: *The course of study is relevant to my life (Mdn=Agree)*

The course of study does not contain much repetition of content		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Totally Disagree	48	12.2	14.4	14.4
	Disagree	77	19.6	23.1	37.4
	Neutral	121	30.8	36.2	73.7
	Agree	69	17.6	20.7	94.3
	Totally Agree	19	4.8	5.7	100.0
	Total	334	85.0	100.0	
Missing	System	59	15.0		
Total		393	100.0		

Table 59: *The course of study does not contain much repetition of content (Mdn=Neutral)*

The course of study provides a lot of practical work		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Totally Disagree	12	3.1	3.6	3.6
	Disagree	21	5.3	6.3	9.9
	Neutral	84	21.4	25.1	35.0
	Agree	142	36.1	42.5	77.5
	Totally Agree	75	19.1	22.5	100.0
	Total	334	85.0	100.0	
Missing	System	59	15.0		
Total		393	100.0		

Table 60: *The course of study provides a lot of practical work (Mdn=Agree)*

The course of study meets my expectations		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Totally Disagree	15	3.8	4.5	4.5
	Disagree	33	8.4	9.8	14.3
	Neutral	98	24.9	29.2	43.5
	Agree	139	35.4	41.4	84.8
	Totally Agree	51	13.0	15.2	100.0
	Total	336	85.5	100.0	
Missing	System	57	14.5		
Total		393	100.0		

Table 61: *The course of study meets my expectations (Mdn=Agree)*

Conclusion

From the results reported above, this mostly typical sample population consisted mainly of young, Maltese females, coming from relatively traditional families of Maltese nationality, with their parents/guardian having mostly completed secondary school. The breadwinner was mainly the father in full-time employment. Respondents were mainly living with both parents and family size was altogether standard, with respondents reporting living with 1-2 siblings in the same household. The preferred family activity the family engaged in together was watching TV. Two of the main reasons for them enjoying studying was that the home environment was positive and that they had a good relationship with their parents/guardian. Regarding academic performance, the respondents were predominantly good academic achievers (through self-report), never having dropped out from a course and never having repeated a year. Most respondents were financially stable, even though the majority received financial support from others. Most respondents evinced their confidence in their chosen career path, as most indicated that once they finished their current course of study they would continue studying at MCAST. In addition, another main reason for them enjoying studying was that they had high self-expectations. Also, most respondents indicated that it was their personal choice to study the course of study they were currently doing at MCAST. All this might be interpreted as indicating that the majority of respondents were self-determined and self-motivated and did not rely on external factors to achieve progress in their chosen career path. Respondents also indicated that they were passionate about their studies, that they found their studies interesting, that they thought that the course of study they were doing was fun to learn, that their course of study was relevant to their lives and that their course of study met their expectations. Yet, the main reason for them not enjoying studying was that physical and/or psychological health issues were having negative repercussions on them. This result seems at odds with the previous results that, collated together, presented a relatively positive profile of our typical respondent. Thus, as argued in the conclusion to Research Exercise 1, the current results indicate that any discussion/s regarding the challenges and barriers being faced by good academic achievers ought to take into consideration the issue of the possibility of early burnout among such students. This research study may indicate that if the needs, challenges, frustrations and difficulties these high achievers by self-report may experience in their learning journey are not appropriately addressed by their educational institution of choice, then the end result may very likely be that these students will experience burnout at a relatively tender age.

Finally, the above-reported issues being perceived as problematic by some students are a reality that the College needs to address for the betterment of students' learning experience. From a student perspective, the communications structure between administration and students needs to be improved and the College might need to focus on strengthening staff skills through tailor-made Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to ensure professional quality service to students.

In the following sections, results from two research exercises, tailored specifically to target so-called academic low-achievers, at State schools (Research Exercise 3) and at MCAST (Research Exercise 4), are presented.

Research Exercise 3
(with low-achieving, Form Three, State Secondary School Students)

Methodology

The sample population of respondents in Research Exercise 1, conducted with Form Four, State secondary school students, had negligible representation from low-achieving State secondary school students. Thus, a shortened and much more straightforward online questionnaire was designed specifically for Form Three, State secondary school students identified by their respective schools as low-achieving students. Once again, State schools were deemed to be the best choice to ensure that all regions in Malta and Gozo were potentially sampled. The online questionnaire was designed and implemented on Qualtrics, in both English and Maltese languages. The research team then liaised with the heads of State colleges to identify those classes populated by identified low-achieving Form Three, State secondary school students, namely classes 9.6 to 9.13. The research team then visited each college and had the said students complete the online questionnaire live in their presence, this to ensure that all identified students completed the questionnaire, albeit safeguarding the right of those who did not wish to take part or whose parents/guardian refused to give consent for the child to participate. All State colleges participated in this research exercise with the exception of one college, where the research exercise could not be conducted due to logistical problems. Ethics clearance to conduct research with State school students was sought from, and granted by, the Ministry for Education and Employment (formerly MEDE; now known as the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR)) and by the MCAST Research Ethics Committee (REC) prior to visiting the colleges and conducting the live sessions with the students. Also, since State school students are defined by Maltese law as being minors, prior to any research intervention, consent was also obtained from these students' respective parents. The responses were collected between November 2019 and January 2020. Once this exercise was finalised, the questionnaire was closed, and data were downloaded in csv file format and imported into Microsoft Excel. Preliminary sorting of data and statistical procedures were done in Microsoft Excel. Further statistical procedures were performed in SPSS version 24.

Results

There were 171 responses in total, with 2 responses being invalid. Thus, the sample size of this research study consisted of 169 valid responses.

More male respondents (*n* = 105, 62.9%; Table 62) responded to the questionnaire than females.

Gender	Count	Percentage
Female	60	35.9
Male	105	62.9
Other	2	1.2
Total	167	100

Table 62: *Count and percentage of respondents by age*

The mean age of the sample population was 13.13 years with a standard deviation of 0.40 (Table 63).

Age	M	SD	Min	Max
	13.13	0.40	12	15

Table 63: *Descriptive statistics for respondents' ages (M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation)*

Most respondents and their parents/guardian were born and raised in Malta (**You**: *n* = 132, 81.0%; **Mother**: *n* = 120, 74.5%; **Father**: *n* = 113, 72.0%; **Guardian**: *n* = 22, 57.9%; Table 64).

Were you and your parents and/or guardian born and raised in Malta?	You		Mother		Father		Guardian	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Yes	132	81.0	120	74.5	113	72.0	22	57.9
No	29	17.8	39	24.2	36	22.9	11	28.9
Don't know	2	1.2	2	1.2	8	5.1	5	13.2
Total	163	100	161	100	157	100	38	100

Table 64: *Were you and your parents and/or guardian born and raised in Malta?*

Most respondents' parents/guardian had completed compulsory education (**Mother**: *n* = 94, 57.0%; **Father**: *n* = 81, 51.3%; **Guardian**: *n* = 13, 41.9%; Table 65).

Have your parents and/or guardian completed compulsory secondary education?	**Mother**		**Father**		**Guardian**	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Yes	94	57.0	81	51.3	13	41.9
No	12	7.3	19	12.0	4	12.9
Don't know	59	35.8	58	36.7	14	45.2
Total	165	100	158	100	31	100

Table 65: *Have your parents and/or guardian completed compulsory secondary education?*

Most respondents' parents/guardian were currently employed (**Mother**: *n* = 106, 67.5%; **Father**: *n* = 127, 81.9%; **Guardian**: *n* = 14, 56.0%; Table 66).

Are your parents and/or guardian currently employed?	**Mother**		**Father**		**Guardian**	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Yes	106	67.5	127	81.9	14	56.0
No	43	27.4	13	8.4	8	32.0
Don't know	8	5.1	15	9.7	3	12.0
Total	157	100	155	100	25	100

Table 66: *Are your parents and/or guardian currently employed?*

Most respondents lived with both parents (*n* = 102, 60.4%; Table 67). The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'Both parents'.

Who do you primarily live with?	**Count**	**Percentage**
Both parents	102	60.4
Mother	48	28.4
Father	10	5.9
Other relatives	4	2.4
Legal Guardian	4	2.4
I live in a sheltered/residential home	1	0.6
Total	169	100

Table 67: *Who do you primarily live with?*

The majority of the respondents had siblings/stepsiblings living in the same household with them (*n* = 134, 80.7%; Table 68) and the mean number of siblings living in the same household was 2.09 with a standard deviation of 1.66 (Table 69).

Do you have siblings/stepsiblings living in the same household with you?	**Count**	**Percentage**
Yes	134	80.7
No	32	19.3
Total	166	100

Table 68: *Do you have siblings/stepsiblings living in the same household with you?*

M	**SD**	**Min**	**Max**
2.09	1.66	1	14

Table 69: *Descriptive statistics: How many siblings/stepsiblings are living in the same household with you? (M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation)*

Most respondents had an average or above-average prior schooling experience (*n* = 153, 90.6%; Table 70). The median for this question corresponded to response item 'A good schooling experience so far'.

Thinking of your experiences in previous school years, would you say that you have had:	**Count**	**Percentage**
A very good schooling experience so far	36	21.3
A good schooling experience so far	51	30.2
An average schooling experience so far	66	39.1
A bad schooling experience so far	9	5.3
A very bad schooling experience so far	7	4.1
Total	169	100

Table 70: *Thinking of your experiences in previous school years, would you say that you have had:*

The sample population consisted predominantly of average academic performers (*n* = 73, 43.5%; Table 71), with the median for this question corresponding to response item 'Average'. When interpreting the results of this question one should always bear in mind that response to this question was based on respondents' subjective experience; no actual exam scores or measured performance indicators were collected through the online questionnaire.

How well do you do in your studies at school?	Count	Percentage
Excellent, I'm probably one of the best in my class	15	8.9
Well above average	10	6.0
Above average	25	14.9
Average	73	43.5
Below average	22	13.1
Well below average	17	10.1
Poor, I'm probably one of the worst in my class	6	3.6
Total	168	100

Table 71: *How well do you do in your studies at school?*

The majority of respondents did not experience any negative life-changing incidents (Yes: 24.4%; No: 56.0%; Table 72), physical conditions (Yes: 18.1%; No: 74.7%; Table 73), psychological conditions (Yes: 20.8%; No: 69.6%; Table 74), learning disabilities (Yes: 27.4%; No: 67.3%; Table 75) or addictions (Yes: 14.4%; No: 78.4%; Table 76) that might have otherwise affected their studies.

Have you experienced any negative life-changing incident in the past, which you think negatively affects your studies?	Count	Percentage
Yes	41	24.4
No	94	56.0
Don't know	33	19.6
Total	168	100

Table 72: *Have you experienced any negative life-changing incident in the past, which you think negatively affects your studies? (Mode = No)*

Do you suffer from any physical condition that you think negatively affects your studies?	Count	Percentage
Yes	30	18.1
No	124	74.7
Don't know	12	7.2
Total	166	100

Table 73: *Do you suffer from any physical condition that you think negatively affects your studies? (Mode = No)*

Do you suffer from any psychological condition that you think negatively affects your studies?	Count	Percentage
Yes	35	20.8
No	117	69.6
Don't know	16	9.5
Total	168	100

Table 74: *Do you suffer from any psychological condition that you think negatively affects your studies? (Mode = No)*

Do you suffer from any learning disability that you think negatively affects your studies?	Count	Percentage
Yes	46	27.4
No	113	67.3
Don't know	9	5.4
Total	168	100

Table 75: *Do you suffer from any learning disability that you think negatively affects your studies? (Mode = No)*

Do you suffer from any addiction that you think negatively affects your studies?	Count	Percentage
Yes	24	14.4
No	131	78.4
Don't know	12	7.2
Total	167	100

Table 76: *Do you suffer from any addiction that you think negatively affects your studies? (Mode = No)*

Most respondents were never bullied or harassed at home (Yes: 9.5%; No: 88.1%; Table 77) but more than half the sample population reported experiencing bullying/harassment at school (Yes: 52.1%; No: 42.5%; Table 78). A chi-square goodness of fit test indicated that the proportion of bullied students at school in our sample population did not significantly differ from the proportion of non-bullied students at school in our sample population, X^2 (1, n = 158), = 1.620, p = .203 (Tables 79 and 80).

Have you ever been bullied/harassed at home?	Count	Percentage
Yes	16	9.5
No	148	88.1
Don't know/Prefer not to disclose	4	2.4
Total	168	100

Table 77: *Have you ever been bullied/harassed at home? (Mode = No)*

Have you ever been bullied/harassed at school?	Count	Percentage
Yes	87	52.1
No	71	42.5
Don't know/Prefer not to disclose	9	5.4
Total	167	100

Table 78: *Have you ever been bullied/harassed at school? (Mode = Yes)*

Have you ever been bullied/harassed at school?			
	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Yes	87	79.0	8.0
No	71	79.0	-8.0
Total	158		

Table 79: *Observed and expected counts for 'Have you ever been bullied/harassed at school?'*

Test Statistics	
	Have you ever been bullied/harassed at school?
Chi-Square	1.620
df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.203

Table 80: *Result of chi-square goodness-of-fit test*

Most respondents liked their teachers at school (Yes: 59.2%; No: 24.9%; Table 81).

Do you like your teachers at school?	Count	Percentage
Yes	100	59.2
No	42	24.9
Don't know/Prefer not to disclose	27	16.0
Total	169	100

Table 81: *Do you like your teachers at school? (Mode = Yes)*

Most respondents were never treated badly by their teachers at school (Yes: 31.5%; No: 58.3%; Table 82).

Have you ever been treated badly by your teachers at school?	Count	Percentage
Yes	53	31.5
No	98	58.3
Don't know/Prefer not to disclose	17	10.1
Total	168	100

Table 82: *Have you ever been treated badly by your teachers at school? (Mode = No)*

Most respondents thought that the educational system used at their school was fair (Yes: 57.6%; No: 20.0%; Table 83).

Do you think that the educational system at your school is fair?	Count	Percentage
Yes	95	57.6
No	33	20.0
Don't know/Prefer not to disclose	37	22.4
Total	165	100

Table 83: *Do you think that the educational system at your school is fair? (Mode = Yes)*

Some of those who replied 'Yes' to the question 'Do you think that the educational system at your school is fair?' further detailed in the text entry field that teachers were kind, treated everyone equally, listened to their questions, found solutions to their problems and that the teachings they imparted to them were good. Others reported that they liked their school subjects, and that homework was balanced. Some of those who replied 'No' to the question 'Do you think that the educational system at your school is fair?' further detailed in the text entry field that some teachers did not pay them attention and did not treat them well, that teachers should shout less, that there were too many subjects and little break time (one respondent suggested having only seven lessons and a longer break time), that more SEAC subjects should be made available, that toilets should be cleaner, that subjects offered were still too difficult for students with disabilities and this prevented them from reaching their goals, that generally the school rules were not good, that there should be less or no homework, that there should be half-yearly exams, that most subjects were being delivered in class strictly in the Maltese language, that some teachers treated foreign students badly, that teachers did not treat all students equally and that teachers should be kind. One respondent also complained of being put "in the worst class" only because of a bad grade obtained in just one subject.

Most respondents felt a sense of belonging at their school (Yes: 65.3%; No: 17.4%; Table 84).

Do you feel a sense of belonging at your school?	**Count**	**Percentage**
Yes	109	65.3
No	29	17.4
Don't know/Prefer not to disclose	29	17.4
Total	167	100

Table 84: *Do you feel a sense of belonging at your school? (Mode = Yes)*

More than half the sample population of respondents claimed that they did not wake up looking forward to going to school (Yes: 36.7%; No: 57.4%; Table 85). A chi-square goodness of fit test indicated that the proportion of students in our sample population who reported not waking up looking forward to going to school in the morning was significantly higher than the proportion of students who did wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning, X^2 (1, n = 159), = 7.704, p = .006 (Tables 86 and 87).

Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning?	**Count**	**Percentage**
Yes	62	36.7
No	97	57.4
Don't know/Prefer not to disclose	10	5.9
Total	169	100

Table 85: *Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning? (Mode = No)*

Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning?			
	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Yes	62	79.5	-17.5
No	97	79.5	17.5
Total	159		

Table 86: *Observed and expected counts for 'Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning?'*

Test Statistics	
	Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning?
Chi-Square	7.704
df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.006

Table 87: *Result of chi-square goodness-of-fit test*

Furthermore, no association was found between waking up looking or not looking forward to going to school in the morning and reporting of past experiences of bullying/harassment at school, X^2 (1, n = 148), = .008, p = .931 (Tables 88, 89 and 90).

Have you ever been bullied/harassed at school? * Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning? Cross-tabulation					
			Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning?		
	Yes				Total
	No				
Have you ever been bullied/harassed at school?	Yes	Count	32_a	49_a	81
		Expected Count	31.7	49.3	81.0
		% within 'Have you ever been bullied/harassed at school?'	39.5%	60.5%	100.0%
		% within 'Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning?'	55.2%	54.4%	54.7%
		% of Total	21.6%	33.1%	54.7%
		Adjusted Residual	.1	-.1	
	No	Count	26_a	41_a	67
		Expected Count	26.3	40.7	67.0
		% within 'Have you ever been bullied/harassed at school?'	38.8%	61.2%	100.0%
		% within 'Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning?'	44.8%	45.6%	45.3%
		% of Total	17.6%	27.7%	45.3%
		Adjusted Residual	-.1	.1	
Total		Count	58	90	148
Expected Count		58.0	90.0	148.0	
% within 'Have you ever been bullied/harassed at school?'		39.2%	60.8%	100.0%	
		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
% within 'Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning?'		39.2%	60.8%	100.0%	
% of Total					
Each subscript letter denotes a subset of 'Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning?' categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.					

Table 88: *Have you ever been bullied/harassed at school? * Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning? Cross-tabulation*

Chi-Square Tests					
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.008[a]	1	.931		
Continuity Correction[b]	.000	1	1.000		
Likelihood Ratio	.008	1	.931		
Fisher's Exact Test				1.000	.533
Linear-by-Linear Association	.007	1	.931		
N of Valid Cases	148				
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 26.26.					
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table					

Table 89: *Chi-Square Tests*

Mantel-Haenszel Common Odds Ratio Estimate			
Estimate			1.030
ln(Estimate)			.029
Standard Error of ln(Estimate)			.338
Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)			.931
Asymptotic 95% Confidence Interval	Common Odds Ratio	Lower Bound	.531
		Upper Bound	1.999
	ln(Common Odds Ratio)	Lower Bound	-.634
		Upper Bound	.693

Table 90: *Mantel-Haenszel Common Odds Ratio Estimate*

Interestingly, an association was evinced between thinking of the educational system used at one's school as being or not being fair and waking up feeling or not feeling like going to school in the morning, X^2 (1, n = 121), = 10.509, p = .001. If students thought that the educational system used at their school was not fair, the odds that they woke up looking forward to going to school in the morning were 5.05 times less than if they thought that the educational system used at their school was fair (Tables 91, 92 and 93).

Do you think that the educational system used at your school is fair? * Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning? Cross-tabulation					
			Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning?		
	Yes				Total
	No				
Do you think that the educational system used at your school is fair?	Yes	Count	43_a	46_b	89
		Expected Count	35.3	53.7	89.0
		% within 'Do you think that the educational system used at your school is fair?'	48.3%	51.7%	100.0%
		% within 'Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning?'	89.6%	63.0%	73.6%
		% of Total	35.5%	38.0%	73.6%
		Adjusted Residual	3.2	-3.2	
	No	Count	5_a	27_b	32
		Expected Count	12.7	19.3	32.0
		% within 'Do you think that the educational system used at your school is fair?'	15.6%	84.4%	100.0%
		% within 'Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning?'	10.4%	37.0%	26.4%
		% of Total	4.1%	22.3%	26.4%
		Adjusted Residual	-3.2	3.2	
Total		Count	48	73	121
Expected Count		48.0	73.0	121.0	
% within 'Do you think that the educational system used at your school is fair?'		39.7%	60.3%	100.0%	
% within 'Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning?'		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
% of Total		39.7%	60.3%	100.0%	
Each subscript letter denotes a subset of 'Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning?' categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.					

Table 91: *Do you think that the educational system used at your school is fair? * Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning? Cross-tabulation*

Chi-Square Tests					
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	10.509[a]	1	.001		
Continuity Correction[b]	9.188	1	.002		
Likelihood Ratio	11.522	1	.001		
Fisher's Exact Test				.001	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	10.423	1	.001		
N of Valid Cases	121				
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 12.69.					
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table					

Table 92: *Chi-Square Tests*

Mantel-Haenszel Common Odds Ratio Estimate			
Estimate			5.048
ln(Estimate)			1.619
Standard Error of ln(Estimate)			.531
Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)			.002
Asymptotic 95% Confidence Interval	Common Odds Ratio	Lower Bound	1.783
		Upper Bound	14.294
	ln(Common Odds Ratio)	Lower Bound	.578
		Upper Bound	2.660

Table 93: *Mantel-Haenszel Common Odds Ratio Estimate*

Most respondents claimed that there was nothing that made them afraid of going to school (Yes: 25.6%; No: 69.6%; Table 94).

Is there anything that makes you afraid of going to school?	**Count**	**Percentage**
Yes	43	25.6
No	117	69.6
Don't know/Prefer not to disclose	8	4.8
Total	168	100

Table 94: *Is there anything that makes you afraid of going to school? (Mode = No)*

Of those respondents who replied 'Yes' to the question 'Is there anything that makes you afraid of going to school?', the majority of those who gave further details in the text entry field claimed that their cause of fear of going to school was due to bullying (bullying at school happened to be the top-ranking comment among those who chose to further specify the reason for their fear of going to school [*n* = 11, out of 29 comments]). Other

respondents mentioned reading, having to attend all lessons, homework and classwork, loneliness, foreign students at school, school tests, not being able to use game consoles and duration of school day as reasons for them fearing going to school.

The majority of respondents claimed that they found support in their studies at home (Yes: 69.3%; No: 18.7%; Table 95) and at school (Yes: 70.9%; No: 13.3%; Table 96).

Do you find support in your studies at home?	Count	Percentage
Yes	115	69.3
No	31	18.7
Don't know	20	12.0
Total	166	100

Table 95: *Do you find support in your studies at home? (Mode = Yes)*

Do you find support in your studies at school?	Count	Percentage
Yes	117	70.9
No	22	13.3
Don't know	26	15.8
Total	165	100

Table 96: *Do you find support in your studies at school? (Mode = Yes)*

Most respondents claimed that they had good friends at school (Yes: 86.9%; No: 7.1%; Table 97).

Do you have good friends at school?	Count	Percentage
Yes	146	86.9
No	12	7.1
Don't know	10	6.0
Total	168	100

Table 97: *Do you have good friends at school? (Mode = Yes)*

Most respondents felt that studying was important for them (Yes: 76.2%; No: 12.8%; Table 98).

Do you think that studying is important for you?	Count	Percentage
Yes	125	76.2
No	21	12.8
Don't know	18	11.0
Total	164	100

Table 98: *Do you think that studying is important for you? (Mode = Yes)*

Of those respondents who answered 'Yes' to the question 'Do you think that studying is important for you?', those who gave further details in the text entry field stated that through studying they learnt more, that studying would help them in the future to get a good job and wage (which some added would help them support their families), that studying helped them do better at school, that studying was important to pass exams and to get good grades in the different subjects, that studying enabled them to learn from their mistakes and that studying would help them get into higher educational institutions such as MCAST. Of those respondents who answered 'No' to the question 'Do you think that studying is important for you?', those who gave further details in the text entry field stated that they did not like having to sit down and read while not paying attention to the teacher when they could spend the time doing manual work; others stated that they did not like studying in general, that it was boring, that the contents learnt were easily forgotten, that it was needless since nowadays they learnt everything through watching videos on the computer and that school in general was meaningless.

No statistically significant association was found between waking up feeling or not feeling like going to school in the morning and thinking that studying was or was not important.

Most respondents thought that going to school was important (Yes: 82.1%; No: 10.7%; Table 99).

Do you think that going to school is important?	**Count**	**Percentage**
Yes	138	82.1
No	18	10.7
Don't know	12	7.1
Total	168	100

Table 99: *Do you think that going to school is important? (Mode = Yes)*

Of those respondents who answered 'Yes' to the question 'Do you think that going to school is important?', those who gave further details in the text entry field stated that by going to school they got to know people and socialised themselves further, that by going to school they were ensured a good education, which would enable them in the future to get a good job (and suffer less, claimed one respondent), that by going to school they learnt new things they had not known about before and that through school they were better prepared for their exams. Of those respondents who answered 'No' to the question 'Do you think that going to school is important?', those who gave further details in the text entry field stated that going to school was a useless chore and a waste of time, that they preferred the idea of home schooling and that they should be given the option of not attending school on a weekday of their choosing, this in order to get a break from school.

No significant association was found between thinking that going to school was or was not important and waking up feeling or not feeling like going to school in the morning.

An association was found between thinking of the educational system used at one's school as being or not being fair and thinking that going to school was or was not important. A Multinomial Logistic Regression analysis showed that the odds of those thinking that the educational system used at their school was not fair also thinking that going to school was not important was 11.636 (95% CI, 1.357 to 99.753) times that of them thinking that going to school was important, a statistically significant effect, Wald X^2 (1) = 5.012, p = .025 (Tables 100, 101, 102, 103 and 104).

Case Processing Summary			
		N	Marginal Percentage
Do you think that going to school is important?	Yes	136	82.9%
	No	16	9.8%
	Don't Know	12	7.3%
Do you think that the educational system at your school is fair?	Yes	95	57.9%
	No	32	19.5%
	Don't Know	37	22.6%
Valid		164	100.0%
Missing		0	
Total		164	
Subpopulation		3	

Table 100: *Case processing summary*

Model-Fitting Information				
	Model-Fitting Criteria	Likelihood Ratio Tests		
Model	-2 Log Likelihood	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Intercept Only	28.913			
Final	18.619	10.295	4	.036

Table 101: *Model-fitting information*

Pseudo R-Square	
Cox and Snell	.061
Nagelkerke	.089
McFadden	.055

Table 102: *Pseudo R-square*

Likelihood Ratio Tests				
	Model-Fitting Criteria	Likelihood Ratio Tests		
Effect	-2 Log Likelihood of Reduced Model	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Intercept	18.619[a]	.000	0	.
Do you think that the educational system at your school is fair?	28.913	10.295	4	.036
The chi-square statistic is the difference in -2 log-likelihoods between the final model and a reduced model. The reduced model is formed by omitting an effect from the final model. The null hypothesis is that all parameters of that effect are 0.				
a. This reduced model is equivalent to the final model because omitting the effect does not increase the degrees of freedom.				

Table 103: *Likelihood ratio tests*

Parameter Estimates									
Do you think that going to school is important?[a]		B	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% Confidence Interval for Exp(B)	
							Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
No	Intercept	-3.466	1.016	11.647	1	.001			
	[Do you think that the educational system at your school is fair?=1]	1.005	1.089	.851	1	.356	2.732	.323	23.096
	[Do you think that the educational system at your school is fair?=2]	2.454	1.096	5.012	1	.025	11.636	1.357	99.753
	[Do you think that the educational system at your school is fair?=3]	0[b]	.	.	0	.	.	.	.
Don't Know	Intercept	-2.079	.530	15.374	1	.000			
	[Do you think that the educational system at your school is fair?=1]	-.536	.678	.623	1	.430	.585	.155	2.212
	[Do you think that the educational system at your school is fair?=2]	-.318	.909	.123	1	.726	.727	.122	4.322
	[Do you think that the educational system at your school is fair?=3]	0[b]	.	.	0	.	.	.	.
a. The reference category is: Yes.									
b. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.									

Table 104: *Parameter estimates (Legend: 'Do you think that the educational system used at your school is fair?': [1] = Yes; [2] = No; [3] = Don't Know.)*

The majority of the respondents claimed that they would not manage to study on their own without having to go to school (Yes: 22.9%; No: 62.0%; Table 105).

Do you think you could manage by studying on your own at home without having to go to school?	Count	Percentage
Yes	38	22.9
No	103	62.0
Don't know	25	15.1
Total	166	100

Table 105: *Do you think you could manage by studying on your own at home without having to go to school? (Mode = No)*

Also, the majority of respondents claimed that in general they enjoyed learning (Yes: 58.7%; No: 24.0%; Table 106).

Do you in general enjoy learning?	Count	Percentage
Yes	98	58.7
No	40	24.0
Don't know	29	17.4
Total	167	100

Table 106: *Do you in general enjoy learning? (Mode = Yes)*

Conclusion

From the results obtained we can describe the predominantly male sample population as mostly typical, with most respondents and their parents/guardian being born and raised in Malta, respondents' parents/guardian having at least finished compulsory education, both parents and/or guardian being currently employed (with the father being the principal breadwinner), most respondents living with both parents, and respondents having an average of two sibling/step-siblings living in the same household with them. The majority of respondents reported they had had a good schooling experience and on average rated themselves as average academic performers (which though somewhat in line with what was expected, seeing that the sample population was made up of students intentionally identified by their instructors as low academic achievers, was solely based on respondents' subjective experience – no tangible performance indicators were collected through the questionnaire). The majority of respondents reported not having experienced any negative life-incidents, or physical or psychological conditions, or learning disabilities, or any addictions that could have otherwise affected their studies. Importantly, though, although most respondents had never experienced bullying/harassment within the home environment, more than half the sample population had at some point experienced bullying/harassment at school. Although, the difference between the proportion of respondents having experienced bullying/harassment at school was not significantly different from the proportion of respondents not having experienced bullying/harassment at school, the issue of

bullying at school should be given some serious thought, especially when seeing this result in conjunction with the result from the question asking respondents whether there was anything which made them afraid of going to school, where many of those respondents that answered 'Yes' to this question listed bullying as the reason for them being afraid of going to school.

Most respondents liked their teachers at school, and most were never treated badly by their teachers at school.

Yet, different nuances emerged in the answer to the question 'Do you think that the educational system at your school is fair?', in which some of those respondents that answered 'No' to the question further detailed that some teachers did not pay them attention and did not treat them well, that teachers should shout less, that some teachers treated foreign students badly, that teachers did not treat all students equally and that teachers should be kind. Interestingly, some of those who did answer yes to the same question, gave diametrically opposite reasons, stating that their teachers were kind, treated everyone equally, listened to their questions, found solutions to their problems and that the teachings they imparted to them were good. Seemingly, certain teachers were being prejudicial, treating some "more equally than others".

Most respondents felt a sense of belonging at their school and the majority found support in their studies both at home and at school. Most respondents claimed that they had good friends at school. Also, most felt that studying was important to them because through studying they enriched their knowledge base and were more likely to get a good job in the future. The minority who replied in the negative to the question that asked whether they thought that studying was important for them detailed that they preferred manual work, that they did not like studying in general, that studying was boring, that the contents learnt through studying were easily forgotten, that studying was needless since nowadays they learnt everything through watching videos on the computer, and that school in general was meaningless. Most respondents thought that going to school was important because by going to school they got to know people and socialised themselves further, that by going to school they were ensured a good education that would enable them in the future to get a good job, that by going to school they learnt new things they had not known about before and that, through school, they were better prepared for their exams. The minority who responded in the negative to the question that asked whether they thought that going to school was important felt that school was a useless chore and a waste of time, that they preferred the idea of home schooling and that they should be given the option of not attending school on a weekday of their choosing, this in order to get a break from school. The majority of the respondents claimed that they would not manage to study on their own without having to go to school and stated that in general they enjoyed learning.

An interesting result came from the response to the question 'Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning?' Most respondents claimed that they did not wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning. This is at odds with the general profile of the sample population, being of a predominantly stable family background, healthy and with a positive outlook on school. It seems that most respondents did indeed have a positive outlook on school but still felt that going to school was a chore. Putting the result to the question 'Do you wake up looking forward to going to school in the morning?' side by side with results from other questions asking about respondents'

perceptions to various elements making up their school life, which, should be stated, taken singularly painted a mostly bright picture of most respondents' school life, it seems then that the majority of respondents had accepted having to attend compulsory education, and chose to perceive the experience as positively as they possible could. Clearly, the transition from the home environment to the school environment was not that smooth. It could be hypothesised that the inherently bureaucratic/academic nature of educational institutions was putting students off from looking forward to going to school in the morning, with some students being better equipped with the right psychological mechanisms to cope with the shift from the homely home environment to the more bureaucratic/academic school environment. Interestingly, no association was found between being bullied/harassed at school and feeling or not feeling like going to school in the morning. Also, the majority of our respondents were bullied at school and yet still perceived the school's educational system as fair and thought that studying and going to school were important. It seems that the common and prevalent profile of the bullied student does not hold ground in this context. However, an association was evinced between thinking of the educational system used at one's school as being or not being fair and feeling or not feeling like going to school in the morning. Those respondents who claimed that they thought that the educational system used at their school was not fair were less likely to have woken up looking forward to going to school in the morning. The question that ought to be asked at this point regarding this association is which one of the two variables is to be treated as the predictor (independent) variable. Clearly, not waking up looking forward to going to school in the morning must be motivated by something else. Thinking that the educational system used at one's school is not fair could be a likely candidate, with such a perception of the educational system employed at one's school promoting a negative feel towards going to school when waking up in the morning. Another association was found between thinking of the educational system used at one's school as being or not being fair and thinking that going to school was or was not important. Those respondents who thought that the educational system used at their school was not fair were more likely to think that going to school was not important. Thinking that going to school is not important must be motivated by something else. Thinking that the educational system used at one's school is not fair could be a likely predictor (independent) variable. These evinced associations and the ensuing discussion give some credence to the earlier claim that the inherently bureaucratic/academic nature of current educational institutions was putting students off from looking forward to going to school in the morning and from thinking that going to school was important. Similar findings have been reported in a study by Chory-Assad (2002). In that study, it was shown that students' perceptions of distributive justice, which concern evaluations students make of resources they have received, such as course grades, did not significantly predict student motivation, affective learning and student aggression. On the other hand, it was reported in the same study that students' perceptions of procedural justice which concern the evaluations students make about the fairness of the procedures used to allocate resources, such as procedures used in final decisions about students' course grade allocations, significantly predicted all three criterion variables, namely student motivation, affective learning and student aggression. In another study by Caglar (2013) with student teachers, it was shown that perception of fairness regarding the learning environment significantly predicted feelings of alienation amongst the student teachers.

Yet, questions asking respondents whether they felt a sense of belonging at their school and whether they had good friends at school were answered by the majority

of respondents in the positive. One could therefore ask: If students felt like they belonged at school and had a thriving social network at school, what could make them not look forward to going to school in the morning? And, if given the option, would students choose to refrain from going to school? To the former question, one could hypothesise that feeling a sense of belonging at school and having good friends at school did not necessarily bear an influence on feeling like going to school in the morning. Presumably, when students are made to think about their school and relate their experience there, what comes to their minds is mostly the school infrastructure, and the staff members, who, for the students, represent the school infrastructure, play a major role in making the schooling experience what it is, and with whom the students have contact daily. Questioning students about their school life may be inherently biased, with such an exercise potentially implicitly presupposing that the school is indeed a bureaucratic/academic educational institution and should be treated as such, and the questions unequivocally selected and worded in such a manner that maintains this distinguishing trait. Respondents' answers to such questions may also be biased in that the respondents, in complicity, so to speak, with the questions being asked, have already presupposed that since the topic being questioned is their schooling experience, reference is being made to the bureaucratic/academic infrastructure in which that experience is embedded. Thus, feeling a sense of belonging at school and having a thriving social network at school might be wholly independent from waking up not looking forward to going to school. It might result that feeling a sense of belonging at school and having a thriving social network at school are contained inside a sphere of experience within, yet independent of, the larger sphere of experience that encompasses the totality of the respondents' school life. One could jump the gun and presume that, thus, the issue might be with the students' relationship with their educators. Yet, results from the questions 'Do you like your teachers at school?' and 'Have you ever been treated badly by your teachers at school?' do not support this provisional conclusion. Most respondents claimed that they liked their teachers at school and most respondents had never been treated badly by their teachers at school. To the question (If, given the option, would students choose to refrain from going to school?), the result to the question asking whether respondents thought that they could manage to study on their own at home without having to go to school clearly evinces that that would not be the case as most respondents claimed that they would not manage to study on their own at home without having to go to school. One could ask: Is studying, then, in general perceived by students as a useless chore? And, again, results evince otherwise as most respondents thought that studying was important and claimed that they in general enjoyed learning.

Shooting down all these hypotheses only strengthens the hypothesised perception of students of their educational institutions as being inherently bureaucratic/academic. It might be that the students' perception of their school (infrastructure) is cloud-based, so to speak, that they are essentially lost in metaphor. Without the proper means to reify their perceptions and feelings of the schooling experience, they might be limping on with their daily school chores half-heartedly. Afraid, or unable, of calling a spade a spade – afraid, or unable, of naming and facing the problem that the daily insurmountable obstacle of going to school presents, they might be missing out on real and valued school experiences.

Research Exercise 4
(with low-achieving MCAST Students)

Methodology

An online questionnaire was designed and implemented on Qualtrics, in both English and Maltese languages. The research team then liaised with the College's 'Directors of Institutes' to identify those classes populated by low-achieving MCAST students, namely students following courses at EQF/MQF Levels 1 and 2, thus students who would have finished compulsory education and obtained a school-leaving certificate, but only one pass certificate, or none, in ordinary level examinations. The research team then visited each Institute and had the said students complete the online questionnaire live in their presence, this to ensure that all students in the identified classes completed the questionnaire. All Institutes participated in this research exercise. Ethics clearance to conduct research with MCAST students was sought from, and granted by, the MCAST Research Ethics Committee (REC) prior to visiting the Institutes and conducting the live sessions with the students. The responses were collected between February 2020 and March 2020. Once this exercise was finalised, the questionnaire was closed, and data were downloaded in csv file format and imported into Microsoft Excel. Preliminary sorting of quantitative data and statistical procedures were done in Microsoft Excel. Further statistical procedures on quantitative data were performed in SPSS version 24. Qualitative data were analysed using MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020.

Results (Quantitative Analyses)

There were 214 responses in total, with all responses being valid. This constituted the sample size of this research study.

The sample population in this research exercise made up 36.7% of the total population of Levels 1 and 2 students registered on CMIS (Content Management Information System; Table 107). The sample population contained 69.6% of the total number of Level 1 students and 35.4% of the total number of Level 2 students registered on CMIS. It is good to note that the reported total number of students registered on CMIS as following courses at Levels 1 and 2, namely 583 students, includes students registered on CMIS but who were, for whatever reason, not attending classes at the time of the questionnaire.

	Total Population (registered on CMIS as at 06/04/2020)		Sampled Population		Percentage of Sampled Population by EQF/MQF Level	
Institute	**EQF/MQF Level 1**	**EQF/MQF Level 2**	**EQF/MQF Level 1**	**EQF/MQF Level 2**	**EQF/MQF Level 1**	**EQF/MQF Level 2**
IAS		47		15		7.6
IET	5	114		12		6.1
IICT		120		56		28.3
ICA	4	49	4	27	25.0	13.6
ICS	1	157		39		19.7
IBMC	13	56	12	28	75.0	14.1
Gozo		17 (*)		21 (**)		10.6
Sub-totals	**23**	**560**	**16**	**198**	**100.0**	**100.0**
Totals	583		214			

Table 107: *Counts for total population and counts and percentages for sampled population by Institute and EQF/MQF Level. (*) Refers to a Level 2 course which is specific for Gozo Campus and is not one which is offered at the Malta Main Campus (numbers of those attending courses at the Gozo Campus identical to the the ones offered at Malta Main Campus are integrated with the numbers pertaining to the respective Institutes). (**) Count integrates the above (*) and other students attending other Level 2 courses at Gozo Campus which are identical to the the ones offered at Malta Main Campus.* ***IAS*** *= Institute of Applied Sciences;* ***IET*** *= Institute of Engineering and Transport;* ***IICT*** *= Institute of Information and Communication Technology;* ***ICA*** *= Institute for the Creative Arts;* ***ICS*** *= Institute of Community Services;* ***IBMC*** *= Institute of Business Management and Commerce*

More male respondents (*n* = 129, 60.3%) responded to the questionnaire than females (Table 108).

Gender	Count	Percentage
Female	83	38.8
Male	129	60.3
Other	2	0.9
Total	214	100

Table 108: *Count and percentage of respondents by gender*

The mean age of the sample population was 17.23 years with a standard deviation of 2.55 (Table 109).

Age	M	SD	Min	Max
	17.23	2.55	15	34

Table 109: *Descriptive statistics for respondents' ages (M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation)*

Most respondents and their parents/guardian were born and raised in Malta (**You**: *n* = 141, 70.1%; **Mother**: *n* = 135, 66.8%; **Father**: *n* = 123, 64.1%; **Guardian**: *n* = 21, 60.0%; Table 110).

Were you and your parents and/or guardian born and raised in Malta?	You		Mother		Father		Guardian	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Yes	141	70.1	135	66.8	123	64.1	21	60.0
No	58	28.9	64	31.7	65	33.9	12	34.3
Don't know	2	1.0	3	1.5	4	2.1	2	5.7
Total	201	100	202	100	192	100	35	100

Table 110: *Were you and your parents and/or guardian born and raised in Malta?*

Most respondents' parents/guardian had completed compulsory education (**Mother**: *n* = 134, 64.1%; **Father**: *n* = 118, 58.1%; **Guardian**: *n* = 16, 59.3%; Table 111).

Have your parents and/or guardian completed compulsory education?	Mother		Father		Guardian	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Yes	134	64.1	118	58.1	16	59.3
No	45	21.5	40	19.7	6	22.2
Don't know	30	14.4	45	22.2	5	18.5
Total	209	100	203	100	27	100

Table 111: *Have your parents and/or guardian completed compulsory education?*

Most respondents' parents/guardian were currently employed (**Mother**: *n* = 126, 60.6%; **Father**: *n* = 151, 78.6%; **Guardian**: *n* = 12, 46.2%; Table 112).

Are your parents and/ or guardian currently employed?	Mother		Father		Guardian	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Yes	126	60.6	151	78.6	12	46.2
No	78	37.5	33	17.2	11	42.3
Don't know	4	1.9	8	4.2	3	11.5
Total	208	100	192	100	26	100

Table 112: *Are your parents and/or guardian currently employed?*

Most respondents lived with both parents (*n* = 132, 62.9%; Table 113). The mode for this question corresponded to response item 'Both parents'.

Who do you primarily live with?	Count	Percentage
Both parents	132	62.9
Mother	56	26.7
Father	11	5.2
Other relatives	8	3.8
Legal Guardian	2	1.0
I live in a sheltered/residential home	1	0.5
Total	210	100

Table 113: *Who do you primarily live with?*

The majority of the respondents had siblings/stepsiblings living in the same household with them (*n* = 166, 79.0%; Table 114) and the mean number of siblings living in the same household was 1.97 with a standard deviation of 1.57 (Table 115).

Do you have siblings/stepsiblings living in the same household with you?	Count	Percentage
Yes	166	79.0
No	44	21.0
Total	210	100

Table 114: *Do you have siblings/stepsiblings living in the same household with you?*

M	SD	Min	Max
1.97	1.57	1	12

Table 115: *Descriptive statistics: How many siblings/stepsiblings are living in the same household with you?*

Most respondents had an average or above-average prior schooling experience (*n* = 191, 89.3%; Table 116). The median for this question corresponded to response item 'A good schooling experience so far'.

Thinking of your experiences in previous school years, would you say that you have had:	**Count**	**Percentage**
A very good schooling experience so far	41	19.2
A good schooling experience so far	79	36.9
An average schooling experience so far	71	33.2
A bad schooling experience so far	18	8.4
A very bad schooling experience so far	5	2.3
Total	214	100

Table 116: *Thinking of your experiences in previous school years, would you say that you have had:*

The sample population consisted predominantly of average or above-average academic performers (*n* = 202, 94.4%; Table 117), with the median for this question corresponding to response item 'Above average'. When interpreting the results of this question one should always bear in mind that response to this question was based on respondents' subjective experience; no actual exam scores or measured performance indicators were collected through the online questionnaire.

How well do you do in your studies at MCAST?	**Count**	**Percentage**
Excellent, I'm probably one of the best in my class	31	14.5
Well above average	46	21.5
Above average	51	23.8
Average	74	34.6
Below average	9	4.2
Well below average	1	0.5
Poor, I'm probably one of the worst in my class	2	0.9
Total	214	100

Table 117: *How well do you do in your studies at MCAST?*

The majority of respondents did not experience any negative life-changing incidents (Yes: 27.1%; No: 58.9%; Table 118), physical conditions (Yes: 7.0%; No: 87.4%; Table 119), psychological conditions (Yes: 15.0%; No: 75.7%; Table 120), learning disabilities (Yes: 15.9%; No: 79.0%; Table 121) or addictions (Yes: 12.3%; No: 83.0%; Table 122) that might have otherwise affected their studies.

Have you experienced any negative life-changing incident in the past, which you think negatively affects your studies here at MCAST?	Count	Percentage
Yes	58	27.1
No	126	58.9
Don't know	30	14.0
Total	214	100

Table 118: *Have you experienced any negative life-changing incident in the past, which you think negatively affects your studies here at MCAST? (Mode = No)*

Do you suffer from any physical condition that you think negatively affects your studies here at MCAST?	Count	Percentage
Yes	15	7.0
No	187	87.4
Don't know	12	5.6
Total	214	100

Table 119: *Do you suffer from any physical condition that you think negatively affects your studies here at MCAST? (Mode = No)*

Do you suffer from any psychological condition that you think negatively affects your studies here at MCAST?	Count	Percentage
Yes	32	15.0
No	162	75.7
Don't know	20	9.3
Total	214	100

Table 120: *Do you suffer from any psychological condition that you think negatively affects your studies here at MCAST? (Mode = No)*

Do you suffer from any learning disability that you think negatively affects your studies here at MCAST?	Count	Percentage
Yes	34	15.9
No	169	79.0
Don't know	11	5.1
Total	214	100

Table 121: *Do you suffer from any learning disability that you think negatively affects your studies here at MCAST? (Mode = No)*

Do you suffer from any addiction that you think negatively affects your studies here at MCAST?	Count	Percentage
Yes	26	12.3
No	176	83.0
Don't know	10	4.7
Total	212	100

Table 122: *Do you suffer from any addiction that you think negatively affects your studies here at MCAST? (Mode = No)*

Most respondents were never bullied or harassed at home (Yes: 5.6%; No: 89.7%; Mode = No; Table 123) or at school (Yes: 24.2%; No: 69.7%; Mode = No; Table 124).

Have you ever been bullied/harassed at home?	Count	Percentage
Yes	12	5.6
No	192	89.7
Don't know	10	4.7
Total	214	100

Table 123: *Have you ever been bullied/harassed at home?*

Have you ever been bullied/harassed at MCAST or at previous schools you attended?	Count	Percentage
Yes	51	24.2
No	147	69.7
Don't know	13	6.2
Total	211	100

Table 124: *Have you ever been bullied/harassed at MCAST or at previous schools you attended?*

Most respondents liked their teachers at MCAST (Yes: *n* = 210, 98.1%; No/Don't know: *n* = 4, 1.9%; Table 125). The mode corresponded to response item 'Yes, I like most of my teachers at MCAST'.

Do you like your teachers at MCAST?	Count	Percentage
Yes, I like all of my teachers at MCAST	47	22.0
Yes, I like most of my teachers at MCAST	96	44.9
Yes, I like some of my teachers at MCAST	67	31.3
No, I do not like any of my teachers at MCAST	2	0.9
Don't know / Prefer not to disclose	2	0.9
Total	214	100

Table 125: *Do you like your teachers at MCAST?*

Most respondents were never treated badly by their teachers at school (Yes: 34.7%; No: 59.6%; Mode = No; Table 126).

Have you ever been treated badly by your teachers at MCAST or at previous schools you attended?	**Count**	**Percentage**
Yes	74	34.7
No	127	59.6
Don't know	12	5.6
Total	213	100

Table 126: *Have you ever been treated badly by your teachers at MCAST or at previous schools you attended?*

Most respondents thought that the educational system used at MCAST was fair (Yes: *n* = 157, 74.4%; No/Don't know: *n* = 54, 25.6%; Table 127). The mode corresponded to response item 'Yes, I think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair'.

Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair?	**Count**	**Percentage**
Yes, I think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair	90	42.7
Yes, I think that the educational system used at MCAST is mostly fair but certain things need to be changed	67	31.8
No, I don't think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair	14	6.6
Don't know	40	19.0
Total	211	100

Table 127: *Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair?*

Most respondents felt a sense of belonging at their school (Yes: *n* = 166, 77.9%; No/Don't know: *n* = 47, 22.06; Table 128). The mode corresponded to response item 'Yes, I sometimes feel a sense of belonging at MCAST'.

Do you feel a sense of belonging at MCAST?	**Count**	**Percentage**
Yes, I always feel a sense of belonging at MCAST	77	36.2
Yes, I sometimes feel a sense of belonging at MCAST	89	41.8
No, I don't feel a sense of belonging at MCAST at all	19	8.9
Don't know	28	13.1
Total	213	100

Table 128: *Do you feel a sense of belonging at MCAST?*

Almost half the sample population of respondents claimed that they sometimes woke up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST (*n* = 106, 49.8%; Table 129). In fact, the mode for this question corresponded to response item 'Yes, I sometimes wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST'. A Chi-square goodness of fit indicated significant differences between the proportions of the three categories, X^2 (2, *n* = 208), = 30.933, *p* < .001 (Tables 130 and 131).

Do you wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST?	**Count**	**Percentage**
Yes, I always wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST	59	27.7
Yes, I sometimes wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST	106	49.8
No, I never wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST	43	20.2
Don't know	5	2.3
Total	213	100

Table 129: *Do you wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST?*

Do you wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST?			
	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Yes, I always wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST	59	69.3	-10.3
Yes, I sometimes wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST	106	69.3	36.7
No, I never wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST	43	69.3	-26.3
Total	208		

Table 130: *Observed and expected counts for 'Do you wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST?'*

Test Statistics	
	Do you wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST?
Chi-Square	30.933
df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.000

Table 131: *Result of chi-square goodness-of-fit test*

Pairwise comparisons using the Bonferroni correction indicated that the proportion of students in our sample population who reported sometimes waking up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST was significantly higher than the proportion of students in our sample population who reported always waking up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST, X^2 (1, *n* = 165), = 13.388,

$p < .001$; that the proportion of students in our sample population who reported sometimes waking up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST was significantly higher than the proportion of students in our sample population who reported never waking up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST, X^2 (1, n = 149), = 26.638, $p < .001$; that the proportion of students in our sample population who reported always waking up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST was not significantly different from the proportion of students in our sample population who reported never waking up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST, X^2 (1, n = 102), = 2.510, p = 0.339.

The scale used for the question 'Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair?' was problematic in that it could not be neatly categorised either as a nominal scale or as an ordinal scale. A significant number of responses with the response item 'Don't know' precluded removing these from the analysis. Also, the scale was more skewed to the positive end, with two response items commencing with the word 'Yes' and only one response item measuring the negative end and commencing with the word 'No'. Following common practice, the responses for the two response items measuring the positive end and commencing with the word 'Yes' (namely response items 'Yes, I think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair and 'Yes, I think that the educational system used at MCAST is mostly fair but certain things need to be changed') were collapsed into one category. This method was justified because' although these two response items measured the positive end each in its own nuanced manner, ultimately respondents were faced with the same introductory word, namely the word 'Yes'. Choosing any of these two response items in essence ultimately provided a positive confirmation to the question, 'Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair?' The aforementioned nuances differentiating response items, 'Yes, I think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair', and, 'Yes, I think that the educational system used at MCAST is mostly fair but certain things need to be changed', only served to provide additional detail to an already disclosed positive confirmation. The literature also gives evidence that a nominal scale with three categories, namely Yes, No and Don't Know (a YNDK nominal scale) may be an appropriate adjunct to a standard 11-point ordinal scale (Gupta, Drabik and Chakrabortty 2016).

An Ordinal Logistic Regression analysis was run with item 'Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair?' as the independent nominal variable with three categories (namely: 'Yes, I think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair', 'No, I don't think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair' and 'Don't know') and item 'Do you wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST?' as the dependent ordinal variable with three ordered categories (namely: 'Yes, I always wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST', 'Yes, I sometimes wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST' and 'No, I never wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST'). This analysis evinced a significant association between thinking that the educational system used at MCAST was fair and waking up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST. The odds of those thinking that the educational system used at MCAST was fair waking up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST was 5.887 (95% CI, 1.991 to 17.405) times that of those thinking that the educational system used at MCAST was not fair, a statistically significant effect, Wald X^2 (1) = 10.276, p = .001 (Tables 132, 133, 134, 135, 136 and 137). No other significant associations were evinced.

Case Processing Summary			
		N	Marginal Percentage
Do you wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST?	No, I never wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST	41	20.0%
	Yes, I sometimes wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST	105	51.2%
	Yes, I always wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST	59	28.8%
Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair?	Yes, I think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair	153	74.6%
	Don't know	38	18.5%
	No, I don't think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair	14	6.8%
Valid		205	100.0%
Missing		0	
Total		205	

Table 132: *Case processing summary*

Model-Fitting Information				
Model	-2 Log Likelihood	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Intercept Only	37.959			
Final	22.683	15.276	2	.000
Link function: Logit.				

Table 133: *Model-fitting information*

Goodness-of-Fit			
	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Pearson	.190	2	.909
Deviance	.190	2	.910
Link function: Logit.			

Table 134: *Test of goodness-of-fit*

Pseudo R-Square	
Cox and Snell	.072
Nagelkerke	.082
McFadden	.036
Link function: Logit.	

Table 135: *Pseudo R-square*

Test of Parallel Lines[a]				
Model	-2 Log Likelihood	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Null Hypothesis	22.683			
General	22.494	.190	2	.910
The null hypothesis states that the location parameters (slope coefficients) are the same across response categories.				
a. Link function: Logit.				

Table 136: *Test of parallel lines*

Parameter Estimates								
		Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
Threshold	[Feel3 = 4]	.017	.519	.001	1	.974	-1.000	1.033
	[Feel3 = 5]	2.454	.549	19.999	1	.000	1.378	3.529
Location	[Fair7=1]	1.773	.553	10.276	1	.001	.689	2.857
	[Fair7=3]	.854	.606	1.987	1	.159	-.333	2.041
	[Fair7=4]	0[a]	.	.	0	.	.	.
Link function: Logit.								
a. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.								

Table 137: *Parameter estimates (Legend: Fair7=1: Yes, I think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair; Fair7=3: Don't Know; Fair7=4: No, I don't think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair.)*

Most respondents claimed that there was nothing which made them afraid of going to school at MCAST (Yes: 17.3%; No: 77.6%; Mode = No; Table 138).

Is there anything that makes you afraid of going to school at MCAST?	Count	Percentage
Yes	37	17.3
No	166	77.6
Don't know	11	5.1
Total	214	100

Table 138: *Is there anything that makes you afraid of going to school at MCAST?*

The majority of respondents claimed that they found support in their studies at home (Yes: 68.5%; No: 22.5%; Mode = Yes; Table 139) and at MCAST (Yes: 74.8%; No: 12.4%; Mode = Yes; Table 140).

Do you ever find support at home with your studies?	Count	Percentage
Yes	146	68.5
No	48	22.5
Don't know	19	8.9
Total	213	100

Table 139: *Do you ever find support at home with your studies?*

Do you ever find support at MCAST with your studies?	Count	Percentage
Yes	157	74.8
No	26	12.4
Don't know	27	12.9
Total	210	100

Table 140: *Do you ever find support at MCAST with your studies?*

Most respondents claimed that they had good friends at MCAST (Yes: 85.0%; No: 7.5%; Mode = Yes; Table 141).

Do you have good friends at MCAST?	Count	Percentage
Yes	182	85.0
No	16	7.5
Don't know	16	7.5
Total	214	100

Table 141: *Do you have good friends at MCAST?*

Most respondents felt that studying was important for them (Yes: 84.0%; No: 6.1%; Mode = Yes; Table 142).

Do you think that studying is important for you?	Count	Percentage
Yes	179	84.0
No	13	6.1
Don't know	21	9.9
Total	213	100

Table 142: *Do you think that studying is important for you?*

Most respondents thought that going to school was important (Yes: 90.1%; No: 3.8%; Mode = Yes; Table 143).

Do you think that going to school is important?	Count	Percentage
Yes	191	90.1
No	8	3.8
Don't know	13	6.1
Total	212	100

Table 143: *Do you think that going to school is important?*

A Multinomial Logistic Regression analysis was run with item 'Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair?' as the independent nominal variable with three categories (namely: 'Yes, I think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair', 'No, I don't think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair' and 'Don't know') and item 'Do you think that going to school is important?' as the dependent nominal variable with three categories (namely: 'Yes', 'No' and 'Don't know'). This analysis evinced a significant association between thinking that the educational system used at MCAST was or was not fair and thinking that going to school was or was not important. The odds of those thinking that the educational system used at MCAST was not fair thinking that going to school was not important was 8.250 (95% CI, 1.278 to 53.254) times that of those thinking that going to school was important, a statistically significant effect, Wald X^2 (1) = 4.919, p = .027. Also, the odds of those thinking that the educational system used at MCAST was fair thinking that going to school was important was 3.717 (95% CI, 0.078 to 0.936) times that of those not knowing whether going to school was important, a statistically significant effect, Wald X^2 (1) = 4.261, p = .039. No other significant associations were evinced.

Case Processing Summary			
		N	Marginal Percentage
Do you think that going to school is important?	Yes	188	90.0%
	No	8	3.8%
	Don't Know	13	6.2%
Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair?	Yes, I think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair	155	74.2%
	No, I don't think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair	14	6.7%
	Don't know	40	19.1%
Valid		209	100.0%
Missing		0	
Total		209	
Subpopulation		3	

Table 144: *Case processing summary*

Model-Fitting Information				
	Model-Fitting Criteria	Likelihood Ratio Tests		
Model	-2 Log Likelihood	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Intercept Only	37.449			
Final	17.450	19.999	4	.000

Table 145: *Model-fitting information*

Pseudo R-Square	
Cox and Snell	.091
Nagelkerke	.168
McFadden	.122

Table 146: *Pseudo R-square*

Likelihood Ratio Tests				
	Model-Fitting Criteria	Likelihood Ratio Tests		
Effect	-2 Log Likelihood of Reduced Model	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Intercept	17.450[a]	.000	0	.
Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair?	37.449	19.999	4	.000
The chi-square statistic is the difference in -2 log-likelihoods between the final model and a reduced model. The reduced model is formed by omitting an effect from the final model. The null hypothesis is that all parameters of that effect are 0.				
a. This reduced model is equivalent to the final model because omitting the effect does not increase the degrees of freedom.				

Table 147: *Likelihood ratio tests*

Parameter Estimates									
Do you think that going to school is important?[a]		B	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% Confidence Interval for Exp(B)	
							Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
No	Intercept	-2.803	.728	14.820	1	.000			
	[Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair? =1]	-1.494	1.018	2.152	1	.142	.224	.031	1.652
	[Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair? =2]	2.110	.951	4.919	1	.027	8.250	1.278	53.254
	[Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair? =6]	0[b]	.	.	0	.	.	.	.
Don't Know	Intercept	-1.887	.480	15.462	1	.000			
	[Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair? =1]	-1.312	.635	4.261	1	.039	.269	.078	.936
	[Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair? =2]	.501	.925	.293	1	.588	1.650	.269	10.109
	[Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair? =6]	0[b]	.	.	0	.	.	.	.
a. The reference category is: Yes.									
b. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.									

Table 148: *Parameter estimates (Legend: 'Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair?': [1] = Yes, I think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair; [2] = No, I don't think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair; [6] = Don't Know.)*

The majority of the respondents claimed that they would not manage to study on their own without having to go to school (Yes: 28.2%; No: 49.8%; Mode = No; Table 149).

Do you think you could manage by studying on your own at home without having to go to school?	**Count**	**Percentage**
Yes	60	28.2
No	106	49.8
Don't know	47	22.1
Total	213	100

Table 149: *Do you think you could manage by studying on your own at home without having to go to school?*

Also, the majority of respondents claimed that in general they enjoyed learning (Yes: *n* = 199, 93.4%; No/Don't know: *n* = 14, 6.6%; Mode = Yes, I sometimes enjoy learning; Table 150).

Do you in general enjoy learning?	**Count**	**Percentage**
Yes, I always enjoy learning	68	31.9
Yes, I sometimes enjoy learning	131	61.5
No, I don't enjoy learning at all	10	4.7
Don't know	4	1.9
Total	213	100

Table 150: *Do you in general enjoy learning?*

Results (Qualitative and Mixed Methods Analyses)

Question: Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair?
Answer: Yes, I think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair (please give more details)

Out of a total of 36 comments inputted in the text entry field (by 12 females and by 24 males), nine comments (by five females and four males) mentioned teachers. These respondents thought that the educational system used at MCAST was fair because teachers treated everyone equally, gave help and support to the students, did not treat students badly and were respectful. Out of these nine respondents, three had experienced bullying at school (one female and two males). Out of these nine respondents, three had been treated badly by teachers (two females and one male). It is good to note here that the way the questions asking about experience/s of bullying at school and about experience/s of bad treatment by teachers were worded, did not allow one to identify whether such occurrence/s had happened prior to enrolment at MCAST and/or after enrolment at MCAST.

Interestingly, one of these nine respondents, even though she thought that the educational system used at MCAST was fair, gave a negative comment in the

accompanying text entry field. She felt that certain teachers did not always agree with one's point of view, resulting in the lesson not proceeding as wished for. This female respondent reported being treated badly by teachers at school (again, it should be noted that the way the question asking about experience/s of bad treatment by teachers was worded did not allow one to identify whether such occurrence/s had happened prior to enrolment at MCAST and/or after enrolment at MCAST). This respondent also reported that she liked some of her teachers at MCAST.

Other reasons for thinking that the educational system used at MCAST was fair were: application of hands-on work, provision of work opportunities, many courses of studies to choose from, the educational system used at the College being overall better than the one used in Secondary School, the capability of the College in preparing one for life, the exam system used at the College being good, help and support being provided for students suffering from certain conditions, the ability to learn new things and the ability to enrol at the College even without having passed one's O-Level examinations.

Two particular cases emerge from this pool of data. The first one, a male respondent, thought that the educational system used at MCAST was fair and reasoned that this was so by commenting that most of the staff at MCAST treated students well. He had had a bad previous schooling experience and had experienced bad treatment from teachers. Given the option, he felt that he would manage to study alone at home without having to go to school. The second case, another male respondent, also thought that the educational system used at MCAST was fair and in his accompanying comment mentioned teachers, stating that they treated everyone equally and did not treat students badly. In sharp contrast to the previous case, this male respondent had had a good previous schooling experience and had experienced no bad treatment by teachers. Yet, he too, given the option, felt that he would manage to study alone at home without having to go to school.

Question: Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair?
Answer: Yes, I think that the educational system used at MCAST is mostly fair but certain things need to be changed (please give more details)

Out of a total of 33 comments inputted in the text entry field (by 15 females and 18 males), 16 comments (by ten females and six males) mentioned teachers. These respondents reported that certain teachers at MCAST did not display the comportment that befit educators, with some arriving late for class or finishing class too early and giving poor or insufficient explanation while in class, and/or exhibiting several attitudinal problems. Out of these 16 respondents, eight had experienced bad treatment from teachers (four females; four males), ten liked most of their teachers at MCAST (six females; four males) and six liked some of their teachers at MCAST (four females; two males), and as regards their academic performance at MCAST, one female rated herself as being excellent, probably one of the best in her class, four (two females; two males) rated themselves as well above average, four (one female; three males) rated themselves above average and seven (six females; one male) rated themselves as average academic performers.

Other aspects of the current educational system used at MCAST, which respondents felt needed to be changed were: the stipend system, the duration of breaks between

lessons, the amount of extra subjects, the timeliness in sending notifications and the importance of fairness in timetabling, the adequacy in the level of difficulty of subjects, the relations between students and the allotment of classes to the morning and early afternoon hours. One respondent also suggested that grading should be more dependent on assignments rather than on school attendance.

One particular case emerges from this pool of data. A male respondent thought that the educational system used at MCAST was mostly fair but that certain things needed to be changed. He had had an average previous schooling experience and rated himself as an average academic performer in his current studies at MCAST. He had never been bullied/harassed at home or at school. He liked some of his teachers at MCAST and had never been treated badly by teachers. Even though he reported having good friends at MCAST, he did not feel a sense of belonging at MCAST and never woke up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST. Given the option, he felt that he would manage to study alone at home without having to go to school.

Question: Do you think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair?
Answer: No, I don't think that the educational system used at MCAST is fair (please give more details)

Out of a total of 11 comments inputted in the text entry field (by two females and nine males), five respondents (one female; four males) complained about specific aspects of the educational system currently used at MCAST, such as: insufficient provision of practical subjects, educational system used at MCAST being too formal with an overload of assignments, the stipend system and too large classes at Foundation Level, which hindered individual attention.

Also, out of the total of 11 comments inputted in the text entry field, two respondents (one female; one male) mentioned teachers, one suggesting (male respondent) that teachers ought to push students more, at school and with their studies at home, and the other (female respondent) complaining that teachers were not treating students equally. The female respondent had experienced bad treatment from her teachers, while the male respondent did not experience bad treatment by his teachers. The female respondent claimed that, given the option, she would not manage to study alone at home without having to go to school, while the male respondent claimed that, given the option, he would manage to study alone at home without having to go to school.

Three particular cases emerge from this pool of data (one female; two males). Although all three respondents complained about the way they were being treated at the College by their teachers, when these complaints were put side by side, the respondents' reasons for complaining about the way they were being treated at the College clearly contradicted each other. One male respondent (Male A) complained that they were not being respected in the same way, while another male respondent (Male B) complained that they were all being treated in the same way, and the female respondent (Female A) complained that they were not being treated equally. Male A and Female A had experienced bad treatment from their teachers, but this was not the case for Male B. Both Male A and Male B had no experience of bullying/harassment within the home environment, but Male A reported experiencing bullying/harassment

at school. Female A had been bullied/harassed both at home and at school. All three respondents had had an average previous schooling experience. Male A rated himself as an average academic performer at MCAST, while Male B and Female A rated themselves as above average academic performers at MCAST. Male A and Female A liked some of their teachers at MCAST, while Male B liked most of his teachers at MCAST. Female A reported that she sometimes felt a sense of belonging at MCAST (Male A and Male B reported that they did not know whether they felt a sense of belonging at MCAST or not). All three respondents sometimes woke up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST. Out of the three respondents, only Male A claimed that given the option he would manage to study alone at home without having to go to school.

Question: Is there anything that makes you afraid of going to school at MCAST?
Answer: Yes (please specify)

Out of a total of 33 comments (by 17 females and 16 males), six respondents (five females; one male) mentioned bullying (a word cloud generated in MAXQDA indicated that bullying was the top-ranking comment). Out of these six respondents, five had been bullied/harassed at school (four females; one male; again, good to note that the way the question asking about experience/s of bullying at school was worded did not allow one to identify whether such occurrence/s had happened prior to enrolment at MCAST and/or after enrolment at MCAST), and two out of these five had also been bullied/harassed at home (two females). One of these six respondents did not report experiencing bullying/harassment at home or at school, but she had witnessed bullying at school. Out of these six respondents, four had been treated badly by teachers (three females [including the female respondent who had witnessed bullying at school]; one male). Out of these six respondents, one female respondent had had a very good previous schooling experience, two respondents (one female; one male) had had a good previous schooling experience and three respondents (three females) had had an average previous schooling experience. One female respondent rated herself as an excellent academic performer at MCAST, probably one of the best in her class, two respondents (one female; one male) rated themselves as well above average academic performers at MCAST, one female respondent rated herself as an above average academic performer at MCAST and two respondents (two females) rated themselves as average academic performers at MCAST. All six respondents felt a sense of belonging at MCAST. One female respondent claimed that she liked all of her teachers at MCAST, another female respondent claimed that she liked most of her teachers at MCAST and the remaining four respondents (three females; one male) claimed that they liked some of their teachers at MCAST. Only one female respondent claimed that she always woke up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST, while the rest (four females; 1 male) reported that they sometimes woke up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST. Only two female respondents found support at home with their studies and three female respondents found support at MCAST with their studies. Most had good friends at MCAST (five females) and two female respondents claimed that, given the option, they would manage to study alone at home without having to go to school. Three respondents (two females; one male) claimed that they always enjoyed learning, while the remaining three female respondents claimed that they sometimes enjoyed learning.

Question: Do you think that studying is important for you?
Answer: Yes (please give more details)

There was a total of 109 comments (by 48 females and 60 males). Eighteen respondents had had a very good previous schooling experience, 42 respondents had had a good previous schooling experience, 31 respondents had had an average previous schooling experience, 14 respondents had had a bad previous schooling experience, and four respondents had had a very bad previous schooling experience. Eighteen respondents rated themselves as excellent academic performers at MCAST, probably the best in their class, 29 respondents rated themselves as well above average academic performers at MCAST, 22 respondents rated themselves as above average academic performers at MCAST, 35 respondents rated themselves as average academic performers at MCAST, three respondents rated themselves as below average academic performers at MCAST, and two respondents rated themselves as poor academic performers at MCAST, probably the worst in their class. Seven respondents had been bullied/harassed at home, while 97 respondents had not been bullied/harassed at home. Thirty respondents had been bullied/harassed at school, while 67 respondents had not been bullied/harassed at school. Twenty-three respondents reported that they liked all of their teachers at MCAST, 54 respondents reported that they liked most of their teachers at MCAST, 30 respondents reported that they liked some of their teachers at MCAST, and one respondent reported that he did not like any of his teachers at MCAST. Thirty-six respondents had experienced bad treatment from their teachers and 64 respondents had not experienced bad treatment from their teachers. Thirty-nine respondents always felt a sense of belonging at MCAST, 47 respondents sometimes felt a sense of belonging at MCAST, and ten respondents did not feel a sense of belonging at MCAST. Thirty-four respondents always woke up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST, 58 respondents sometimes woke up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST and 14 respondents never woke up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST. Seventy-three respondents found support at home with their studies, while 24 respondents did not find support at home with their studies. Eighty-two respondents found support at MCAST with their studies, while 12 respondents did not find support at MCAST with their studies. 89 respondents had good friends at MCAST, while ten respondents did not have good friends at MCAST. Twenty-nine respondents felt that, given the option, they would manage to study alone at home without having to go to school. Fifty-one respondents felt that, given the option, they would not manage to study alone at home without having to go to school. Forty respondents claimed that they always enjoyed learning, 62 respondents claimed that they sometimes enjoyed learning, and five respondents claimed that they did not enjoy learning at all.

Out this total of 109 comments, 65 comments (by 33 females and 32 males) were effectively coded under the rubric of 'for future career and goals'. Sixteen comments (by six females and ten males) were effectively coded under the rubric of 'for the joy of learning'. Twelve comments (by four females and eight males) were effectively coded under the rubric of 'for assignments, exams and grades'. Three comments (by one female and two males) were effectively coded under the rubric of 'for revision of material covered in class'. The remaining 13 comments were either redundant or invalid.

From this pool of data, one particular case emerges. This male respondent thought that studying was important. He had had a very bad previous schooling experience

and rated himself as an excellent academic performer at MCAST, probably one of the best in his class. He had been bullied/harassed both at home and at school. He liked none of his teachers at MCAST and had experienced bad treatment from his teachers (either at MCAST or at previous schools he had attended). He did not feel that the educational system used at MCAST was fair because, at Foundation Level, the classes he attended were too big, which hindered individual attention from his teachers. He claimed he did not feel a sense of belonging at MCAST. He never woke up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST. He found no support with his studies either at home or at MCAST. He also claimed he did not have good friends at MCAST. In general, he reported always enjoying learning but did not think that going to school was important. Still, he claimed that, given the option, he would not manage to study alone at home without going to school.

Question: Do you think that studying is important for you?
Answer: No (please give more details)

Out of a total of nine comments (by one female and eight males), only two comments (by two males) could be coded under some general rubric, which in this case was 'prefer to have a job'. From the remaining comments, one male respondent reasoned that studying was not important for him because, although he felt he was not good at studying, he still managed to pass his exams. Other individual comments mentioned that studying was too easy, that the content of one's studies was easily forgotten, that studying was not fun, that willpower was more important than studying and that it was pointless studying if the subject was of no interest to one.

Question: Do you think going to school is important?
Answer: Yes (please give more details)

There was a total of 98 comments (by 41 females and 56 males). Twenty respondents had had a very good previous schooling experience, 35 respondents had had a good previous schooling experience, 33 respondents had had an average previous schooling experience, eight respondents had had a bad previous schooling experience, and two respondents had had a very bad previous schooling experience. Fourteen respondents rated themselves as excellent academic performers at MCAST, probably the best in their class, 21 respondents rated themselves as well above average academic performers at MCAST, 26 respondents rated themselves as above average academic performers at MCAST, 32 respondents rated themselves as average academic performers at MCAST, two respondents rated themselves as below average academic performers at MCAST, one respondent rated himself as a well below average academic performer at MCAST and two respondents rated themselves as poor academic performers at MCAST, probably the worst in their class. Six respondents had been bullied/harassed at home, while 87 respondents had not been bullied/harassed at home. Thirty-one respondents had been bullied/harassed at school, while 56 respondents had not been bullied/harassed at school. Twenty-three respondents reported that they liked all of their teachers at MCAST, 43 respondents reported that they liked most of their teachers at MCAST and 31 respondents reported that they liked some of their teachers at MCAST. Twenty-nine respondents had experienced bad treatment from their teachers and 60 respondents had not experienced bad treatment from their teachers. Thirty-six respondents always felt a sense of belonging at MCAST, 40 respondents sometimes felt a sense of belonging at MCAST and eight respondents did not feel a sense of

belonging at MCAST. Thirty-three respondents always woke up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST, 52 respondents sometimes woke up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST and ten respondents never woke up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST. Sixty-eight respondents found support at home with their studies, while 21 respondents did not find support at home with their studies. Seventy-eight respondents found support at MCAST with their studies, while eight respondents did not find support at MCAST with their studies. Eighty-three respondents had good friends at MCAST, while eight respondents did not have good friends at MCAST. Twenty-seven respondents felt that, given the option, they would manage to study alone at home without having to go to school. Forty-six respondents felt that, given the option, they would not manage to study alone at home without having to go to school. Forty respondents claimed that they always enjoyed learning, 52 respondents claimed that they sometimes enjoyed learning and five respondents claimed that they did not enjoy learning at all.

Out of this total of 98 comments, 41 comments (by 22 females and 18 males) were effectively coded under the rubric of 'for future career'. Thirty-five comments (by 11 females and 24 males) were effectively coded under the rubric of 'to educate oneself'. Twelve comments (by six females and six males) were effectively coded under the rubric of 'for personal and social development'. Comments that could not be classified under some sort of rubric included the following reasons for going to school being important: the risk of absenteeism potentially leading to expulsion from school, not attending school preventing one from achieving his/her aims, gaining of experience, taking of notes and doing assignments, school providing help with one's studies and going to school being important as long as online studying was not an option.

From this pool of data, one particular case emerges. This male respondent thought that going to school was important because he felt he could not live without school. He had had a bad previous schooling experience and rated himself as a poor academic performer at MCAST, probably one of the worst in his class. He had been bullied/harassed both at home and at school. He liked all of his teachers at MCAST and had experienced bad treatment from his previous teachers. He felt that the educational system used at MCAST was fair. Yet, he claimed he did not feel a sense of belonging at MCAST. He always woke up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST, yet he reported fearing going to school at MCAST because of his fear of work and men. He found support both at home and at MCAST with his studies. He claimed he had good friends at MCAST. He thought that studying was important because it would help him find a practical job and be independent. He claimed that, given the option, he would not manage to study alone at home without going to school. In general, he reported always enjoying learning.

Question: Do you think going to school is important?
Answer: No (please give more details)

None of the comments could be grouped and classified under some sort of rubric. Individual reasons for thinking that going to school was not important included: not enough hands-on experience provided at school, personal financial difficulties, teaching methods that were perceived as somewhat outdated, difficulty in finding a job even with a diploma and the ability to find a well-paid job even without any schooling. One respondent reasoned that everyone needs to be educated, and that

"education is education", irrespective of whether it is gained at school or at the place of work.

Conclusion

From the results obtained, the predominantly-male sample population can be described as mostly typical, with most respondents and their parents/guardian being born and raised in Malta, respondents' parents/guardian having at the least finished compulsory education, both parents and/or guardian being currently employed, most respondents living with both parents, and respondents having an average of two sibling/stepsiblings living in the same household with them. The majority of respondents reported they had had a good previous schooling experience and, on average, rated themselves as above average academic performers. The majority of respondents reported not having experienced any negative life-incidents, or physical or psychological conditions, or learning disabilities, or any addictions that could have otherwise affected their studies at MCAST. Most respondents had never experienced bullying/harassment within the home environment or at school. Most respondents liked their teachers at MCAST, and most were never treated badly by their teachers at school. Most respondents thought that the educational system used at MCAST was fair and most sometimes felt a sense of belonging at the College. Most respondents claimed that they sometimes woke up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST.

Although the majority of respondents claimed that there was nothing that made them afraid of going to school at MCAST, aggregated responses from the minority, who claimed the opposite, indicated that bullying was the top-ranking reason for this minority being afraid of going to school at MCAST.

The majority of respondents found support in their studies both at home and at MCAST. Most respondents claimed that they had good friends at MCAST. Also, most felt that studying was important to them. Most respondents thought that going to school was important and that they would not manage to study on their own without having to go to school. The majority of respondents stated that in general they sometimes enjoyed learning.

From the quantitative analyses performed on this dataset, a significant association was evinced between thinking that the educational system used at MCAST was fair and waking up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST. Results showed that those who thought that the educational system used at MCAST was fair were more likely to wake up in the morning looking forward to going to school at MCAST than those who thought that the educational system used at MCAST was not fair. Also, another significant association was evinced between thinking that the educational system used at MCAST was or was not fair and thinking that going to school was or was not important. Results showed that those thinking that the educational system used at MCAST was not fair were more likely to think that going to school was not important than to think that going to school was important. Also, those thinking that the educational system used at MCAST was fair were more likely to think that going to school was important than those not knowing whether going to school was important. These significant associations are similar to the significant associations evinced in Research Exercise 3, where it was shown that (1) those respondents who claimed that they thought that the educational system used at their school was not fair were less

likely to have woken up looking forward to going to school in the morning and (2) those respondents who thought that the educational system used at their school was not fair were more likely to think that going to school was not important.

Through qualitative analyses performed on individual cases, a much more nuanced and complex situation was evinced. For example, a male respondent thought that the educational system used at MCAST was fair and reasoned that this was so by commenting that most of the staff at MCAST treated students well. He had had a bad previous schooling experience and had experienced bad treatment from teachers. Given the option, he felt that he would manage to study alone at home without having to go to school. The second case, another male respondent, also thought that the educational system used at MCAST was fair and, in his accompanying comment, mentioned teachers, stating that they treated everyone equally and did not treat students badly. In sharp contrast to the previous case, this male respondent had had a good previous schooling experience and had experienced no bad treatment from teachers. Yet, he too, given the option, felt that he would manage to study alone at home without having to go to school. Clearly, classical models used in profiling students do not have much predictive power when applied to these individual scenarios.

In light of the results obtained in Research Exercise 3, it was argued that students might be potentially perceiving their respective educational institutions as inherently bureaucratic/academic. It was argued then that the students' perception of their school (infrastructure) might be cloud-based, so to speak, that they might be essentially lost in metaphor; and that without the proper means to reify their perceptions and feelings of the schooling experience, they might be limping on with their daily school chores half-heartedly. This inability to name and face the problem that the daily insurmountable obstacle of going to school presents to them, might be leading them to miss out on real and valued school experiences.

If, as will be shown in the ensuing results for Research Exercise 5, students, already minded for work, enrol at VET institutions such as MCAST because such institutions are more aligned to the realities of the workplace than other more academically-oriented educational institutions, the notion of academic components within their curricula, components which prevail even within VET institutions, might potentially be putting them off their studies. Tailoring VET institutions on the exact same principles on which the workplace is founded might seem like an unsound principle, as that would seemingly necessitate that such institutions do away with all academic components incorporated in the curricula prevalent in VET institutions. However, tailoring VET institutions on the exact same principles on which the workplace is founded might seem like an unsound principle only if the education sector at large insists on maintaining the opaque and divisive definition and application it has given all things academic to date (see, for example, a study by Ii, Fitzgerald, Morys-Carter, Davie and Barker 2018, which explored the perceptions of professionals in academia, industry and healthcare sectors in England regarding tri-sectoral collaborations in the healthcare sector). The results presented in this research exercise and the following one (Research Exercise 5) seem to corroborate the hypothesis that students yearn for some degree of homogeneity between the school and workplace realities.

Research Exercise 5
(with ex-MCAST Students who dropped out from their studies)

Methodology

Phone interviews were conducted with ex-MCAST students of all EQF/MQF levels (EQF/MQF Introductory Level A to Level 7), who had dropped-out from their course of studies at the College. The research team liaised with the Registrar's office at MCAST to obtain the contact details of the said students and also demographic data pertaining about them. Due to data protection regulations, the research team were able to receive from the Registrar at MCAST only data of those students who had enrolled for academic years 2017-2018, 2018-2019 and 2019-2020, since these were the first student cohorts to explicitly give their consent to be contacted by MCAST via contact details provided by the students in their application forms during application phase (data for academic year 2019-2020 may have been incomplete as deregistration process of students who had dropped out of academic year 2019-2020 may not yet have been fully finalised at the time the data was received from the Registrar). Five members of the research team, this including one of the authors of this study, conducted the short phone interviews with these students. An online template was designed and implemented on Qualtrics, in both English and Maltese languages, to cue researchers while conducting the phone interviews and also to aid in data collection. Notes were also taken manually during the phone interviews and these were incorporated with data collected using the online template after each respective phone interview. The researchers conducting the phone interviews started each phone interview by introducing themselves and the project. They then proceeded to explain the aim of this research exercise (namely to hear directly from each respondent what his/her experience/s at the College was/were like and what his/her reason/s for dropping out from the College was/were), and, lastly, they outlined confidentiality and anonymity matters before proceeding to obtain consent from the respondent to conduct the phone interview. Ethics clearance to conduct research with these ex-MCAST students was sought from and granted by the MCAST Research Ethics Committee (REC) prior to conducting any phone interviews with the said students. The phone interviews were conducted between September 2020 and December 2020. Once this exercise was finalised, the online template that was used by the researchers conducting the phone interviews to collect the data was closed, and data were downloaded in csv file format and imported into Microsoft Excel. Preliminary sorting of quantitative data and statistical procedures were done in Microsoft Excel. Qualitative data were analysed using MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020.

Data analyses for this research exercise are still in progress and what is being presented next are the preliminary results obtained from the analyses conducted on the data so far.

Results

Out of a population of 1770 cases, 957 phone interviews were conducted, out of which 930 were valid responses. Thus, the sample size for this research exercise was of 930 responses.

More phone interviews were conducted with male respondents (*n* = 557, 59.9%) than with female respondents (*n* = 372, 40.0%; Table 151).

Cohort	Male	Female	Other	TOTALS
17-18	274	188	0	**462**
18-19	178	126	1	**305**
19-20*	105	58	0	**163**
Totals	**557**	**372**	**1**	**930**
Percentage	**59.9**	**40.0**	**0.1**	**100.0**

Table 151: *Count and percentage of respondents by cohort and gender*
** Data for academic year 2019-2020 may have been incomplete as deregistration process of students who had dropped out of academic year 2019-2020 may not yet have been fully finalised at the time the data was received from the Registrar.*

Most of the respondents were of Maltese nationality (*n* = 885, 95.2%; Table 152)

Cohort	Maltese	Other	TOTALS
17-18	446	16	**462**
18-19	284	21	**305**
19-20*	155	8	**163**
Totals	**885**	**45**	**930**
Percentage	**95.2**	**4.8**	**100.0**

Table 152: *Count and percentage of respondents by cohort and nationality*
** Data for academic year 2019-2020 may have been incomplete as deregistration process of students who had dropped out of academic year 2019-2020 may not yet have been fully finalised at the time the data was received from the Registrar.*

The Institute of Community Services (ICS) had the best representation within the sample population (*n* = 233, 25.1%), followed by the Institute of Engineering and Transport (IET; *n* = 177, 19.0%), then by the Institute of Business Management and Commerce (IBMC; *n* = 147, 15.8%; Table 153).

Institute	17-18	%	18-19	%	19-20*	%	% of total
Cross-curricular	2	0.4	1	0.3	0	0.0	0.3
Gozo Campus	7	1.5	12	3.9	10	6.1	3.1
ICA	68	14.7	35	11.5	13	8.0	12.5

IAS	36	7.8	30	9.8	15	9.2	8.7
IBMC	86	18.6	32	10.5	29	17.8	15.8
ICS	105	22.7	96	31.5	32	19.6	25.1
IET	92	19.9	57	18.7	28	17.2	19.0
IICT	65	14.1	40	13.1	33	20.2	14.8
Pathway	1	0.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.1
Other	0	0.0	2	0.7	0	0.0	0.2
Master's programme	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	1.8	0.3
Totals	**462**		**305**		**163**		**930.0**
Percentage	49.7	100.0	32.8	100.0	17.5	100.0	100.0

Table 153: *Count and percentage of respondents by cohort and institute*
** Data for academic year 2019-2020 may have been incomplete as deregistration process of students who had dropped out of academic year 2019-2020 may not yet have been fully finalised at the time the data was received from the Registrar.*

EQF/MQF Level 4 had best representation in the sample population (*n* = 350, 37.6%), followed by EQF/MQF Level 3 (*n* = 201, 21.6%), followed by EQF/MQF Level 6 (*n* = 183, 19.7%; Table 154).

EQF/MQF Level	**17-18**	**%**	**18-19**	**%**	**19-20***	**%**	**% of total**
Level 1	5	1.1	1	0.3	0	0.0	0.6
Level 2	47	10.2	50	16.4	17	10.4	12.3
Level 3	90	19.5	78	25.6	33	20.2	21.6
Level 4	184	39.8	93	30.5	73	44.8	37.6
Level 5	24	5.2	8	2.6	4	2.5	3.9
Level 6	99	21.4	57	18.7	27	16.6	19.7
Level 6/7	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	2.5	0.4
Level 7	0	0.0	11	3.6	0	0.0	1.2
A and B	1	0.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.1
EASA	3	0.6	7	2.3	0	0.0	1.1
IMO	9	1.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	1.0
N/A	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	2.5	0.4
Blank	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.6	0.1
Totals	**462**	100.0	**305**	100.0	**163**	100.0	**930.0**

Table 154: *Count and percentage of respondents by cohort and EQF/MQF Level*
** Data for academic year 2019-2020 may have been incomplete as deregistration process of students who had dropped out of academic year 2019-2020 may not yet have been fully finalised at the time the data was received from the Registrar.*

The following are the results of a cross-tabulation (Gender by Institute by EQF/MQF Level) for cohort 2017-2018 (Table 155).

Female	**188**
Gozo Campus	**1**
3	1
Institute for the Creative Arts	**23**
2	3
3	7
4	7
6	6
Institute of Applied Sciences	**24**
2	3
3	4
4	9
6	8
Institute of Business Management and Commerce	**48**
2	5
3	5
4	24
6	14
Institute of Community Services	**74**
1	2
2	8
3	20
4	18
5	23
6	3
Institute of Engineering and Transport	**8**
3	2
4	3
6	1
EASA	1
IMO	1
Institute of Information and Communication Technology	**9**
2	1

3	1
4	4
6	3
Pathway to Independent Living (Malta)	**1**
AandB	1
Male	**274**
Cross-curricular	**2**
1	2
Gozo Campus	**6**
2	1
3	1
4	4
Institute for the Creative Arts	**45**
1	1
2	1
3	13
4	22
6	8
Institute of Applied Sciences	**12**
2	1
3	1
4	9
6	1
Institute of Business Management and Commerce	**38**
2	5
3	8
4	18
5	1
6	6
Institute of Community Services	**31**
2	5
3	11
4	10
6	5
Institute of Engineering and Transport	**84**

2	10
3	12
4	30
6	22
EASA	2
IMO	8
Institute of Information and Communication Technology	**56**
2	4
3	4
4	26
6	22
Grand Total	**462**

Table 155: *Cross-tabulation (Gender by Institute by EQF/MQF Level) for cohort 2017-2018*

The following are the results of a cross-tabulation (Gender by Institute by EQF/MQF Level) for cohort 2018-2019 (Table 156).

Female	**126**
Gozo Campus	**6**
2	1
4	4
6	1
Institute for the Creative Arts	**16**
3	2
4	7
6	7
Institute of Applied Sciences	**20**
3	3
4	4
5	2
6	8
7	3
Institute of Business Management and Commerce	**16**
2	2
3	3
4	9

6	1
7	1
Institute of Community Services	**57**
2	10
3	21
4	11
5	5
6	9
7	1
Institute of Engineering and Transport	**5**
3	2
6	3
Institute of Information and Communication Technology	**6**
3	1
4	4
6	1
Male	**178**
Cross-curricular	**1**
3	1
Gozo Campus	**6**
3	4
4	2
Institute for the Creative Arts	**19**
2	1
3	3
4	8
6	7
Institute of Applied Sciences	**10**
2	1
3	2
4	4
5	1
7	2
Institute of Business Management and Commerce	**16**
1	1

2	2
3	3
4	5
6	4
7	1
Institute of Community Services	**39**
2	12
3	16
4	6
6	5
Institute of Engineering and Transport	**51**
2	13
3	12
4	13
6	5
7	1
EASA	7
Institute of Information and Communication Technology	**34**
2	8
3	5
4	15
6	6
Other	**2**
7	2
Other	**1**
Institute of Engineering and Transport	**1**
4	1
Grand Total	**305**

Table 156: *Cross-tabulation (Gender by Institute by EQF/MQF Level) for cohort 2018-2019*

The following are the results of a cross-tabulation (Gender by Institute by EQF/MQF Level) for cohort 2019-2020 (Table 157; data for academic year 2019-2020 may have been incomplete as deregistration process of students who had dropped out of academic year 2019-2020 may not yet have been fully finalised at the time the data was received from the Registrar).

Female	**58**
Gozo Campus	**2**
Level 3	1
Level 4	1
Institute for the Creative Arts	**7**
Level 4	6
Level 6	1
Institute of Applied Sciences	**6**
Level 3	2
Level 4	4
Institute of Business Management and Commerce	**15**
Level 2	2
Level 3	1
Level 4	7
Level 6	4
Level 6/7	1
Institute of Community Services	**21**
Level 2	3
Level 3	5
Level 4	10
Level 5	2
Level 6	1
Institute of Engineering and Transport	**3**
Level 3	1
Level 4	1
Level 6	1
Institute of Information and Communication Technology	**4**
Level 3	1
Level 4	2
Level 6	1
Male	**105**
Gozo Campus	**8**
Level 2	2
Level 3	3
Level 4	1
N/A	1

(blank)	1
Institute for the Creative Arts	**6**
Level 2	1
Level 4	2
Level 6	3
Institute of Applied Sciences	**9**
Level 3	2
Level 4	4
Level 6	3
Institute of Business Management and Commerce	**14**
Level 3	1
Level 4	11
Level 6	2
Institute of Community Services	**11**
Level 3	6
Level 4	1
Level 5	2
Level 6	2
Institute of Engineering and Transport	**25**
Level 2	4
Level 3	5
Level 4	6
Level 6	7
N/A	3
Institute of Information and Communication Technology	**29**
Level 2	5
Level 3	5
Level 4	17
Level 6	2
Master's Programme	**3**
Level 6/7	3
Grand Total	**163**

Table 157: *Cross-tabulation (Gender by Institute by EQF/MQF Level) for cohort 2019-2020*

Most respondents had had a positive schooling experience prior to enrolling at MCAST (*n* = 704, 76.5%; Table 158).

How would you describe your schooling experience prior to enrolling at MCAST?	Count	Percentage
Positive	704	76.5
Neutral	190	20.7
Negative	26	2.8
Total	**920**	**100.0**

Table 158: *How would you describe your schooling experience prior to enrolling at MCAST? (Mdn = Positive)*

Why do you think it was a negative experience?	Count
Family characteristics	1
Health problems	2
Personal circumstances	1
Teachers/educators	8
Behavioural problems	0
Lack of support / guidance	2
Absenteeism from school / exclusions	0
Other	23

Table 159: *Why do you think it was a negative experience?*

The main reasons that led respondents to enrol at MCAST (Table 160) were:

- More hands-on learning (*n* = 398; 42.8% of sample)
- MCAST offered course of studies wished for (*n* = 307; 33.0% of sample)
- The possibility of starting courses at MCAST from a lower level / with less prior qualifications (*n* = 221; 23.8% of sample)

What was the reason that led you to enrol at MCAST?	Count
Attending previous Skills Kits courses	3
More hands-on activities / experiences	377
It was possible to start courses from a lower level	171
Having the impression that the courses are not so difficult	14
Other	638

Table 160: *What was the reason that led you to enrol at MCAST?*

The majority of respondents had a good experience once they started studying at MCAST (*n* = 517, 55.9%; Table 161).

What was your experience like once you started studying at MCAST?	Count	Percentage
Very good	155	16.8
Good	517	55.9
Neutral	218	23.6
Bad	30	3.2
Very bad	5	0.5
Prefer not to disclose	0	0.0
Total	**925**	**100.0**

Table 161: *What was your experience like once you started studying at MCAST? (Mdn = Good)*

The majority of respondents claimed it was their decision to leave MCAST (*n* = 910, 97.8%; Table 162).

Was it your decision to leave MCAST?	Count	Percentage
Yes	910	97.8
No	20	2.2
Prefer not to disclose	0	0.0
Total	**930**	**100.0**

Table 162: *Was it your decision to leave MCAST?*

Out of these 910 respondents who claimed it was their decision to leave MCAST, 29.6% (*n* = 269) stated that work and financial reasons were the reasons why they decided to leave MCAST (Table 163).

Yes, it was my decision to leave MCAST. Why?	Count
Parents / friends pressured me	3
Family characteristics	23
Health problems	29
Personal circumstances	90
Schooling and educators	245
Behavioural problems	1
Lack of support and guidance	7
Money and work	204
Other	525

Table 163: *Yes, it was my decision to leave MCAST. Why?*

No, it was not my decision to leave MCAST. Why?	Count
MCAST struck me off	8
Parents / friends pressured me	1
Family characteristics	2
Health problems	1
Personal circumstances	4
Schooling and educators	1
Behavioural problems	0
Lack of support and guidance	0
Money and work	4
Other	17

Table 164: *No, it was not my decision to leave MCAST. Why?*

They chose 'schooling and educators' in the previous question. Prompt.	Count
Style of learning	31
Relationship with teachers	37
Learning environment	24
Lack of enjoyment	59
Lack of interest	34
Other	213

Table 165: *They chose 'schooling and educators' in the previous question. Prompt.*

Most respondents reported feeling fine when they left MCAST (*n* = 519, 55.8% of sample; Table 166).

How did you feel when you left MCAST?	Count
Fine	519
Lost	136
Sad	215
Best decision that I could have taken	111
Had a lot of time on my hands	14
Other	236

Table 166: *How did you feel when you left MCAST?*

Most respondents stated that they looked for a job after leaving MCAST (*n* = 585; 62.9% of sample; Table 167)

What did you do afterwards?	Count
Search for a job	585
Search for another course	191
Rethink about my interests and objectives - self-reflection	45
Other	298

Table 167: *What did you do afterwards?*

Most respondents stated that they were currently working (*n* = 749; 80.5% of sample; Table 168)

- Out of those 749 respondents who stated that they were currently working, 84 (11.2%) were thinking about studying again, 131 (17.5%) were actually studying, and two (0.3%) were studying and already thinking about studying again.

What are you currently doing?	Count
Searching for a job	37
Working	749
Thinking about studying again	97
Studying	232
Nothing / unemployed and not studying	38
Other	194

Table 168: *What are you currently doing?*

Most respondents stated that they had re-enrolled or were thinking of re-enrolling at MCAST (*n* = 635; 70.2%; Table 169).

Has respondent re-enrolled or is thinking of re-enrolling at MCAST?	Count	Percentage
Yes	635	70.2
No	197	21.8
Not applicable	72	8.0
Total	**904**	**100.0**

Table 169: *Has respondent re-enrolled or is thinking of re-enrolling at MCAST?*

Limitations

Certain samples (namely samples for Research Exercises 1, 4 and, possibly, 3 [population size in this case was not available]) were not representative samples (assuming a margin of error of 5 and a confidence level of 95%) due to the sizes of these samples being somewhat small due to low response-rate from population. Also, certain sample populations were recruited through purposive sampling (namely samples for Research Exercises 3 and 4), this due to research design, which might reduce the generalisability of the findings to the student population as a whole. However, the authors of this study believe that the overall homogeneity evinced in the findings across the research exercises, presented above, somewhat mitigates the above-mentioned limitations.

All differences in gender representation across the research exercises presented above were statistically significantly different. Research exercises 1 and 2 sampled significantly more females than males. Research exercises 3, 4 and 5 sampled significantly more males than females. The authors of this study believe that this close balance and also the overall homogeneity in the other results found across research exercises 1, 2 3, 4 and 5 somewhat counteracts and mitigates limitations that might be caused by differences in gender representation.

General Discussion

Reviewing the literature that analysed the factors that contribute to students opting to enrol at VET institutions, it was shown that students who are mainly attracted to VET come from minority groups (Oakes et al. 1992), low socioeconomic backgrounds (Agodini et al. 2004), low-income families (Xhumari and Dibra 2016; Oakes et al. 1992), with parents' level of education being low (Xhumari and Dibra 2016). Previous research also noted that teachers can dramatically influence students' achievements (Dislen 2013; Clark and Cefai 2014; Bufton 2001). Teachers' expectations of their students can trigger a self-fulfilling prophecy, whose "specious validity", as Merton (1948: 195) pointed out, "perpetuates a reign of error", with teachers who think lowly of their students, and adjusting their behaviour in class accordingly, reaping low achievement from their low expectancy students (that would not have occurred had there been no self-fulfilling prophecy), and, conversely, with teachers who think highly of their students, and adjusting their behaviour in class accordingly, reaping high achievement from their high expectancy students (that would not have occurred had there been no self-fulfilling prophecy) (Jussim 2013). Research also noted that students enrolling into VET institutions are mainly low academic achievers (Agodini et al. 2004; Xhumari and Dibra 2016), with low educational expectations (Agodini et al. 2004), and unable to enrol and do well in general education (Xhumari and Dibra 2016). Previous research also showed that early leaving is more common among students enrolled at VET institutions than amongst students enrolled in general education tracks (CEDEFOP 2016), and that it is high-achieving, affluent parents and students who are most willing to push the system, while low-achieving and mid-range students have less-involved parents who are less determined to challenge the system (Oakes et al. 1992; Wells and Serna 2017).

In light of these findings reported in the literature, it was argued that if teachers stigmatise students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, then these teachers will relate to these students differently from the way they will relate to their other, more affluent students. Such stigmatised students will then most likely underachieve (Dislen 2013; Jussim 2013) and enrol in VET (which has been shown to mainly attract low achievers [Agodini et al. 2004; Xhumari and Dibra 2016]), where, as already previously statistically measured and verified (CEDEFOP 2016), they will most likely drop out. These students and their parents, in all probability, will not challenge the system, maintaining the status quo, this as has been reported previously in the literature (Oakes et al. 1992; Wells and Serna 2017). This lack of determination in the parents will not likely be simply attributable to their low socioeconomic status since, as research in Malta has shown (Abela and Tabone 2008), poor parents' involvement in their children's educational needs is on par with that practised by those parents above the poverty line.

The solution to the impasse created by this self-fulfilling prophecy would be an attitudinal shift among all parties involved (i.e. students, parents, educators and other

professionals at school, and senior management teams at school). Yet, an attitudinal shift on such a scale would seem somewhat impractical and unmanageable.

If one returns to the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy, one can see that VET institutions themselves may be unwittingly perpetuating a self-fulfilling prophecy, and this because of their very ethos, which is of making themselves more aligned to the place of work than other more academically-oriented educational institutions. If, as has been shown in the results presented in Research Exercise 5, most students opt to enrol at MCAST because MCAST provides more hands-on activities and thus provides more relevant skills that will be directly useful for one's future employment, then it could be that such students, already minded for employment, perceive schooling at MCAST as inherently non-academic and 'more like work'. When faced with the reality that MCAST, as a VET institution, still incorporates within its curricula academic components, such students, having been nurtured throughout their development as not fit for academia, will most likely drop out and immediately enter the workforce instead, fulfilling what it is that made them enrol at MCAST in the first place (i.e. to seek employment). Indeed, as was shown in the results for Research Exercise 5, work and financial reasons were the main reasons why respondents decided to leave MCAST, with most stating that they looked for a job after leaving MCAST, and with the majority currently working.

Of those respondents who stated that they were currently working, 29% further stated that they were either thinking about studying again, or were actually studying, or were studying and already thinking about studying again. It thus seems that the passion for learning and self-improvement had not abated. In light of these findings, the authors of this study propose an alternative strategy to the previously-mentioned attitudinal shift. If, as results indicate, many students are slipping through the net of schooling, preferring instead to enter early into the world of employment, then MCAST, being the leading VET institution on the island, might seek to strengthen further its ties with industry, and support industry with in-house training, upskilling and reskilling, through various models other than the ones already being carried out. Apart from the various benefits this would bestow to all parties, such a move would effectively render the term 'student dropout' a very fluid term. The reasoning behind this last statement is that, if a VET institution is losing full-time, on-campus students due to such students deciding to enter the workforce instead, the institution will now essentially be 'recapturing' these students, now at their chosen place of work. Thus, if an MCAST student drops out from on-campus tuition to enter the workforce, by having a VET institution such as MCAST penetrate the workplace, this by MCAST becoming a 'mobile' educational institution, this ex-student of MCAST will be effectively reinstated as an active student of the College, through on-the-job training certified by the Island's leading VET institution.

This proposed model can be extended further by incorporating competency-based, industry-driven curricula tailored by strategic partnerships between educational institutions, government bodies and industry (Gupta 2008; Baumann et al. 2014). Research conducted amongst employers in nine countries, namely in Brazil, Germany, India, Mexico, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States, has shown that 40% of employers list 'lack of skills' as the main reason behind entry-level vacancies (Mourshed, Farrell & Barton 2012). Also, research in Turkey has shown that the training of 68% of the Turkish workforce is not compliant with Industry 4.0 and the training of the remaining 32% of the Turkish workforce is not suitable for the future (Durmuş & Dağli 2017). As Baumann and colleagues (2014) argue, "By

establishing common industry standards and delivering competency-based learning outcomes, a program can grow to meet the talent demands of its profession. The new economy requires skill diversity, and cannot be [solely] sustained by a white-collar workforce. It will increasingly demand a workforce of technicians with the technical skills and problem-solving abilities necessary to maintain innovative technologies, because its prosperity will depend on them. The magnitude of this need is so great that successful technical education must be replicated across industry sectors" (p. 38).

In a study by Alsoud and colleagues (2021), it was found that:

- Vocational education has a significant positive relationship with industry curriculum;
- Industry curriculum has a significant positive relationship with employability;
- Apprenticeship method of learning has a significant positive relationship with employability;
- Industry curriculum significantly mediates between vocational education and employability.

Alsoud and colleagues (2021) argue that to increase employability, high-quality vocational education ought to be delivered through apprenticeship models that keep up-to-date with industry-driven curricula. This observation by Alsoud and colleagues is especially pertinent in the context of Industry 4.0, which necessitates an altogether new set of skills (Shahroom & Hussin 2018). Locally, such a model has been implemented in an EQF/MQF Level 3 programme, the 'Diploma in Heating, Ventilation and Air-Conditioning', through collaboration between MCAST and ACIA (AC Importers Association). This collaboration between education and industry, through a scholarship scheme known as 'industry on campus', sees that enrolled apprentice students learn the trade in labs furnished with the latest equipment and tools provided by the industry. Students, apart from their monthly government stipend, also enjoy a yearly allowance, and are guaranteed employment within the industry once they conclude their one-year long apprenticeship programme at MCAST (BT Commercial 2021; Deguara 2019).

A more radical model would be the education-in-industry model, such as promoted by the 'Ford College Graduate Program', an in-house programme that provides rotational job assignments for recent college graduates during their first years of employment with Ford Motor Company (Ford Motor Company 2020). Such job assignments tap into diverse skills such as Information Technology, Manufacturing, Human Resources and Finance (Ford Motor Company 2020). With a duration of between 24 to 36 months, this depending on the programme chosen, these programmes offered as part of the 'Ford College Graduate Program' aim to equip enrolled individuals with the necessary skills to enable them to further grow within the Company (Ford Motor Company 2020).

Learning to work, by doing work one does at work? Admittedly, this might not be the only pathway available ahead, but it is most definitely a very fertile 'pastureland', ready to be intelligently exploited and put to use for the benefit of present and future societies. The issue of student dropout may be a perennial problem, but with effective educational strategies and platforms set in place at the workplace, societies can ensure that proper education and training remain truly accessible to all, including to those who have effectively given up on following classical educational and training pathways.

Although beyond the scope of this study, attention should also be provided to current, possibly qualified, employees. In the current world pandemic scenario, in-house training and, more importantly, reskilling/upskilling programmes have become pivotal in reorienting employees to the new work-landscape reality.

> The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on global economies, supply chains, and corporations are far reaching. G20 countries are grappling with historically high unemployment rates, as stay-at-home-orders upended livelihoods. This, coupled with jobs increasingly at risk of automation due to advancing technology, will impact the availability and quality of employment for years and is contributing to rising income disparity and distrust in institutions. Reskilling will be key to reversing these trends, as displaced workers look to develop new skills to remain relevant and large youth populations entering the labor market seek the skills needed for the workforce of the future (Global Solutions Initiative Foundation gGmbH 2023).

What is called for is a paradigm shift not only in the content of education, especially in the more academically oriented core content, but also in the mode of education delivery. Such a paradigm shift would enable VET institutions such as MCAST to safely navigate the as yet mostly uncharted waters the current world scenario has put to the fore.

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