

ENGAGING INNOVATIVE KNOWLEDGE THROUGH APPLIED
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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Quality Assurance - a Catalyst for Innovation and Performance in Micro and Small HEIs

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Research Question

How do quality assurance systems impact innovation and performance of Higher Education Institutions in small island states?

Background

- QA in higher education has come to the forefront since the 1980s with the Bologna Declaration placing it on the European agenda in 1999 and the setting up of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA, 2023).
- Higher education in small states such as the EU state of Malta is characterized mostly by micro and small institutions
- There is currently very limited literature on QA in higher education in the context of small island states and none that investigates the three concepts of quality assurance, innovation and performance.
- There have been 158 registered further and higher education institutions in Malta since 2010 but 40 have since withdrawn, had their license expire or revoked over an average four years of operation (MFHEA,

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Research Objectives

To explore:

- a) the effect of quality assurance on innovation,
- b) the effect of quality assurance on the institutional performance of micro/small HEIs
- c) the effects innovation and institutional performance can have on each other

To develop a framework that enables higher educational institutions to understand the application of quality assurance principles, systems and processes in order to foster innovation and improve institutional performance

Methodology

- A Grounded Theory approach has been selected due to the rigorous iterative nature of the process and the grounding of the theory in the data itself.
- The constant comparative analysis process and adherence to the alternating nature of data generation and analysis is applied.
- Analysis follows a variant of the Conditional/Consequential Matrix developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998).

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Data - Main Source

Qualitative data:

- Primary data for this study is collected through in-depth interviews that are flexible and open-ended as to allow the participants to '*assume more power over the direction of the conversation*' (Birks and Mills, 2015)
- Persons responsible for QA in ten small HEIs in Malta were interviewed

Secondary Data

Qualitative Data:

- MFHEA Audit Reports
- HEI Quality Documents

Quantitative Data:

- HEI Audited Accounts
- MFHEA Qualifications dataset

As stated by Glaser (1978) "*all is data*", this secondary data will be used for methods triangulation Patton (2002).

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Sample

- This paper is based on the first ten cases.
- Cases were chosen via purposive sampling
- In three cases, the person responsible for quality is also the CEO as the institution is micro
- Nine are private-funded while one is state-funded.
- Seven are considered as micro enterprises (European Commission, 2015).

Institution	Average Revenue	Ownership	Is Subsidiary	Note	Total Registered Programmes	Active	Inactive	Full Qualifications	Core Team size
Institution 1	2M	Private	No	Owner Manger	655	612	43	118	20
Institution 2	2M	State	No	State	704	677	27	135	42
Institution 3	0.5M	Private	No	Owner Manger	80	54	26	9	2
Institution 4	0.6M	Private	Yes	Industry Parent	92	89	3	7	6
Institution 5	Revoked	Private	Yes	Industry Parent	2	0	2	0	2
Institution 6	0.3M	Private	Part	Spin off	103	79	24	11	9
Institution 7	0.5M	Private	No	Owner Manger	350	197	153	62	6
Institution 8	NA	Private	No	Foundation	36	8	28	0	4
Institution 9	Pending	Private	Part	Spin off	25	20	5	9	5
Institution 10	0.5M	Private	No	Owner Manger	117	84	33	15	20

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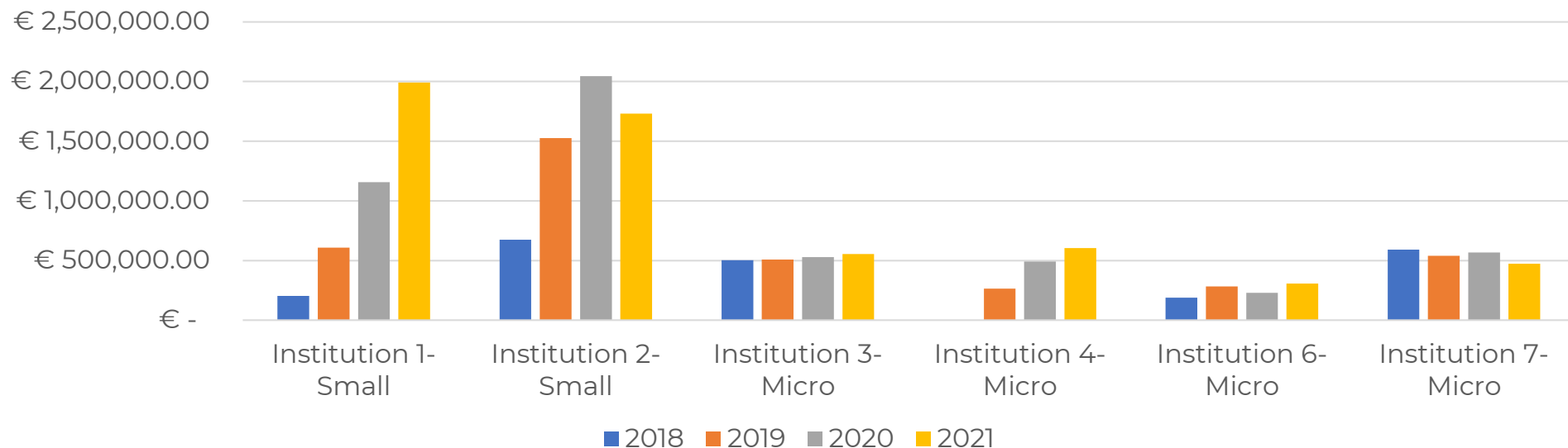
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Sample

- When reviewing the audited accounts submitted by the HIEs, one can observe how three micro institutions are struggling while small institutions are performing better.
- Micro HEIs are concerned with the unpredictability of funding schemes offered by Government, which may not be sustained over time, and when coupled with competition, creates viability issues.

HEI revenues



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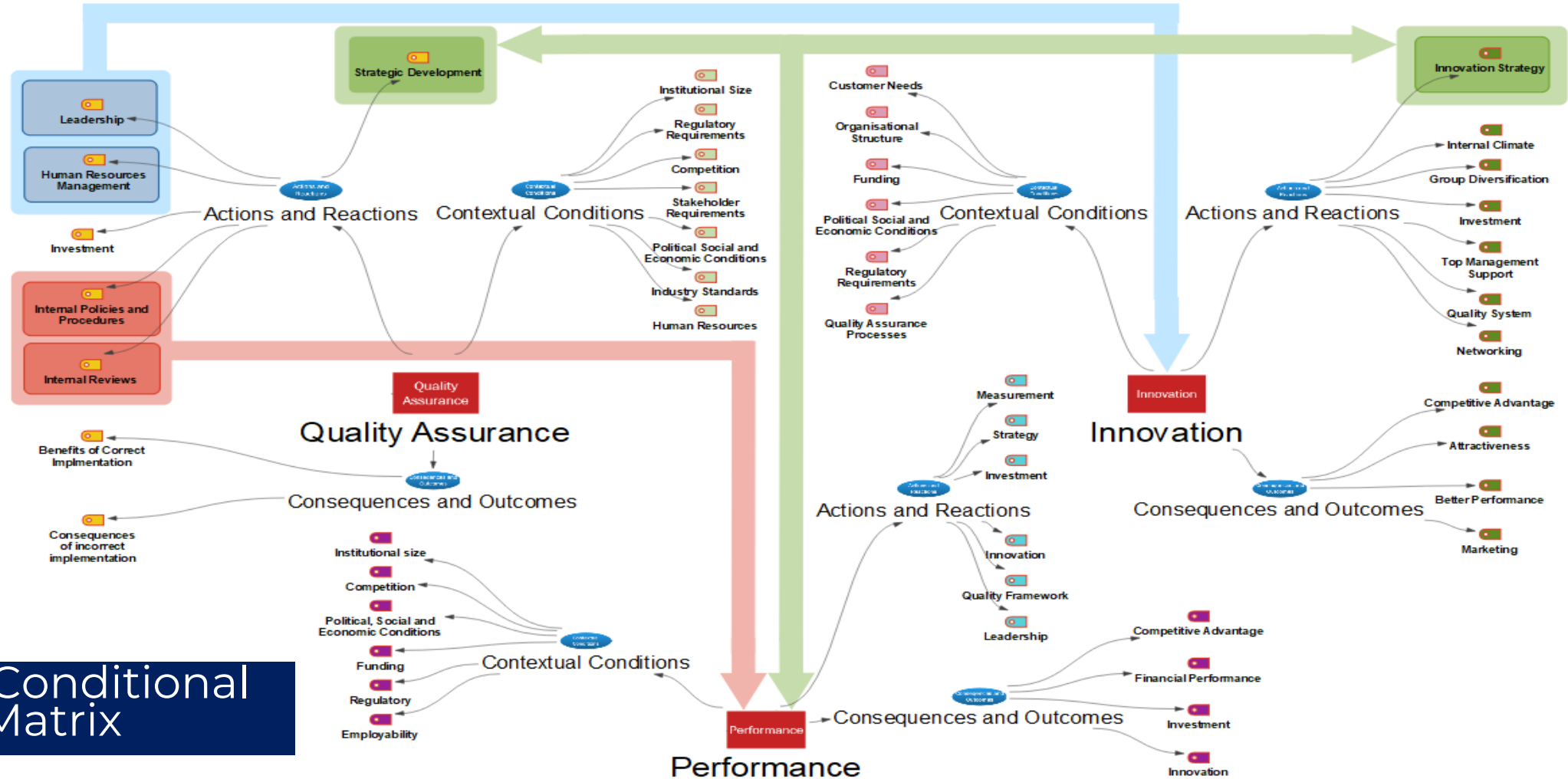


Analysis

- Data analysis is being carried out using MAXQDA (Verbi Software).
- In order to respect the constant comparative analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) each interview is immediately transcribed and painstakingly coded by the researcher before the next. Each next case was selected based upon the findings of the previous.
- All codes are summarized and grouped into categories. Summaries provide the opportunity to reflect further on the emerging codes and such reflection motivates the generation of memos as well as identifying links between codes for merging and grouping into categories.
- Paraphrasing of the interviews aside from the coding and summaries aids the reflexive process.
- Memos annotate emerging themes that can be investigated further in subsequent interviews.
- The analysis follows the Conditional/Consequential Matrix paradigm developed by Strauss and Corbin (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) as this fits appropriately with the scope of the study

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Triple Conditional Matrix

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Conditional Matrix for the Quality Assurance Domain only



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Main propositions emerging from the

- Micro HEIs find it more difficult to reach economies of scale
- It is more difficult for micro institutions to meet regulatory requirements
- Small and micro private HEIs face unfair competition from state institutions
- Study visa issues impact planning and marketing
- Funding schemes need to be administered differently by the state.
- Small HEIs with larger core setups that plan strategically are more likely to be successful.

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Implications and

Preliminary findings show that HEIs agree that there is strong potential for growth in the higher education sector on a national scale if proper policy and national strategy are in place. Policy developments are required on four aspects:

- Competition rules between state-funded institutions and private HEIs need to be clearly defined
- A clear policy on educational funding schemes is required as these are essential factors small HEIs consider when developing strategies and planning investment
- Student VISA policy and clearer rules for issuing are required
- A revised national strategy aimed at setting the vision for Malta as an educational hub in the Mediterranean is required thus providing private HEIs a clear understanding of the government's intentions.

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Next Steps for this research study

- This study follows a GT Methodology and covers the first ten cases
- Categories are already emerging and uncovering how aspects of QA affect innovation and performance
- The findings so far elaborate significantly the contextual conditions in which micro and small HEIs operate and how policy and legislative change can assist these small firms in developing their strategies for growth
- The early conceptual framework is to be developed further into a substantive theory that is firmly grounded in the data
- The study needs to build towards theoretical saturation which has not yet been achieved

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THANK YOU

