

## **STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOL LIFE AND LEARNING: JUNIOR COLLEGE, SIXTH FORMS, AND MCAST YEAR 1 STUDENTS IN MALTA.**

### **Purpose of Study**

Understanding the nature and experience of student engagement is crucial to the success of any educational institution. The main aims of the study are:

- To determine the nature of student engagement or lack of student engagement.
- To identify the relation between the significance of student engagement and the academic achievement of students.
- To identify the different forms and purposes of student engagement in any educational institution.
- To identify different forms of student engagement that students experience academically, socially and culturally.
- To identify conditions and pedagogical approaches that support and enhance student engagement and others that may hinder student engagement.
- To identify the forms of leadership that support and hinder student engagement.
- To identify the views about student engagement of the administrators, teaching staff and support staff.

### **Background**

Portelli (2005) has argued that student engagement as a concept has occupied educational research since the time of Plato and Aristotle, who contemplated the knowledge that should be passed on to future generations; while Augustine considered the role of students in the process of learning. But apart from the process of learning and the involvement of students in it, Rousseau, Montessori and Dewey also considered students' individual and social needs, while Freire and other critical and feminist theorists have argued that the practical application of knowledge and its contribution to the emancipation of the individual as an active citizen in a democratic society also need to be contemplated (see Portelli 2005).

Bearing these various aspects of student engagement in education in mind terms such as

connections, connectedness, relations, commitment, promise, closeness, belonging, involvement, inspired, interested, motivated, attachment, integration, concentration and effort, ownership, empowerment, authenticity and responsibility (Portelli 2005)

may spring to mind. Portelli (2005) suggests that certainly these terms are generally endorsed by educators, policy makers and parents alike. However, what may differ is how these concepts and terms are perceived by administrators, teachers and students; how they are prioritized; how and by whom they are influenced; or how they are conveyed in the learning process and in the administration of education; to name just a few.

### **Motivation for the Research Project**

It is crucial to address these questions to identify the reasons for the disengagement from education of 19 year olds in Malta when compared to 17 year olds. Data from the NCFHE Further and Higher Education statistics survey has continuously shown that while participation in Further and Higher Education at age 17 has increased from 59% in 2008 to 83% in 2012, participation at age 19 is considerably lower and also appears to have remained relatively stable over the years from 55% of the total cohort at age 19 in Malta in 2008 to 56% in 2012.

**Figure 1: 17 and 19 year old student population in Further and Higher Education**

Age	Level	1999	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	
17	<b>Population:</b>															
	Further (Academic)	2,169	1,547	2,398	2,633	2,603	2,190	2,358	2,138	2,300	2,438	2,480	2,391	2,418	2,360	
	Further (Vocational)	344	823	606	879	1,110	1,113	1,144	994	994	1,332	1,473	1,305	1,137	1,196	
	Higher	42	54	24	5	6	9	7	13	8	10	13	130	78	58	
	Other programmes*														13	
	Short course															209
	Total Further & Higher	2,555	2,424	3,028	3,517	3,719	3,312	3,509	3,145	3,302	3,780	3,966	3,826	3,633	3,836	
	Total population cohort	5,984	5,430	5,425	5,314	5,533	5,584	5,368	5,302	5,474	5,147	4,826	4,613	5,038	4,848	
	<b>Participation rate:</b>															
	Further (Academic)	36%	28%	44%	50%	47%	39%	44%	40%	42%	47%	51%	52%	48%	49%	
	Further (Vocational)	6%	15%	11%	17%	20%	20%	21%	19%	18%	26%	31%	28%	23%	25%	
	Higher	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	3%	2%	1%	
	Other programmes*														0%	
	Short course														4%	
Total Further & Higher	43%	45%	56%	66%	67%	59%	65%	59%	60%	73%	82%	83%	72%	79%		
Others**	57%	55%	44%	34%	33%	41%	35%	41%	40%	27%	18%	17%	28%	21%		
Total population cohort	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%		
19	<b>Population:</b>															
	Further (Academic)	272	34	141	211	176	346	122	613	742	638	319	355	607	548	
	Further (Vocational)	408	612	582	930	808	884	880	1,129	1,103	943	1,148	873	793	794	
	Higher	1,076	1,240	1,324	1,242	1,315	1,318	1,372	1,336	1,369	1,411	1,362	1,628	1,561	1,396	
	Other programmes*														125	
	Short course														151	
	Total Further & Higher	1,756	1,886	2,047	2,383	2,299	2,548	2,374	3,078	3,214	2,992	2,829	2,856	2,961	3,014	
	Total population cohort	5,711	5,794	5,571	5,430	5,245	5,314	5,533	5,584	5,368	5,302	5,474	5,147	4,826	4,613	
	<b>Participation rate:</b>															
	Further (All)	12%	11%	13%	21%	19%	23%	18%	31%	35%	30%	27%	24%	29%	29%	
	Higher	19%	21%	24%	23%	25%	25%	25%	24%	26%	27%	25%	32%	32%	30%	
	Other programmes*														3%	
	Short course														3%	
	Total Further & Higher	31%	33%	37%	44%	44%	48%	43%	55%	61%	56%	52%	56%	61%	65%	
Others**	69%	67%	63%	56%	56%	52%	57%	45%	39%	44%	48%	44%	39%	35%		
Total population cohort	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%		

\* Other programmes refers to programmes by non-licensed education providers or not accredited locally by the NCFHE

\*\* Others refers to those persons who are not registered in any of the institutions that participated in the survey.

(Source: 1994–2005 NSO Education Statistics; 2006–2007 NCFHE provisional data; 2008–2013 NCFHE Further and Higher Education Statistics Survey 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014)

Thus, in order to understand the reasons for this considerable decrease in participation between age 17 and 19, it appears important to reflect on the concept of student engagement held by administrators, teachers and students in Further Education. This is true more specifically for Sixth Forms, since these reflect the majority of student enrolments in Further Education.

Portelli (2005) suggests that

some of these implications and beliefs are not consistent with each other, we are then faced with the following moral or ethical questions: Which conception of engagement is more worthwhile or suitable? Are all forms of student engagement equally valuable? Whose conception of engagement is considered to be most worthwhile?

Consequently, the research will seek to illuminate those concepts of student engagement and its related practices that contribute to making education relevant for the individual as well as for society; support attainment and encourage participation beyond Further Education. In fact, there are different conceptions and practices of student engagement. Student engagement consists of a two-way process, the perspective of the students and that of the educational institution. These two critical features will be reflected in this study. In fact, this study will take into account the time and effort, student invest into their study and other educational extra-curricular activities. On the other hand, student engagement must be seen also from the manner the Maltese educational institutions organise their resources and create learning opportunities or support services to encourage students' participations in educationally purposeful activities. Therefore, this research would contribute to a better understanding of student engagement held by administrators; lecturers and students; how this perception is translated in the learning process; in the school administration or environment and how it influences students' experiences of learning and their plans to continue or discontinue their studies after Sixth Form. Consequently, through this study ways to increase engagement among a range of student populations shall be identified.

### **Research Questions**

Based on these considerations the research questions to be addressed in this research include amongst others:

- How do administrators / lecturers understand student engagement?
- What do administrators / lecturers do to increase student engagement?
- How do students understand student engagement?
- How do students experience student engagement?
- How does this understanding and experience of student engagement influence students' plans to continue / discontinue their education after Sixth Form?

### **Research Methodology**

The research is designed in a two-step approach of a survey and group / individual interviews of administrators; teachers and students. Surveys will be employed initially in order to gain an overview of the different understandings of student engagement held by administrators; lecturers and students. The findings from this survey will provide a broad overview of the different concepts held and terms used with regard to student engagement. This will allow for a revision and refinement of the questions to be deployed during the group / individual interviews.

In a second step, group / individual interviews will be carried out among administrators; teachers and students from Junior College; Giovanni Curmi Higher Secondary School; Sir M.A. Refalo Sixth Form; St. Aloysius Sixth Form; De La Salle Sixth Form; St. Martins Sixth Form, Verdala International School and MCAST (Introductory and Foundation Courses). These interviews will provide detailed field data on the basis of which it is expected that detailed profiles of the understanding of student engagement of school administrators; teachers and students who left the respective Sixth Form in June 2013 or June 2014. In order to identify, the factors that encourage or discourages student to continue or discontinue their education after completion of the Sixth Form the study will focus on former Sixth Form students rather the students who are presently attending Sixth Form.